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Chases, Gunplay and Terrorism, Without the Familiar Landmarks

A mystery can sustain suspense because the plot is clever, or because its provenance is mysterious.

ALESSANDRA STANLEY
TELEVISION REVIEW

"Tell No One," a French film, spooked and delighted American viewers by transporting a best-selling thriller by Harlan Coben to France and thereby scrambling familiar cues and expectations.

"The Diplomat," a two-part, four-hour counterterrorism mini-series on Saturday on Ion, was made for British and Australian television and

is similarly disorienting. It stars Dougray Scott and is a little like Fox's "24," only murkier and much shorter: "24" divided by 6 and steeped in Graham Greene.

It's not nearly as good as it tries to be, but it's not at all bad — a post-Sept. 11 thriller for viewers who have lost patience with Jack Bauer and don't mind mixed signals.

The hardest thing to figure out may be where to find it: the Ion network (its slogan is "positively entertaining"), a national outlet that was once known as Pax, is listed as WPXN in the Time Warner Cable

program guide for New York (in between Blimberg and ShopNBC), and is mostly home to a confusing jumble of infomercials, reruns and movies like "Octopussy."

"The Diplomat" is a confusing jumble of genres: an action-adventure yarn crammed with shoot-outs, Russian mobsters and chase scenes, but set in England, Tajikistan and Australia and overlaid with a scrim of bleak, BBC-style realism that includes a Helen Mirrenesque female chief inspector from Scotland Yard,

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Dougray Scott in "The Diplomat," a new mini-series on Ion.

Chases, Guns and Terrorism Without the Usual Locales

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Julie Hales (Rachael Blake).

And oddly, given the context of terrorism, espionage and nuclear proliferation, the United States is not mentioned; nor is it an unseen presence. Even MI6 agents do not grumble about C.I.A. interference.

Mr. Scott, who has been seen as a lust interest on "Desperate Housewives," has a pedigree in action and espionage, including "M:I-2" and "Enigma," a movie based on the novel by Robert Harris. Here he plays Ian Porter, a British diplomat who is arrested by Scotland Yard on charges that he helped Russian mobsters smuggle drugs into Britain.

Porter faces graver dangers than prison: the Russian mobsters are also trafficking in "loose nukes," nuclear materials that made their way to the black market after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The British foreign intelligence service, MI6, is with Porter, then after him, and so is a Russian Mafioso. That pursuit doesn't end even after Porter is

sent to Australia under a witness protection program along with his ex-wife, Pippa (Claire Forlan "CSI: NY").

Too many of the plot points and characters are clichés of the counterterrorism thriller: ruthless, leather-clad Russian mobsters; perfidious intelligence officers; and cynical police detectives. But those conventions are confounded by less familiar set-

A British diplomat, Russian thugs and Australian accents.

tings (the gas stations and brothels of Sydney) and minor players who are not easily assessed or dismissed, including two buff, macho Australian policemen assigned to protect the Porters in hiding.

Chief Inspector Hales is also hard to read and perhaps not as sternly by-the-book as she projects. Even Pippa could have hidden agenda behind her long-suffering smiles.

Porter isn't as strong and silent as he seems, though at first he mostly looks sullen. It turns out that his bouts of rudeness mask a personal tragedy that is revealed slowly, in grainy flashbacks.

The French have a word, "dépaysement," to describe the disorientation people experience when they leave home and go abroad. The sudden loss of familiar landmarks can be unsettling but also exhilarating: there is a thrilling uncertainty to even the most mundane tasks, like taking a bus or buying a meal.

Thrillers made for a non-American audience have a similar effect. Even stock characters and classic plot feints are colored in unfamiliar hues that keep viewers guessing. "The Diplomat" has its share of flaws, but they are harder to pin down and easier to forgive in translation.

The Diplomat

Ion Television, Saturday night at 7, Eastern and Pacific times; 6, Central time.

Directed by Peter Andrikidis; Justin Bodle, Des Monaghan, Brendan Dahill and Robert Halmi Jr., executive producers; Greg Haddrick and Mr. Andrikidis, producers; Peter Gawler, script editor; based on a concept by Ronan Glenane, Neil Greenwood and Mr. Haddrick. Produced by Screentime for UKTV.

WITH: Dougray Scott (Ian Porter), Rachael Blake (Julie Hales), Jeremy Lindsay Taylor (Mark Wilson), Richard Roxburgh (Charles Van Koors), Claire Forlani (Pippa Porter), Don Hany (Sergei Krousov), Elan Zaveisky (Nikolai), Jonny Pasvolsky (Antonio Morelli), Tony Martin (Bill Murray), Alex Menglet (Dimitri), Socratis Otto (Shannon Cross), Stephen Curry (Neil Trent), Costa Ronin (Vladimir), Alin Sumarwata (Yasmin Van Koors), Anita Hegh (Annabelle), Shane Briant (Winston Beale), Chris Haywood (Browning), Fergus and Hugo Whelan (Louis), Doris Younane (Jenny Basheer), Duncan Young (Jason Polkinghorne), Luisana Belle Frost (Grace) and Kate Box (Roma Hennessy).