

State of Play (DC in the Movies)

The new journalistic thriller *State of Play* offers a rarity: a solidly crafted motion picture about Washington, DC. And though the film takes pains to incorporate the city into its narrative, it still plays with some of the old clichés of politics in film.

Based on a 2003 British mini-series, *State of Play* builds tension by having dogged reporter Cal McAffrey (Russell Crowe) of the “Washington Globe,” contend with an old friend, ambitious Congressman Stephen Collins (Ben Affleck), involved in a political scandal. An apparent suicide by a staffer of Collins looks fishy to McAffrey, and he and his young blogger colleague Della Frye (Rachel McAdams) hone in on Collins, devastated by the loss of a person who was also his lover. The suicide is also linked to a street killing in Georgetown, and the plot is further thickened by the staffer’s involvement with a major defense contractor and the congressman’s investigation of that company.

Familiar Washington skullduggery is played out in *State of Play*, which offers the usual Hollywood portrayal of congressional politics as a thoroughly corrupting process, an enterprise for villains. Comparatively, journalism, though its purposes and personnel may be flawed, remains relatively heroic and humane.

The film’s congressional figures are typical. Cong. Collins is a rising star and on the side of the angels in probing the vile defense contractor. Yet the guy is two-timing his wife by romancing his young staffer. More nefarious is his smarmy party whip (Jeff Daniels), who appears to be in bed not with an ingenue but with the multi-billion-dollar defense company. As the story drives to its conclusion, Collins’s relative innocence fades as murky motivations take over.

Washington-area film buffs will have fun picking out local sights. *State of Play* revels in the variety of its locations, featuring locales like Ben’s Chili Bowl on U St., Heller’s Bakery in Mount Pleasant, the Market Inn in SW, the Rosslyn Metro station, etc. Local references are tossed in for authenticity, as when the Globe editor, a feisty Helen Mirren, cracks that the paper’s burgeoning story is “not just gossip over drinks at The Monocle!”

For Hillites, it’s amusing to see how congressional elements are treated. Apparently, the filmmakers weren’t allowed to shoot near the Capitol itself, so they used surrogate buildings to indicate legislative gravitas and architecture. Thus, Cong. Collins stands on the steps of the National Archives standing in for a House office building. Later, when Collins heads to his “office,” he instead runs into the Mellon Auditorum on Constitution Avenue. And when Cal is seen quizzing Collins in an “official” colonnade on the Hill, they are actually cruising the 12th Street side of the Federal Triangle. With such playful invention does imaginative Hollywood depict official Washington.

Even with shining light on the underside of our politics and fiddling with our geography, *State of Play* remains a briskly-paced, smartly written, and entertaining thriller, with some deft performances. It’s easy to get caught up in and challenging to follow—and it uses much of a DC that we can all recognize.

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