

Air

A major Hollywood movie about the creation of and merchandising of a new sneaker may seem puzzling—perhaps appalling even—but with the right script and performances, it could prove a worthy night at the movies. And it does in Ben Affleck’s “Air,” a salute to hustling, high-stakes capitalism, starring Matt Damon as Sonny Vaccaro, a top sales agent for the Nike Shoe Company, based in Beaverton, Oregon and run by its founder, Phil Knight (played by director Affleck himself).

It is 1984, and Nike is distant third in sales of gym shoes, well behind giants Converse and Adidas. Knight feels (hopes) they can catch up to his rivals by juicing Nike’s shoe sales, now dormant, and wants to do it by offering exclusive deals to three top basketball prospects for the National Basketball Association. However, Sonny has another, even riskier idea: offer all their contract money to one, singular player who can transform a team: Michael Jordan of the University of North Carolina.

Though at first Knight thinks Vaccaro is nuts, he eventually allows him to pursue his idea. Sonny uses a tactic Phil has not thought about: going personally to Wilmington, North Carolina to personally pitch to Jordan’s mom, Deloris. She hears Sonny out on her front lawn--expressing his awe for Michael’s singular talent--and agrees to at least give Nike consideration, while Vaccaro realizes that his Mom is essentially Jordan’s manager.

The competition to land Jordan heats up, and Deloris and her husband Jeff visit all the competing brands at their headquarters to hear their different pitches. At Beaverton, Vaccaro makes his case, putting all his heart into it. Nike eventually gets Doris’s positive call—along with the condition that her son gets a cut of sales for every new “Air Jordan” sold. Vaccaro agrees, gets Knight to sign on, and the rest is basketball history.

The movie has intimations of another major sports agent movie “Jerry McGuire,” though it lacks the boy-girl love story...unless you consider the “love” Vaccaro clearly has for Michael Jordan’s on-court moves and competitive desire. What might seem odd to some viewers is that all the drama of this film revolves around—a shoe!

Queer and overstated this may be but the point here is that film, nicely penned by Alex Convery, really represents capitalistic passion, a true red-blooded American theme. Moreover, it is an underdog story: rooting for the “little guy” (even if “he” is a billion dollar corporation).

*To note: Michael Jordan does **not** appear in the picture except in video clips and with his back to the camera. Apparently the filmmakers decided there was no need to find a double for an uber-celebrity.*

Finally, it is a most entertaining production, graced with winning performances from a stellar cast including the ever-brilliant Viola Davis as Deloris, Jason Bateman as the cool Marketing VP Rob Strasser, Chris Messina as Jordan's profane agent, Matthew Maher as the earnest designer of the Air Jordan, self-deprecating Ben Affleck as Knight--portrayed in a combination of fey and forceful--and especially Damon.

Damon is the core of the film, played here as an overweight schlub with a keen basketball mind, an eagle eye for talent, and with the air of a naïve confidence man. In "Air," Damon adds to his lustrous roster of roles of typical American guys who personify societal issues and concerns.

(The film, now in theaters, is rated "R" for language and runs one hour and 51 minutes.)

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