

Shattered Glass

Washington is often seen by outsiders as a navel-gazing town, a place full of self-important people full of blind ambition and fervent hustle, gauging others by their proximity to power and whether they are on “in” or “out” lists. “Inside the Beltway,” even for folks who have no idea what the Beltway is, has become the tossed-off phrase for our city’s picking at its figurative umbilical. Such a view ignores--as so many of us who merely *live* here know--all the real people with real lives who reside here (readers of this paper, for instance) as it concentrates on those figures in the intertwined worlds of politics, government, PR, consulting, and journalism.

A new film takes an inside peek at part of that self-conscious Washington world and subjects it to a careful and dogged scrutiny. *Shattered Glass* is based on the true story of a journalist gone awry, and it offers a convincing microcosm of what overweening desire and ambition can do to someone wholly caught up in the DC whirl. “This is a cautionary tale,” says its filmmaker Billy Ray, “a story about the difference between being a good reporter and being a hot one.”

Stephen Glass was the hottest young thing among a batch of hot young things in the late 1990’s at *The New Republic*, the venerable political weekly which prided itself as being the “in-flight magazine of Air Force One.” Led by editor Michael Kelly (a Capitol Hill native) and publisher Martin Peretz, the small circulation (80,000) journal was a must read for the Big Guys. Its aspiring editorial staff of bright young writers averaged just 26 years of age, while Stephen Glass was only 24.

We see Glass (Hayden Christensen) early musing on the tricks and techniques of political feature writing as he comes before his old high school journalism class to speak to them as the hot-shot boy who made good. We also see him in May 1998 spinning out clever narratives in office conferences of stories he has dug up by himself, great stories of staid conservatives gone amuck and, especially, of a kid computer hacker flummoxing major tech companies. He’s so witty, so sharp, so *good* at inveigling himself into others’ lives and getting the dirt, so admired by the other kids in the office. And he’s so nice besides, remembering little gifts and birthdays, tossing out encouraging words and self-deprecating comments. So maybe he gets one little piece of a story wrong; his pieces pass the fact checkers and he always has his great, detailed notes.

The movie’s set-up, which takes about a quarter of the picture, is careful and fluent in the script penned by Ray, who also economically directed this, his first feature film (he has co-written several film scripts). It makes the momentum towards Glass’s demise that much more effective, especially after Kelly (Hank Azaria) is fired by publisher Marty Peretz (Ted Kotcheff) because he wants a different tone to the magazine’s political writing. The boss then names staff writer Charles “Chuck” Lane (Peter Sarsgaard) as editor. Glass is, of course, adored by the staff while Lane, a much cooler customer and a much less sexy writer, is suspected by the disgruntled staff of having precipitated Kelly’s demise.

The next turn in the plot comes when a much-admired Glass piece on the computer hacker--entitled “Hack Heaven”--is checked out by a New-York-based on-line publication *Forbes Digital Tool*. Staffer Adam Penenberg (Steve Zahn), chided by his editor, Kambiz Foroohar (Cas Anvar), because he missed this major story on his beat,

starts looking into Glass's report. He discovers some flaws in the piece: a company cited cannot be contacted, a hacker's convention mentioned did not take place. Foroohar calls Lane with their doubts and the rest of the picture traces, with increasing tension, how the phlegmatic Lane unmasks the ever more frantic Glass, who--ever inventive if not honest--connives to create back stories to support his piece. The sickening truth trickles out, until Lane and his magazine learn that the protean Glass has fabricated dozens of his "special" features over the years.

Beyond the intriguing detective story, the film is suggestive on other, broader issues. Beyond the sense of personal, human tension in *Shattered Glass* is the ever present tension between two supreme journalistic values: the need of journalistic integrity--of "getting the story right"--balanced against the editorial imperative to back your own writers and reporters--of "not giving into outside pressure." Other questions of office politics and the practice of journalism are also raised (there are mini-essays buried in the script on, *inter alia*, fact-checking and the craft of note-taking).

The film, though a thoroughly DC story, was shot in Montreal (a few Washington exteriors grace the film's credit sequence). It essentially takes place in standard office space, flitting around offices, conference rooms, and cubicles (the film's look and feel in this regard readily recalls *All the President's Men*). It's claustrophobic, and rightly so, as the lies--if not the literal walls--close in on the ever garrulous Glass.

The closest thing the film has to an "action" sequence is its turning point and is beautifully played by the leads and directed by Ray. As doubts about the "Hack Heaven" piece mount, Lane drives Glass out to Bethesda to scout out the site of the hacker's convention which the reporter supposedly covered. The two flail around a building lobby, an outdoor eatery, a streetfront restaurant, and all the time Lane, in the slowest of slow burns, is questioning Glass about the meticulous details of his story, and the young man's defenses begin to collapse. This *mano-a-mano* for the truth might seem pale to some, but to this reviewer it operates with far more devastating effect than any Batman or Terminator tussle.

Billy Ray based his *Shattered Glass* screenplay on an article by H.G. "Buzz" Bissinger of the same title that appeared in a 1998 issue of *Vanity Fair*. He helped his cause considerably by consulting the protagonists in the story (although Glass did not cooperate) and by interviewing *The New Republic* staffers and others. In this fine first outing, he achieves a verisimilitude that is both convincing and compelling.

Young Christensen (last seen as the morose Anakin Skywalker in *Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones*) is spot on as the earnest, sly, ever-ingratiating Stephen Glass. He gives off the right mix of rank callowness and grinning cynicism, a forbidding combination. While on a run, the actor's winning smile charms you just as Glass's must have beguiled his co-workers, and during his demise, his excuses expose him as the petty adolescent he really is.

Even better to my mind, in a very different role, is Sarsgaard's Chuck Lane. Director Ray here develops this character effectively to match how he is seen by his cohorts. Sarsgaard's Lane at first does seem a humorless, sleepy-eyed wonk, miles removed from the personable Glass. But he gradually comes across as serious, and, after he is surprisingly named *The New Republic's* editor, he becomes a bastion of integrity who does what he can to save his journal. An unassuming, but very legitimate hero.

A criticism could be made of *Shattered Glass* that the motivation of the lead character is never made wholly clear (there are passing suggestions that he is under pressure from demanding parents). Yet this lack of a psychological dimension detracts little from what is more a “howdunit?” rather than a who- or whydunit. We can simply accept that this was a profoundly flawed fellow who has since, by the way, followed up his disastrous journalistic career with what he should have been doing all along--writing a novel about a journalistic fraud.

(“Shattered Glass” is rated PG-13 for language, sexual references and brief drug use.)

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