

Rendition

A good example is “Rendition,” a thriller ripped-from-the-headlines which depicts a national security system gone awry as an innocent Egyptian-American chemical engineer (Omar Metwally) is viciously treated as a terrorist “rendered” to an Arab state (apparently Tunisia). His distraught American wife (Reese Witherspoon) urges U.S. authorities to rescue her husband while an American CIA agent (Jake Gyllenhaal) loses his stomach for complicity in the engineer’s persecution. The background of a true terrorist’s environment is also sketched through a separate storyline of a Muslim Romeo and Juliet.

The overall mood of the picture is extremely grave, and it gets stomach-churning with all-too-graphic scenes of torture undertaken to wrench the “truth” out of the imprisoned engineer. Viewers should come prepared for some unrelenting violence. With these caveats out of the way, the film—with one enormous caveat—is well made by South African director Gavin Hood (who made the fine “Tsotsi”) and well acted all around. Among featured players, Peter Sarsgaard is tone-perfect as a sympathetic Senate aide, and Meryl Streep is a smooth but chilling CIA boss. Among the leads, Mr. Gyllenhaal is fine (if appearing a tad youngish) as the anguished agent, and Ms. Witherspoon is touching as the apprehensive spouse, while a bevy of Middle Eastern actors also perform well, especially Mr. Metwally as the put-upon engineer.

The caveat to the film’s quality mentioned above? A deplorable manipulation in the story which cannot be revealed in advance because it affords the movie’s one very baroque twist—but it is a twist which left a very bad taste in this viewer’s mouth (film is rated “R”, running time is 120 minutes).