

Movie Review: 'Lions for Lambs'

by David_Elliott

"Lions for Lambs" shears a lion to find a sheep. Shearing off his talent as a moviemaker, though in a conscientious way, is Robert Redford.

'LIONS FOR LAMBS' - Meryl Streep and Tom Cruise star in Robert Redford's 'Lions for Lambs.' CNS
Photo courtesy of David James. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Redford directed and stars, evidently working out his disgust with American policies, post-9/11. He and writer Matthew Michael Carnahan ("The Kingdom") stack idea cards in three piles, then feebly shuffle them. Too many land on the floor.

In the first pile, Redford is a weary if not quite jaded professor, trying to lure his most gifted student (Andrew Garfield) out of cynical slacking. They sit in the prof's office and toss bim-bam ideas at each other, as the old prof tries to make the callow flipster wise up.

Their repartee on life choices, ideals and engagement intercuts with (pile two) scenes of a ramrod Republican senator, a sort of Rumsfeld Kennedy acted by Tom Cruise. He attempts to persuade a tired, skeptical journalist (Meryl Streep) that a new military gambit in Afghanistan will be the "tipping point" that can lead us to victory - everywhere!

Cruise, still boyish in a manly way, preens as if he's back in "Magnolia" making the pitch. Streep snipes back, sulks, takes shorthand notes, gets a bit squishy as Cruise unfolds the flag of duty, honor, country. He makes a confession of Bushian mistakes seem like a rallying cry - the guy is a Karl Rove dream.

In the third pile, two of Redford's students who enlisted for military service, to affirm their adulthood and citizenship, are sent out on the front edge of the new effort in Afghanistan. That entails crack teams' "seizing the high ground," in a country with so much high ground that even Marshall Zhukov's vast WWII army might have failed.

So the film is two bull sessions plus almost static action footage that often relies on bad computer imaging. The soldier buddies appear to fall or jump from their helicopter, evidently without parachutes, yet survive the impact on rugged peaks (remarkably fake ones).

The movie clicks off facile, earnest points, balanced to represent many angles of view. The movie is like a totem pole for earnest Hollywood liberals still trying to impress their professor - just put your own head on top.

How is it possible that a serious, thoughtful progressive for 40 years, a big star whose directing has shown strength with actors ("Ordinary People," "Quiz Show") and nature ("A River Runs Through It"), can offer this canned cram of debate notes? The cross-cuts are a virtual spoof of montage, and the edit even suggests that Arlington National Cemetery is right near the White House.

This jabbering, photographed pamphlet might spark some discussion, but as a movie it suffocates on gas. The modest success is Streep. Her silences outgun the verbiage, and her fidgeting with a thermostat seems a creative highlight.

A United Artists release. Director: Robert Redford. Writer: Matthew Michael Carnahan. Cast: Robert Redford, Meryl Streep, Tom Cruise, Andrew Garfield. Running time: 1 hour, 34 minutes. Rated R. 1 star.

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