

K-19: The Widowmaker

The new submarine opus, *K-19, the Widowmaker*, is the movieland version of an actual incident aboard a landmark Soviet submarine in 1961. The drama of a reactor breakdown on that vessel is enacted in parallel with the drama between the contrasting leadership styles of the two captains aboard, the skipper (Harrison Ford), a by-the-book ramrod, and his executive officer (Liam Neeson), the empathetic, understanding fellow.

All the recent U-boat movies you can think of--*Das Boot*, *Crimson Tide*, *Hunt for Red October*, *U-571*--will be evoked by *K-19*, but, let's face it, if you revel in the tension on board one of these massive tin cans, you will find much to entertain you here also. The director, Kathryn Bigelow, keeps that tension taut, with the additional wrinkle of the damaged reactor. In fact, the real drama concerns not so much the enemy outside but the lethal radioactivity inside. The struggle of several crew members to repair the reactor leak--in worthless chemical suits--is truly gut-wrenching.

Like any decent submarine movie, *K-19*, evokes effectively the cramped quarters of the vessel, and after a time, you will acquire your own sense of its geography. Ford and Neeson are both stalwart presences, though their Russian accents lie somewhere between Moscow and Malibu. Their performances show them moving towards a kind of accommodation, as stiff Ford comes to truly value his men while conciliatory Neeson attains backbone when a mutiny threatens.

Most striking amongst a batch of (appropriately) young officer and crew aboard *K-19* is Peter Sarsgaard, who plays a fresh-faced, though sad-eyed, reactor officer. Way in over his head, the novice officer first panics during the reactor incident but later proves a hero who gives his life to fix the leak. Young Sarsgaard covers this transformation with panache.

K-19 is, of course, a Hollywood flick, so it cannot avoid some standard excesses. Principal among them is a constantly baleful soundtrack. Director Bigelow, not known for her subtlety, has both music and effects too often juiced up when it isn't necessary, when the action in the sub speaks for itself.

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