

## The Courier

“The Courier” is a true-life spy story, a moody return to the Cold War thriller of the 1960’s, recalling, most recently, Steven Spielberg’s “Bridge of Spies” (2015) which places a regular US citizen in the web of serious East-West international intrigue. Here the protagonist is an unassuming British businessman, Greville Wynne (Benedict Cumberbatch), recruited into one of the greatest international conflicts in history.

At the behest of the British's MI-6, in the persons of Dickie Franks (Angus Wright) and a CIA operative Emma Donovan (Rachel Brosnahan), Wynne is asked to participate in a covert partnership with Soviet intelligence officer Colonel Oleg Penkovsky (Merab Ninidze) a loyal officer who, though deemed fully loyal by the authorities, has become totally disaffected from the Soviet regime, and seeks a way out by defecting with Soviet nuclear secrets in that will provide crucial intelligence to prevent a nuclear confrontation with the West. This at the time of the U.S.-Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis with a pugnacious Nikita Khrushchev in charge of the Kremlin.

Wynne, though a very buttoned-down businessman, exhibits a hail-fellow-well-met style that just suits his job as a companionable broker of trade and exchanges between British tradesmen and their Soviet counterparts. Years of such schmoozing have given him an ability to move into and within Russian business circles with ease, which Western officialdom (and intelligence) cannot penetrate. Both the English MI-6 Franks and the CIA’s Donovan approach him for a “simple” job of linking up with a top USSR source and potential defector: Col. Penkovsky in Moscow. The first collection of material from the Soviet goes swimmingly. And as promised, Greville just has to smile a lot, listen to Penkovsky, and whisk some valued envelopes back to London.

The relationship blossoms for each man, to the point where Wynne invites—and MI-6 London agrees—to bring Penkovsky to the English capital for briefings, including scouting defection prospects. The film’s kicker that this gambit might really work is when Greville takes Oleg to the Royal Ballet to see a Russian company perform “Swan Lake” at Covent Garden. The men burst into applause and tears at its close, with Penkovsky realizing he might still be able to taste Russian glories even in his new found land.

Wynne’s sweet wife, Sheila, (Jesse Buckley) is devoted to her husband and their young son, but he has kept her totally in the dark about his spy work, insisting he is just keeping up with his usual trade business, only at a new level. Meanwhile, Penkovsky charms the Wynne family.

After secretly transferring hundreds of classified documents, the plan has proved a tremendous success, but Penkovsky returns to Moscow only to get trapped in the KGB’s web and can no longer be contacted by London. Learning of this, Wynne, who has built up such trust for his Russian counterpart, insists he must return to the USSR himself to find and rescue Penkovsky. But he has

passed from being a mere courier to a true agent, and the Soviet spy machine tracks him down. Both Wynne and Penkovsky are captured and placed in parallel prisons for years before they will meet again.

The two men—traitor and spy—are very effective in their two roles. Cumberbatch must transition from a genial, open British citizen to a tight-lipped, determined enemy of the Soviet Republic and finally, to a gaunt, crushed denizen of one kind of Gulag (his only relief being an unexpected visit from Sheila after a spell in prison). Ninidze embraces the role of the defector, a man of surface power who must maintain a complete poker face so to as not to reveal a life of secrets and to willingly undercut his country's power.

The real Wynne proved, even as an amateur, a most effective spy, and he survived, also wrote two books about the episode, but over his last 30 years, never returned to that profession.

*(The film runs 151 mins. and is rated "PG-13.", and is in English and Russian.)*

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