

Movie Review: 'Charlie Wilson's War'

by David_Elliott

With "Charlie Wilson's War" Tom Hanks is a long, fine way from the famous bucket of caramel corn, "Forrest Gump." No Gump or Gumby is this.

The movie's energizing strength is intelligence. It is so entertainingly adult.

'CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR' - Julia Roberts and Tom Hanks star in the drama 'Charlie Wilson's War.'
CNS Photo courtesy of Francois Duhamel. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Of the many smart people in it, the main brain is Congressman Charlie Wilson. Up from rural Texas with more than a hint of Lyndon B. Johnson in speech and connivance, Wilson gives Hanks a juice fest of political Americana, the kind that Paul Newman had as Gov. Earl Long in "Blaze" (1989).

Wilson, by passion and skullduggery, roped together covert deals and some congressional black-op budgets to feed modern arms to the Afghan guerrillas fighting the Soviet invasion of the 1970s. Buffing his smartness is Aaron Sorkin, who adapted a book by the late George Crile, and director Mike Nichols.

As in "Heartburn" and "Primary Colors," Nichols relishes the D.C. games but is savvy about larger concerns. He's almost the Gore Vidal of modern films, and nobody excels Nichols in steering good actors into a groove where they can bring out the Nichols & May tang of lines like these:

"Why is Congress saying one thing and doing nothing?"

"Tradition, mostly."

Wilson is a crafty, impish, mostly liberal politician, able to satisfy his mostly rural, Christian constituents without being a hypocrite or moralizer. He can fight a good fight, and for good reasons, while also slurping drinks, sharing a jacuzzi with strippers or ogling the sexy girls who secretary for him (one he calls "Jailbait").

Wilson is pulled into deep empathy with the Afghan cause as the Soviets hound it down, in part because he wants to bed the rich Houston hostess and Christian anti-Red activist Joanne Herring. Her Saluki dogs (not Afghans) accessorize her chic bones, and Julia Roberts' funny, snappy voltage is more than matched by Philip Seymour Hoffman as roguish CIA agent and firecracker Gust Avrakotos.

The actor with the imposing gut and laser-slicer voice has a joy match with Hanks. And there is delightful work also from Amy Adams as Charlie's chief of staff, Ned Beatty as an old congressman just short of caricature, and Om Puri as Pakistan's President Zia.

Almost confounding even himself, Wilson gets the CIA guys and the Houston commie-haters, Afghan patriots, Israeli and Egyptian suppliers into the same jacuzzi of global gamesmanship. Five million dollars in aid becomes a billion with help from the Saudis, and soon, equipped tribesmen are bringing down Soviet tanks and choppers to the amusing but also moving strains of Handel's "And He shall purify" from "The Messiah."

Sinners of many stripes and faiths were somewhat purified by what Wilson and his cohorts helped the Afghans achieve, beating the Red Army. He's a hero without sanctimony, though the movie is a bit coy and choked at the end about how the crusade opened a long chain of blowback.

From Cold War triumph came the shadows of Osama bin-Laden and 9/11/01, another Afghan war and a big, grisly sideshow called Iraq. But Charlie Wilson fought, won and had his own fun doing it.

A Universal Pictures release. Director: Mike Nichols. Writer: Aaron Sorkin. Cast: Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, Ned Beatty, Shaun Toub, Om Puri. Running time: 1 hour, 37 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

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