

Red Sparrow doesn't sing

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 02 March 2018 10:33



Rating: «« out of «««««

Running Time: 140 minutes

Based on a bestselling spy book, the new film *Red Sparrow* seems to hark back to Cold War thrillers of the past, although with one novel little twist. The operative is a Russian woman who uses the power of seduction to woo her targets before striking. It's an interesting concept with a lot of potential, but this adaptation ends up looking and feeling too slick for its own good. It's so polished, that ultimately it lacks the necessary gravitas or even provide pulpy thrills to grip viewers.

Dominika Egorova (Jennifer Lawrence) is a Bolshoi ballet dancer who is struggling to make ends meet and care for her mother. An on-stage accident quickly ends her career. Soon, she is warned that she will lose her home and be unable to pay for her parents' health care. Thankfully, Dominika's slimy uncle Vanya (Matthias Schoenaerts) is a high-ranking government official involved in a clandestine spy program. He recruits the woman for a Sparrow program that teaches students to use particular persuasion skills to ensnare enemies of the state. The ex-dancer's first undercover operation is to find a mole within the Kremlin who is reporting to CIA operative Nate Nash (Joel Edgerton) and report to General Korchnoi (Jeremy Irons).

This is a very good-looking movie, with lots of beautiful locations and impressive photography as the characters move around Eastern Europe from the snowy streets of Moscow to Hungary, Turkey and England. When activities revolve around characters moving through outdoor locations trying not to attract attention, the imagery is striking. However, at times the glossy and

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polished appearance of the film works against its dead serious attempts to detail the unseemly inner workings of the icy outfit and the dehumanizing techniques used on the students.

Much of the first half of the feature involves Dominika's recruitment and training process from stern instructor Matron (Charlotte Rampling). It's a pretty thankless role for the talented veteran, with the lessons involving demands that the ex-dancer provide sexual favors to others in front of the class. In fact, much of the movie involves a series of over-the-top sneers and leers from characters who bark metaphors like, "Every human being is a puzzle of need and you must learn to be the missing piece." These scenes, along with violent attacks and attempted rapes on Dominika from several overly hard-boiled characters are indeed brutal. However, the glossy-looking film never finds a truly believable or authentic tone.

Later sections of the movie involving actual espionage do add some tension and intrigue to the proceedings. Unfortunately, the second half is still hampered by the main relationship between the protagonist and her CIA lead. Nash is essentially a goody two-shoes. He's unwaveringly earnest, heroic and unwilling to succumb to Dominika's techniques. Naturally, the spy immediately falls for him, leading to suggestions that she might be willing to turn double-agent. Sadly, there isn't a whole lot of onscreen chemistry between the two and the romance comes off in an eye-rolling manner. This important connection falls flat and ends up dragging down the pace. In the end, even the final reveal isn't all that surprising.

Perhaps this all worked as an engaging thriller on the printed page, but this adaptation has tonal issues and bizarre moments that, between the onscreen brutalities, may earn more guffaws than chills. Frankly, I never expected to hear an Oscar-winning actress have to utter the line, "You sent me to whore school!" but that's one of the many strange, borderline comical outbursts that occurs in this film. I admire the boldness of the performers for taking on such an unusual project, but *Red Sparrow* never manages to sing.

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