

Bridge of Spies



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Produced by Stephen Spielberg, Kristie Macosko Krieger and Marc Platt. Directed by Stephen Spielberg. Screenplay by Joel & Ethan Cohen & Matt Charman. Production Design by Adam Stockhausen. Cinematography by Janusz Kaminski. Art Direction by Marco Bittner Rosser. Original Music by Thomas Newman. Edited by Michael Kahn.

Cinematic length: 141 minutes. Distributed by 20th Century Fox and Walt Disney Pictures. Production Companies: Touchstone Pictures/Dreamworks Pictures/Fox 200 Pictures and several others. Cinematic release October 2015: Check for ratings. Rating 85 %.

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Cast

Tom Hanks as *James B. Donovan*

Mark Rylance as *Colonel Rudolf Abel*

Amy Ryan as *Mary McKenna Donovan*

Sebastian Koch as *Wolfgang Vogel*

Alan Alda as *Watters*

Austin Stowell as *Francis Gary Powers*

Billy Magnussen as *Doug Forrester*

Scott Shepherd as *Hoffman*

Eve Hewson as *Carol Donovan*

Jesse Plemons as *Murphy*

Michael Gaston as *Williams*

Peter McRobbie as *Allen Dulles*

Domenick Lombardozi as *Agent Blasco*

Will Rogers as *Frederic Pryor*

Dakin Matthews as *Judge Mortimer W. Byers*

Stephen Kunken as *William Tompkins*

Edward James Hyland as *Chief Justice Earl Warren*

Francis Gary Powers Junior (uncredited)

Review

Bridge of Spies works well as a retelling of three Cold War incidents: the American capture of the Soviet agent Colonel Rudolph Abel in New York in 1957, the Soviet downing and capture of pilot Gary Powers in 1960 and the detention of an American student, Frederick Prior in East Berlin soon after.

The four incidents eventually interweave. In the film they develop in the order just given - as they did in history. Mercifully Spielberg does not get didactic or stagey or rush his story or spoon feed the audience with an obvious narrative. Not doing these things but keeping a story interesting requires special skills which Spielberg

and his writers have. The audience follows an elderly man (Mark Rylance) who appears to be an amateur painter doing mundane things, but we can see something must be wrong as several men track him through the streets, then in the park concealed objects have been left for him. FBI agents arrest him at his apartment and he turns out to be Colonel Rudolf Abel, a Soviet agent who will go on trial.



The laconic, phlegmatic Abel and the dedicated Donovan confer.

Nobody wants to defend him, including his eventual defender, an insurance lawyer James B. Donovan (Tom Hanks). His wife Mary (Amy Ryan) also goes against taking the case, but his boss (Alan Alda) himself under pressure from the government, forces Donovan to become Abel's courtroom defender. What is supposed to happen is that Donovan merely goes through the motions of a defence so that Abel will be convicted and executed. Instead Donovan, once in the job, follows his lawyer's ethics and gives the best possible defence he can. The evidence appears as too strong for an acquittal, but he manages to change the

sentence from a death penalty to imprisonment, with the possibility of a prisoner exchange with the Russians.



Waiting at the bridge

This happens and Donovan has to go to the divided city of Berlin to effect an exchange: Abel for Gary Powers. However as usual in politics nothing really can be as simple as it seems.

Hanks appears of course centre stage and he does a variation of the persona he did so well in *Philadelphia* and *Saving Private Ryan*. Once again he portrays an average man, differentiated only by above average abilities and an undeflected dedication to his aim. Once again that aim concerns decency. Here he does the best he can for Abel his client. This leads to ostracism and threats at home and a dreary prolonged stay in Berlin.

The sense of place and era is well done but not overstated and stagey. What is missing here is a sense of time passing. From Abel's arrest in 1957 until the exchange at the Potsdam Bridge in 1962 seems like only a few months in the film.



Gary Powers goes on trial for espionage in Russia



The Donovan family had to endure ostracism, threats violence and public hostility due to his defence of Abel

Spielberg wisely avoids the usual clichés in films dealing with espionage and diplomacy: the highly placed traitor, femme fatales, high speed car chases, and overloud overly fast tension music, spectacular explosions, extras toppling over dead within seconds from a single bullet, endless excitement given a glossy treatment and goodies verses baddies. All these things work in the fantasy world of James Bond, but should be avoided by others.

Instead Spielberg and his team capture the dreary world of diplomacy/espionage. Prolonged complications become frequently vexing. Nobody seems to be a villain, everybody does what they think will be best for their country. The west gets depicted as conformist, intolerant of uncertainty, ruled by expediency. Communism East Berlin style resembles a jail, where escape attempts from Lenin's utopia can easily result in death. Donovan witnesses refugees trying to climb the new Berlin wall being machine gunned, as if this was common. One beneficial effect of watching this film is to dispel the myth of the good old days of the late 1950s/early 1960s. Even so, it takes great skill to make a film about this world without becoming boring.



Waiting on “the Bridge of Spies” which is Germany’s Potsdam Bridge. The lone figure here surrounded by the accoutrements of Cold War hostility suggests the powerlessness of the individual faced with state power.

Criticisms? The film leaves out two dramatic moments: the newsboy's accidental finding of the Soviet microfilm hidden in the hollowed out coin and the Soviet use of Gary Powers and his plane for propaganda purposes. Abel's ultimate career, lecturing soviet school students about espionage could have made an ironic point. The coin eventually led to Abel. Oddly Spielberg's parents were in Russia then and saw Power's U2 plane on public display with accompanying slogans, but he does not use their recollections.

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