



FEATURED, THE ROMEO SECTION

REVIEW: THE ROMEO SECTION BRINGS MORE INTELLIGENCE TO CBC

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Tonight marks writer Chris Haddock's return to CBC with Vancouver-set spy series *The Romeo Section*, and fans of his *Intelligence* in particular, and of intelligent drama in general, will be rewarded with a nuanced, layered story that slowly sinks you into its world of lies, corruption and murder.

Andrew Airlie plays professor Wolfgang McGee, who teaches and studies the history of the opium trade while covertly infiltrating today's heroin trade as an independent contractor to the Canadian intelligence community. All the deniability, none of the accountability as his handler Al (Haddock favourite Eugene Lipinski) points out to his bosses.

McGee oversees Romeo and Juliet spies — informants engaged in intimate relations with intelligence targets — and apparently was one himself. None of this is very clearly explained in the first two episodes, though it becomes clear enough. It's not completely clear how all the storylines are connected, though McGee and his work seems to be the connection. It's not always clear when characters are telling the truth, or what their silences mean, but that's part of the allure.

You will be confused. Hold on and let the story unfold. I wasn't sold at the start of the episode, especially when, excited to get the screeners, I first tried to watch while multitasking. I was, in fact, annoyed that we seem to need an intelligence briefing to understand the basic premise of the show. But by the end, and when watching with attention, I was nearly as hooked as one character is on cocaine.

The knowledge you need comes as you need it. The pleasures, big and small, of story and character paying off in unexpected ways continues throughout. Stick with the first episode and I suspect you'll be craving more. Some intel on the plot, though, is that McGee manages — coerces? — jittery informant Rufus (Juan Riedinger), who struggles to keep up with his target and lover Dee (Stephanie Bennett), in all her partying, murderous intensity. She's married to drug lord Vince and Rufus is caught between her ambitions and his own.

Meanwhile mysterious Eva (Sophia Lauchlin Hirt) is a cleaner at a church where Mexican national Miguel (Mathias Retamal) is seeking sanctuary. And McGee flirts with fellow professor Lily Song (Jemmy Chen), whose interest in his decade-long work-in-progress on opium, and her connection to the Chinese art and diplomatic scene, seems suspicious to me only because everything in this show is not quite what it seems.

Somewhere in the plot mix is the pending regime change of a Chinese Triad operating out of Vancouver, and an intelligence leak that has McGee paranoid — or realizing — that he's about to be pushed out.

In some ways McGee is like the soft-spoken House of spies, and I don't say that only because [I can't get over](#) that Airlie was orange guy in the *House*

pilot (though, mostly). Rumpled, unshaven, world-weary and witty, his Wolfgang McGee is the central character who reels you in to the series and acts as glue to hold the different worlds together.

McGee himself seems to float a little above the action, intricately involved in a variety of heavy dealings while maintaining an ironic detachment that seems part self-preservation, part semi-sociopathic, and part just part of the job.

Because this is a Haddock show there's a lot of meat on those story bones, making me yearn for a philosophical discussion on the meaning of sanctuary and the places we can hide ourselves, for example, or know more about the connections between the historic opium trade and today's drug wars. Yes, I'd like to read McGee's opus too.

The show is also peppered with hilarious lines you have to pay attention to catch in McGee's deadpan delivery, and a sense of lightness in the exchanges between McGee and Al or McGee and Lily, for example.

I have to love a show that has an exchange where a junior colleague laments that she gets bored to tears of everything she thinks of writing about, with McGee responding: "I believe the French have a word for that." "They would, wouldn't they?" is the reply as the conversation moves on.

Another show would feel the need to spell the word out but Haddock trusts his audience, and has faith his audience will trust him.

He has an ear for naturalistic dialogue, even when in black and white an exchange like that sounds very writerly — and it is spoken between two professors talking about writing after all. Some scenes sound so natural they almost feel improvised, yet the dialogue and plotting is tight enough to make me believe in the firm hand of the writers.

Haddock is working here with regular collaborators like director Stephen Surjik, producers Laura Lightbown and Arvi Liimatainen, and composer Shaun Tozer, along with his "writers room so small it's a writer's closet" of Jesse McKeown and Stephen Miller.

But no, [Haddock is not going to save the CBC](#). His previous and similarly espionage-themed series *Intelligence* was cancelled after two seasons for low ratings. I hope but do not expect *The Romeo Section* will get more eyeballs, and I hope and do expect that CBC has lower ratings expectations for *Romeo* than, say, *Murdoch Mysteries* or *Romeo's* wildly incompatible lead-in *Dragons' Den*. If you make cable-like shows, you must expect cable-like ratings, right?

Regardless, all viewers should care about is that *The Romeo Section* is an ultimately engrossing series that rewards an engaged audience. And that Wolfgang McGee is a character you'll want to get to know as far as he'll let you.



Diane Wild

Diane is the founder of *TV, eh?* She loves books, movies, TV, science, space, traveling, theatre, art, cats, and drinking multiple beverages at the same time.