



FILM REVIEW: Dominic Cooke's IronBark starring Benedict Cumberbatch

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Benedict Cumberbatch turns in another quality performance as UK businessman, Greville Wynne, turned Cold War secret agent in the political thriller *Ironbark* from Director Dominic Cooke. Wynne leads a relatively comfortable life with a warm and proper wife, Sheila, portrayed by the sugary Jessie Buckley. The chemistry between the two is natural and realistic as their relationship bends to its breaking point as Greville cannot intimately share his newly enacted double life try as he may.

The film, a period piece, opens with a harsh speech being delivered by the former Soviet Union premier, Nikita Krushchev, menacingly threatening to wipe the United States from the face of the earth. The clip appears to be an archival newsreel and provides an eery authenticity to what *Ironbark* undertakes. A decorated Russian Army Officer, portrayed by [Merab Ninidze](#) in a tour-de-force performance, has seen enough and reaches out to the West to stop the madman Krushchev from destroying civilization as it existed in the 1950s and 1960s.

The “Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,” Rachel Brosnahan, turns in a surprisingly adept performance as CIA official Emily Donovan, while Angus Wright convincingly portrays British intelligence agent Dickie Franks. The two intelligence officers recruit Greville Wynne to be a courier of secret documents out of Russia. What would become known as the Cuban Missile Crisis is exposed as Wynne couriers roughly 500 documents during the top-secret intel operation. Unfortunately, all does not go as planned when the stakes are raised. Yet, what is revealed catapults the narrative into an unflinchingly suspenseful political drama.

At its best, *Ironbark* delivers an insightful truth in matters of the heart during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, formally known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics with grace and efficiency from start to finish. In the Q & A following the film’s screening at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival, Director Cooke confessed to the amount of thought and visualization exercised before executing the film’s scene takes – no more than 2-3 takes.

From a directorial standpoint, a well-designed shot list is only a part of executing a highly polished take. The starring cast of Cumberbatch, Brosnahan, Buckley, Ninidze, Wright as well as Kirill Pirogov (Oleg Gribanov) was magnificent. The cinematography from the Director of Photography, Sean Bobbitt was exquisite. And the production design, costuming and sound had a considerable artistic flair.

Filming locations in both London and Prague rounded out a highly believable and quite authentic period piece.

Granted a few moments seem to stagnate. Yet, the contrived pauses allowed for moments of comedic relief (primarily in the idiosyncrasies of the film's protagonist Wynne. Ultimately these moments served contrast in juxtaposition to the Gulag scenes. In my opinion, this speaks highly of Cooke's mastering the medium for the digestive machinations of a pro-Western audience.

Not surprisingly, as numerous deals are inked during Sundance, *Ironbark* was snatched up by Roadside Attractions and Lionsgate, officially on January 27th, 2020, three days after its premiere. Originally scheduled for a March-April release, *Ironbark* is now in a TBA (To Be Announced) status for release. Stay tuned as this was one of the best audience films of the 2020 Sundance Film Festival! Highly recommended.



Ironbark Director Dominic Cooke responds to the audience following the premiere of his film at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, on January 24th, 2020. (Photo courtesy of Sundance.org)



Left to right; Merab Ninidze, Dominic Cooke and Rachel Brosnahan display their *Ironbark* premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. (Photo courtesy of Sundance.org)

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