

Red Joan

Here comes another British spy film “inspired by a true story,” this one adapted from a novel. “Red Joan” describes how a young woman physicist at Cambridge University came to pass secrets about the British nuclear program to the Soviet Union right after World War II. This figure, Joan Stanley (representing a real person, Melita Norwood, who collaborated with the Soviets) is played in her maturity by Judi Dench. The film opens in 2000, when widow Joan is arrested by MI5 officers at her quiet suburban home, taken into custody, and questioned about her earlier involvement with communist and leftist contacts. Her traumatic interrogation drives her to recall a series of flashback memories.

The first flashback is to 1938 Cambridge, where 18-year-old Joan (Sophie Cookson) is smitten both by physics and by Leo (Tom Hughes) an intriguing émigré— from Russia via Germany—a young “red” enamored of the USSR, and, to a lesser extent, Joan. Joan’s loyalties are divided, though, since she admires her earnest nuclear physics professor, Max Davis (Stephen Campbell Moore) both for his knowledge and for his early awareness of her scientific acumen, even though she is “just a girl.” He eventually takes Joan on his team to work on secret nuclear developments. Her ping-pong life between fitful romance and steady achievement lasts through WWII, when the reality of the US atom bombs dropped on Japan chastens her views on nuclear power. She becomes convinced that, to achieve equilibrium in the world, she must reveal nuclear secrets to the USSR to balance the Americans and engender “world peace” through what came to be called mutually assured destruction.

Back to 2000, we see the elder Joan, feeling in her bones that she has really done nothing wrong but agonizing about her probably traitorous acts. These scenes are countered by her younger self preparing a cover-up for her actions, one that requires her fleeing to Australia to start a new life with a husband. Evidence of that eventual family appears in the framing story in the person of her son, Nick (Ben Miles) a noted barrister who gradually learns of his mum’s clandestine past and is revolted by it.

For avid Judi Dench fans, be aware she is essentially a featured player here, secondary to the main action in the 1930’s and 1940’s. Her performance is one mostly of pained perturbation, though she shows off some sparks in some intense exchanges with her son. The star of “Red Joan” is Cookson (who appeared in the “Kingsman” series) who does a decent job of playing the naïve who slowly gravitates to crusader, a woman emotionally driven by “better red than dead” logic. She is nicely balanced by the veteran Moore, whose Max is a serious yet jaunty type who comes to fully value Joan. Her paramour, played by Hughes, comes off less well, more of a sketch than a real person (we never see him at work or at any other task). Hughes basically does a glib variation on his Prince Albert character from the PBS series “Victoria,” complete with an affected Russo/German accent.

Trevor Nunn, one of the greatest of contemporary British stage directors, here helms his first big screen film since 1996 (“Twelfth Night”) and does a capable job. No fireworks, little flash, this is a competent little espionage thriller that might satisfy one on a Friday night out... Whether you will debate Joan’s ethics afterwards at dinner is another story.

(The film is rated "R" with a running time of 101 minutes.)
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