

THE RUSSIA HOUSE

Directed by Fred Schepisi
Produced by Paul Maslansky and Fred Schepisi
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Released in 1990

An espionage romance is usually glossy and adventuresome. *The Russia House* is gritty and gray, showing a more realistic approximation of what spy craft is really about, while emphasizing the human costs of the late Cold War. Though too much emphasis is placed on the theory that the arms race is a beast fueled by the political stakes of defense contracts, the film largely focuses on the futility of intelligence operations, with their limited capability to filter truth from a dirtied pool of muddy misinformation.

The Russia House deals with a boozy British publisher who inspires the courage of a burned-out military scientist hoping to save Russia from itself by publishing state secrets. Serving as a kind of liaison for the two men is a divorced mother of two living in Moscow. When forced to choose between fulfilling his duties to Britain and leaving the pretty Muscovite to the consequences of state treason, the protagonist-publisher decides that she is the "only country" he wants to call home.

Success is found on many levels. The film is primarily distinguished as being the first major Western production to be shot in the Soviet Union. But it also shines with a near-perfect cast:

- James Fox as the sympathetic British spymaster who's brilliance for espionage isn't matched by a similarly outsized operating budget
- Roy Scheider as the unsympathetic but believable American intelligence chief whose long experience gives him a cynical edge
- Klaus Maria Brandauer as the enigmatic Soviet genius resigned to his probable destruction
- Michelle Pfeiffer as the wary Katya, balancing wizened idealism with the caution of a protective mother
- And, of course, the inimitable Sean Connery, one of the greatest stars in cinematic history, bringing anger, devilish humor, and surprising tenderness to his role as Barley Blair, the haunted everyman with the chance to start again

Michael Kitchen, John Mahoney, J.T. Walsh, and an uncredited Eric Idle also make welcome appearances in a film that combines the best of ensemble collaboration and starring-role support.

Jerry Goldsmith's remarkable score anchors the film. A combination of orchestral and synthetic textures, infused with elements of jazz, and unified by the prominent use of saxophone, the score relates the distressed feelings of characters who are justifiably hesitant to speak frankly. The score is graced by the duduk, an old Armenian wind instrument resembling

an oboe. It is particularly effective in scenes involving Dante, when he is not present but his cries seem to echo on the winds.

Though the Soviet Union is sympathetically rendered, it doesn't get a pass. In fact, they must have been really hard up for hard currency if they read the script as filmed and still said 'okay.' Consider:

- Katya informs Barley that she, "like everyone else in Moscow," is divorced.
- We get plenty of shots of broken-down, junky Soviet cars.
- Dante says that, in the course of his duties for the state, he is writing lies, and lies even to his masters (the truth, apparently, is that the Soviets are losing the arms race but, so far, keeping this secret).
- Katya complains that even though glasnost gives Russia's citizens the right to complain, that doesn't mean everybody will have the shoes they need.
- Dante, it is implied, did not die of hepatitis, but was killed after his capture by the authorities.

Of course, neither the British nor the Americans come off looking too good either. Expanding on a comment Barley makes to the Soviet authorities, this is a film about honor, not ideology. And when Katya and her family arrive safe in Lisbon, the web of fear at last relaxed, a rejuvenated man who took on three countries can finally embrace victory. Barley inspired Dante, who inspired Katya, who inspired Blair to live up to his rhetoric. In the end, Barley, by betraying his country, couldn't save the world, but he could save Katya. And why not? He loved her more than any country and knew that if he didn't take care of her she'd be lost.

Love engenders much, and even more when it goes awry. But however love is defined, it demands sacrifice, thrives on truth, and is proven by fidelity in all its forms. Before, these were foreign concepts to Barley Blair, but now he has a reason to believe.

The Russia House is an intelligent, thought-provoking romantic thriller not to be forgotten. Though its political concerns were practically passé from the day of its release, the film's deeper message will always be topical.