

'State of Play' pays homage to print journalism's role



Ken Hively / Los Angeles Times

With the help of Ben Affleck's conflicted congressman, director Kevin Macdonald, left.

explores the watchdog role of newspapers in "State of Play."

Kevin Macdonald's drama, set amid the walls of power in Washington, is about reporting the tough story because the public has a right to know. Ben Affleck plays a rising congressman.

By Rachel Abramowitz >>>
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"What happens when journalists aren't there to ask the difficult questions of politicians?"

That's just one concern Kevin Macdonald, the 41-year-old Scottish documentary filmmaker turned director, is raising with his new political thriller, "State of Play."

The movie, which stars Russell Crowe, Ben Affleck, Helen Mirren and Rachel McAdams, is set during these tumultuous times for the fourth estate. The backdrop for this tale of inside-the-Beltway conspiracy and intrigue is a Washington, D.C., newspaper, similar to the Washington Post, except without the benevolent Graham family as the owners, and it does capture the feeling of an industry in transition, perpetually under economic pressures from the outside, while inside a battle for supremacy reigns between the brash but unseasoned young bloggers and the traditional hard-charging gumshoe reporters.

Affleck, who plays an ambitious up-and-coming politician, and Macdonald tend to banter jocularly with talking about the seismic shifts in the media landscape,

but they didn't make the film to dance on the grave of any institution. This is the kind of movie where the closing shot is a loving pan to newspapers traveling through the printing plant. "It's the last hurrah for this analog technology. You look at it and it feels like this noble beast, the last lion in the wilderness . . .," Macdonald says. "That's what got me interested in a film about journalism."

Over a lunch, on a windy day, at the completely empty and barren poolside of the Four Seasons Hotel, Affleck and Macdonald -- who both speak with exuberance and authority about what they see as the responsibilities and shortcomings of news-gathering organizations -- resemble the dynamic between the film's main characters: Crowe's disheveled but tenacious reporter, Cal McAffrey, and Affleck's shiny bright congressman, Stephen Collins -- old college pals who have grown apart while working for the public trust (albeit in very different capacities) in the nation's capital.

Macdonald, who won an Oscar for his documentary "One Day in September," about the Munich Olympic massacre, before directing 2006's "The Last King of Scotland," is the rumpled one with shaggy hair and a journalist's zeal for blunt truth telling, tempered by his understanding of the Hollywood publicity machine. (He comes from a prominent filmmaking clan, both as the grandson of writer-director Emeric Pressburger, Michael Powell's collaborator on "The Red Shoes," and brother of prolific U.K. producer Andrew Macdonald.)

Looking trim in a peacoat, Affleck gives off an air of radiant health and tends to undercut his director's more earnest musings with good-natured jokes.

The film, based on the gripping 2003 six-hour British miniseries of the same name, begins with what seem to be unrelated events. A street kid is gunned down in an alley. A beautiful, young woman working on the Hill dies in a subway accident. While investigating the shooting murder for his newspaper, Crowe's journalist uncovers connections between the deaths -- and what may be a larger government conspiracy involving a private, Halliburton-like military contractor -- that could derail the career of his old buddy the congressman.

Actors bow out

Making matters even more complicated, Crowe's character has had an affair with the congressman's wife, played by Robin Wright Penn. In a departure -- and updating from the miniseries (see story this page) -- McAdams plays a newbie blogger, more accustomed to pontificating than reporting, who finds herself paired with Crowe, who has major conflict-of-interest issues as the investigation delves deeper into his friend's past. Mirren plays the paper's acerbic top editor, caught between the financial demands of the paper and her desire to break big news and speak truth to power.

Crowe wasn't the original choice to play McAffrey. Brad Pitt was initially cast as the conflicted but dogged newsman, and even made a dash- ing research visit to the Washington Post.

"It was the biggest thing that ever happened there," Macdonald says wryly.

"The biggest thing that happened at the Washington Post was that Brad Pitt went through?" Affleck asks. "Wow."

Macdonald is circumspect about what happened to Pitt, who dropped out a week before shooting was to commence in November 2007, which in turn led to Edward Norton, who was supposed to play the congressman, also leaving the project. Pitt was unhappy with the script and wanted to push until after the writers strike to allow for more rewrites. Universal threatened to sue the superstar for violating a pay-or-play deal, unless an appropriate replacement could be found.

"Basically, Brad and I sort of realized we were trying to make different films," says Macdonald, although along the way, a team of top screenwriters came in to work on the script, including Matthew Michael Carnahan ("The Kingdom"), Tony Gilroy ("Michael Clayton"), Billy Ray ("Breach"), as well as Macdonald's close friend, Peter Morgan ("The Queen"), who did uncredited rewrites.

The character of McAffrey "has to be somewhat inadequate-seeming," he adds. "He has to admire, and look up to his friend, and feel his friend has achieved what he hasn't. Imagining Brad Pitt in that role was very hard. That's why it didn't work out, why we couldn't quite make it fit. It wasn't organic. So when Russell came in, he could fit that."

Indeed, a portly Crowe appears in the film -- a character choice that might be spot-on for depicting a slovenly journalist but not always the way movie fans like to see a leading man. Asked about his star's unexpected girth, Macdonald says diplomatically: "It fits the part. The idea is that the character is somebody who's gone to seed. The choices [Russell] made, they fit with that. It wasn't exactly what myself and the studio imagined. In that case, it worked. One of the good things about Russell, he's an actor with no vanity."

But he's also an actor who takes great pride in what he puts up on screen, and, according to Macdonald, working with him isn't always the easiest experience.

"Russell is highly opinionated," the director says. "He is very smart, and he has his own ideas a lot of the time about how his character should be. Sometimes that would be great." He gives the example of Crowe deciding his character should always wear a pink-breast cancer armband, in honor of his mother who died young of the disease and left him unable to connect emotionally, a character detail that is never mentioned in the movie.

"Things like that cumulatively have the impact," Macdonald says. "It's collaboration with Russell. He's not the kind of actor when you can say, 'Do it again, but turn your head 3 degrees to the left,' like you're a photographer. He has ideas about how he's going to do it, and it's hard sometimes to get him off that. He can be tough."

When Norton left, Affleck came in to play the politician and did his share of hands-on research, visiting the offices of such congressmen as Patrick Murphy (D-Pa.), Adam Smith (D-Wash.) and Illinois Democrat Rahm Emmanuel, now President Obama's chief of staff (and brother to Hollywood talent agent Ari Emmanuel, whose Endeavor represents Affleck). This said, Affleck carefully points out that his troubled politician isn't based on any one figure.

Though Affleck and Macdonald evince a kind of romantic fondness for the noble calling of ink-stained wretches, they come across little less impressed with the lives of elected officials. Everything was a bit smaller than he expected, says Affleck, including the offices. "You have this idea, here are the halls of power and you're going to walk in and there's going to be, like, trumpets, or horns are going to blow. None of them rival the offices of the great American CEOs with \$2,000 trash cans."

Affleck admits he was wary about playing a politician on screen, because of his history for being politically outspoken. "There is some baggage I carry," he says. "Playing a political character, I was afraid there would be some carry-over. People wouldn't be able to see the character." Ironically, though he once mused about going into politics, that infatuation apparently has passed -- for now. "It's something that seems much less appealing to me now the more I'm exposed to it," Affleck says. "That's a clear political denial. Next month expect his name on the ballot box for governor of California," Macdonald jokes. "Even going around with all these congressman, it truly is full-time fundraising, with a little bit of politics thrown in. A lot of it is ugly, tawdry work. Maybe I'm not selfless enough," Affleck says. "I also like my life. I like it more than I ever have. I loved doing this movie. I don't have any desire to step outside of that at any time."

--Journalists' role

Of course, smart adult dramas, particularly ones like "State of Play," which cost a reported \$60 million to make, are themselves an endangered species within the studio system; perhaps they're not quite on the gurney with print journalism, but as Affleck says: "Usually, if you're doing a movie like this, you're in a much smaller trailer." Even Affleck, who saw the worst of tabloid journalism during his days dating Jennifer Lopez, sees the value of traditional news gathering organizations devoted to public service. "It's the horse and buggy thing," he says. "Newspapers are the horse and buggy, and they're now making cars. But I think the bigger danger is letting go of the horses and buggy entirely while not making sure we keep from them the things that were valuable to this culture -- the history of excellence in journalism. "We're making the movie sound like it's deadly serious," Macdonald offers. "It's a thriller with some comedy. The best movies are fun and make you think. Smart entertainment is the thing there's a shortage of."

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