

Entertainment



STATE OF PLAY

Old and new-school newspaper reporters race against time to uncover the truth behind a number of murders, including that of the lover of a Congressman and whether the military contractor he's holding hearings on is involved. Drama-PG-13.

Cal McAffrey (Russell Crowe) is an old-school reporter for the Washington Globe who isn't crazy with the idea of Internet bloggers such as coworker Della Frye (Rachel McAdams), or that the paper's feisty editor, Cameron Lynne (Helen Mirren), is being forced by the publication's new corporate owners to focus more on the bottom line than on in-depth, investigative reporting. While covering some local murders and probing Det. Donald Bell (Harry Lennix), Cal becomes enticed by the story of Sonia Baker's (Maria Thayer) death.

Initially ruled a suicide, Cal knows something is amiss when a connection develops between her and the other victims. The story gets even more complicated when he learns that she was an aide to Congressman Stephen Collins (Ben Affleck), who just so happens to be Cal's former college roommate. Cal was and still is friendly with Stephen's wife, Anne (Robin Wright Penn), but the men have since had a falling out. When it's revealed that Stephen and his aide were having an affair, the plot only thickens even more.

With Majority Whip Rep. George Fergus (Jeff Daniels) wanting to take Collins off a congressional hearing that's investigating a powerful military contractor, Point Corp, Cal thinks there's more to the story than what's appearing on the surface. Not excited about working with Della due to their different reporting styles and facing a deadline imposed by Cameron, Cal does what he can to get info out the likes of PR man Dominic Foy (Jason Bateman), all while hoping to avoid hitman Robert Bingham (Michael Berresse) who may or may not be working for Point Corp in an effort to quell the investigation.

Our take: 6.5 out of 10

In what's nothing short of full-fledged irony, newspapers are routinely reporting on the shuttering of their industry's paper and ink players, leaving one to wonder which will be the last to run a story on its own demise. With the eventual last run of the printing press, newspapers will join a list of products from a bygone era that were delivered to one's home, as if by magic, to greet one in the morning, just like the milk, eggs and such left by those rarely seen.

Of course, newspapers will still be delivered, albeit electronically to one's computer, cell phone or PDA. Yet, it just won't be the same, and the fear among many old school folks -- as well as those in the news biz -- is that

old-fashioned, in-depth investigative reporting will also eventually disappear in favor of more instantaneous and impulsive, but lightweight and not always factually correct news blurbs and tweets.

The demise of hard-copy newspapers is a central element in "State of Play," but the dramatic thriller from director Kevin Macdonald has more up its sleeve than just that. Throw in a congressional sex scandal tinged with murder (think Gary Condit and Chandra Levy) as well as a private contractor made up of former soldiers now doing military and security ops here and abroad (Blackwater, anyone?) and the result is a decently made and mostly engrossing flick that marries old school storytelling with more up-to-date sensibilities. While not perfect and containing perhaps too many twists and a few narrative and/or logistical problems, it's still a satisfying ride.

There's nothing here you haven't really seen before -- especially if you caught the original BBC mini-series on which this is based (I didn't) -- but Macdonald and his trio of screenwriters -- Matthew Michael Carnahan, Tony Gilroy and Billy Ray -- get decent mileage out of the recycled and reconfigured material, and they certainly keep things moving at a good and nearly always engaging clip.

What makes it work so well, however, is the presence of and performance by Russell Crowe. Once again proving he's one of the best actors working today, Crowe effortlessly becomes his character, and the fact that his is a flawed soul only makes him that much more interesting to watch.

If there's one striking flaw, it's that we're supposed to believe that he and Ben Affleck (as a former soldier turned Congressman whose aide-turned-lover has just ended up dead, conveniently when he's grilling the military contractor in a congressional hearing) were college roommates back in the day.

Perhaps Affleck was a boy wonder or Crowe was a late bloomer in terms of post high school studies, but the visible age difference is a bit problematic, and that somewhat taints their interaction, exchanges, and the subplot of their past and present related to Robin Wright Penn's character (married to the Congressman, but with a fling with the reporter sometime in the past). Affleck is okay but not great in the role that needs more oomph and shades of gray to make it really work and pay off.

While the likes of Jeff Daniels and Helen Mirren are pretty much wasted (he as the Majority Whip, she as the tart-tongued editor doing the usual "we have to meet our deadline" newspaper boss bit), Jason Bateman steals his scenes as a somewhat flamboyant PR man targeted for information extraction by the seasoned reporter. Rachel McAdams (who still makes me think she's Parker Posey's kid sister) is also good as the newspaper blogger who ends up teamed with the vet to get to the bottom of all of the murder and apparent conspiracy.

Certainly timely in multiple ways, the film might not be novel in its underlying plot or the way in which the story is told and unfolds. And it might just have too many surprise revelations that quickly start piling up at the end (perhaps they felt more natural, if they existed as they do here, in the mini-series where they'd have more time and space to unfold).

Yet, thanks to the efforts of the cast (especially Crowe) and crew, "State of Play" ends up being a fairly engrossing and occasionally riveting experience, not to mention perhaps a cinematic adieu to old school newspapers, their reporting, and movies about just that. The film rates as a 6.5 out of 10. Courtesy of Screenit.com •

Dear Carol

Dear Carol,

My family put me in this home for old people. They said I couldn't live alone anymore and I had to have help. I had too many accidents, so I couldn't drive and get to the store for food, so I wasn't eating really well. I also fell on the stairs and broke my arm. So they put me in here. It's not so bad but I get lonely for my family and they aren't coming to visit me nearly as much as they did when I first moved in.

My children and grandchildren just don't stop by very often and I miss having them to talk to. How can I make them come more often?

Lonely Granny

Dear Lonely Granny,

You say they don't come as often as they did when you first moved into your new home. Is it possible you have caught the C and C disease? That stands for Complain and Criticize. Think about the content of your conversation with your family. Are you living in the past, complaining because you can't do the things you used to do? Do you criticize your new home, your family members and people in your new home? No one wants to hear a list of negative comments. Catch the Listen and Praise flu. Ask your family and your new neighbors about themselves and listen without interrupting. Praise your family for coming to see you, praise whatever accomplishments they had made in their lives. When you show people you care about them they will show how much they care about

you. If you are pleasant to be with, others will want to be with you.

Dear Carol,

My neighbor is very enthusiastic about her religion. She is always giving me things to read from her church. She invites me to her services and steers our conversation to lectures about her faith. I respect her beliefs and am not interested in learning more about them or becoming involved in her church. She is a sweet person and our children go to school and play together. We help each other out by watching each other's kids, lending each other things and generally being good neighbors. How can I get her to stop preaching to me all of the time? I value her friendship but not her lectures.

Babs

Dear Babs,

Tell your friend and neighbor exactly what you wrote to me. You respect her religion and all it means to her but you are not interested in hearing about it. If she continues to lecture and preach ask to change the subject. If she persists tell her you are fond of her and you are going to leave if she cannot respect your wishes and beliefs and, if she keeps preaching, walk away. Some people become so addicted to their own beliefs that they mistakenly think they should be forced upon another. A true friend does not behave that way.

Send questions to askcarolnow@gmail.com

Carol is a Life Coach available for private consultation in person or on the phone. •

Gardening



LAST-MINUTE GARDENING GIFTS

This is a great time to take cuttings of African violets, rosemary, jade, or any other plant that would make a good Mother's Day gift place them into a decorative pot, add a ribbon and sentimental card. What mother or grandmother could resist?

Need a few last-minute shopping suggestions for a gardening friend? These would make welcome gifts: a new gardening book, a subscription to a garden magazine, a houseplant, a nice container, some quality tools, or a gift certificate from a nursery or garden center or a gift certificate to their favorite catalog or nursery, a pair of gardening gloves, plant labels and stakes, permanent markers for making labels, or some hand cream.

Consider some long-lasting, well-made garden gloves, a specialty trowel or pruner, wireless weather gadgets, ventilated rubber garden clogs, heat mat and indoor light unit for seed starting, or a garden bench. Even non-gardeners can enjoy holiday plants or easy-to-grow amaryllis bulbs. Who knows, you might inspire someone!

Content provided by the National Gardening Association, courtesy of Arcamax.com.

What Not to Give This Mother's Day

A leading online gift service has recently revealed what Mom doesn't want to be given this mother's day. 500 moms were asked to name the best and worst Mother's Day gifts. Are these on your list?

Worst Mother's Day Gifts Ever:

- Forgetting Mother's Day - this is a no-brainer

- Kitchen appliances

- House Hold Tools

- Cleaning supplies

- Dead and poorly arranged flowers

So, what do moms care most about? Moms want loved ones to remember their special day. Most moms love jewelry, flowers, and a day off from chores. What she wants most is your time ... our most valuable asset.

Here are some of the gifts that topped the list.

The best gifts are:

- Jewelry

- Homemade cards (It doesn't have to be expensive -- your thoughts are worth far more)

- Homemade gifts

- A day at the spa ... This is especially fun to do with a friend

- Help with chores

- Beauty products ... Consider putting together a beauty basket filled with massage oils, lotions, and all of her other favorite beauty products.

Surprise the superwoman of the household with something special.

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