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John Doyle: The Romeo Section is a subtly sexy thriller for grown-ups

By John Doyle

New CBC drama is an expertly made and deftly engrossing, cerebral show

Somebody is watching and that somebody is being watched, too. A guy is having an affair with the girlfriend of a violent drug-gang leader. He's being watched. So is she.

There's an old man in prison. Is he the notorious gang boss? If he is, is it genius to be hiding out in prison, nobody really knowing who he is? There's a young woman cleaning a church, sullen and resentful that this is part of her probation. She shoplifts and an older man sees her and offers to pay for the food she stole. What does he want? Is it her, or her skill at skulking around, unnoticed? And that guy, the older man, is being watched, too. Is the watcher friend or foe?

Welcome to *The Romeo Section* (CBC, 9 p.m.), an expertly made and deftly engrossing cerebral thriller. Eight years after CBC cancelled *Intelligence*, creator Chris Haddock is back with this, an espionage drama that is John le Carré-esque in its depiction of spies under pressure. Less dark and less densely plotted than *Intelligence*, it is, nevertheless, serious-minded on the matter of differentiating ethical decisions. And those decisions, influenced by vanity and ego, are often life-and-death decisions.

It's about spies, through and through. World-weary Canadian spies running various operations to glean information about foreign governments and local thugs. They handle informants who are in danger or are just dangerous, or so drugged-out and undercover that they're in grave danger. And then, of course, there's Head Office. There's talk of a leak in the operation and everybody is being watched by somebody who is also being watched. It's an intriguing, subtly sexy thriller for grown-ups, this one.

We meet main character Wolfgang McGee (Andrew Airlie, who is superb as a middle-aged man grown cynical about integrity and scruples), an academic of sorts, in Hong Kong at the race track. Hushed, elliptical and very brief conversations tell us he's collecting information. Then there's an odd conversation in an antique store, and there, perhaps, the theme of the series is handed to us when Wolfgang says, "I appreciate a good con, even if I'm the sucker in it."

In Vancouver, we meet Rufus (Juan Riedinger), who has his hands full with Dee (Stephanie Bennett, admirably going full throttle into a very meaty role), who has two main interests – sex and cocaine. That her boyfriend, Vince (Matt Bellefleur), is a mob boss doesn't bother her. She's cooking up plans for murder.

Meanwhile, mysterious figures meet in coffee shops and make visits to jail. And the key plot turn is when Wolfgang is informed by the boss, Al (Eugene Lipinski, who is exquisite in this type of role) that HQ is talking about a leak in the system.

The Romeo Section is smart and addictive from the get-go. Haddock moves us quickly and confidently into an intricate web of intrigue, and we're kept oriented – mainly in Wolfgang and Rufus – even as the intricacy escalates.

This is, in some ways, a very British thriller. It has a quietness instead of carefully timed eruptions of loud violence and melodrama. It's acrid in the way British thrillers can be – most of the people are liars and the truth is always a bit out of reach. And there's a finely constructed tension rising constantly. Even as circles of deceit expand and contract, there's the feeling that the main characters are being pushed toward the edge of a cliff.

The acting is strong throughout, and it takes a special skill to be in tune with Haddock's particular style of subtle, unemphatic television drama. Nobody shouts and nobody roars melodramatically, unless it's a drugged character who's supposed to be high and hotheaded.

Now, after the debut of CBC's *This Life*, we can see another gripping, entertaining Canadian drama that isn't one of those mechanical, wind-up toys of a genre production. The show also fills the eye with glossy visuals, but there's a point to that – the layered complexity of Vancouver is being shown to us.

Best of all, *The Romeo Section* isn't simplistic. It doesn't ride roughshod over the intelligent viewer's skepticism about the spies and spying. It makes the mundanity of spying compelling with flashes of dry humour, and when there needs to be an impact moment of drama, that drama arrives sideways, not telegraphed and then dropped on us.

Somebody is watching and that somebody is being watched, too. It's how this perverse world of espionage works. And if you watch this show, you're drawn into it with aplomb and rewarded.