

# Close encounter of Spies

By  Daniel Derksen

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Spielberg wears his serious hat for *Bridge of Spies*, giving us a heated close encounter of spies during the Cold War of deep-seated feelings of animosity and distrust that existed between the US and the Soviet Union in the 1950s.

Inspired by true events, it follows the inspirational bravura of *Schindler's List*, which landed Spielberg his first Oscar for Best Director, and his films *Munich* and *Lincoln*, where epic intimacy provides grand spectacle and emotive human drama.

In *Bridge of Spies*, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union captures US pilot Francis Gary Powers after shooting down his U-2 spy plane. Sentenced to 10 years in prison, Powers' only hope is New York lawyer James Donovan (Tom Hanks), recruited by a CIA operative to negotiate his release. Donovan boards a plane to Berlin, hoping to win the young man's freedom through a prisoner exchange. If all goes well, the Russians would get Rudolf Abel (Mark Rylance), the convicted spy who Donovan defended in court.



## Spy exchange

*Bridge of Spies* deals with an issue as simple as the exchange between a Soviet spy and an American pilot, that is unreasonably complicated by those who make up the rules, and eventually conquered by those who know how to break the rules.

It's this wonderful daredevil dance between defeat and success that fuels the drama and humour in *Bridge of Spies*, constantly opening the gap between result and expectation and keeping us involved with every action and reaction.

If there's one thing Spielberg is truly a master of, it's creating immediate suspense that provokes the imagination and promises that something extraordinary is going to happen out of an ordinary situation.

Just as he captured the essence of the brutality of war with his opening sequence in *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg flawlessly draws us into the world of spies and their secret manoeuvres with the opening of *Bridge of Spies*.

The first image of Soviet spy Rudolf Abel is that of an artist painting a self-portrait, trying to capture the spirit of a man who has lost his true identity. He receives a phone call and is soon followed by man in black, followed by another man, and then another until it explodes in a wonderful crescendo of mystery and hyper-excitement.



## The hunter and the hunted

We immediately grasp the essence of the hunter and the hunted, big boys playing 'I catch a spy' with agents closing in on the enemy, launching a rousing human drama that leads to a satisfying resolution.

We take this journey with ease and comfort, and soon find ourselves drawn into an intellectual political war zone that is cold and calculated, a playful and polite power game of bartering between two giants in the history of politics.

You don't have to be a political animal to enjoy the film or understand its political landscape; ultimately it's about people who become pawns that are swallowed by conceited political protocols and fraught hidden agendas.

The crackling screenplay by Matt Charman and the Coen brothers sizzles with emotional depth and has a sentimental understanding of the world and dilemmas the characters find themselves in. It is a dialogue-driven narrative supported by rich visual splendour and aptly fulfils the function of dialogue in film: ultimately to reveal character and allow us to grasp a deep and involving understanding of their humanity.

In particular, the humanity of two strangers whose destinies intertwine and change their worlds, that of a Soviet spy, featuring a brilliant performance by Olivier Award winner Mark Rylance, and Oscar winner Tom Hanks as James Donovan, an insurance claims lawyer from Brooklyn who finds himself thrust into the centre of the Cold War when the CIA enlists his support to negotiate the release of the captured American U-2 pilot.

Tom Hanks comfortably crawls under the skin of Donovan, allowing us to empathise with the fragile disposition of his character, a man whose confidence and calm demeanour override his nervousness.

## Rewarding viewing

Bridge of Spies offers rewarding viewing for anyone seeking escapism that is sophisticated and meaningful. It's like reading a book you want to keep on your bedside table, and often revisit.

In our world where communication is hampered by those who cannot speak our language, Bridge of Spies shows that there is only one way to solve misunderstanding, simply do the human thing, and this will open up a world of understanding where people are united through action and not divided by ignorance.

It's not a Bond or Bourne Identity type of action spy thriller, but follows in the tradition of classic films adapted from the realistic spy novels of Len Deighton and John le Carré, with relatively serious Cold War thrillers that dealt with some of the realities of the espionage world like The Spy Who Came in from the Cold (1965), The Deadly Affair (1966), Torn Curtain (1966), and the Harry Palmer series, based on the novels of Len Deighton.

At the end of Bridge of Spies one is reminded of Spielberg's Close Encounter of The Third Kind, where strangers meet and how their unison is bathed in a sea of lights.

This shows that although he dons his serious hat for discerning films, there will always be the child inside of him as a consummate storyteller and story maker that reminds us of that magical light of hope that will never fade.

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## ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

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