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MIFF 2012: "Shadow Dancer" moves beautifully to an all too familiar tune

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 16, 2012 BY TOPE IN MIFF, REVIEWS, SPOTLIGHT
TAGGED: 1993, AIDEN GILLEN, BELFAST, CLIVE OWEN, DOCUMENTARY, INFORMANT, IRA, JAMES MARSH, MAN ON WIRE, MI5, SHADOW DANCER, SPY, THRILLER

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Shadow Dancer

Directed by James Marsh

Tom Bradby

2012, UK, Ireland



There's no *real* reason to believe that the artistry required in the making of a documentary is vastly different to that required in the making of a fictional narrative. Nonetheless it is always interesting to watch filmmakers transition from one to the other, sometimes permanently, sometimes as one-off dabblings. Martin Scorsese and Werner Herzog, both consummate documentarians, have been swinging back and forth between both forms for as long as they've been making films, and to the benefit of both their filmographies there has been some very productive crossbreeding during the span of their respective careers. Then you have those old and new masters of fictional narrative filmmaking, from Antonioni and Resnais to the Dardennes, who cut their teeth making documentaries before they settled on crafting their own very particular realities, while the Wisemans and Morrises presumably saw and still see limitless potential in the documentary format. Finally, there are the younger filmmakers exploring their craft, artists like Argentine Celina Murga who's recent and inaugural foray into documentary production, *Normal School*, is compelling content wise but leaves much to be desired from a pure filmmaking standpoint. 2008's *Man on Wire* is a ridiculously beloved documentary and, from memory, part of the acclaim heaped upon it was due to director James Marsh's elegantly inventive way of recreating an event of which the only visual documentation in existence (or at least available to filmmakers) were evocatively grainy still photographs of Philippe Petit treading a tightrope strung up between New York's twin towers in 1974. Intercutting these with talking heads and artfully stages re-enactments of the actual events, Marsh managed to craft an engrossing and often suspenseful narrative.

With *Shadow Dancer*, Marsh makes his narrative feature debut with a brooding piece of historical fiction. Set primarily in Belfast circa 1993, *Shadow Dancer* centres on Colette McVeigh, a young single mother who finds herself a soldier for the IRA, involved in activities deemed by the British government to be terrorist acts. In an utterly predictable opening sequence, screenwriter Tom Bradby (adapting his own novel) and Marsh station us in Belfast 1973 where a young Colette's adamant belief that it's her younger brother's turn to go out and buy their father a pack of fags results in tragedy befalling the family, an event which ostensibly drives her and her surviving brothers Gerry and Connor, and much of the family, into the ranks of the Irish Republican Army. For many reasons but mainly for the fact that the IRA have always been fiery proponents of their cause on legitimate political grounds, this sequence is barely necessary in establishing the fierce motivation and headstrong antagonism of the McVeigh family, not it is a vital means of foreshadowing the bruised ambivalence of Colette as she is trapped between two opposing forces for much of the film. To be honest, for such a scene to be depended upon to bolster this essential piece of backstory, it would help if the scene itself didn't feel as though its primary purpose was to lay emotional groundwork. It rings terribly of "plot device".



Clive Owen, in one of those roles that takes a strapping male star and turns him into a disenchanted, sleep-deprived, middle-aged public servant with a bit of a paunch, is reliably tense as Mac, an MI5 operative whose team nabs Colette early in the film shortly after she makes an intercepted bomb drop in the London Tube. Using the safety of her young son as a bargaining ploy, Mac attempts to recruit Colette as an informant, offering her two options: cooperation or deep trouble. Reluctantly she agrees, but she is of two minds and two hearts, and to this conflict her ultimate response is emotional remove. But this film would not be the pseudo-espionage thriller that it is without the twist. As Mac becomes increasingly invested in protecting Colette, whether from a purely professional standpoint of due to some burgeoning emotional attachment, he uncovers some strange dealings within MI5, dealing which are a direct threat to Colette's safety. If Clive Owen looks disillusioned at the beginning of the film, what he is at the end of it is simply heartbreaking.



For a filmmaker accustomed to fashioning narrative and thematic harmony from disparate bits and pieces of evidence and hearsay, Marsh's approach is refreshingly elegant and assuredly so. He is not afraid of images, and seems to have enough trust in their potency to let them breathe a little. Editorially he is no Bela Tarr, but he is a far, far cry from Michael Bay. The visual style has a very particular look common, of late, to British productions of a similar bent; hazy and grainy with a loose centre of focus and a bias towards the gentle handheld aesthetic. It reminds one of the kind of dirty nostalgia that the *Red Riding* trilogy is soaked in: displaying a weird longing for the anxiety and oppressive socio-political atmosphere of certain eras past, the moral murkiness and sense that everything could go belly up at any moment.



Andrea Riseborough's performance as Colette circa 1993 is subdued but emotionally charged nonetheless. What makes her a compelling protagonist is her nearly absolute lack of anything upon which a viewer can hang their confidence. With her wispy frame, milkmaid prettiness and her doleful expression, Colette's strength as an individual is derived from her stoicism, which is clearly not borne of some inability to emote. Her utter terror at the situation she is in is deadly apparent in her moments alone, but when faced with the demands of Mac or the gentle but hawk-eyed suspicion of bloodthirsty IRA enforcer (David Wilmot in a creepily considerate performance), Colette is a wall. There are moments, though, when this wall is tested, and it is a tad surprising when the clear cracks in it go either unnoticed or are underestimated and ignored. In particular, there is one tense scene during with Colette's safety is at real risk. How she navigates this situation unscathed is still somewhat puzzling, even after further thought.



Watching *Shadow Dancer* is one of those discomfiting film-going experiences during which the *stuff* being reflected off the screen at you is hard to fault, not the style nor the story nor the score, and certainly not the performances. But even as all these elements work together harmoniously to produce a solid piece of cinema, there is something slightly rote about it. Frankly, Marsh is too talented a director to deliver a film severely lacking in the direction department, and the more one thinks about it the more the writing surfaces as *Shadow Dancer*'s unfortunate snag. Bradby's screenplay is by most accounts a fine piece of screenwriting. As a narrative, the film is compelling and at times mildly thrilling. As a character piece, it is perhaps a little thinly sketched but forgivably so. Of assistance to Bradby in this department are the fine acting chops of the likes of Aiden Gillen (probably best known as Tommy Carcetti in *The Wire* or as *Game of Thrones*'s Petyr Baelish) who plays the resolute, single-minded Gerry, and Domhnall Gleeson as the fiery younger brother Connor. Dialogue-wise, Bradby adheres strongly to a very particular strain of speech and is unafraid to be dialectically acute to the films credit, in principle. Admittedly, the audio during my screening did this strongly-accented, vernacular-laden dialogue no favours being, frankly, too generous in volume and in bass. Had this not been an issue, I image the authenticating effects of having a particular *voice* would have been a stronger contributing factor to the *reality* of the film, which is honestly quite strong. Unfortunately, as the film chugs towards its conclusion, it begins to resemble a "spy thriller" in the way its various narrative threads are hurriedly resolved. This is made all the more depressing when you realise that *Shadow Dancer* continues to look and feel like a much more sophisticated film.

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Nigerian-Australian Sydney-based med student, film enthusiast and fledgling writer. Also a soccer fan and filmmaker in-utero.

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