Allied: Conventional warfare

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Directed by Robert Zemeckis, written by Steven Knight

It is a bit difficult to review *Allied*, primarily because it does not provoke any strong feelings one way or the other. This is the sort of film one watches if stuck on an airplane without reading matter for the flight. At the end of the two hours, the viewer does not know anything more (or less) about the world and goes about his or her business.

That is a pity because the period in which *Allied* is set, the Second World War, is a never-ending source of drama and storytelling. However, the artist has to have an inkling of what the war was about to have something profound and moving to say. Most of today's commercial films use history as essentially a backdrop and so the story, actors and special effects never coalesce into an artistically satisfying experience.

American director Robert Zemeckis (*Back to the Future, Forrest Gump*) has brought to the screen the story of Max Vatan (Brad Pitt) a Royal Canadian Air Force intelligence officer parachuted into French Morocco during 1942. His mission is to link up with Marianne Beausejour (Marion Cotillard), a member of the French Resistance, and assassinate the German ambassador in Casablanca.

They are to pose as husband and wife so as not to arouse the suspicions of the Germans and their Vichy French allies. In private, Max and Marianne make clear to one another that their mission is the prime objective and they cannot let personal feelings get in the way, but of course…

If the reader does not want to have the plot ruined, the author would advise him or her to stop reading.

The pair complete their mission and settle down in Britain, where Marianne bears a child by Max. Then comes the bombshell—Max learns from his superiors that "Marianne" may be a German agent and the real Marianne may have been killed in France. If Marianne is in fact an agent, then Max will be ordered personally to execute her, now his wife and the mother of his child. What will he do?

There is obvious talent at work here. Pitt and Cotillard are both gifted actors and do their best with the script provided. Therein lies the problem. We see Pitt and Cotillard do their best version of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, but the end result is nowhere near the same.

We never really understand why Max loves Marianne—in fact, none of the characters are really developed. The plot itself is a bit problematic and something of an anti- *Casablanca*. In Michael Curtiz's 1942 classic, Bogart's character ends up helping the Resistance and putting his personal feelings aside for a larger cause. The opposite nearly happens in *Allied*, as Max tries to smuggle Marianne out of the country when he learns of her true identity. (The film also brings to mind works like Victor Saville's *The Dark Journey* (1937), with Vivien Leigh and Conrad Veidt as World War I spies—and lovers—working for France and Germany, respectively.)

There is a definite blandness to the proceedings and images, despite the shooting, exotic locales, and costumes. It is remarkable in 2016 how historically accurate filmmakers can render the settings and props, but the trick of telling a good and convincing story remains a problem. So, we are left with Pitt and Cotillard going at it emotionally for a good portion of the film, without much to show for their efforts.

Max and Marianne have their child under a rain of German bombs, but the Nazi blitz over London was largely done by mid-1941, well before the events in the film, which take place after 1942. However, the image of a child literally being born in the midst of the bombardment was apparently too much for Zemeckis to resist.

Then there is the obvious moral dilemma of not

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wanting to shoot your wife who is really a Nazi spy. This is the dramatic crux of the film and also its weakest element. Granted, Max and Marianne, given the nature of their work, are trained at lying and deception. However, how was it possible that Marianne did not do or say anything during their time together to alert Max to the possibility that something was amiss?

Accents and code words can easily be memorized by a spy, but political convictions are a different matter. It is hard to believe that Marianne's own motivations and beliefs could be kept entirely hidden for so long. Then, again, there are examples in history of spies assuming identities and keeping their true selves hidden from family and coworkers for years and decades. At any rate, this question is not seriously explored in *Allied*.

The closest we get to anything like this occurs when Marianne complains to Max in their new home in England that he is spending too much time away from her. She asks what it is that's so important as to keep him away, and he responds, "the liberation of your country."

This is not the occasion to get into the history of the second imperialist World War. Contrary to the Hollywood mythology incorporated into many films, this was not a war for democracy or liberation, although masses of people who fought in it thought it was.

It is in keeping with his overall career, marked by conventionality and predictability, that Zemeckis passes on the official view of the war and everything associated with it. His *Forrest Gump* (1994) was one of the most abject celebrations of conformism made in the last several decades. Zemeckis's endeavors tend to fail largely due his uncritical acceptance of the ideological and artistic limits imposed on him.

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