



FILM: **BRIDGE OF SPIES**

FDG RATING: 3.6 ☺☺☺☺○
Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Director: Steven Spielberg
Actor: Tom Hanks (James Donovan)
Actor: Mark Rylance (Rudolf Abel)

DATE: NOVEMBER 15, 2015

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **BRIDGE OF SPIES**

A Spielberg spy film starring Tom Hanks sounded like a Hollywood recipe for cinema sensationalism possibly without equal amounts of substantive depth but fold in the writing talents of Joel and Ethan Cohen and you get a fully baked film. Tom Hanks was excellent as a New York insurance settlement lawyer, James Donovan, unexpectedly recruited by the CIA in the mid 1950s to negotiate the release of prisoner Francis Gary Powers, a US pilot who while flying a U2 spy plane over Russia, was shot down, captured, and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Previously, Donovan had also incongruously agreed to his legal partners request to defend Rudolf Abel, believed to be a Cold War KGB spy. But rather than doing the minimal required, Donovan shocked the judge, his firm, prosecuting attorneys, and his family by mounting a strong defense of Abel, seeking acquittal, causing angry repercussions by the American public. He convinced the judge to sentence Abel to 30 years imprisonment, rather than death, on the grounds that Abel may one day be valuable as a bargaining chip with the USSR. This is exactly the tactic Donovan uses to gain the release of Powers, plus using uncompromising negotiating skills, also gains the release of Frederic Pryor, an American economics graduate student, who visits his German girlfriend in East Berlin just as the Berlin Wall is being erected, is stopped by border guards and arrested as a spy.

Our expectations were dramatically rewarded by the compelling script and especially by the intriguing, quirky, Rudolf Abel character (Mark Rylance), a non-menacing spy, whose reserved, calm response to the most serious of questions such as every time Donovan asks him if he's worried about the possibility of being executed, Abel flatly replies, "Would that help?" Abel adds an unexpected element of understated humor. Surprisingly, we really care about Abel and respond to him as a soft spoken human being (we first see him as an artist painting a portrait in his room) rather than as a single dimensional spy engaged in espionage. We also see that the USA is doing exactly the same kind of spying.

We noted the exceptional cinematography, costuming and 1950s sets that drew us into the film, capturing the period perfectly. When Donovan gets to Europe, the color palette changes with East Germany completely drab gray. We could feel the fear that dominated people's lives constantly obsessing about the Russian threat. Bridge of Spies was engaging from start to finish, suspenseful, and insightful about the different faces of patriotism. We passed a unanimously positive verdict on the film awarding it 3.6 on a scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)



.....
See you at the movies!
Adriane Dedic, adedic@pacbell.net
Film Discussion Group (FDG) organizer