

From Russia with Love: Jovial Bond

Aiming for a whole month of James Bond reviews was pretty exciting for me. I didn't grow up with the series, and have really only seen maybe three films in their entirety. In fact, I actually started with Bond by seeing *Quantum of Solace* in the theatres with my folks – a movie I'm told is one of the weakest in the franchise. So having a reason to go back through the years and see all the highs and lows 007 has to offer is a big deal for a kid whose main exposure was weekends of *Nightfire* matches in friends' basements.

So Day One of our series, and the start of my venture, was Bond's second outing, 1963's *From Russia with Love*, starring the iconic Sean Connery. As a direct sequel to *Dr. No* from the previous year, the master spy once again faces off against SPECTRE forces as he attempts to recover a stolen cipher machine. Along the way, 007 teams up with a member of the Russian secret service, making a daring chase through the great cities of Europe.

Seeing Connery in his prime is simply one of the best parts of the film, and, I assume, holds up for just about every other time the Scotsman put on the classic tux. He's charming and ingenious throughout the whole adventure, and it's clear that he was a natural fit for the character. The way he plays off of Pedro Armendariz's lighthearted Kerim Bey or watching him romance Daniela Bianchi as the sultry Tatiana makes it clear that Connery created the framework by which ever successive Bond would be made.

Past that, it's definitely an intriguing plot, thin though it may be, and it's nicely punctuated with some really clever action scenes, once it all gets rolling. The movie handles both fistfights and boat chases with equal grace, knowing clearly when to raise the tension and when to go for a laugh or raucous explosion. This levity of tone is a really nice addition, especially when compared to the more gritty and straight-jawed approach used by the latest films in the series. Top this all off with the now-signature array of wacky Bond gadgetry, and it's readily apparent how 007 so quickly became a household name and a foundational action hero.

If there are any issues to be had with the film, they're two-fold: the standard issue of sexism and a rather lackluster end. The first has been so clichéd that it's almost not worth talking about, but there are a few troubling interactions between the daring spy and a number of women that just feel a little gross against today's progressivism. Bond sexing up two gypsy girls to stop their fighting or the complete disregard for any character development from Tatiana are the standout examples, but they're not the only awkward tensions. "The Bond Girl" is basically cinematic shorthand for the trophy babe for the roguish hero, and this early entry highlights its formation.

And the final beats of the film... Well, without giving too much away about an admittedly 50-year-old film, let me just say that I had to literally ask "That's how it ends?" to my empty room as the credits rolled over the last scene. There's another quick fight, an escape, and a few more cute lines between Bond and Tatiana, then call it quits. I really expected a bit more resolution, a bit more finality, but, then again, I suppose they wanted to leave something hanging for the sequel they were already touting in the credits.

I've been told that this is one of the best films in the Bond legacy, and while I'm not completely obsessed about it, I can see where it could garnish that reputation, especially by viewers in its time. I still think I like *Skyfall* a bit better, but that may just be time and personal tastes. All that said, *From Russia with Love* is a really solid action-thriller, and one that, if nothing else, has gotten me even more excited to see more Bond adventures throughout the month.

Final Verdict: Watch It