

Shadow Dancer

The late 20th Century's Irish Troubles have been the subject of a number of notable British films in recent years ("Bloody Sunday," "The Boxer," "Some Mother's Son," etc.). You can add the tight, tense "Shadow Dancer" to that list.

Written by Tim Bradby (from his novel) and directed by Englishman James Marsh (mostly known as a maker of solid documentaries such as "Man on Wire" and "Project N.I.M."), the picture opens with a 1970's scene which sets up the motivation of the main character, then quickly shifts to its principal timeframe, 1993.

We are in London, where an IRA sympathizer, Collette McVeigh (Andrea Riseborough), mishandles a bomb placement in the Underground. She is observed then detained by MI-5, where an agent, Mac (Clive Owen), allows her to be released if she will inform on her brothers, Gerry (Aidan Gillen) and Connor (Domhnall Gleason), local activists back in Belfast. He also promises that she can thus obtain a life for her son, who lives with her and her Ma (Brid Brennan). Though not herself an thoroughgoing activist, she is expected to pick up intelligence on operations and pass it on to Mac, re-located to Belfast, in clandestine meetings.

The enigmatic IRA chieftain, Kevin Mulville (David Wilmot) keeps a close eye on the McVeigh family and, as some operations—such as an assassination attempt—are thwarted, he comes to suspect Collette and her family and looks to unmask a snitch in their midst. Since the film follows Collette throughout, including her sessions with and calls to Mac, we gradually learn that there is an informant who cannot be her. The film ends as grimly as it started with inevitable violence and a shocking twist.

It's hard to find a hero in "Shadow Dancer" because it contains all the moral ambiguity that constituted the Northern Ireland struggles; nobody comes out quite clean, family's are torn, threats hover over so many lives. The film captures this ambiguity along with steady tension, and it does it the more effectively by not forcing it. The situations are dire and threatening enough that the filmmakers do not have to juice it up with perfervid action or slam-bang. It is a British thriller, underplayed and the more compelling for it. Settings are plain or ordinary (though the film was shot entirely in Dublin, not Northern Ireland), music is unadorned, production values are appropriate but restrained.

What shines in "Shadow Dancer" is the acting, also underplayed just right and taut in its subtlety. Sturdy Clive Owen is a competent but conflicted agent who comes to identify too much with his source; he offers here a lovely contrast with his more macho roles. Andrea Riseborough ("Brighton Rock," "W.E.") plays a young woman under pressure with grace and believability, her earnest face shorn of makeup, her hair a bit unkempt, her emotions constantly bottled up. To be honest, the film carries a sense of dread, the weight of which Riseborough's Collette has to bear. She looks capable of many solid performances down the line.

A cautionary comment on the film's dialogue: though it does not carry subtitles, for many Americans the Irish accents might prove difficult. Not making it any easier is the fact—at least in the print I witnessed—that the exchanges were often soft and circumspect, sometimes delivered only in whispers. Such tones are right for the

material—they are plotting and passing secrets after all--but it could also lead to some incomprehension. All this is to say, pay attention, listen carefully; catching the film's softness masking hardness is worth the trouble.

(The film runs 101 minutes and is rated "R" for language and violence.)

(July 2013)