

7 Days in Entebbe

“7 Days in Entebbe” is a “tick-tock” thriller, a movie that counts down minutes, hours, or, in this case, days to a dramatic, suspenseful resolution. Older audience members may recall the real incident, but younger filmgoers can be forgiven if they don’t know about this riveting rescue.

The plot opens when two German radicals associated with the Bader-Meinhof Gang, Wilfried Bose and Brigitte Kuhlmann (Daniel Brühl and Rosamund Pike), and two members from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) take over an El Al flight from Athens to Paris on June 27, 1976. The group aims to trade the plane’s hostages for imprisoned Palestinians in Israel and commands that the airliner stop in Benghazi before heading to their final destination, Entebbe Airport in Uganda. There, the country’s despot, Idi Amin Dada (Nonso Anozie), is happy to welcome them (the plane carries almost 250 passengers, more than 80 of them Jewish). Thus begins a waiting game, as the terrorists isolate the Jews and then wait for their demands to be met.

Parallel to the terrorist/hostage narrative are the machinations—both political and military--in Israel over how to handle the crisis. Key figures here are the earnest Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (Lior Ashkenazi) and his canny Defense Minister Shimon Peres (Eddie Marsan), who must decide whether and what kind of military action they might take and, just as importantly, the political ramifications of any effort they launch. As it turned out, the raid was a thorough success, with the terrorists all summarily executed, but four hostages lost, and with one (famous) Israeli casualty, Col. Yoni Netanyahu, the older brother of Benjamin.

The film does not have much time for backstories of the multiple characters: its point is taut conflict. The director, Brazilian José Padilha, has shown competence in this genre before with another tick-tock film from 2002, “Bus 174.” We learn a bit of Wilfried and Brigitte’s backgrounds from flashbacks in Germany, showing them plotting the act. The two play out contrasting roles, she the more fanatic and excitable; he the calmer one, somewhat more skeptical of their cause. Pike carries off her assignment well, with a good German accent and an anxious face showing both fear and fervor. Brühl is even better, trying to make more rounded and complex what could easily be a two-dimensional figure. As for the Israeli leaders, Marsan is an unctuous and gnomonic presence, while Ashkenazi exudes reason along with political smarts.

No breakthrough, no masterpiece of its genre, “7 Days in Entebbe” is a foursquare rendering of an amazing military action.

To note: This reviewer has a very personal connection to this drama. In June 1976, I was a Foreign Service officer living in Nairobi with my family. On June 27th—the date of the Air France flight from Tel Aviv—I saw my wife and two daughters off on a flight to London with a brief stopover at Entebbe. I learned later that they left Entebbe on the last flight out, after 11 pm. The next day I heard about the Air France hijacking, then after the raid itself, I came to a stunning realization: if my family’s flight out of Entebbe had been delayed for any reason, the hijacked plane would have landed and closed the airport down, leaving my family held at the same airport as the hostages. What might have been...

(The film is rated “R” and runs 107 mins.)

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