

Walk on Water

Walk on Water is a tight, efficient thriller from Israel, done with a panache that depends much on lead Lior Ashkenazi playing Eyal, a chilly Mossad operative who--as we see in the opening sequence--can off an Arab--a presumed terrorist--and his family with nary a twitch. His next assignment looks tepid, trailing a young German, Axel Himmelman (Knut Berger), to get information on his grandfather, Alfred Himmelman, an old Nazi officer. A contemporary fellow, Eyal doesn't want to dwell on historic, speculative cases; he wants action against current enemies. Still, he takes on the job, acting as Axel's Israeli tourist guide, a plot point that lets them--and us viewers--see some fascinating pieces of the Israeli landscape.

The open, affable Axel is gay, and his politically active sister Pia (Caroline Peters) lives in a kibbutz, and, though Eyal keeps his distance from both, he also begins to warm to them. Then, hearing about a family reunion that may bring the old Nazi out of hiding, Eyal follows Axel to Berlin to peek in on the get together. At the denouement, this sleek story breaks down somewhat, climaxing in a clumsy and stilted birthday party in a lavish Berlin villa, which Eyal too easily encroaches. There is also a too-quick conversion of the tough Mossad man from disciplined, veteran agent to agonized penitent.

Still, the film, directed by Eytan Fox, is smart and well-paced, with the added exoticism of its Middle East setting (the film won the equivalent of three Israeli Academy Awards last year). The lead, Ashkenazi, is intriguing to watch, evidencing a supercool, easy machismo. He's the brooding type with a stern, contained look that bespeaks deep currents reminiscent, for example, of the English actor Clive Owen. He is ably seconded by Berger and Peters as the Germans he befriends, both open-minded liberals who detest their country's--and their family's--past. In the end *Walk on Water* (the title plays on a dream of the Dead Sea) is a heartening story with an intriguing cross-cultural dimension we don't see often enough at the movies.

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