

## Spotlight

Tom McCarthy is hardly a name filmmaker, but in a dozen years, he has written and directed three stellar films (“The Station Agent,” “The Visitor,” and “Win-Win”), and now he has launched probably his best effort, the superb “Spotlight,” an impeccably crafted scenario about the Boston Globe unearthing one of the stories of the century, the scandal of sexual assaults by Catholic priests in the Boston Diocese.

McCarthy, a yeoman actor himself for over 25 years, infuses his films with believable dialogue and local detail and peoples them with full-bodied characters limned through marvelous actors. In an interview, he stated his intent to make this chronicle real: “We were very committed to being as true to the work these reporters do as possible. We put our money on [the idea that] committing to that process, albeit analog and dated, was just going to be compelling, in the sense that there's no substitute for roll-up-your-sleeves blue collar journalism. It was essential that we portray that as accurately as possible and not try to glamorize it or romanticize it or sensationalize it in any way.”

The story begins in July 2001, when the new editor of the Globe, outsider Marty Baron (Liev Schreiber), a Jew from Florida, lunches with Walter “Robby” Robinson (Michael Keaton) the leader of the paper’s investigative team—called “Spotlight”—to discuss a possible new coverage for the independent team, specializing in in-depth reporting. A recent article on clerical child abuse becomes the trigger and Robinson, along with his team, the amped-up reporter Mike Rezendes (Mark Ruffalo), the earnest writer Sacha Pfeiffer (Rachel McAdams), and the reserved researcher Matty Carroll (Brian d’Arcy James), take up the challenge.

The rest of the film chronicles the group’s relentless and immensely detailed pursuit of their bleak story, piece by relentless piece. A handful of sexual abuse cases rises to a Baker’s dozen, then, as the team uncovers records of priestly transfers and runs down long-time survivors, the focus of the story morphs from the ghastly revelations about priestly conduct into a thoroughgoing condemnation of a Catholic diocese which has, under the leadership of the corrupt Cardinal Law (Len Cariou), buried the whole problem through its use of political and social power. Their search leads the reporters, mainly lapsed Catholics, to those who help round out the story, like sympathetic lawyer Mitchell Garabedian (Stanley Tucci), and those who provide pushback from threatened institutions, like lawyers Eric Macleish (Billy Crudup), representing victims, and Jim Sullivan (Jamie Sheridan), representing the Diocese.

To this critic, “Spotlight” inevitably begs comparison with that paragon of all films on investigative journalism, “All the President’s Men” (1976). Though the investigation it treats may not have the singular portent of that classic Watergate film, the issue is no less serious, and the current film’s sure focus on and resolute presentation of realistic, shoe-leather journalism bares comparison to that earlier epic. “Spotlight’s” script is splendid in building its case, gingerly matching suspenseful exchanges with purposeful exposition. It may seem unlikely that dogged archive searches, hurried phone calls, furious note-taking, and endless office visits would make for compelling cinema, but in “Spotlight” they do. And when the staff’s work pays off, the exultation among them is

real, yet tinged with regret when they realize the scandal could have been unearthed much earlier.

And though it deals with the most repugnant of themes, the film avoids the lurid wallow in them that commercial TV typically indulges. A fine example of its tact with purpose is in a fine crosscutting section between two reporters and two now-grown victims, both of whom bare their souls for the first time. In this double whammy, Sacha questions a crushed gay man, Joe (Michael Cyril Creighton), who gingerly unveils the ruin of his life, while, contrastingly, Mike quizzes a tough Southie guy named Patrick (Jimmy LeBlanc) who spits out a hard, profane condemnation of his faith. This point-counterpoint crystalizes the human cost of priestly abuse.

The cast of “Spotlight” is a dream, one of the best acting ensembles assembled in recent years, and while that cast will certainly merit end-of-year acting accolades, picking out any one individual as “best actor” would be fruitless, because the collective is so superb. All of the above actors mentioned turn in estimable performances, as does—to add one more—a testy John Slattery as Ben Bradlee Jr., deputy editor of the Globe at the time. Ruffalo as the relentless Mike, Schrieber as the principled Marty, McAdams as the sensitive Sacha, Keaton as the newsman-lifer Robby—everybody performs with an honesty and sincerity that does honor to the theme and to journalism.

McCarthy deserves full marks for both guiding his charges and crafting their lines to maximum effect. He is assisted immeasurably in his cinematographer, Masanobu Takayanagi, who eschews facile close ups and hand held gyrations and favors a balanced tableau of his actors in mid shot under subdued color tones; his composer, Howard Shore, who graces the film with an unobtrusive, murmuring piano score; and his production designer, Stephen H. Carter, whose workmanlike settings (many done in a Toronto studio) perfectly match their inhabitants.

“Spotlight” will definitely have a spotlight on it as we approach awards season. (*Running a 127 tense minutes, the film is rated “R” for sexual language.*)

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