

Father, Mother, Teenager, Spy

Sheffield, Rob . Rolling Stone ; New York Iss. 1258, (Apr 7, 2016): 32.

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ABSTRACT

"Want me to make some eggs?" It's one of those grimly brilliant domestic scenes only *The Americans* can do: A trained KGB killer giving the basics of espionage to her wide-eyed teen daughter as if they're talking maxipads.

FULL TEXT

Headnote

'*The Americans*' finds a way to get more intense, hitting harder than any TV drama

Early in the excellent new season of *The Americans*, there's a moment when suburban mom Elizabeth (Keri Russell) and teenager Paige (Holly Taylor) have one of those mother-daughter talks in the kitchen, except what Elizabeth is explaining is spycraft. "It's what we call a 'source,'" she says soothingly. "It's more about getting people to trust you, to help them understand that you want the same thing that they want, which is to make the world a safer place for everyone. Not everyone sees it that way, so it's all done in secret." Then Mom pauses. "Did you eat? Want me to make some eggs?" It's one of those grimly brilliant domestic scenes only *The Americans* can do: A trained KGB killer giving the basics of espionage to her wide-eyed teen daughter as if they're talking maxipads.

It didn't seem possible that *The Americans* could push this far, because so much of it seemed to depend on its basic premise: two Russian spies embedded in the D.C. suburbs circa 1983, posing as a married American couple. But it keeps digging deeper into the espionage of everyday life. It's really about the Cold War between kids and parents, between husbands and wives, between lovers and enemies. Matthew Rhys' Philip and Russell's Elizabeth have a marriage unlike any other on TV - arranged, businesslike, but bonded by history and bloody secrets. They kill people, they go to bed, they lie to each other, they hide bodies, they argue about their kids, then they kill people again.

Part of the reason *The Americans* keeps evolving is that Paige has turned into a real character - she's the Sally Draper of this story, the teen daughter who's gotten dangerously wise to the family secrets. Elizabeth and Philip have always clashed over their daughter - Elizabeth wants her to follow in their footsteps and serve Mother Russia; Philip's one dream in life, the hope that kept him going, was to protect his daughter from the life. Now it's too late for that, and you can see new levels of despair in his never-exactly-cheerful eyes. When he goes undercover wearing one of his wigs, he looks disconcertingly like Bob Odenkirk playing Saul Goodman - he's lost in the American dream the same way Saul is, except he's even more fundamentally hosed. Whether he's going to an EST seminar or planning a murder, he keeps looking at his life and wondering how it could possibly get worse. Then it keeps getting worse.

Sidebar



THE AMERICANS

WEDNESDAYS, 10 P.M., FX

FATHER KNOWS BEST Rhys and Taylor talk it out.

DETAILS

Subject:	Espionage
Publication title:	Rolling Stone; New York
Issue:	1258
Pages:	32
Number of pages:	1
Publication year:	2016
Publication date:	Apr 7, 2016
Section:	R &R: Television
Publisher:	Rolling Stone LLC
Place of publication:	New York
Country of publication:	United States
Publication subject:	Music
ISSN:	0035791X
Source type:	Magazines
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	1777976319
Document URL:	http://ezproxy.middlebury.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1777976319?accountid=12447
Copyright:	Copyright Rolling Stone LLC Apr 7, 2016
Last updated:	2017-11-22
Database:	ProQuest Central

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