

Weiner

Yeah, yeah, does anyone need to hear more about the utterly disgraced and too appropriately named Anthony Weiner, the New York City pol who calamitously destroyed his political future by displaying his bulging privates online to young women? Can any more tired jokes be made about this inept Lothario whose once-promising career became a punch line? Perhaps not, but—funny thing—a new movie about his misadventures makes for a very compelling documentary about our politics, urban life, campaigns, and how our media works.

The filmmakers began by covering Weiner's comeback campaign for mayor of New York in the spring of 2013, two years after his resignation from Congress. One of the documentarians, Josh Kriegman, had worked on Weiner's first run for the city's mayor in 2005 and had, one supposes, earned his confidence. Kriegman and co-director Elyse Steinberg were granted amazing access to the candidate and his wife, Huma Abedin, one-time confidante of Hillary Clinton at the State Department, and the two hoped to record what might have been a redemptive run.

And it looked like redemption when Weiner's campaign took fire in the spring and summer of 2013. He was hitting on all cylinders, attracting adoring crowds all over the five boroughs, leading in the polls over several other contenders, and comfortable in appealing to "his people." This momentum is wonderfully captured in one montage that shows Weiner heading rallies on every national or ethnic day in the city, speechifying, waving flags, and inspiring everybody. His appearances are wonderfully contrasted with a shot of rival Bill de Blasio, appearing forlorn during one parade with a small gaggle of fans clustered solemnly around him.

Then, after about six weeks, a new thunderbolt: more sexting peccadillos emerge, new ones involving more women willing to come forward to tell all about their online pal, Carlos Danger, Weiner's nom-de-plume. Worse, these new acts happened after the earlier episodes and well after he had already resigned from Congress. Now, with two feet and one hand in his mouth, Weiner begins a slide he cannot stop. His campaign staff stays loyal, his wife soldiers on, his energy does not flag, but he crashes again big time.

Throughout the whole shattering campaign, we are with Weiner and his wife, in intimate moments at home (with their young boy), discussing operational details and strategy, appearing in public before voters and an insatiable press. Kriegman and Steinberg are there every step of the way, unobtrusive observers, quietly documenting calamity. The exposure of both of the Weiners is so total that it comes as a shock when, after one particularly dicey exchange with Abedin, Anthony quietly asks the filmmakers to leave their room.

What makes this movie compelling for this political junkie is how fully it captures one modern political campaign, at least one in the Big Apple. Both the drudgery (fundraising on the phone) and the highs (a bright turn on a talk show) are shown in full. Most depressing, the film shows a marauding media (is it worse in New York?) badgering Weiner on his scandalous behavior and utterly uninterested in his policies (his main theme is anticipatory of the 2016 campaign in focusing on the hollowed-out

middle class). In these scenes, one sympathizes with a now pathetic Weiner trying and failing to get reporters off the sex shtick, but the latter cannot be slaked. It thus raises larger questions about how our politics and our media function, and how much the public conversation is driven by spectacle and noise.

Finally, the film leaves us with a complete mystery: never, not even in later interviews with Weiner after the race, do we get any clear idea of WHY the man finally did what he did...

(The film is rated "R" for sexting imagery and tough language and runs 100 mins.).