

'Homeland' lets audience identify with 'enemy' in Iraq war

Film

LOS ANGELES, Oct. 5, (RTRS): What would you do if the world's most fearsome military presence threatened to invade where you live? How does one even begin to prepare for that kind of assault? In "Homeland (Iraq Year Zero)," Baghdad-situated filmmaker Abbas Fahdel offers world audiences an extraordinary opportunity to identify with the "enemy" in the Iraq War — conveniently faceless in most Western coverage, but humanized here by members of Fahdel's own family. Clocking in at nearly six hours and presented in what may feel like raw home-video form, this transformative verite glimpse into the lives of everyday Iraqis demands both patience and empathy to sit through, but the reward is worth every second, as an extremely limited number of courageous programmers and curious audiences can attest.

Stylistically speaking, Fahdel's

approach flies in the face of what we've come to think of as "war movies," whether scripted or otherwise. Nothing here seems polished, manufactured or even remotely sensationalized. Recorded over the course of 17 months, beginning in February 2002, the film opens with a shot of a cat, for crying out loud, and features scenes of its subjects singing, shopping and watching cartoons, as well as celebrating family weddings and religious feasts. The idea here is to immerse audiences in a world that, while superficially different from their own, resonates as familiar on the most fundamental levels — namely, that desire to be left alone and allowed to survive.

Haunting

In this respect, Fahdel (who visited his relatives, but assembled the film in France, where he has spent the majority of his life) makes the curious, yet undeniably haunting choice of informing us via sober

onscreen text which of his family members will die before the film ends — not so much a spoiler as a bit of foreboding that underscores the senselessness of their fates, while excusing the fact that it was never his intention to make a snuff film. Their deaths will remain undepicted. Thus, it is perhaps an hour into the film when we learn that Fahdel's 12-year-old nephew Haidar will be killed after the US invasion.

While the film's attention has a tendency to drift at times, Haidar serves as a sort of mascot throughout, kidding around with his relatives, explaining basic principles for the camera's benefit and trying his best to experience a normal childhood under these exceptional circumstances. Given what we already know of his fate, Haidar becomes a kind of walking ghost, helplessly naive about the actual dangers of the imminent American attack. As far as he and the family are concerned, they have been through this

before: In one scene, Haidar and his cousins joke about how a diaper can serve as a gas mask, while in another, he re-applies tape to keep the living-room windows from shattering, covering traces that remain from the last war.

Divided into two parts, subtitled "Before the Fall" and "After the Battle," the film concludes its largely 2002-set first half with a visit by Haidar to the Al-Amiriyah shelter, now a memorial to the 400 civilians killed when Americans bombed the facility in 1991. To quote one of President George W. Bush's family members (who clearly fared better than Fahdel's), "Stuff happens," though "Homeland" goes a long way to recover the sense of human tragedy in what others may view as cold inevitability. In the meantime, it's thoroughly unnerving to see Bush (and by extension ourselves) referred to in the way many of us saw Saddam Hussein

depicted at the time. Here, Hussein is celebrated as Iraq's "beloved master" by local TV, who present the US as a bully nation that crossed an ocean to start a fight — though no one seems to miss him terribly once he's gone.

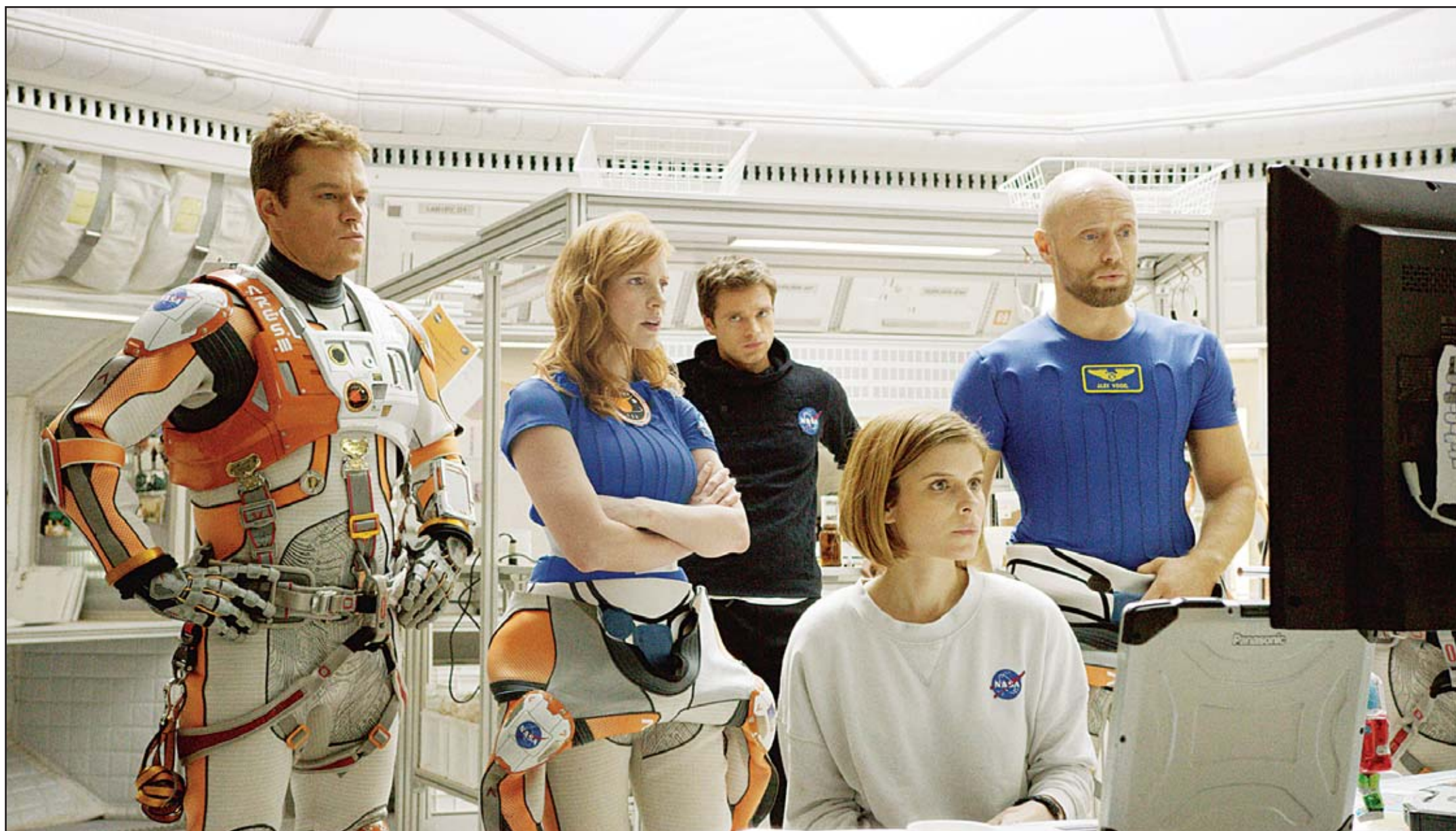
Corrupt

The longer and less immediately engaging second half picks up three weeks after the 2003 invasion and finds both Fahdel's family and the nation completely transformed by the experience. It's now commonplace to see American armored vehicles in the streets, where those who might not be so candid with a foreign crew reveal how beefs with Hussein's corrupt system have now shifted to complaints about the ineffectual new system in place. It almost goes without saying that people would be unhappy with the war, and the inconveniences captured feel relatively minor compared to those which have been thoroughly reported via more pro-

fessional journalists. Clearly determined to film everything he can from ground level, Fahdel tours the city to find many prominent buildings reduced to rubble, including both the country's leading radio station and the Baghdad Cinema Studios' film archive. The helmer spends much of his time in the car, guided by relatives who supply much-needed context for what we're seeing. This unofficial driving tour has become almost hypnotic by the point the film ends — with the sort of chilling impact to which faux docs such as "Blair Witch Project" and "Cloverfield" (where the cameraman doesn't necessarily survive the experience) have perhaps desensitized us. Here, there's no thrill to the horror, just the heavy weight of having witnessed the true toll of xenophobia, coupled with the gift of being offered the one thing that could prevent its ever happening again: empathy.

Variety

Features



In this photo provided by Twentieth Century Fox, Matt Damon (from left), as Astronaut Mark Watney, Jessica Chastain as Melissa Lewis, Sebastian Stan as Chris Beck, Kate Mara as Beth Johanssen, and Aksel Hennie as Alex Vogel, appear in a scene in the film, 'The Martian'. 'The Martian' collected \$55mn in the US. (AP)

Film

Shyster, enemy spy turned into national heroes

'Spies' richly recreated period drama

LOS ANGELES: "The Martian" blasted off with a massive \$55 million this weekend, nearly surpassing another space-based adventure,

"Gravity," as the highest-grossing October debut in history.

The Ridley Scott release was bolstered by rapturous reviews, with critics calling the picture among the director's best and heaping praise on Matt Damon's performance as an astronaut stranded on the Red Planet. It marks the second-best launch of Scott's career, behind only

"Hannibal's" \$58 million debut, and the second-best premiere for Damon, trailing "The Bourne Ultimatum's" \$69.3 million bow.

"It's going to hold up really well," said Phil Contrino, vice-president and chief analyst at BoxOffice.com. "It's got everything. It's got suspense, action, heart and humor, and the ending is really satisfying. People will walk out of the theater and talk it up to their friends."

Twentieth Century Fox backed the \$108 million production and pushed the film out to 3,831 theaters. It was a blessed rollout. In addition to the strong notices, media reports about the possible discovery of water on Mars kept the distant planet front-and-center in people's minds.

"You can't make this stuff up," said Chris Aronson, Fox's domestic distribution chief. "The fact that there was the announcement on the same week as our film just excites people. Human beings are just interested in other worldly things right now." (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: "The Martian" soared into the stratosphere this weekend, picking up a colossal \$45.2 million to top foreign sales charts. Ridley Scott's outer-space epic debuted in 9,611 screens

LOS ANGELES, Oct. 5, (RTRS): It's no small feat turning a shyster and an enemy spy into national heroes, but that's the unique achievement of Steven Spielberg's "Bridge of Spies." If Jimmy Stewart were alive today, the director surely would have asked him to play James Donovan, a noble New York insurance lawyer roped into providing an alleged Soviet agent with pro-bono legal representation, who later goes on to broker his exchange for two Americans held captive by Communists. Failing that, he'd done one better and cast honorary Boy Scout and all-around good guy Tom Hanks in the role, transforming a potential indictment of patriotic hypocrisy and Cold War subterfuge into a riveting, feel-good time for the whole family putting it on track to top "War Horse."

Spielberg may as well have gone full-"R" with this deliciously shady spy-swap plot, as the richly recreated period drama — which benefits from a crackling Coen brothers script polish — boasts more courtroom time than it does actual cloak-and-dagger intrigue (in one scene, Hanks' runny-nose hero literally has his cloak stolen off his back by East German street thugs). While the helmer's myth-making approach makes for great Capra-esque entertainment, younger auds may find it terribly old-fashioned — and they'd be right to think so, although Spielberg would be the first to admit it was his intention to play things classical, resolutely shooting on celluloid, while blending aspects of a tony legal thriller with a hat-tip tribute to the rich, expressionistic look of 1940s film noir.

In Donovan, Hanks finds one of the chewiest late-career roles the actor could possibly hope for, playing the New York attorney with fists balled and belly slightly paunched, simultaneously non-threatening and ready for a fight. Called into the office of his good-old-boy boss (Alan Alda), he has no choice to take a case that he recognizes will

surely make him unpopular, defending Rudolf Abel (Mark Rylance, a remarkable theater actor with a relatively short screen c.v.), whom the FBI have arrested and charged as a Russian spy.

Alarming

Set in 1957, "Bridge of Spies" evokes the era as one of mounting thermonuclear hysteria and alarming group-think, in which a lawyer who advocates for a Soviet agent can be seen as a traitor to his own country (potentially worse than Abel, who wasn't American to begin with). "Everyone will hate me, but at least I'll lose," he jokes, though even his family — meatloaf-making wife Amy Ryan, plus three flag-pledging kiddos who practice Bert the Turtle's "Duck and Cover" drills in class — question his loyalties.

Because this is Hanks we're dealing with, audiences know what to expect, though the revelation here is Rylance (an actor Spielberg also cast as his forthcoming BFG), who appears utterly transformed — to the few who recognize his typically charismatic screen presence — into a balding, Eeyore-like gray moth of a man. Though there can be no doubt Abel is a spy, the film prefers to depict him as a relatively innocuous painter, earning from us a sympathy that no American citizen would have felt at the time. This is an essential strategy in all that follows, considering that "Bridge of Spies" depends on our believing that Donovan and Abel are the most noble men in the film, each committed to their respective ideals: in Donovan's case, "what makes us Americans" (the Constitution), and in Abel's, doing whatever he's told to undermine it.

If the basic narrative of "Bridge of Spies" were to take place today and a foreign agent were arrested in New York City, the poor sap — who'd surely be labeled a "terrorist," rather than a "spy" — would be shipped off to some torture-friendly detention facility never to be

heard from again, not assigned a lawyer of Donovan's caliber. But Spielberg has no room for such cynicism, recasting the Coens' nihilist distrust of the system as comedy (the siblings reworked "Suite Francaise" co-writer Matt Charman's script, and while he was the one to unearth this terrific true story, the Coens' fingerprints are all over its telling). Here, profoundly disturbing revelations about how America operates are played for a chuckle, as when the judge for the case (Dakin Matthews) denies Donovan's request for due process, adding that he hopes his client is found guilty as swiftly as possible.

Simultaneous with all of Donovan's legal dealings, another spy story unfolds, as the CIA recruits an elite group of pilots to "drive" high-altitude camera-equipped U-2 planes over Soviet airspace. As "Bridge of Spies" repeatedly — and rather eloquently — reminds, the Cold War was one of information, not necessarily weaponry, and in these exciting, if somewhat clunkily integrated scenes, we see how America fought for an edge in this intelligence battle. We also meet lantern-jawed Francis Gary Powers (Austin Stowell), who will be shot down in the film's most dynamic sequence — a rare taste of action amid so many slick wheeler-dealer proceedings.

Plead

As it turns out, insurance-savvy Donovan was right to plead that the judge spare Abel's life, as the Soviet spy now gives America a bargaining chip to trade for Powers' return — a responsibility that falls to Donovan after Hoffman, the CIA stooge (Scott Shepherd) who'd strong-armed him earlier, returns to beg his assistance. Given the political sensitivities between the two atomic-trigger-happy nations, the Agency insists that Donovan make the deal as a private citizen with no ties to the US government, which suits the film just fine, as it gives Hanks every opportunity to go rogue.

The CIA is only interested in Powers, but Donovan — who tells his family that he's going salmon fishing in England — has decided that he won't settle for less than two freed Americans: He plans to bargain for the release of a second prisoner as well, Frederic Pryor (Will Rogers), an American economics student who managed to get himself caught on the wrong side of the newly erected Berlin Wall. Pryor complicates things not only for the deal, but for the script as well, though a sappy reenactment of his arrest does provide Spielberg with the chance to show the construction of the landmark that later came to signify the Iron Curtain.

A scene in which Donovan watches East German escapes gunned down while trying to scale the wall, later echoed by fence-climbing children back home in New York, is a touch too far, the sentimental girl-in-red indulgence the director allows himself here. Otherwise, he plays much of what unfolds in the film's overseas second-act for absurdist comedy: With the exception of Sebastian Koch's enigmatic East German lawyer, the Krauts are all played by odd-looking character actors with silly accents — although to be fair, the crew-cut G-Men aren't especially nuanced either.

The movie slyly manages to have it both ways, criticizing the sort of blind American boosterism of the era while indulging in cheap xenophobic barbs, as when Donovan criticizes newly christened countries the German Democratic Republic and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics for choosing names that are far too long, evidently forgetting the mouthful from which he hails. Spielberg knows where to draw the line, however, maintaining a measure of hindsight-enhanced criticism amid his Hollywood fantasy (the CIA's willingness to sacrifice Pryor seems especially damning in an otherwise generally Pollyanna-like portrayal).

across 49 markets this weekend, including such major territories as the United Kingdom, Italy, Australia and Hong Kong. Combined with its domestic haul, the 20th Century Fox release has earned \$100.2 million. It opens in Germany, Russia and South Korea next weekend, and should do particularly



Scott



Damon

well when it launches in China. The country's space program plays a key role in the film, a plot point that should help it attract crowds in the People's Republic.

The \$108 million production stars Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain, Kristen Wiig and Jeff Daniels, and scored the second biggest

October domestic debut in history with \$55 million, trailing only "Gravity."

In second place, "Lost in Hong Kong" continued to be a major attraction in China, where it is quickly becoming one of the country's top-grossing locally produced films in history. The slapstick comedy sequel to 2012's "Lost in

Thailand" made \$41 million, pushing its total to \$204 million.

Another Chinese title, "Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe," nabbed third place with \$34 million. The film centers on grave robbers trying to find a hidden treasure and has made \$68 million since opening on Sept. 30.

The top five was rounded out by the Chinese comedy "Goodbye Mr. Loser" and "Hotel Transylvania 2" with \$26 million and \$20.4 million, respectively. "Goodbye Mr. Loser" has earned \$37 million in less than a week of release, while "Hotel Transylvania 2" has picked up more than \$150 million globally. (RTRS)

ARABO TIMES

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2015