

Argo

Think of a movie that starts out like “Body of Lies” (2009) then switches gears to “Wag the Dog” (1998) before settling down to “Munich” (2002). That’s how a Hollywood pitchman might set up the new suspense film “Argo” for some studio suits, but that facile combo diminishes what is a well-wrought new suspense film from Ben Affleck.

Affleck, who directs and stars, discovered the story of the “Canadian Caper” through a 2007 article by Joshua Bearman in “Wired” magazine. The Caper involved the Canadian Embassy sheltering six US Foreign Service officers during the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-80 and eventually helping them to escape. At the time—January 1980—the Americans’ escape was wholly attributed to Canadian efforts, but after 1997, classified information emerged which indicated that the escape was engineered by the CIA and an Agency expert in “exfiltration,” Tony Mendez, along with assistance from some Hollywood veterans. That released information was the basis for the Bearman article.

Chris Terrio wrote the screenplay for “Argo” (the name of an actual unproduced screenplay) in a neat three-act set-up: 1) the Embassy takeover and the officers’ escape and the resulting CIA’s struggle to spring the six; 2) Mendez creating an escape scenario by inventing a science fiction film--“Argo”--with a Canadian crew whose members were scouting Iran as a location, and 3) Mendez, as the supposed director, getting into Tehran to both prep the American fugitives as Canadians to mask their escape.

A story too strange to be true, except that it happened. Affleck himself plays Mendez, with a distinctive 1970’s shag and a poker face (a little too poker faced for my taste). Rotund John Goodman and rail-thin Alan Arkin play his lively industry contacts who assist in creating a plausible back-story for the fictitious film, a sham project which gullible Hollywood folk easily swallowed at the time.

Personal note: As a Foreign Service officer myself in Tehran in 1976-78, I was fully aware of the Iran hostage event and its long-running drama. I looked at this film with different eyes because I worked in the Embassy compound, knew the city’s streets and was familiar with its airport. All this is to say up front that “Argo” is *not* a documentary but an entertainment vehicle, and it fully succeeds as that.

Parts of “Argo” achieve real verisimilitude. For example, shooting in Istanbul as a stand-in for Tehran, Affleck and his cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto get the right look for the latter’s streets. Moreover, in his casting of the six fugitives, Affleck has assembled a cast of little-known but gifted actors (led by Tate Donovan as Robert Enders, playing a consular officer) who are dressed and coiffed to strikingly resemble the actual officers. For even more authenticity, the director was able to get unusual access to the entrances and the insides of both the CIA building and the State Department to undergird his drama.

Yet this is an entertainment, remember. “Argo” also introduces some elements that create drama but are utterly implausible, like the fugitives going to visit the Tehran bazaar while still in hiding. Where the script and film truly depart most from the actual Canadian Caper is in the ending of it.

All the tension in the film leads up to a nail-biting finale at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport, as the potential escapees and Mendez sweat a series of trials with perusal of their passports, a last-minute phone call from Washington to approve the operation, then being held up by a skeptical (and very scary) Revolutionary Guard while a group of regime zealots come ever closer to identifying the group from their shredded photos. Not to mention a last-ditch chase sequence where Iranian authorities try to run down the airplane on the tarmac. Didn't happen, any of it.

The real escape was uneventful on the surface—even if the stomachs and psyches of those escaping must have truly been in turmoil. This is, of course, a Hollywood ending and who would deny the thoughtful and earnest Affleck this boffo finish. Not me, for one; it proves to be a real rouser in a film that also offers rare kudos to the dogged work of our intelligence services and our diplomats.

(The film is rated "R" for violence and language and runs 120 minutes.)

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