

The Hollywood Reporter: Risky Business

State of Play, state of the media

By Steven Zeitchik



There's something familiar that tends to happen when Hollywood takes on journalism. It either unreservedly lauds those who practice the profession ("All the President's Men," "Frost /Nixon") or turns their stories into a timeless tale of truth-telling crusaders against commercial-minded slicksters ("Broadcast News," "The Paper," etc).

In other words, it ignores the ethical and tactical ambiguities -- not to mention the heavy-lifting scut work -- that the job actually entails.

"State of Play," an otherwise up-the-middle thriller involving the typical mix of Washington, D.C., power brokers, flirts with something deeper for a while: moral ambiguity.

In the pic from Kevin Macdonald (a former journo himself), which we caught at a screening at the Academy on Wednesday night, Russell Crowe stars as an old-timey investigative reporter who delves into the connections between a series of murders and a Blackwater-esque mercenary company, with a congressman who also happens to be Crowe's close friend (Ben Affleck) at the center of it all.

There's an inherent paradox a longtime reporter faces, because he's in a position where, in order to continue doing good work, he has to guard the very relationships that made him such a strong reporter in the first place -- but to guard those relationships is sometimes to hold back his best work. The little pickle is dramatized effectively (if a little grandiosely) with the Crowe-Affleck friendship and other choices he and editor-in-chief Helen Mirren (convincing, basically M in an editor's office) face.

In arranging the pieces this way, "State of Play" (which is based on a BBC miniseries that didn't play up journalism nearly as much) thus highlights the pitfalls, unusually authentic for a studio movie, that a hardcore reporter must skirt, as well what happens when idealism and self-aggrandizement become indistinguishable, as they do at times for Crowe's character. (The movie also dabbles in amazingly procedural questions like whether stories should be broken online or saved for print, a subject unlikely to ring the chimes of the general moviegoing public. And it's no doubt the only movie in history to offer a closing-credit sequence showcasing the minute tasks that go into printing and delivering a newspaper.)

In the end, "State of Play" shies away from a fully rounded portrayal of journalism. Like all studio pictures, it ultimately needs heroes, and it's a lot easier to have someone fly around dodging bullets and chasing smoking guns than deal with the prosaic business of developing, and placating, sources (not to mention that pesky task of writing the stories). So instead reporters conjure up dramatic revelation after dramatic revelation.

These reporters are so plugged in, and seem to summon up golden sources with the flick of a pen, that the cops are pumping *them* for information. In their power and job description, these are government agents more than

ink-stained wretches; make Crowe's character a detective and he's instantly cast-able in a "Law & Order" spinoff.

It was refreshing for a little while, though.

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