



Standing Man

Friday, October 16, 2015

Breaking from my series of vintage Spielberg reviews, I tried to imagine myself at my old, clackety electronic typewriter in England 20 years ago, capturing my thoughts on paper for Judy and Don, custodians of the Steven Spielberg Film Society in Arizona -- here's my take on Spielberg's new one, his 28th feature, which opened today:

The Standing Man

By Joe Fordham (October 2015)

Bridge of Spies is about a conscientious man adrift in pagan times. Tom Hanks is magnificent as James Donovan, an insurance lawyer who becomes moral center of the film – and it is easy to see resonances with Spielberg's *Lincoln* as both films focus on protagonists, both are lawyers, who become increasingly put-upon by pressures of the world and they have to answer to a deeper feeling.

Spielberg humanized Lincoln by focusing on the towering figure's role as a father and a

husband. With Donovan, from the start we have a classic Spielbergian Everyman. This is a suit-wearing man with a sense of humor about his profession – he knows insurance law is a game of compromise and book-smarts – but he is witty and warm, and you really feel for him as he tries to navigate his way around the thankless task that he's presented, acting as legal counsel for Rudolf Abel, a Russian spy who's arrested in a brilliant *Munich*-like suspense sequence that opens the film.



The pyrotechnics here are with words, so it is talkative, but the movie is also gorgeous to look at. Spielberg and Janusz Kaminski are channeling Gordon Willis, depicting New York, as slick and dark and brooding, while the world beyond the Iron Curtain is stark and cold and atmospheric, particularly in its depiction of apocalyptic East Berlin where the grim-faced soldiers of the German Democratic Republic are hoisting cement blocks to wall off half the city. There's a great sense of time and place. I think it's the first time Spielberg and Kaminski have filmed in Poland since *Schindler's List*, and they do a great job of evoking the frightening world of the Soviet occupied city. It's a soulless alien place.

There's also a great performance by Mark Rylance as Abel, the guy that Donovan is tasked to provide legal counsel. It seems like nobody apart from Hanks' character even cares about giving the guy a fair trial. Abel is stoic but matter-of-fact, and seemingly at peace about his Fate, whatever that might amount to. He is an enigmatic presence, reminiscent of Itzhak Stern in *Schindler's* – we first see him reflected in a mirror, painting his self-portrait, as if he is trying to make sense of his own face – and he never tips his hand.



It is very touching to see the bond that develops between Abel and Donovan. That's where the humor comes from, too – it is gallows humor, because it's humor under incredibly tense and absurd circumstances, but that's what makes it so powerful. Abel's droll

wisdom is perhaps indicative of the Coen brothers' influence on Matt Charman's screenplay. But whatever its origins, Abel and Donovan come to recognize each other's isolation as lone figures who must take a stand. And that becomes a key image in the film.

In a breathtaking moment, Spielberg frames a climactic scene using one of his favorite compositions – the canted-high-shot, seen in *Sugarland* and *Jaws* – picturing Donovan in a tableau on Glienicke Bridge from a surreal God's-eye perspective. He is the standing man. It is a poignant image, underscored by Thomas Newman's music, which never attempts to fill the shoes of a John Williams score. It's part of a bigger picture, a masterful job of a

complex story told in a beautiful and elegant way, with much charm and grace.

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