

Movie Review: 'State of Play' old-style journalist builds case one fact at a time

by Lee Grant

"State of Play" is part political conspiracy thriller, part ode to old-style newspaper journalism, but neither part is coherent. It's in a state of disarray.

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Scottish director Kevin Macdonald ("The Last King of Scotland") bangs out a run-of-the-mill picture, based on an admired BBC miniseries, that opens with a thrilling splash of deadly street crime and evolves into a connected murder of a pretty, young Washington researcher who is having an affair with a congressman (Ben Affleck).

Russell Crowe plays a funky, aging reporter at the Washington Globe (the credits give "Special thanks to The Washington Post"), a slob who scarfs junk food (chili cheeseburgers accompanied by chili cheese fries), drives a ratty old Saab, his apartment a pigpen. And there's this strange, long hair out of another era.

Crowe's Cal McAffrey finds himself digging into one aspect of the case and then the other, partnered with the newspaper's young blogger, the nifty-named Della Frye (Rachel McAdams). He's old-fashioned, working sources and double-checking facts; she, meanwhile, is ready to put the latest immediately on the website.

"You think he was having an affair with that girl?" she asks Crowe of the congressman, his old friend.

Says he, "I don't know. I'd have to read a couple of blogs before I have an opinion."

McAdams is supposed to be a spunky, ambitious, "cub" reporter attempting to impress the newspaper's editor (queenly Helen Mirren, in snarky mode, dealing with her publication's new owners), but the usually intriguing actress ("The Notebook") is flat.

There's only Mirren's assessment: "She's hungry, she's cheap and she turns out copy every hour."

The story has to do with Affleck's philandering liaison and connections to a private military security firm operating rogue-like in Iraq and Afghanistan. The relationship between Crowe's reporter and Affleck's Washington heavyweight goes back to college when they were roommates. The men, though, seem from different generations, mismatched.

Meanwhile, Crowe is having death-defying adventures, escaping crazed gunmen, hijacking people to out-of-the-way motel rooms.

There's an attempt at touching some of the issues facing a newspaper industry in survival mode, but "State of Play" loses its credibility in scenes like Crowe finishing a provocative Page 1 piece way past deadline ("we've been holding the front page for four hours," howls Mirren), strolling out of the building, not hanging around for his editors to read it, let alone have lawyers look at it.

There are only a handful of films — "All the President's Men," perhaps the best — that have realistically captured the work of investigative reporters. Pouring through documents, hours on the phone, doesn't always lend itself to vivid cinema.

"State of Play" endeavors to catch the aura of a newsroom — notebooks are the right size, messy desks look fairly realistic, but how the editors carry themselves, for instance, doesn't ring true (for that, check out the final season of HBO's "The Wire," which was filmed at the Baltimore Sun). It would've been good also to depict at least one news meeting where editors debate the merits of stories and decide what goes on Page 1.

There are some smart supporting performances, particularly Jason Bateman as a smarmy public relations guy with smarmy clients (he played a PR guy also in last year's "Hancock"), and Jeff Daniels as a congressman spouting religion and patriotism when faced with the truth of his involvement in a cover-up.

Affleck's long-suffering wife is portrayed by Robin Wright Penn, who brings dignity to those women standing by the side of their cheating husbands as they make public pronouncements of contrition.

It is disappointing to hear such dialogue as Affleck's when he shows up at Crowe's door: "I could go somewhere else (pause), but I have no other place to go," particularly on a film that has three screenwriters — one of them, the gifted Tony Gilroy ("Michael Clayton").

Then again, there's this exchange when Daniels, in all his arrogance, says to a cornering Crowe, "How did you find me?"

Responds the reporter, "I followed the trail of crumbs, congressman."

Now that's journalism.

"State of Play." Rated: PG-13. Running time: 1 hour, 58 minutes. 2 stars.

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