

## The Contender

Though it has been on Washington screens for a couple weeks, I thought it might be useful to assess, for those folks on Capitol Hill who haven't yet seen it, what this latest Hollywood version of DC life offers.

You have probably heard about the basic plot: a rising Democratic (ex-Republican) female senator is named by the President to fill the vacancy for his deceased vice-president. She is doggedly opposed by the congressman chairing her confirmation hearings, who raises alleged sexual escapades from her past to quash her chances. Yet she fights on against him and the general political odds.

Some potential for tight, crackling political drama, right? The underside of Washington chicanery and all that. The premise of *The Contender* is clearly and efficiently stated, and the committee confrontation escalates nicely as nerdy Congressman Runyon (a wonderful--and unrecognizable--Gary Oldman) keeps digging dirt on the cool-as-a-cucumber Senator Laine Hanson (Joan Allen). Jeff Bridges as President Evans is amusing as a clever, would-be hayseed, who has a neat running gag about how he can order any possible sandwich he wants from the omniscient White House kitchen. Allen herself, noted for portraits of repressed women (see *The Crucible*), is able to get somewhat beyond her natural reserve and even assumes a feminist stance by insisting the scandal charges do no merit a response. The turns of plot, some of them manipulated by crusty presidential special assistant Newman (Sam Elliott), are intriguing, and the eventual outcome keeps you guessing.

Then--it happens so often in American commercial flicks--the script (written by director Rod Lurie) betrays all, and the movie's finale collapses into improbability and bathos. It would not be fair to those contemplating seeing the picture to reveal the ultimate plot turns, but the last scene is so grotesque--and goes so much against the general tenor and good sense of the movie--that I have no qualms about describing it.

The finale has the fulminating President *calling a session of Congress* (Oops, isn't it the other way around?), walking into a House chamber that looks about the size of a DC high school auditorium, and ordering a "live roll call" to confirm his nominee! What is meant to show triumph and high-mindedness turns ludicrous--and kills some of what has gone before. Otherwise, this movie coulda' been a contendah...

(Rated "R" for mature themes.)

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