

‘Shadow Dancer’ with Clive Owen is Tense IRA Thriller

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- [Andrea Riseborough](#) [2]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [3]
- [Clive Owen](#) [4]
- [David Wilmot](#) [5]
- [Domhnall Gleeson](#) [6]
- [Film Review](#) [7]
- [Gillian Anderson](#) [8]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [9]
- [James Marsh](#) [10]
- [Shadow Dancer](#) [11]



Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Would you betray your cause and the rest of your family tree for the safety of your son? Such is the nightmarish question that Collette must answer in James Marsh’s tense, complex “Shadow Dancer,” a slow-burn thriller that may be a bit too slow at times but builds in power by the final reel. It is On Demand now and opens in New York and Los Angeles on Friday, May 31. It’s worth seeking out.

Collette McVeigh (Andrea Riseborough) fights for the Irish Republican Army. It’s not a decision she made. She was born into it. And she was forever changed when she saw her young brother splayed out on their table after being shot in a conflict in 1973. Twenty years later, she is a part of the resistance that continues decades of conflict with bombings around the U.K. We first see her on a train, paranoid, skittish, and holding a suspicious bag that she clearly wants to leave somewhere.



Shadow Dancer

Photo credit: Magnolia

Collette’s planned bombing is a bust and she’s grabbed by MI5 in the guise of Mac (a perfectly steely Clive Owen), who presents her with her doomed fate. Go to jail for decades and leave her son behind or turn on her family and everything that she has fought for her entire life. She has no choice. She goes undercover for MI5 in the IRA, turning on her own brothers, Connor (Domhnall Gleeson, son of Brendan) and Gerry (Aiden Gillen, so subdued compared to his “Game of Thrones” performance that some may not even make the connection). Gillian Anderson is brilliant in a smaller role as Mac’s superior at MI5.

“Shadow Dancer” details paranoia and infighting on both sides of the conflict that has torn the United Kingdom apart. We see Connor, Gerry, and the rest of the IRA members in Collette’s world start to become suspicious of their own and we see Mac dealing with misinformation and personality clashes at MI5 as well. Marsh’s film is a thriller that really illustrates how groups fall apart and get nothing done without political motivation. Everyone is being lied to in “Shadow Dancer” and it’s what people don’t tell each other that determines their fate more than what they do.

James Marsh (“Man on Wire,” “Project Nim”) also directed “Red Riding: 1980,” the second installment of the great “The Red Riding Trilogy,” and fans of those films will see a lot in common in “Shadow Dancer” – the intrigue, the period details, the subtle approach to drama. However, those who found “1980” a bit slow will think the same of this. Cinematographer Rob Hardy (who shot “Red Riding: 1974”) brings a tonal commonality between that trilogy and this work that really fits Tom Bradby’s script, based on his own book.



Shadow Dancer

Photo credit: Magnolia

Performances are strong throughout. Riseborough plays Collette as undeniably vulnerable but also backed by years of conviction and the pain that came not only from watching her brother die but watching her father close the door in her face as it happened. She looks like she's never shaken that image and feels that pain and worry for her other loved ones in every moment of existence. The cause took her brother. She won't let it take her son. It's a complex balance of the vulnerability of her position and the determination to escape it. Owen perfectly matches her – their scenes together are the best in the film, playing almost like an old Carol Reed spy thriller – and Anderson nearly steals the film. Few actresses can deliver a line like *"I thought you were a lot smarter than that"* and make it sound like a compliment, an insult, and a threat.

As much as I love many of the individual ingredients of "Shadow Dancer," I do wish they worked to something a little greater as a whole. The film lacks a bit of narrative thrust, almost too slow in its burn and not explosive enough in its finale, but that's because it's a thriller that demands character consideration and doesn't present easy answers. It's a film that's not opening in most markets in the country but one that you really should make an effort to find.

"Shadow Dancer" stars Andrea Riseborough, Clive Owen, Aidan Gillen, Domhnall Gleeson, David Wilmot, Stuart Graham, and Gillian Anderson. It was written by Tom Bradby and directed by James Marsh. It is now available On Demand and will be released in New York & L.A. on May 31, 2013.



[12]

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