

Zero Dark Thirty

Four years ago, director Kathryn Bigelow achieved critical mass with “The Hurt Locker,” an unblinking and compelling look at the world of one dedicated US soldier in the Iraqi war, a film which—with modest box office—won the Oscar for Best Picture of the year. Since then, she has been working on another film with intimations of “The Hurt Locker”: “Zero Dark Thirty,” out now for Academy Award consideration.

“Zero Dark Thirty” also has a tough Middle East war context, but here the conflict is in Afghanistan (the title is a military term for 30 minutes after midnight, but the director remarked that it also refers to the “darkness” inherent in the search for Osama Bin Laden). This film highlights another single-minded, even obsessive protagonist whose mind and motives are hard to read, but, instead of a bomb disposal sergeant, we have a dogged intelligence officer single-mindedly pursuing Bin Laden. Instead of a year’s duty in Iraq, we witness an almost decade-long search for America’s principal terrorist target.

The film opens with sounds of September 11th under a black screen, then shifts to a “black site” in south Asia in 2003, where a young CIA operative, Maya (Jessica Chastain) witnesses a virulent interrogation of a captured terrorist (including water boarding) by an Agency colleague, Dan (Jason Clarke), her introduction to serious field work. Maya then is assigned to Islamabad, part of the CIA station headed by Joe Brady (Kyle Chandler) and established as a “tracker,” trained to both identify and run down potential al Qaeda operatives and, ideally, bring them to heel. Her particular focus: Bin Laden.

Over the years, she, along with her team, comes to identify one “Abu Ahmed” as someone close to Bin Laden, possibly his courier, and her investigations carry her to Saudi Arabia, London, Kabul, and back to Pakistan, quizzing detainees, studying records, piecing together leads. Word comes in 2009 that her promised connection, Abu Ahmed, is dead, but Maya later discovers him under another identity and insists he is the link.

By 2010, Maya is at CIA headquarters in Langley, convinced that the once Abu Ahmed—now identified as Ibrahim Sayeed—is the key to Bin Laden and defiantly pushing her boss George (Mark Strong) to mount an operation focused on him. The go-ahead, after a frustrating delay from higher-ups, is finally given by the unnamed CIA Director (James Gandolfini, in a bad wig and Leon Panetta glasses) and the White House. No one but Maya, it seems, is absolutely certain of the outcome.

In another parallel to “The Hurt Locker,” “Zero Dark Thirty” proceeds as a gripping docu-drama, with convincing and vivid re-creations of both the coarseness and craft of the intelligence game, where tension is the rule and humor is mordant. Chastain as Maya moves in this world of darkness like a sleek animal, using all her senses to sniff out her *bete noire*. A winsome actress in other guises, Chastain here is sallow-cheeked, knit-browed, driven by we know not what. Again, like Sgt. James of the “Hurt Locker,” we know very little of this warrior’s back story; we have to just accept her as she is—a character defined by her fixated passion.

All of this is prelude to the fact that “Zero Dark Thirty” is a terrific movie. Even if every intelligence element may not be exactly right, Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal

(who also teamed with her on “The Hurt Locker”) richly catch the spirit and detail of the search and what it takes to find a Bin Laden needle in a Pakistani haystack.

The film culminates, of course, with the raid on Abbottabad, Pakistan. This gripping sequence is a tour de force of movie re-creation, much of it viewed through the SEAL teams’ green night-vision goggles and moving in real time once inside the compound. Every foot of advancement, every door encountered, every fleeting body seen, every random human sound—all combine to a stunning sense of your creeping right along with these hit teams. And the curt finale is much as it must have been: a brutal, fatal shot to fell the monster (and Bigelow shows appropriate reticence in not showing his visage).

The filmmakers must have had some great cooperation or solid briefings from Agency sources because their re-creation of the Bin Laden compound seems palpable. The studly SEALs are portrayed as practiced and professional, yet mixing apprehension with a contained machismo. Once back again in Afghanistan—with the trophy of a shiny body bag—they are welcomed by Maya, with tears running down her cheeks: mission accomplished.

A great deal of political posturing about this movie—its “revealing” of classified information, its “condoning” of torture as effective intelligence, etc.—has been made by talking heads who have not even seen the movie. Forget the political point-making: go to admire a movie thriller which is as thoroughly dedicated and professional as the people it depicts.

(Rated “R” for combat violence, the film runs 157 min.)

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