

Child 44

“Child 44” is based on the first of a trilogy of novels by British novelist Tom Rob Smith (that recalls the Western revisiting of the Soviet era by Martin Cruz Smith in “Gorky Park”). It appears that this Smith’s novels are part of a pitch-black trend in contemporary crime literature and entertainment wherein seriously flawed protagonists in grim settings take on the inevitable serial killers. The translation to film of “Child 44” may please fans of the novel with its nasty *frisson* but probably not many others.

The plot begins with the introduction of a boy orphaned by the Ukrainian famine of 1933, an orphan who becomes Leo Demidov (Tom Hardy) a Soviet Army hero of Berlin. Shift to 1953 (the last year of the Stalin era), and he has become a relatively idealistic domestic security officer in Moscow. After informing one of his close colleagues that the latter’s son was a victim of a “train accident” rather than a crime, Demidov is spurred to investigate a series of murders in a country where national doctrine dictates “There is no murder in Paradise.” His insistence in investigating two such cases gets him demoted, and he and his schoolteacher wife Raisa (Noomi Rapace), accused of being a spy, are both exiled to a militia assignment in the grim industrial town of Volsk.

While there, he discovers yet another child’s death and looks to investigate further. His new superior, General Nesterov (Gary Oldman), first opposes him then joins in on the serial killer investigation during which they uncover as many as 44 child deaths. Their marriage having been tested, both Leo and Raisa clandestinely return first to Moscow and then to Rostock in search of the killer (Paddy Considine). Sadly, the film’s denouement is a crude mess, ending up in a nonsensical mud fight.

Matching the novel’s grim tone, the movie, deliberately directed by David Espinoza and shot in the Czech Republic, is moody, if not morbid, its palette a mix of dirty gray and steel blue with little letup. That mood is further reinforced by an intrusive, plodding music score that just underscores the somberness. Noted American writer Richard Price (“The Wire”) contributed a script that lacks the punch and wit of his streetwise novels.

Some of the acting redeems the misery. Rapace is mostly effective as the modest teacher who ultimately proves her mettle as a tough cookie and loyal sidekick to her husband. Oldman, in too limited a role, is earnest and compassionate as an ostracized officer who finds new purpose. Yet some of the acting is overdone or grotesque, chiefly Joel Kinnaman as Leo’s security service colleague Vasili who turns out to be his constant nemesis. The role throughout is that of a vicious, unbelievable stereotype of an under-motivated villain.

The reason to see “Child 44” is to watch the further evolution of the contemporary Tom Hardy as a movie actor. Here, the hunky Britisher (so outstanding last year in two films, “Locke” and “The Drop”) takes on Demidov, a taciturn but sensitive soul, belying his brutish exterior. His Russian accent (the film is in English) seems accurate and his sympathies genuine. His steady underplaying is welcome in a film that tends too much to the overcooked.

(*The film is rated “R” for offensive violence and runs too long at 137 minutes.*)