

## American Traitor: The Trial of Axis Sally

Loosely based on a true story of post-WWII, “American Traitor: The Trial of Axis Sally,” follows the wartime life of an American woman, Mildred Gillars (Meadow Williams), dubbed “Axis Sally” for broadcasting Nazi propaganda to American troops during World War II, her story exposes the grim nature of the Third Reich's propaganda machine, her eventual capture in Berlin at the war's end, and her subsequent trial for treason--the core of the script--against the United States.

On her radio shows, Axis Sally would typically alternate [swing music](#) and propaganda messages aimed at American troops. These messages would advocate surrender, stoke fears that soldiers' wives and girlfriends were cheating on them and note that the Axis powers knew their locations. US soldiers listened to Gillars' broadcasts for the entertaining music even as they were skeptical about her attempts at blatant propaganda.

While the film uses sequences showing Gillars' studio work, it intercuts these with her trial in 1948-49 outside Washington, DC, where she is represented by cynical lawyer James Laughlin (Al Pacino). The film does not show DC locations, however, because it was shot in Puerto Rico. Her trial, on eight counts of treason, results in one conviction, based on one specific broadcast.

Directed by Michael Polish and co-written by him and two others, this is an intriguing historical footnote which somehow never fully gels on screen. There is an unfortunate dankness to the cinematography, especially the gray-brown tones of the jail and the courtroom—although this may actually have been the intent of Polish.

Al Pacino, long in the tooth now (at 81), lacks coherence as the defense attorney and rings changes on his growling New York cadences. He becomes a senior version of his over-the-top defense attorney in “And Justice for All” (1979). Meadow Williams personifies—in wardrobe, makeup, and lipstick—a pin-up girl of the period, but her performance is tentative and stiff, and her face looks like a mask. Other players are adequate, such as Swen Temmel as Billy Owen, Laughlin's naïve assistant (who appears to be falling for Mildred), and Thomas Kretschmann as a swinish Josef Goebbels, but a good many are stilted.

“American Traitor” seems like something of a vanity project for Williams, who also executive-produced. It might have turned out better if she had been able to distance herself more from it.

*(This film is rated “R,” runs 107 minutes, and opened on streaming sites on May 28).*

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