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For the Sake of Deception

Patrik Breil · Wednesday, June 12th, 2019

Jed Mercurio has created a gripping political drama that touches upon many relevant topics, yet falls short of its potential. Too many themes, gratuitous plot twists, and a lack of plausibility prevent an otherwise well-crafted drama from reaching its true potential.

By Patrik Breil

Upon its release in August 2018, the political thriller *Bodyguard* by Jed Mercurio (best known for his ongoing police drama *Line of Duty*) managed to capture the interest of the British public like few shows before in recent years. In the same year, only the World Cup garnered similar ratings, and for a TV show boasting similar numbers (more than 10 million viewers) you would have to go back to early *Downton Abbey* episodes. In the wake of its success, Netflix secured the international rights midway through the season. But can the show live up to the expectations fueled by its UK run?

A Strong Foundation Squandered

Bodyguard follows Sergeant David Budd (Richard Madden), a highly skilled and duty-bound veteran turned officer. The first episode starts off with an excellent sequence, which excels in its depressingly real depiction of the threat posed by terrorism and of our impotence to prevent some of those attacks. During this gripping scene aboard a passenger train, it is up to David to defuse the situation. He has to rely on his military training, while he simultaneously opens up on an emotional level. In the end, he is able to thwart the attack and, after a standoff with police forces, apprehends one of the attackers alive. But not only is the tension palpable; we become invested

TV Show

Cast: Richard Madden, Keeley Hawes, Gina McKee, Sophie Rundle, Vincent Franklin, Pippa Haywood, Stuart Bowman, Paul Ready

Created and written by: Jed Mercurio

Directors: John Strickland, Thomas Vincent

Available on Netflix

Six episodes ranging from 56 to 75 minutes

in the protagonist immediately because David is set up as more than a stereotypical action protagonist. He is a real person struggling with posttraumatic stress disorder and a failed marriage. The experiences David has made in Afghanistan have left him a deeply insecure shell of his former self, which is now struggling to just keep on going and to find a new purpose other than husband or soldier.

Despite his instable condition, David is rewarded for his actions with the dubious privilege of protecting Home Secretary Julia Montague (Keeley Hawes). This new assignment proves to be problematic. As a leading politician within the government, Julia both welcomed Britain's involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq while she also supports surveillance policies that would turn citizens even more transparent. From the get-go, the two are positioned as diametrical opposites: the hawkish, calculating politician, protected by the compassionate officer, who personally suffered because of decisions made by the former. The stage is ultimately set when the audience is informed that Julia has managed to make enemies both within her own party by trying to overthrow Prime Minister Vosler (David Westhead) and in circles unrelated to party politics.

It is here, in the first half of the season, where the strengths of the show are most apparent. The plot is tense and its scope still manageable because its focus is on the two main characters reacting to events beyond their control. David and Julia's relationship keeps the show interesting and anchors the more prominent plot-points to relatable characters. Yet, this solid pairing somehow develops into one of the first headscratchers of the show. Their relationship does not remain purely professional, and their romance is as cliché as it is out of nowhere. It is only thanks to Madden and Hawes that this development does not drift into the implausible, which would undermine the realistic and tense atmosphere crafted up to that point. Despite this flaw, the first three episodes lay the foundation for a more than solid thriller, that keeps the audience guessing as to who is behind all the events surrounding David.

Questions of Believability

While the first half of the season feels like a well-crafted political thriller, where no one is to be trusted, events following the third episode kickstart the conspiracy theory underpinning the plot. This goes so far that the audience has to question even the protagonist's motivations. The doubts regarding plausibility sowed by the handling of David's relation to Julia are unfortunately proven correct. In an increasingly complicated web, Metropolitan Police is pinned against the Secret Service, while war veterans, organized crime, terrorists, and members of the political establishment are also added into the mix; all are made out to potentially be major players in the unfolding events.

While intrigue and plotting are the hallmarks of any political thriller, the characters on either side, among them David's superior Lorraine Craddock (Pippa Haywood),

Minister Mike Travis (Vincent Franklin), and Commander Anne Sampson (Gina McKee), feel more like walking plot developments than real human characters with credible motivations. For instance, it remains wholly unconvincing that police officials and intelligence agents would find it more appealing to work against one another on all levels, going so far as to actively hinder progress in the proceedings, than to cooperate in any reasonable manner during a national emergency. Why parts of the intelligence community passively watch while certain events happen further raises questions regarding the prominence of twists over believability and realism in the latter half of the show.

Plot twists, like the intrigue so prominent in many political thrillers, can be highly rewarding and interesting when executed well. *Bodyguard*, however, never manages to make them feel natural in the sense that, even if it is not foreshadowed too obviously beforehand, you would in retrospect still accept a certain behavior or plot development as a conceivable possibility. By relying on some absurd twists, the story starts feeling more like on the spot decisions than a thought-out story progression. The initial terror attack is overshadowed by a second one that brings the danger closer to David. But instead of crafting an interesting narrative around terrorism and counterterrorism, new elements, motivations, and factions are introduced at the drop of a hat. As a consequence, the attacks lose their impact and the mystery behind them, which initially hooked the viewers, becomes more or less irrelevant while the show is throwing new mysteries at them. What first started out like a modern take on 1970s political thrillers becomes a vehicle for non-characters who mainly serve as smokescreens.

A Lack of Focus Keeps Bodyguard From Living Up to its Potential

Part of the show's allure is the actuality and interconnectedness of the topics presented to us, but the show suffers by trying too much during its relatively short runtime and could have benefited from a more focused thematic approach. Many of the topics touched upon would be enough for any six-episode show by themselves, let alone all of them mashed together. From the outset, we are presented with a protagonist plagued by his experiences made in an unnecessary war and his marriage failing as a result of it. The show could have used this as a jumping-off point and could have explored how Western military action has real effects back home and how many of the people risking their lives in the so-called »War on Terror« are left alone with their problems.

David's suffering is portrayed prominently but almost exclusively as a personal issue. As a societal one, it is absolutely underrepresented: no mentioning of what families must go through and how or in which way the state's support for veterans of our modern unpopular conflicts is lacking. The only digression into this is a single scene of veterans at a self-help meeting. But the significance of the scene is diminished by simply being staged as a vehicle to introduce yet another narrative to the show. Here, a trimming of the plot would have proven beneficial. Focusing on domestic issues instead of also including Islamist terrorism would still allow for a tense thriller with high stakes.

The audience is shown the threats of terrorism and how it is instrumentalized to

introduce problematic surveillance policies. In a questionable way, *Bodyguard* refuses to really engage with the problems related to surveillance policies. The issue of Britain's reaction to terrorism – the intrusion into its citizens' private lives – is treated with no real nuance and serves as little more than a device to make Julia a less sympathetic character. No real disadvantages or threats of constant surveillance are discussed in any significant way. As it turns out, a more complete web of surveillance could even have uncovered at least one of the conspiracies much earlier. By also throwing onto the pile the reaction of organized crime to such policies, *Bodyguard* becomes increasingly overburdened.

Worryingly, the creators of the show also decided to follow a narrative that normalizes a general suspicion against any Muslim person. One of the prime suspects of one of the attacks turns out to be the innocent pawn of larger forces; yet, the name of that character is never cleared in any meaningful way. Further, a seemingly innocent person is revealed to be an Islamist zealot bent on destroying Western society, which seems to confirm the legitimacy of widespread suspicion against all Muslims. In the latter case, the creators were at least attentive enough to circumvent gender roles by placing a female terrorist in charge of the train attack. To add to these topics, the show covers questions of women in leadership roles and questions of political intrigue, to name the most prominent topics. None of it is really fleshed out enough to carry the show on its own for its entirety, and the lack of room given to those elements results in the topics lacking impact. More often than not, they feel like mere window-dressing, behind which the next plot twist awaits.

Engaging Mess

What keeps the show interesting despite its structural flaws in the second half is the direction by Thomas Vincent and John Strickland. With the solid foundation of the first three episodes, it is especially the second half of the season that benefits from their direction. What the episodes now lack in character, motivations, and believable developments is thankfully saved by the presentation that counters the mess of intrigues and convoluted plans. The visual style leaves little to be desired. Tense scenes in mundane locations like the train from the beginning, a bar, or even just an unremarkable front porch effectively convey a high level of suspense to the audience. The action is shot engagingly – without relying on shaky cam elements and rapid cuts – and some of the set pieces are outstanding, especially for a television show with a decidedly lower budget than that of big players like *Game of Thrones*. Particularly the last big set piece during the final episode, which is centered around David making his way through London on foot, is crafted so expertly that some of the dubious plot developments that got him there in the first place are luckily overshadowed. The direction and Madden's performance (for which he won a Golden Globe as best actor in a drama series) combine as the show's forte and manage to keep the audience invested without them doubting some of the debatable developments – at least for the runtime of each episode. In hiding some of the flaws of an increasingly complex and implausible script, the show enables the audience to disband its skepticism, which becomes more necessary the closer we get to the finale of the season.

All in all, many of the twists and turns the show displays feel like calculated deceptions of the audience in order to surprise or shock them. But despite its flaws,

Bodyguard manages to keep the audience's interest and convincingly promises that it is worth to follow the show down a rabbit hole of schemes and deceit. That it cannot live up to its extremely successful UK run, however, should not diminish the fact that *Bodyguard*, albeit being overly convoluted, is a highly bingeable and entertaining show.

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