

Chris Pine excels as a veteran who enters world of private security in 'The Contractor'

By Katie Walsh
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Chris Pine slips into his best spy-wear for Tarik Saleh's "The Contractor," a character study (cloaked as a thriller) of a U.S. Army Ranger who tries his hand in the murky world of private security. Written by J.P. Davis, "The Contractor" paints a deeply cynical picture of life after service for American military heroes, having destroyed their bodies on the battlefield and left to fend for themselves and their families in an increasingly brutal world.

Davis' orderly script proceeds almost like clockwork through its acts, setting up our main character, James (Pine) and his situation at home, struggling to support his family after he's involuntarily discharged from the Army for using banned substances to treat his lingering injuries. He's promised his wife (Gillian Jacobs) he'll stay out of private security contracting gigs, but the temptation of big money promised by an old war buddy, Mike (Ben Foster), and Rusty (Kiefer Sutherland), the proprietor of a security company known as "The Ranch," proves too tempting to pass up. It's a seductive sell, with cash up front and Rusty's folksy charm; he tends tomato plants while talking of safe, honorable money, nothing like "Erik Prince" (of Blackwater notoriety).

When James lands in Berlin, "The Contractor" transforms

from an American family drama into a Euro spy thriller. He's tasked with trailing a scientist working on viral pathogens, and told he has ties to terrorist organizations with designs on releasing a bioweapon, so James doesn't blink when he, Mike and their crew break into the lab to steal research. It's a well-oiled mission, executed in low voices and quiet movements, but as the mission changes, and the scientist begs for his life and family, James' eyes start darting around behind his balaclava, doubt creeping in. Soon enough, he has to go rogue, on the run in Germany, "Jason Bourne"-style, though it's not his government chasing him, but a shadowy private American company.

There is a bleak poetry to Davis' script, as the men of this world reckon with the things they've done as lifelong warriors. There's no pontificating, far from it, just a few choice words and details that add nuance to a story, or flip it on its back. But the spare resonance is so restrained as to be even a bit underwritten. Unlike most films, "The



Vlad Cioplea/Paramount Pictures
From left, Chris Pine as James Harper, Eva Ursescu as Kelly, Ben Foster as Mike, Nicolas Noblitt as Mike Jr., and Tyner Rushing as Christine in the action/thriller "The Contractor."

Contractor" could have used a hair more exposition, or at least more clearly defined motivations beyond "family," which becomes a catch-all for why these men do what they do. Does James have a greater sense of justice and empathy? How evil are the people pulling the strings? For a situation this messy, the story is almost a little too clean.

What elevates "The Contractor" is the incredible cast. Pine is excellent, whether he's in

motion — swiftly executing the technical skills he knows so well — or in repose, often in physical or mental anguish. But Pine is never better than when he's opposite magnetic character actor Foster. The two played brothers in Taylor Sheridan's heist film "Hell or High Water," and

as soon as Foster rolls in, "The Contractor" instantly becomes a better, and more complex film. Every moment Foster is on screen as the unpredictable Mike is electrifying, and the chemistry Pine and Foster create in their wounded, yet loyal brotherhood is undeniable.

But "The Contractor" is decidedly Pine's film. His performance is as efficient as the script, which Saleh in turn mirrors with a crisp, smooth aesthetic. There's nothing particularly showy about the style, but it serves the story of this professional warrior working his way through an unfamiliar place, on the run. When it starts to get a bit grittier, the handheld camera comes in, as Pine has to muck about in the mud and literally go underground to find the truth. What he extracts isn't triumph, but rather, a cautionary tale, a dark fable about what faces veterans after serving their country.

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