



Her spa weekend hadn't turned out to be very relaxing.

BLACK BOOK 15

Verhoeven doses up on Dutch courage...

OPENS 19 JANUARY

Director Paul Verhoeven

Starring Carice van Houten, Sebastian Koch, Thom Hoffman, Halina Reijn

Screenplay Gerard Soeteman, Paul Verhoeven

Distributor Tartan Films

Running time 146 mins

WHAT'S THE STORY?

Her hideout blasted, Jewish bombshell Rachel Steinn (Carice van Houten) takes up with the Dutch Resistance, who persuade her to infiltrate Nazi HQ by getting jiggy with local Gestapo commandant Ludwig Müntze (Sebastian Koch). But when the undercover chanteuse actually falls in love with him, her motives are called into question...

Calling *Black Book* Paul Verhoeven's finest film in years is hardly a great stretch. After all, his last feature – 2000's *Hollow Man* – was almost as empty as its protagonist. But now with *Black Book*, in which Verhoeven goes Dutch, directing in his native language for the first time since the days of *Wham!*, it's clear that escaping Hollywood has revitalised the director. In the last six years, he's rediscovered his knack for spinning a cracking, white-knuckle yarn.

It's not his first foray into World War Two: that was 1977's *Soldier Of Orange*, which put him on maps outside Holland. But whereas said film was laconic and brooding, *Black Book* is brisk, frisky and glossed with a fine Hollywood sheen, courtesy of Verhoeven's years of churning out blockbusters like *Basic Instinct* and *Total Recall*. (Indeed, such unashamed populism will probably mean the Academy

voters will bypass this work come ballot time next spring.)

The juggernaut pacing is occasionally a mixed blessing: Verhoeven doesn't trust his audience to sit still for long, skimming through the intricate, double-crossing plot and wartime intrigues like he's overseeing a World War Two Greatest Hits documentary. Even his beguiling star, van Houten (who's otherwise a magnificent find), tends to rush through scenes like she's got a hairdresser's appointment to keep. And Verhoeven's decision to bookend the movie with scenes in a kibbutz (which means you know Rachel doesn't die...) leaches tension from some of the film's more traumatic moments.

But the twists, turns and "who's-the-traitor?" mystery will keep you hooked, while Verhoeven casts no judgment on a Jewish woman deploying sexual charms to bag an SS Sturmführer, adding a layer of complexity to an otherwise straight-up thriller. His sly humour and sex-and-nudity fixations are also in full flow, including a sure-to-become-notorious scene where Rachel dyes her pubic hair blonde. Tame stuff when you recall *Showgirls*, but it's safe to say the agent provocateur of Dutch cinema has got his mojo back. And that's good news in our *Book*.

Matt Mueller

VERDICT

Stacked with espionage, romance and tragedy, this sees Verhoeven back on his game, while van Houten gives a bold breakout performance.

