

STATE OF PLAY _____ (8/10)

"All the President's Men" meets modern-media reality

Screenplay by Tony Gilroy

Screenplay by Matthew Michael Carnahan

Screenplay by Billy Ray

BBC Television Series: Paul Abbott

Directed by Kevin Macdonald

Russell Crowe ... Cal McAffrey

Ben Affleck ... Rep. Stephen Collins

Rachel McAdams ... Della Frye

Helen Mirren ... Cameron Lynne

Robin Wright Penn ... Anne Collins

Jason Bateman ... Dominic Foy

Jeff Daniels ... Senator George Fergus

Michael Berresse ... Robert Bingham

Harry Lennix ... Det. Donald Bell

Della Frye: Did we just break the law?

Cal McAffrey: Nope. That's what you call damn fine reporting.

Not being a reader of *Variety* or really in tune with the machinations behind the scenes of modern film making, I was unaware until sitting down to write this review that the movie *State of Play* is a two-hour Americanized condensation of the critically acclaimed six-part British television series of the same name. The BBC series *State of Play* aired in 2003; if you look at the two IMDb records, the movie currently ranks 7.8 with viewers while the TV series ranks a full point higher at 8.8!

The story is of an old-school Washington, D.C., journalist Cal McAffrey (Russell Crowe) who investigates the shooting of a drug addict and a passerby, as well as the suspicious death of the mistress of a high-ranking Congressman, Stephen Collins (Ben Affleck). Collins happens to chair a committee probing the depredations and illegal activities of a Blackwater-like mercenary-soldier corporation. Right away, one can see the tension between the truth and the conspiratorial workings of the power elite... for which plenty of scarily believable background and foreground is provided.

One also gets a visceral sensation of how power literally oozes from the pores of the federal insiders (a fine performance by Jeff Daniels as the party leader Senator George Fergus underscores this point). The writers and director create a dark, dank, upchuck-worthy miasma of greed and depravity that seems to flow through every nook and cranny of the city... threatening to contaminate even the most innocent. McAffrey, who has managed to prosecute his print-oriented (writing-oriented, dammit) reporting career to the highest level, would seem to be a good candidate for contamination. But Cal is admirably, eccentrically unmoved by anything except old-fashioned pursuit of a story.

Our memories of the classic journalistic whodunit movie, *All the President's Men*, may have dimmed through the years, but most of us who are old enough to remember the Redford/Hoffman classic can't help but notice the parallels. But instead of the buddy reporter being a guy, Della Frye (Rachel McAdams)—also representing the online part of the newspaper (a Washington Post lookalike named the *Globe*) shows up to pester Cal to let her in on his way of going after hard news. She makes a good foil for the veteran print warrior, but this movie is another Russell Crowe powerhouse... his is the life force that serves as the prime mover behind practically every scene, even the ones he's not in.

But aside from these observations about acting, which truthfully I know nothing about, it's a rewarding experience to have a dominant sort like Crowe strengthen such a plot-centered film. (Can you imagine *Casablanca* without Humphrey Bogart, *Bullit* without Steve McQueen, *Good Will Hunting* without Matt Damon (and Robin Williams), etc.?) *State of Play* has a refreshingly rapid pace, with a complex set of circumstances to sort out; it's a longer movie at 2:07 hours, but the viewer is never bored. Further, there's a logic and believability to most of the action and what we discover as a consequence of it.

The problem with a plot-focused movie is as a reviewer you have to wind up discussing matters peripheral to the plot without giving anything away. And that's fine, because in *State of Play* these matters hold interest for us as well. For example, the wife of the Congressman, Anne (Robin Wright Penn) fleshes out, pointedly, the relationship between Rep. Stephen Collins and Cal McCaffrey. Then on the real subject of outsourcing the military, viewers are delighted to know how the tens of billions of funding for Blackwater and its counterparts may actually make martial law in America possible... if certain Kleptocons have their way.

You also see the tension between the truth and what a newspaper has to do to survive these days, which means satisfy the megacorporation it belongs to that it's making a profit and benefiting well-placed people who demand to be benefited. Academy Award winner Helen Mirren, as Cameron Lynne, chief executive of the *Globe*, adds another stellar performance to her portfolio. She chides Cal and chafes at the fact he's taking so long to get the facts, constantly reminding him the first lesson of a newspaperman is to survive in the business. Naturally, Cal and Della's nosing around is ruffling some very big feathers—the kind that pull purse strings and redirect corporate policies for her paper.

All the actors acquit themselves well, but no doubt Crowe deserves a spot on the list at 2009-season Oscar-nomination time. The best ones make you think they're not acting, that what you see on the screen is perfectly real. Moreover, and this is more a tribute to the writers, the character he creates is delineated as if he were one of your oddball best friends... even a class-A drinking buddy. Not a phony note anywhere.

Entertaining, yes.

Inspirational, too, especially as we witness the epic struggle—which seems so incredibly difficult these days—to stick the truth to power.

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State of Play | Journalistic Independence | Blackwater | Russell Crowe