

## Guantanamo Bay Drama ‘Camp X-Ray’ With Kristen Stewart

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The haunting setting of Guantanamo Bay is used for elementary emotional effect in “Camp X-Ray,” a prison drama electrified more by its performances than its hopes of a profound narrative about the interactions between gatekeeper and captive.

In a role that further expands her dramatic potential, Kristen Stewart stars as Cole, a member of the United States Military Police Corps assigned to the ethics battle within Gitmo. Soon after stepping into her new workspace, she is sternly warned about its different moral conditions to those of regular prisons: Per the definitions in the Geneva Convention, the men locked up here are known as “detainees,” not prisoners; most aggressively, these inmates are considered as part of an active war against America, though their reasons for such acts are rarely discussed. Taking on aggression as a character feature to the role she must play as a guard, Cole works the different cell blocks, and attempts to distance herself from the feeling of empathy for the detainees.

These efforts are challenged when she pushes the library cart to the cell of detainee Ali (Peyman Moaadi, from “A Separation”). Chatty and inquisitive, Ali tries to talk with her about the various books on the cart, and even shares his frustration that the library doesn’t have the final “Harry Potter” book that he’s been waiting on for two years. Cole struggles to treat him without compassion while circling his cell block, and the interaction ends with him humiliating her in front of his cellmates, and her peers.



‘Camp X-Ray’

Photo credit: IFC Films

Ali is sentenced to become a “frequent flyer” for the incident, in which he’s only allowed to sleep for two hours before being moved to a different cell - a weeklong practice. For Cole, the initial interaction puts a crack in her fortitude, which only continues to expand as she further questions the purpose of the institution that she contains.

With a respect developing between the two as time passes, the narrative direction that these characters embark upon sometimes becomes



tedious. But though overlong, “Camp X-Ray” resonates with its two vivid embodiments of the Guantanamo Bay life, as Stewart and Mooadi convey the emotional complications within such a gray setting. Stewart’s stoney eyes, as mixed with an entirely human sense of discomfort, provides a compelling image of someone assuming aggressiveness. On the other side of the cell door is Mooadi, who paints a rich image of a detainee’s convoluted psyche, all with the camera often only showing him behind glass, or a voice that fills the cellblock. A nod to the potential of Mooadi’s performance can be found in how his dialogue gets away with laying out the film’s direct metaphors (such as his remark about he and Cole both being stuck at Gitmo), working at an obviousness that the film can’t swiftly utilize itself (as with its cringing climax).



‘Camp X-Ray’

Photo credit: IFC Films

Guantanamo Bay flirts with becoming one helluva loaded setting for a prison drama, were it not for how “Camp X-Ray” sticks to the prison’s Standard Operating Procedure that can reportedly be found on Wikileaks, according to this film’s press notes. There aren’t debatable politics in the “frequent flyer” segment, or in other passages in which detainee terms like “Hitchcock on the Block” are defined. Gitmo successfully provides “Camp X-Ray” with a layer that is elevated beyond regular law, and one that is vividly based on hatred. (Still, directors need to chill out on their 9/11 imagery references, as Sattler so cheaply does in the film’s first frames.)

Instead, the politics that aggressively derail “Camp X-Ray” involve that of gender. In his desire to construct a military woman with inner resilience, (where her boss tells her in the beginning that “these [detainees] just don’t like girls” and then later asks her, “are you a soldier, or a female soldier?”), Sattler fulfills a common mistake of cheapening the strength within female characters by treating them as exclusive. With men shown to be as plainly and thoroughly non-compassionate, Cole appears in contrast to them with bogus saintliness, as the film nudges that her change to the system is due to her position of simply not being a man; not because she’s a human being first. The tension within this initially complicated character progressively withers, as her confined journey through “Camp X-Ray” becomes sappy and self-righteous.

*“Camp X-Ray” opens at Chicago’s Gene Siskel Film Center on November 7, 2014. Featuring Kristen Stewart, Peyman Moaadi, Lane Garrison, and John Carroll Lynch. Written and directed by Peter Sattler. Rated “R”*



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