

The Front Runner

More than 30 years ago, the Democratic Party had a show horse, a 41-year-old senator, both serious and studly, to challenge the post-Reagan Republicans. Gary Hart of Colorado was tested in the political fires of the 1972 race as the campaign manager of George McGovern, then, at 39, became a promising senator steeped in national security and environmental affairs. After a failed presidential bid in 1984, he became his party's clear front runner by May 1987, only to have his promise crushed by a scandal concerning an alleged affair with a young woman. That mostly forgotten episode about our electoral politics has now been revisited by writer/director Jason Reitman in "The Front Runner," a film that carries resonance for our own current frenzied politics

After a brief prelude, "The Front Runner" plunges us into the febrile atmosphere of the 1987 campaign, with Hart, all great hair and silver-tongued delivery, appearing to have the Democratic Party's nomination. His ascension, however, is thwarted when journalists of the Miami Herald find that he may have consorted with a young Donna Rice (Sara Paxton), first aboard a yacht, "Monkey Business," then at his townhouse on Capitol Hill, while his wife Lee (Vera Farmiga) remained at the family home in Colorado. The outraged Hart—who confronts journalists stalking him in DC—insists there is nothing in the alleged "affair" and denounces them for invasion of privacy. The "sex scandal" becomes a national obsession, and the senator tries to defend himself against an ever-more voracious media. But he cannot and ultimately withdraws from the race. The private has become the political.

The film aims to show this tipping point in American politics when a politician's private life became fair game, when "character" became a defining element of a candidacy, and when an expanding mass media could overwhelm a politician's life. Reitman, and his co-writers Matt Bai and Jay Carson, trace this sea-change by concentrating less on the individual Hart and instead focusing judiciously on his campaign itself and its cast of characters.

Hugh Jackman's performance, in fact, is a rather opaque one, representing the candidate at a distance; earnest and attractive, yes, but unknowable to his public. The grit of his campaign comes in the sundry staffers he has around him, players like campaign manager Bill Dixon (J.K. Simmons), assistant Irene Kelly (Molly Ephraim) and eager staffers like Billy Shore (Mark O'Brien) and Joe Trippi (Oliver Cooper), his true believers who dream of a political breakthrough with their paragon boss.

The human side of this story comes from Hart's family, Lee and his daughter Andrea (Kaitlyn Dever). The unwitting "villains" of the story are the media, both members of *The Miami Herald*, led by Bob Martindale (Kevin Pollak), and *The Washington Post*, where reporter A.L. Parker (Mamoudou Athie), becomes, almost accidentally, his journalistic nemesis. All the above performers, and dozens of others, combine to produce in convincing detail a believable campaign story, an ensemble that clicks.

There are several standouts. Worthy of special mention is Farmiga as a loyal yet skeptical critic of her husband who confronts the wounded Hart in a terrific showdown scene. Also there is Simmons as the hard-bitten Dixon, profane but passionate, Paxton as the sincere yet naïve Rice, and Ephraim as the steadfast back-up to her boss. Paxton and Ephraim, in fact, have one of the best takes in the movie. Just after Rice's cover

has been blown to the media, the two women sit in a bar as Donna nervously tells of her relationship with the senator and how desperately she wants a role in the campaign, while Irene, acting as Rice's minder, patiently, humanely hears her out while knowing full well that all Donna's dreams will be crushed. It is an exquisite two-fer in a film filled with smart scenes.

(The film is rated "R" and runs 113 mins.)

Jason Reitman on "The Front Runner"

Director Jason Reitman was on hand for a preview of "The Front Runner" in DC in mid-October and addressed the audience. He quickly emphasized that "this film is not about Gary Hart but about the 20 people around him," i.e. staff, advisors, and hangers-on. Further, he said, it is less about Hart than "it is about the rest of us" who might be fans of a political candidate. He added that he did not want to do a biopic but rather a campaign film. "We watched 'The Candidate' (a Robert Redford film of 1972) and that became our North Star." The film was much less from Hart's point of view and more "looking over Hart's shoulder." "I wanted the audience to identify with their own character." He also carefully varied the film's pacing, using what he called a "frenetic, nervous shooting" for the bustling campaign sequences and holding on longer shots for exchanges between characters.

Getting the Donna Rice figure right was very important for Reitman. "She's the character that I had the most sympathy for," the director said, "because people were so dismissive of her." He purposely held off showing Rice fully, obscuring her face, for example, when Hart meets her on the "Monkey Business." She is not shown fully until a crucial interview sequence "when we first see Donna, and the camera just sits on her."

Reitman noted that he had come to DC twelve years before to shoot his lively comedy "Thank You for Smoking" when he found "the city's atmosphere was light; very different from today." Asked about doing satire these days, Reitman at first wondered out loud if it's possible then said that for this film he "tried to get the details right." In this sense, he said even "the background actors were crucial, all their costumes and activities" helped the film to feel more specific.

With some apprehension, Reitman and his team showed the finished film to some of its principal personages of the film³. The filmmakers thought the real protagonists might be wary of viewing it, but Reitman said he was surprised because "their reactions were much more filmic, not personal"—they were able to distance themselves. After Rice screened it, Reitman said "Donna was moved by how the film showed her." As for the Harts, he reported that "the senator asked 'Do I really talk like that?' and his wife Lee countered with 'Yes, you do.'"

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