

Those Cute Spies Around the Corner: Remember the cold war? Here's a TV drama that does
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Those Cute Spies Around the Corner

Remember the cold war?
Here's a TV drama that does.

By JEREMY EGNER

"The Americans," a new spy thriller starting Wednesday on FX, has a C.I.A. pedigree, is set in the geopolitical crucible of the cold war 1960s and stars Keri Russell playing against winsome type as a Communist hard-liner who is equally adept at seducing bureaucrats, kicking the heads of her enemies through walls or inserting a bit of propaganda into her son's homework.

It has plenty going for it as a cloak-and-dagger series. In other words, especially in a prime-time era defined by another espionage drama, "Homeland."

But it's the metaphorical tension of the show's domestic conceit — a pair of deep-cover K.G.B. agents are assigned to pose as husband and wife in the Washington suburbs — that the show's creators hope will elevate it into something more than a pulpy diversion. The bet is that beyond the chintzy window dressing, viewers will find some deeper resonance in the story of two people thrown together by fate, who end up years later with two kids, a house in the burbs and a superficial marriage that they keep up for appearance's sake.

"Regardless of whether you're spies, how much do you really know somebody?" said Ms. Russell, perhaps best known as the title figure in "Felicity," which was shown on WB from 1998 to 2002. "How much do you really choose somebody?"

Or as Joel Fields, an executive producer, put it, "What is marriage besides going through the motions?"

"The Americans" was inspired by the 2010 arrest of a ring of actual Russian sleeper agents. The case, with its forged passports, coded messages and other details seemingly derived from a John le Carré novel, spurred Amblin Entertainment to contact Joe Weisberg, who was once undercover trineer at the C.I.A. In the 1990s before moving on to write for series like "Dawgtag" and "Falling Skies." The show he came up with moved the spy story to the 1960s and drew on his recollections of how working undercover affected the family lives of operatives he met at the agency.

Even in this show, which has a lot of fun with espionage, there were stories we could tell that could feel real," Mr. Weisberg said. (Just not too real. As part of his C.I.A. nondisclosure agreement Mr. Weisberg has to submit his scripts to the agency for approval.)

"The Americans" begins in 1961, more than a decade after the show's spies, played by Ms. Russell and Matthew Rhys, emigrated to the United States, had children and established a modest travel agency — all part of the cover — in Falls Church, Va. (The show is actually shot in and around New York City.) The election of

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microfilm.

Keri Russell and Matthew Rhys, right, play parents and spies in "The Americans" on FX.

Above, Ms. Russell and Mr. Rhys with Keri Russell and Holly Taylor, who play their children.

Ronald Reagan, with his "Evil Empire" rhetoric, as president has intensified the hostility between the superpowers. Meanwhile the couple has come to a sort of emotional crossroads, torn between a longstanding loyalty to the motherland and devotion to their American family. Externally charged high jinks ensue as the agents, known as Phillip and Elizabeth Jennings, negotiate both their own deepening relationship and a series of increasingly dangerous operations.

The period details are relatively muted, aside from a soundtrack that features Pat Benatar, Juice Newton and the reggae "In the Air Tonight" by Phil Collins. "We tried to find a way of being true to the period without being slaves to it," said Adam Arkin, a producing director for the series.

But the time frame does allow the show to borrow actual historical tension and off-screen characters while spinning a yarn free of smartphones or online technology.

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When the agents bug the office of Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, they use an analog microphone and a remote transmitter the size of shoe box.

"It makes for better television because you're not just looking at a computer screen," said Mr. Rhys, a native of Cardiff, Wales.

Ms. Russell added, "We have to drive by our drop spot — like, we're looking under rocks for messages."

Often at odds within the series, the actors share an obvious rapport in person. Interviewed together in Ms. Russell's trailer on the set in Gowanus, Brooklyn, they traded jokes about the series (Mr. Rhys: "I think she kills me in Episode 8." Ms. Russell: "Then it's just going to be called 'The American.'") along with more earnest musings about the challenges of creating a credible phony-but-maybe-becoming-real marriage while also occasionally beating people up.

Ms. Russell's trial by fire came in the pilot, she said, when her character was required to kick the head of a rival agent through a wall. The rattled actress was ultimately intimidated into action by a pep talk of sorts from David Vadim, the actor preparing to receive the blow.

"He was putting in his mouth guard and he said, 'Listen, do it right once, otherwise I'm going to be mad if we have to do it again,'" she said.

Ms. Russell, who played vulnerable

charmers in films like "Waitress," acknowledged that subverting this reputation was "what was interesting" about taking on a K.G.B. agent.

She was chosen by John Landgraf, the president of FX, a longtime admirer. He considered her hiring to be in line with the network's tradition of surprising casting, which has revealed the grittier capabilities of Michael Chiklis in "The Shield," Ted Danson in "Damages" and Katey Sagal in "Sons of Anarchy."

"I wanted to see Felicity's dark side," he said.

A cynic might presume that Mr. Landgraf also wanted a spy drama on his schedule after the success of Showtime's "Homeland," suspecting that "The Americans" might represent the leading edge of a post-"Homeland" proliferation of covert thrillers.

However, FX picked up "The Americans" before "Homeland" made its debut, Mr. Landgraf said.

The producers draw a closer comparison with "The Sopranos," which is perhaps not surprising. Who wouldn't want to keep company with one of the most acclaimed shows in history? But the point, Mr. Fields said, is "you were drawn into this intense family drama that happened to be set in a very challenging world, and the same is the case here, we hope."

Occasionally the two sides overlap. In the premiere episode Mr. Rhys's character dons one of his spy disguises before hunt-



ing down and throttling a brute who ogled his teenage daughter at the mall. While helping her son with a school project about American Moon landings, Ms. Russell's Elizabeth notes, a tad defensively, that "the Moon isn't everything, just getting into space is a remarkable accomplishment."

But these and other comic grace notes — like the juxtaposition of Ms. Russell plotting darkly while wearing Guess mom jeans and other '80s 'burwear — are exceptions to a generally taut, morally ambiguous tone that owes more to claustro-

Keri Russell, seen here in "Felicity," moves beyond her comfort zone in the new series "The Americans."

phobic espionage tales like "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy" than "Mr. & Mrs. Smith." The couple chase targets through noisily city streets, sure, but they're also visibly tormented after poisoning an innocent pawn.

Not even the subdivision is safe when a F.B.I. counterintelligence agent, played by the veteran character actor Noah Emmerich, moves in across the street. Mr. Emmerich was drawn to his first television series by questions it raises about patriotism and "enemy" cultures, as reflected by its "ambiguity about who you're supposed to be rooting for," he said in his trailer.

Coincidentally Mr. Emmerich was preparing to film a scene set on the day that John Hinckley Jr. tried to assassinate Reagan — an event that helped jump-start the modern gun-control movement through the wounding of James Brady — on the same afternoon that Wayne LaPierre, chief executive of the National Rifle Association, was speaking in Washington to discourage new gun regulations after the shooting in Newtown, Conn. "Sometimes the lens of history can give you a little distance and perspective," Mr. Emmerich said, "to explore historical issues that are actually completely contemporary."

ONLINE: 'THE AMERICANS'

A scene from the premiere and an extended interview with Keri Russell and Matthew Rhys: nytimes.com/television