

ESPIONAGE HITS THE HIGH "C": A CHRISTOFF LEWIS MYSTERY

LOGLINE: After discovering that his favorite diva may "not be herself," a geeky opera buff and his best friend must untangle a mysterious plot orchestrated by a secret organization.

FADE IN:

OPEN ON:

INT. A DUNGEON - EVENING

A large circular area with stone walls houses a computer to the left, a heavy metal door to the right and in the center two PEOPLE tied to two chairs.

Tied to one chair with his wrists bound is CHRISTOFF LEWIS, African American, 34, attractive, but awkward, geeky. Think Steve Urkel meets David Oyelowo. Directly behind him, also tied to a chair with bound wrists, is MONICA BEBOW, Caucasian, 28, Christoff's no nonsense best friend. Before them stands FIVE STERN MEN In black suits.

CHRISTOFF

(V.O.)

This scene was just a few short weeks ago. That's me and my assistant--

MONICA

(V.O.)

Business Partner.

CHRISTOFF

(V.O.)

Oh... sorry, Business Partner tied up there. Like you, I used to think that opera was the höchste Kunst, the highest of art. But that cold, rainy night I discovered that the world of opera is as twisted as one of its plots, filled with betrayal, passion, and a lot of sitting around wondering what the hell is going on.

MONICA

(V.O.)

Focus.

CHRISTOFF

(V.O.)

Sorry.

A CLAP OF THUNDER is heard as the scene of a tied up Christoff and Monica...

DISSOLVES TO:

FLASHBACK. INT. THE LOBBY OF A LECTURE HALL - EARLIER THAT EVENING

Christoff and Monica are about to enter. Standing in front of the doors is VIRGINIA, a deep-voiced, surly usher who looks like she couldn't care less.

VIRGINIA

Ticket.

Monica hands Virginia her ticket and walks inside. Christoff, searching, can't seem to find his.

CHRISTOFF

I thought it was right here. I'm such a scatterbrain sometimes. I thought I put it in my Friday wallet, but maybe it's in my Thursday wallet. Or would I have been crazy and put it in my Tuesday wallet? I'm... I'm sorry, I'm just so excited to hear Laretta Ricci talk about her opera career. I am obsessed with her. I wrote an article on my Opera Blog about how warm and talented she is and that when she sings it's like she's connecting directly with you, you know what I mean?

VIRGINIA

(beat)

No. Ticket.

CHRISTOFF

Sorry. C'mon Christoff, pull it together. Did you know that in addition to being a world-class opera diva, Laretta started a foundation that champions racial representation not only on the stage, but also on the administrative--

VIRGINIA

Sir. I don't care. If you don't have a ticket, you cannot go in.

A CLAP OF THUNDER is heard. From behind Christoff, RICCARDO, early 40s, attractive, steps forward. He flashes two tickets in front of Christoff and Virginia.

RICCARDO

I have an extra.

CHRISTOFF

(V.O.)

Standing before me was the handsomest man I'd ever seen. His finely chiseled jaw combined effortlessly with his soft, dark eyes. He was more beautiful than a plate of my mother's homemade mac-and-cheese... and smelled even better.

CHRISTOFF (CONT'D)

Wow, you're sexier than a bowl of cheesy macaroni.

RICCARDO

What?

CHRISTOFF

You heard that?

VIRGINIA

We all did. Now give me those ticket.

Virginia snatches the tickets away from Riccardo.

CHRISTOFF

Thank you...

RICCARDO

Riccardo.

Riccardo smiles at Christoff then enters the auditorium and goes to the right. Christoff, in a daze, keeps staring after him.

VIRGINIA

Sir, move! You're blocking the entrance!

INT. THE LECTURE HALL - MOMENTS LATER

A beaming Christoff sits down next to Monica.

CHRISTOFF

I couldn't find my ticket. But the sexiest man ever had an extra one.

MONICA

Did you thank him?

CHRISTOFF

Sort of. I got flustered. He was so beautiful, like--

MONICA

A plate of your mom's macaroni and cheese?

CHRISTOFF

And he smelled even better.

(beat)

If I see him again, I'll be sure to give him a proper thank you.

As if on cue, Riccardo comes down the aisle towards Christoff and Monica.

CHRISTOFF (CONT'D)

(to Monica, whispered
through a grit smile)

Oh my God, it's him.

RICCARDO

Well, hello again. Do you mind if I sit next to you?

Christoff giggles and snorts.

MONICA

That's Christoff speak for, "yes."

Riccardo sits.

The lights in the hall go down as the lights on the stage go up.

The audience applauds as LAURETTA RICCI, 36, gorgeous, dressed in an icy blue outfit, enters. She glares coldly at the audience.

Following her is HAMMOND FAIRFAX, older, warm, serious. They take their seats. Christoff squeals with delight.

HAMMOND

Hello everyone. Welcome to tonight's in depth look at the career of one of opera's most fascinating artists, Laretta Ricci. Ms. Ricci, I'll start off by asking about your organization that is seeking more transparency in the racial equality practices of opera companies around world.

Lauretta shifts uncomfortably in her chair.

LAURETTA

Mr. Fairfax, I was under the impression that we would be speaking about my opera career, not... other things.

HAMMOND

But of course, Ms. Ricci. I just thought that you'd want to express your feelings about--

LAURETTA

Shall we talk about my debut at La Scala when I was only 28?

HAMMOND

Um, yes... please... tell us about your La Scala debut.

Christoff, confused about Lauretta's presence, and wanting to talk to Riccardo, leans over.

CHRISTOFF

(Whispering)

She seems to be having an off day.

(Joking)

It's almost like she's a clone.

Christoff giggles. Riccardo stares intensely at Christoff.

RICCARDO

Excuse me, I need to make a phone call.

Riccardo gets up quickly and leaves.

MONICA

Did you ruin yet another human interaction?

CHRISTOFF

Probably?

(beat)

Probably.

EXT. IN FRONT OF THE THEATER - AFTER THE LECTURE

Rain is pouring in thick sheets. Monica and Christoff are standing in front of a Neon Marquee that says, "Lauretta Ricci, the Real Me."

CHRISTOFF

That was the strangest interview ever. Tonight, she just didn't seem like herself. Something was off.

MONICA

Face it. Opera people may be fascinating on stage, but they're duds in real life. I've got an early morning tomorrow. You need a lift?

CHRISTOFF

No, I'm going to walk and think for a bit.

Monica shrugs and walks away. The rain begins to pour even heavier as Christoff makes his way down the dark, lonely street.

Lost in thought as he is walking, he is pulled back to reality by the SOUND of someone following him.

He quickens his pace. The footsteps behind him quicken as well. He turns a corner and waits. The footsteps draw closer and closer, Christoff shuts his eyes as his heart pounds faster and faster until...

CHRISTOFF (CONT'D)

I will not become one of the 8 percent of people who get mugged!

Christoff opens his eyes and assumes an attacking bear stance.

Standing in front of him is Riccardo.

RICCARDO

I'm sorry, I did not mean to frighten you. Christoff, right? You seem very passionate and knowledgeable about opera, particularly the career of Lauretta Ricci and I found you intriguing. Scusi, my name is Riccardo. Would you care to join me for a nightcap at my favorite speakeasy?

CHRISTOFF

(Nervous)

Prohibition lasted from 1920 to 1932 with Roosevelt openly calling for its repeal.

RICCARDO

I'm confused. Is that a yes?

A clap of THUNDER booms.

INT. A SPEAKEASY

Christoff and Riccardo are standing at a bar. Both have cocktails. Christoff, however, seems to be the only one drinking.

CHRISTOFF

Her answer about Callas being one of many inspirations was just... well, it was just wrong! In the 2018 December issue of Opera for All, she spoke extensively about how Callas was her sole source of artistic influence.

(To himself)

She just wasn't herself,

(He realizes)

...because it wasn't her!

Riccardo stares at Christoff but says nothing.

CHRISTOFF (CONT'D)

What? Do I have a boogie hanging from my nose?

RICCARDO

I'm going to the restroom. I'll be right back. Please, finish your drink.

A CLAP OF THUNDER is heard as Riccardo walks away. Christoff feels a tap on his shoulder. He turns around. It's Monica.

CHRISTOFF

What are you doing here?

MONICA

On a hunch, I watched some YouTube videos of Laretta and you were right. She was not herself.

CHRISTOFF

Monica, I think the Laretta we saw was a...

Just as Christoff is about to share his theory, he begins to feel woozy. In slow motion he falls backwards landing on the hard bar floor.

He sees five men, all in identical black suits, moving towards him. One of them has grabbed a struggling Monica. He passes out.

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. THE DUNGEON - PRESENT

Christoff and Monica are tied up to chairs with their wrists bound like at the open.

Standing before them are the five men identified only by their Nationality, the AMERICAN, the RUSSIAN, the GERMAN, the ITALIAN, and the FRENCHMAN.

THE RUSSIAN

Allow me to introduce ourselves. We are the League of Opera Impresarios.

A CLAP OF THUNDER.

CHRISTOFF

Let us go!

THE FRENCHMAN

You two have figured out our little scheme of cloning opera artists who are trying to... how do you say in English? (BEAT) Ah, yes, disrupt our very intricate system of oppressing artists who are-

THE GERMAN

Too black, too gay, too much.

THE ITALIAN

We created our Laretta replica because Miss Ricci was becoming too vocal in her call for equity in the opera world. She had to be silenced.

The clone of Laretta walks out of the shadows. She winks at Christoff.

CHRISTOFF

(V.O.)

Monica and I had stumbled upon an operatic scheme that went all the way to the top. We needed to find the real Laretta and escape.

THE AMERICAN

We must thank our double agent for infiltrating Laretta's organization. He was able to kidnap Miss Ricci and replace her with our cloned one.

A CLAP OF THUNDER is heard.

THE AMERICAN (CONT'D)

Damn it! Will you stop it with the thunder?!

The German is holding a thunder sheet.

THE GERMAN

Sorry, Just wanted to create the mood.

Riccardo emerges from the shadows.

CHRISTOFF

You?!

MONICA

I've always said you had terrible taste in men. Now that taste is going to get us killed.

CHRISTOFF

(V.O.)

Dammit, Christoff! You should have recognized the tell-tale signs from verywellmind.com that he was a liar.

FLASHBACK - INT. THE SPEAKEASY

Christoff and Riccardo are talking.

CHRISTOFF

(V.O.)

Being vague and offering few details.

CHRISTOFF IN THE FLASHBACK

How did you manage to get an extra ticket for the lecture?

RICCARDO

I knew a guy who knew a guy who knew a guy.

CHRISTOFF

(V.O.)

Repeating questions before answering them.

CHRISTOFF IN THE FLASHBACK

Where were you born?

RICCARDO

Where was I born? Where is anyone born?

CHRISTOFF

(V.O.)

Unconscious grooming behaviors.

Riccardo runs his hands through his own hair, then runs his hands through Christoff's hair. To make matters even more awkward, Riccardo runs his hands through the hair of a complete stranger standing next to him.

INT. THE DUNGEON -PRESENT

THE FRENCHMAN

Let's leave so we can devise a plan to get rid of them. It must be grand and operatic!

THE RUSSIAN

And knowing you, very expensive.

The Frenchman, the Russian, the Italian, the German and the American, all break into laughter as they leave the dungeon.

The Laretta clone leaves followed by Riccardo, who closes the dungeon door.

Monica feels a strange bump from Christoff's chair.

MONICA

What are you doing?

Christoff appears in front of Monica, free. He begins to loosen Monica's restraints.

MONICA (CONT'D)

How did you...?

CHRISTOFF

Easy, when I presented my hands to be tied up in front of me, I crossed them at the wrist. I then rotated my wrists approximately 45 degrees, so that once the ropes were tight, I was able to straighten out my wrists and loosen the rope. For the chest, I tensed all my muscles when they were tying me up, thus causing my body to expand. When I relaxed, my body shrank back 2.25%, making the ropes loose enough to fall off. I just happened to spend Saturday night watching 23 different videos on the subject.

Monica is now free.

MONICA

Thank you for saving me.

(beat)

Also, maybe you should get out of the house every now and then.

Christoff and Monica rush to the dungeon door.

MONICA (CONT'D)

We've got to find a way to o--

Christoff flings himself at the dungeon door. It was actually open which sends Christoff flying into an unseen hallway.

CHRISTOFF

(O.S.)

It was open. Also, so is a gas above my eye.

INT. VARIOUS HALLWAYS IN THE DUNGEON

Christoff and Monica are running down a series of corridors. He has his hand over the cut above his eye.

CHRISTOFF

It may take longer than the usual one to three days for this cut to heal. But under no circumstances am I to rub it. Rubbing it can cause infection.

(MORE)

CHRISTOFF (CONT'D)

I was just reading this article about what happens when an eye gets infected. It can turn--

MONICA

Christoff! More "finding our way around this maze of corridors" and less "random information stashed inside that brilliant brain of yours!"

They round a corner and see an open door. They crouch down directly outside of it.

INT. JUST OUTSIDE A LAB

Christoff and Monica look inside. They see the League and Riccardo working at various stations.

The cloned Laretta is sitting on a chair staring at the real Laretta, who is tied to another chair.

MONICA

I'm assuming you've read several articles on the best way for two people to take on six humans and a clone. What's the plan?

CHRISTOFF

This!

Christoff bursts through the door yelling a war-like cry as he enters.

MONICA

That's a terrible plan.

Monica follows.

INT. THE LAB

The fight that ensues can only be described as... weird.

Christoff enters swinging his arms in a windmill fashion as he walks towards the Five. Monica spots Riccardo and lunges herself onto his back.

MONICA

You son of a bitch!

RICCARDO

Wait, I can explain!

Monica and Riccardo fall to the ground. She is now on top him and begins punching him.

The cloned Laretta grabs Monica from behind. Monica is kicking and screaming as the cloned Laretta places her in a chair.

Riccardo, now recovered, rushes over towards the Five and, to the surprise of everyone, starts helping Christoff to fight them.

CHRISTOFF

You're fighting for the wrong side!

RICCARDO

I want to fight for whatever side you're on.

Riccardo flashes a smile at Christoff as he punches the American in the face.

Christoff, looking at Riccardo but still swinging his arms, unknowingly hits the Italian, knocking him out.

The cloned Laretta winks at Monica and releases her. The cloned Laretta jumps into the action attacking the Russian.

MONICA

Who the hell is fighting whom?!

Monica rushes over towards the Frenchman who is grabbing the cloned Laretta. She kicks the Frenchman in the "croissant." He "melts" to the ground.

The German grabs Monica. The cloned Laretta faces the German and sings a pitch so high that the German falls to the ground in agonizing pain.

Christoff turns and notices that the Italian is down. He looks around the room and sees that the German, the Russian, the American, and the Frenchman are also down.

Christoff looks at Riccardo. Riccardo smiles. Christoff looks at the cloned Laretta. She smiles. Christoff turns and looks at Monica. She has a "I don't know what the hell just happened" look on her face.

INT. THE SAME ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The Five are now tied up as the SOUND of sirens are HEARD approaching.

Christoff, Monica, and Riccardo turn towards the "cloned" Laretta.

LAURETTA

Let me explain. Riccardo was posing as a spy for the League of Opera Impresarios, but he was really working undercover to save me. He knew that I wasn't "myself," so when he met you and your brilliant mind, he was able to put it together that the Laretta onstage was a phony. He left the lecture and called the police for backup.

MONICA

Then why in the hell did you have us kidnapped?

CHRISTOFF

Wait, I think I understand. Riccardo had to pretend to still be working for the League in order to gain access to their headquarters and find the real Laretta. So, you told them that I'd figured out their plan. While they were focusing on us, you were able to locate the real Laretta and tie up the cloned one.

The tied-up, cloned Laretta screams ferociously trying to get free.

MONICA

She seems delightful.

CHRISTOFF

You left the dungeon door open hoping that we'd be able to free ourselves from the restraints.

(To Laretta)

And you winked at me, to let me know that you were the real Laretta.

LAURETTA

You were right, Riccardo, he's smart and handsome.

Christoff giggles and snorts.

Police Officers flood the room and begin taking the Five and the screaming, fighting cloned Laretta away.

RICCARDO

I'm sorry for mixing you up in all of this. But your efforts may have just saved the entire opera world.

(beat)

By the way, I'd still love to get you that night cap. What do you say?

CHRISTOFF

(Nervous)

Nightcaps are known to help us fall asleep faster and increase deep sleep in the first half of the night.

(beat)

Or am I mistaken, and you meant the cloth garment that one wears to bed?

Christoff smiles awkwardly. Riccardo looks at Monica.

MONICA

That's Christoff speak for, "yes."

FADE OUT.