

Argo: the Iran-hostage crisis in perspective

Directed by and starring Ben Affleck, this is a knock-out of a thriller

By Julio Nakamurakare
Herald staff

FILM REVIEW

THE BACKGROUND. In 1979, as the Iranian revolution was reaching a boiling point beyond the control of the US-enthroned, merciless ruler Reza Pahlavi, the revolt centered on the premises of the US Embassy in Tehran. As the enraged mobs and paramilitary forces besieged the Embassy, over fifty staffers burned and shredded classified information before they were taken hostage by the infuriated revolutionaries. They were prisoners threatened with execution in what was previously regarded as a secluded enclave out of any potential danger.

This is when Tony Mendez (Affleck), a CIA “exfiltration” specialist, concocts a risky plan to free the six US citizens who, unknown to Iranian intelligence, had fled the US Embassy headquarters and sought shelter at the residence of the Canadian ambassador.

With few very viable options, Mendez devises a daring plan which, at first, seemed to have crept out of a Hollywood B-movie: creating and setting up a phony Canadian film project shot in neighbouring Iraq and then spending a few days in Tehran for additional footage for their sci-fi movie.

For things to really work out, the phony had to be real — Mendez went shopping for a real film script gathering dust in a producer’s office, purchased the rights and hired talent and an entire crew that actually started making a flick. It was fake, but it was real too. So real that Mendez engineered a press operation announcing the project on the cover of *Variety* film industry publication.

The operation, code-named *Argo* after the fake movie’s title, remained a secret and a different version of the real rescue operation was fed to the world media. The truth came out only in 1997, when the information was declassified.

THE FOREGROUND. Ben Affleck’s third directorial effort after his much-lauded — and deservedly so — *Gone Baby Gone* (2007) and *The Town* (2010) is followed by an even more ambitious project designed, perhaps, to give him pride of place on the roster of the Great American Moviemakers.

While both *Gone Baby Gone* and *The Town* were set in or around the area of Affleck’s native, familiar turf of Boston, where he grew up, *Argo* takes him miles, miles away in geographical terms but, most importantly, as regards sociopolitical content.

Gone Baby Gone was based on Dennis Lehane’s action and emotion packed novel about a young girl’s kidnapping and the professional and personal crisis suffered by the detective assigned to the case. Affleck’s reading of the novel and the protagonist’s predicament was a profound, deeply affecting psychological study in the blurry boundaries between the personal and

professional life of a man, just a man drawn by circumstances to take an introspective, painful look at his own self and doings.

Affleck's followup, the tension-filled *The Town*, focused on a gang of bank robbers in Boston (according to statistics, the city on top of this type of heist) once again leaned on the personal aspect of one character (even if it was the baddy) while the action served as the fast-paced backdrop to a highly proficient thriller.

ARGO. Affleck's *Argo*, dealing with the 1979-1981 Iran-hostage crisis that threatened the stability of President Jimmy Carter's administration and his chances of reelection, is as good a thriller as all the hoopla has made it to be, but it is also packed to the brim with rather naive ideological content.

Argo, the film, focuses on Tony Mendez, the "exfiltration" expert who at first sees no feasible, realistic solution to the human and political problem of rescuing six US embassy staffers hiding at the Canadian Ambassador's residence, away from their less fortunate peers holed up in their diplomatic mission's premises and under permanent torture and execution threats by enraged Iranian mobs. Theirs was the most harrowing contingency, but the quantitatively smaller problem of safely bringing the six US staffers back home was not only a humanitarian concern.

If found and caught by Iranian revolutionaries and given the treatment inflicted on accessories to the US convivial attitude to the dethroned Shah, Carter's government would have been ridiculed, exposed to embarrassment and would have had to publicly own up to the failure of their diplomatic dealings and intelligence service logistics.

Code named Eagle Claw, the US's first military and intelligence attempt to put an end to the hostage crisis ended in humiliation in April, 1980, when a plan was implemented to land aircraft covertly in the desert to allow special forces to infiltrate Tehran and free the hostages at the US Embassy. No minor glitch was allowed, for the survival of Carter's government was at stake and it could take no further blows.

Eagle Claw failed miserably.

This is when Mendez steps in, and this is the setting for Affleck's proficient retelling of Operation Argo, the brainchild of Mendez, Affleck's commanding yet self-effacing character. On the bright side of things, Affleck's glossy, glamorous and sometimes scandalous showbiz profile does not stand in the way of a perfectly credible character reconstruction. Unrecognizable under a then-fashionable carefully *negligé* mane of black hair and matching beard, Affleck, who is not a great actor, astutely foregrounds the well-narrated, well-paced string of events and somehow retreats to the position of handler and not a larger than life hero, as would have been very tempting to do.

Affleck, perhaps under the clever guidance of his new buddy George Clooney, who jumped on the bandwagon as coproducer, went for a clean-cut, surgical approach to screenwriter Chris Terrio's and Joshua Bearman's dexterous narrative. You see, docudramas and dramatizations of real-life events will always bear the stigma of being unfaithful for the sake of narrative. Affleck and Terrio-Bearman wisely weeded out the details and minutiae that would have slowed the action and hindered the relentless pace at which *Argo* charges ahead. No matter how faithfully you stick to the facts, purists will always spot

something that rings untrue, something missing, something that wasn't there, when the real events happened.

In purely cinematic terms, *Argo* is filled with the kind of teeth-gritting intensity only comparable with the best entirely fictional thrillers. It goes to Affleck's credit that the otherwise arduous, tedious process of negotiating the terms of Operation Argo does not result in a tedious give and take. *Argo*'s tightly woven story development is so compact and efficient that nothing short of "breathtaking" would be a proper adjective.

In addition, the two trusted Hollywood filmmakers hired by Mendez deliver perfectly timed, snappy one-liners that relieve the tension to then have it soar again to the action flick category *Argo* is supposed to fit in, apart from ideology-loaded docudrama. But the tension-relieving humorous snippets of dialogue fail to portray the wisecracking Hollywood players, whose personalities are only contoured but never fully developed. The same goes for the six staffers living in claustrophobic seclusion at the Canadian Ambassador's home. The acting is great, but the performers are seldom given the chance to flesh out fully rounded characters. Once again, it's a screenwriter's and a director's traumatic dilemma: respecting every single detail and neglecting some pivotal points in order to make a story flow more naturally.

This is the approach *Argo* goes for, and there's no denying that the gimmick works wonders. *Argo*, indeed, retells well-known facts as though they were revelations, and it reveals what lay shrouded in mystery as though it were a given. It manages both feats at breakneck speed, giving viewers no respite through its 120-minute length.

True, there's a tinge of nationalist pride to *Argo*, in the fact that common wisdom is not needed to predict what's coming next: inevitable, perfectly timed and choreographed triumph for the good guys, and embarrassing defeat for the bad guys.

And even if a US flag waving in the wind at the hero's home may be a bit too much of a tell-tale sign, there's no arguing that *Argo* is a good, very good movie.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Argo. US, 2012. In English with Spanish subtitles. Written by: Chris Terrio, Joshua Bearman. Directed by: Ben Affleck. Cinematography: Rodrigo Prieto. Editing: William Goldenberg. Music: Alexandre Desplat. With: Ben Affleck, Bryan Cranston, Alan Arkin, John Goodman, Victor Garber, Tate Donovan. Distributed by: Warner. NC13. Running time: 120 minutes.