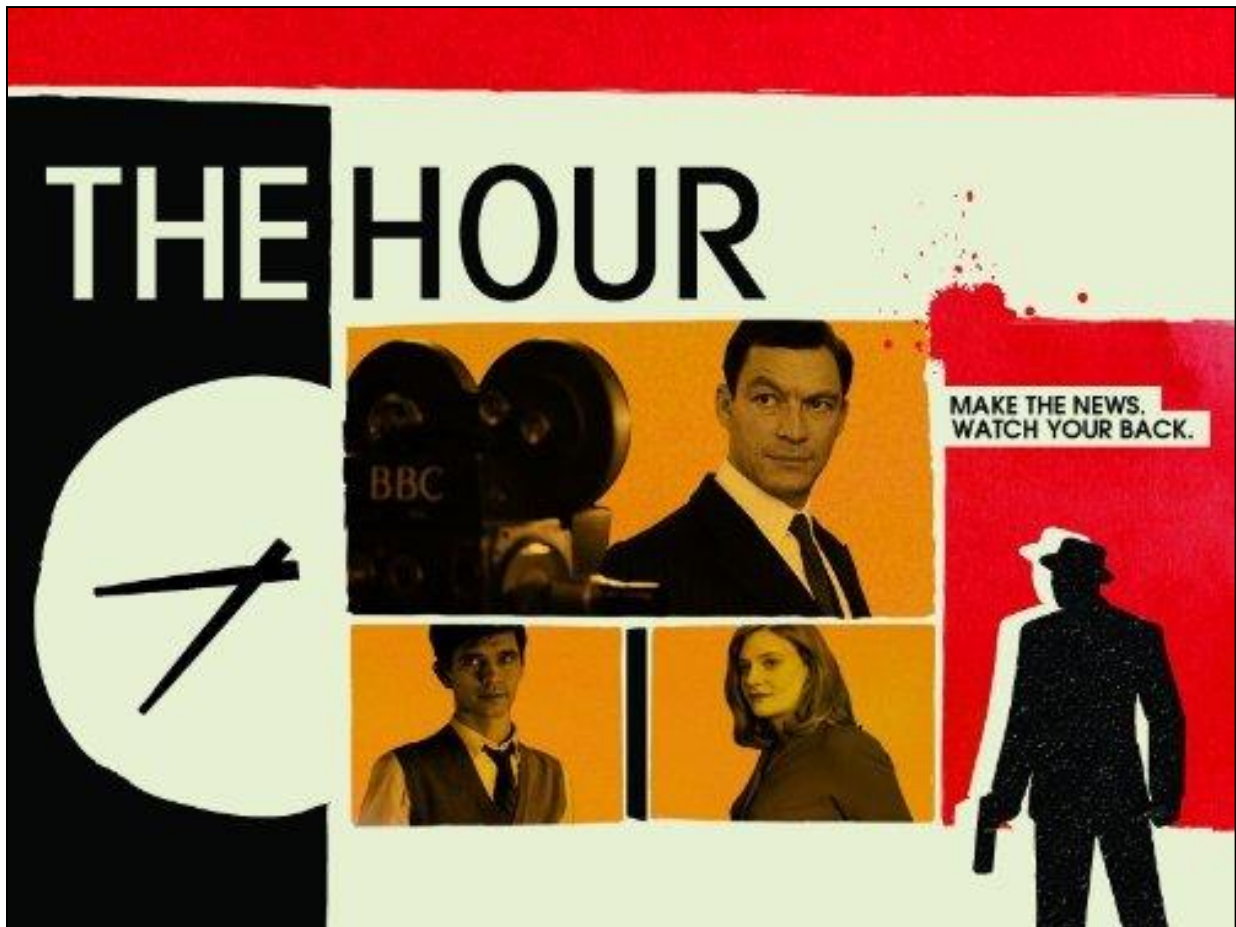


Review #44 : *The Hour* (2012)

Romola Garai and Ben Whishaw



Espionage in the Government and Shenanigans at Work

Americans are beginning to obsess about decline, but the British long ago turned brooding over fallen empire into an art form.

'A lie has no legs. A scandal, now that has wings.'

TRAILER

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_nyCY1s2CA

The Hour, a BBC America series which started in 2011, is among the best of the genre. It's a six-part thriller that blends the Suez crisis, one of Britain's sharpest intimations of loss, with a more intimate look at ambition and espionage in the workplace.

The narrative of this period piece set in the 1950s unfolds through an amber haze of cigarette smoke, whiskey and social taboos. Yet this BBC series isn't a pale imitation of anything else on TV. *The Hour* does borrow from the movie *Broadcast News*, as well as the 2003 BBC mini-series *State of Play*, but with a style and intelligence all its own.

The series opens in the offices of the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1956, only five years after the first Cambridge spies were unmasked as double agents, and just as President Abdel Nasser is consolidating power in Egypt. It's a time of unsettling change, except at the BBC, where even driven reporters are assigned to do feel-good newsreels about debutante balls and royal visits.

No one is more impatient with what he calls the '*brisk banality*' of TV news than Freddie Lyon (**Ben Whishaw**), a brilliant and irascible young reporter. He grouses about the coverage, sneering : '*Martial law may have been imposed in Poland, and we have footage of Prince Rainier on honeymoon with his showgirl.*'

Bel Rowley (**Romola Garai**), a beautiful and well-educated producer, is Freddie's best friend and protector. She's one of very few women in so high a position. He calls her *Money Penny*, a reference to the secretary in James Bond novels that she only occasionally finds annoying. Bel has a promising career but also a stunted social life, as she keeps falling in love with unavailable men.

When Bel and Freddie are assigned to help create a daring live news program called *The Hour*, their rapport is threatened by the arrival of Hector Madden (**Dominic West**), a brashly confident newcomer who, through family connections, gets the plum job of chief anchor of the show.

The three journalists quickly find themselves in a triangle, only there is more at stake in it than their feelings or even journalistic integrity. Their new venture is shadowed by the mysterious death of a young woman who happens to be Freddie's childhood friend. The

program also seems to attract slippery interference from the powers that be. And there are signs that British intelligence has a mole or two within its inner sanctum.

The more Freddie is advised not to pursue the circumstances of his friend's death, the more he insists on investigating it on his own.

World War II ended a decade earlier, but there is nothing particularly triumphant about this Britain, which seems too exhausted by the past to lead the future effectively. Class privilege is still intact but is under assault from all sides. In the United States, President Eisenhower favours decolonization, while immigrants flooding into Britain from newly independent former colonies expect to be welcomed. A new generation of angry young men is emboldened to challenge the system, and so are some of the women who learned self-reliance when their men were fighting overseas. Bel is respected by her colleagues yet is occasionally reminded that, as a woman, she is considered a second-class citizen, a reminder most often delivered by Angus McCain (**Julian Rhind-Tutt**), an upper-class snob who is a media adviser to the ailing Prime Minister Anthony Eden.

Dominic West here plays a well-bred charmer whose ambition is flecked with self-awareness. **Romola Garai**, although not conventionally pretty, plays a girl who has a great sense of humour and a grave demeanour. Her healthy physique accentuates Freddie's fragility. **Ben Whishaw**, who played Sebastian Flyte in the 2008 movie of *Brideshead Revisited*, has the unnourished body of a London youth reared on wartime rations. The storyline shows him as being in love with Bel yet too clumsy and too shy to reveal himself so.

Engaging secondary characters bolster these three, particularly Lix Storm (**Anna Chancellor**), a former war correspondent in charge of foreign news who stays alert and sardonic in all circumstances.

The Hour is so good that it seems far too short. It can at times be puzzling, and not everything in it is recommendable, but the series is rarely dull : its occasional slow pace, an increasingly absurd plot, oriented preachiness and of course inevitable sex scenes are indeed regrettable because the writing, the mood, the costumes, the cast (and of course those accents!) are quite good if not excellent.

The second season is darker and shows that hard-working reporters like Freddie are too often undone by dubious keepers who cower behind a Potemkin village of standards, policy... and checks in an effort to avoid controversy... or worse, scandal.

As Season 2 opens, the show within the show is now solidly successful : having made its anchor, Hector Madden is enough of a star to now wile his time away in nightclubs, signing autographs and consorting with chorus girls, only to skid into the studio with seconds to spare. Watching the clock and sighing in irritated resignation is producer Bel Rowley (**Romola Garai**), who puts up with Hector's antics for the same reason his wife, Marnie (**Oona Chaplin**), does — because he is talented and charming and because, like most women in the 1950s, they may have increasing influence but they do not yet have real power. Randall Brown, Bel's new boss, on the other hand, does have power.

Within minutes of the first episode, he not only gives Madden an ultimatum, but he also brings in a possible replacement, none other than... Freddie Lyon (**Ben Whishaw**), the dogged young firebrand around whom last season revolved. After broadcasting an interview that questioned the British government, Freddie was fired, leaving Bel bereft of both a constant if unrequited suitor and her most brilliant news gatherer...

This season is not just as terrific as it was last season, it's better. More important, despite Whishaw's brilliant portrayal of Q in *Skyfall*, this season is less James Bond and focuses more on personal stories and tensions of an increasingly multicultural city, with the inevitable rise of gangland-style crime.

The men and women of *The Hour* are dealing with shifting social strata, though creator **Abi Morgan** seems content to leave Britain's class issues to *Downton Abbey*, showcasing instead the effects of immigration and the women's movement. Indeed this season has an air of maturity that owes more to characters than pencil skirts and the still seductive snick of monogrammed lighters : Bel and her staff are no longer young Brits shaking up the fusty old BBC. Now they are forced to question their own motivations as well as those of the Establishment. In the first two episodes anyway, this makes for a more **sophisticated storytelling, a drama of adults who must take responsibility** for decisions of the mind as well as the heart. There again, get ready for some preaching and unsuitable scenes, but also great storytelling and great actors +++