

Farewell

One of those films “based on a true story,” “Farewell (*L’Affaire Farewell*)” offers the intriguing tale of a disaffected KGB officer who, in 1981, makes contact with an innocent French engineer with the express purpose of passing him Soviet secrets to the West

Lt. Colonel Grigoriev of the KGB (Emir Kusturica) is fed up with Brezhnev regime and concerned about his family’s future in the USSR. He has a loving wife, Natasha (Ingeborga Dapkunaite), and a teen-aged son to worry about. Not looking for any financial reward and avoiding traditional methods of spycraft, Grigoriev approaches an unlikely prospect, the engineer Pierre Froment (Guillaume Canet) who works for the Thomson corporation in Moscow.



Their connections are almost haphazard, their drops are unorthodox, their relationship curious, but the material keeps coming to the French Secret Service from the spy who is given the codename “Farewell.”

Over a two-year period, French President Francois Mitterand (Philippe Magnan) personally checks this mother-lode of material, and, eventually, even President Reagan (Fred Ward) is able to share the

documents, most of which touch on American security matters. While the Western powers are able to make hay with this intelligence, the relationship between Farewell and Pierre gets more dangerous and begins to fray, with Soviet authorities getting ever closer to finding the mole.

This is an espionage thriller that packs plenty of tension without any of the obviousness of the James Bond series or other crass spy films. The sensibility, provided by director Christian Carion (“Joyeux Noel”) and screenwriter Eric Raynaud, is thoroughly French, i.e., relatively understated and subtle, perhaps in part because the story is based on a French novel (by Sergey Kostine) which takes off from a real—and unusual--case, that of KGB Col. Vladimir Vetrov. The filmmakers achieve an authentic look, too, even though they were not allowed to shoot in Russia (filming was in the Ukraine).

Part of its attraction is that, while it does develop that tension mentioned above, “Farewell” is not morose or heavy—in parts it is even light-hearted. Poor Pierre, in way over his head, is at times a comic figure, befuddled, wondering how he got himself into such a fine mess while his concerned wife Jessica (Alexandra Maria Lara) urges him to get out of the business.

Guillaume Canet impersonates Froment with the right mix of earnestness and haplessness, a poor guy—with whom anyone can identify—who gets caught up in a dangerous game. Emir Kusturica is also effective as the shambling, dour colonel, a

decent representative of so many Soviets who had just had it with their barren lives. Interestingly, both of the leads are themselves prominent film directors, Canet having made the splendid 2006 thriller "Tell No One," while Kusturica, from Serbia, has had a wide-ranging international career since his breakthrough 1985 film, "When Father Was Away on Business."

Less effective are the performances of the featured Americans. Here perhaps Canet and Raynaud's unfamiliarity with the US context and the English language shows in scenes featuring Fred Ward as Reagan and his invented advisors, played by Willem Dafoe and David Soul (where did he come from?!). Ward's resemblance to Reagan is approximate, but his delivery just won't convince US ears, and the dialogue spoken by the American characters is wooden and inert.

But don't see "Farewell" for Cold War correctness, enjoy it as a fascinating episode of that period, told with style and sympathy, and, I should emphasize, appropriate for a spy flick, one with a great final plot twist.

(The film, with French and Russian subtitles, is unrated and runs 112 min.)

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