

The Debt

A Review by Tom Sims, Executive Director, Cape May Film Festival

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We've seen some of the themes and modalities used in the new film *The Debt*—but in many cases not like this. There is the weaving between storylines set in past and present—similar to *Sarah's Key* (2011) or *The Secret in Their Eyes* (2009). Certainly the theme of bringing Nazis to justice is nothing new. Somehow *The Debt* makes very good use of the subject and style proving that they are not so overused to be employed effectively. But notice I said “very good” use—not “great” use.

The Debt follows the 40-year story of three Mossad secret agents sent to Berlin in the mid-1960s to bring a Nazi war criminal (played masterfully by actor Jesper Christensen) to justice. The war criminal, now a gynecologist, is first approached by agent Rachel Singer under cover as a patient. The character is played in 1965 by Jessica Chastain (try to name a film she hasn't been in this year—*The Help*, *Take Shelter*, *The Tree of Life*) and in 1997 by Oscar winner Helen Mirren. The other two agents are played superbly by Tom Wilkinson and Ciarán Hinds in 1997 and Marton Csokas and Sam Worthington in 1965. The initial kidnapping of the doctor goes reasonably well but is ultimately botched. He must become a most reluctant house guest at the agents' apartment until they are told what to do with him. The U.S. doesn't want to get involved, and the Israeli government begins to ignore the young agents' plight.

There is a clear “a-ha” moment in *The Debt* that is truly remarkable and makes you sit up in your seat and marvel at the crafty writing and stylish storytelling. After that “a-ha” moment, the film sort of... well... goes on... and is not nearly as sure-footed or remarkable. Still, that one brilliant moment is worth the price of admission as is the fine writing throughout the film (you never feel jolted or confused by the past/present migration). And also quite notable is the casting in this film. As you move from past to present, the actors' features make it believable that these two sets of younger and older players could be the same characters. More importantly, the actors capture the spirit of their characters—despite 40 years difference.

So *The Debt* is certainly worth the price, even if in the end you're feeling like the film hasn't paid all of its debt to flawless storytelling.

A brief word in remembrance of Beach Theatre: a landmark on the Cape May map, Beach Theatre had been home to our Festival for many years—and we mourn with film lovers all over Cape May at its demise.