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Posted: Wed., Feb. 8, 2012, 9:00am PT

Safe House

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By JUSTIN CHANG

Hardly the first movie to envision the CIA as a hotbed of corruption, secrecy and deadly internecine warfare, "Safe House" is a viciously energetic South Africa-set actioner that makes up in sweaty atmosphere and brute force what it lacks in surprise. Swift but overlong, this mechanically effective Hollywood debut from Swedish-born helmer Daniel Espinosa ("Easy Money") doesn't have an original bone in its body -- or, by the end, an unbroken bone between its two leads. Cat-and-mouse pairing of Denzel Washington and Ryan Reynolds should land punchy if not pulverizing B.O. blows at home and overseas.

The first-produced screenplay by David Guggenheim superficially recalls the template of 2001's "Training Day" in that it casts Washington as a ruthless, not-to-be-trusted avatar of violence playing malevolent mentor to a white-male rookie. But there are also shades of the "Bourne" movies present in the pic's slamming edits and herky-jerky handheld camerawork, its de rigueur cynicism toward dirty agency politics, and its restless toggling between the men in the field and the CIA suits trying to hunt them down.

At the heart of the matter lies a particularly hoary MacGuffin: a classified list of operatives and agency secrets that must be protected at any cost. That means capturing Tobin Frost (Washington), a murderous rogue spy who has eluded the CIA for years, but has now surfaced in Cape Town with the incriminating file in his possession. A man with many enemies, as well as a name perhaps calculated to evoke serial killers and Santa Claus, Frost is ambushed by thugs barely five minutes in and winds up surrendering at the CIA's nearest safe house.

The housekeeper on duty there is Matt Weston (Reynolds), an agency greenhorn in love with his unsuspecting French g.f. (Nora Arnezeder), bored with his far-flung outpost and ready for an exciting career in international espionage. Frost's arrival turns out to be his make-or-break career opportunity: When the aforementioned thugs launch a ferocious attack on the safe house, Weston must go on the run with Frost, ensuring that he doesn't let him get away -- and isn't killed by either the attackers or Frost himself.

Frost, of course, is not about to make this easy for him. When he's not turning the tables on Weston in the middle of a crowded stadium or grabbing the wheel from him in one of the film's many extended vehicular smash-'em-ups, this most skilled of assassins attempts to wage a subtler form of psychological warfare. Yet the cruel put-downs feel second-rate, the anti-CIA sentiments could have been lifted from a blotter, and the old-pro/young-gun dynamic never rises above routine.

Washington, as cool and formidable a presence as ever, is none too energized by his material,

which requires him to drop thinly veiled taunts about Weston's sexual preferences and mutter tough-guy cliches about how impossible it is for a spy to sustain a meaningful relationship. You don't say.

Reynolds comes off as much more alert and engaged by comparison, in part because both he and his character have more to prove. Appearing opposite a heavyweight co-star in an action-heavy vehicle that requires far more in terms of bodily endurance than f/x-laden extravaganzas like "Green Lantern," the thesp rolls up his sleeves, benefiting from his ability to project intelligence as well as insecurity, often simultaneously. Supporting cast includes Vera Farmiga, Brendan Gleeson and Sam Shepard as three CIA execs whose various hidden allegiances will come as no surprise to anyone paying attention, as well as Ruben Blades as a world-weary old ally of Frost's who gets closest to supplying the film with a cold, bruised heart.

Perhaps aware that his characters will compel interest only to the extent that they're in danger at all times, Espinosa puts Frost and Weston through the physical wringer, dispensing bullet holes and stab wounds like party favors while giving stunt coordinators Greg Powell and Grant Hulley, fight coordinator Oliver Schneider and second unit director/d.p. Alexander Witt ample room to cut loose. Lenser Oliver Wood keeps the cameras on the move, and editor Richard Pearson adds another layer of disorientation by slicing and dicing every other scene into a barely coherent frenzy. In contrast with the fragmented kineticism of Paul Greengrass' "Bourne" movies, there's no existential dimension to the shattered-glass aesthetic here; it's just raw, chaotic action, inelegantly shot and staged but no less unnerving for it.

Pic extracts considerable production value from its Cape Town shoot, most impressively during a chase scene set in the township of Langa, which finds Frost evading capture by leaping across slum rooftops. The ensuing destruction of homes provides an apt image of U.S. powers reducing Third World civilization to rubble, while putting a cruel spin on the pic's title, though no one involved seems aware or particularly sympathetic.

Contact Justin Chang at justin.chang@variety.com

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