

‘The Courier,’ a spy thriller based on real events is worth watching

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««

out of «««««

Running Time: 111 minutes

This feature will be playing at open theaters and drive-ins starting March 19.

The new thriller *The Courier* details a seemingly unlikely tale of an ordinary man asked to go undercover and place himself in extraordinarily dangerous circumstances. While the description might initially sound like a work of fiction, the film itself is actually based on a true story. At times, this period piece tries to cover too much of the lead's unusual experiences over its relatively short time span. Still, the performances are excellent and the climactic events add enough gravitas to earn this feature a recommendation.

Greville Wynne (Benedict Cumberbatch) is a businessman selling goods in Eastern Europe. With the Cuban Missile Crisis at its height, he is unexpectedly approached by British and American officials Dickie Franks (Angus Wright) and Emily Donovan (Rachel Brosnahan). They ask him to help them by meeting high-ranking Soviet colonel, Oleg Penkovsky (Merab Ninidze).

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It seems this figure wants to stop nuclear war between the nations by passing on information about the USSR's nuclear program.

Wynne is taken aback by the request, but agrees, meeting Penkovsky during a business trip to Moscow and acting as a spy and courier, receiving information and delivering it to authorities in London. Unfortunately, the secret job becomes increasingly dangerous and puts great strain on his marriage to wife Sheila (Jessie Buckley).

The movie isn't particularly fast-paced early on, spending a great deal of time with Wynne being introduced to Franks and Donovan and following his first few business trips to Moscow, where he meets Penkovsky. These early interactions are nice and help develop the growing friendship between the two men, but they aren't particularly tense. In fact, the protagonist is in the dark about much of what he's actually doing for the first half of the movie. This approach is used to add some mystery to the story, but also removes much of the drama and tension from early ventures behind the Iron Curtain.

However, as suspicion from Russian officials about Wynne and Penkovsky begins to grow, events become considerably more charged. The lead character gets the opportunity to depict a regular man dealing with the incredible stress of being a spy and trying to stifle his emotions in public. We see him experience fear, panic and anger, which eventually starts to manifest itself at home. Cumberbatch is solid in the role and as enemies close in, all of the performers really begin to show their stuff.

There are some powerful exchanges between Wynne and Sheila, as well as some heartfelt conversations between the protagonist and new friend Penkovsky.

The movie provides a sweet message, including moments in which the British and Russian men tell their kids that while notable politicians might threaten each other, regular citizens from different nations shouldn't be enemies and can find common ground. A few of these scenes would have come off as incredibly corny with a less capable cast, but the actors here are all exceptional and manage to sell the material. Admittedly, the tale does try to cover a great many elements and frequently jumps from Wynne in Moscow to the British and American intelligence officials maneuvering behind the scenes. There is far more tension and drama when we follow Wynne around, but some of the exposition is required to keep the plot moving forward.

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So, while there isn't much about the story itself that will surprise viewers, this film has very likable characters with plenty of moving moments between them. In the end, *The Courier* isn't the spy thriller to end all spy thrillers, but it does deliver a few powerful scenes and ultimately serves as a decent tribute to some unheralded heroes.

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