

The Company Men

“The Company Men” thoughtfully treats a theme rarely addressed in mainstream Hollywood pictures: the workings of business in America—and the consequences of the global economy. Writer-director John Wells (known as executive producer of TV’s “ER” and “The West Wing”) takes on the story of a corporate down-sizing by limning the fates of three company men let go from a Boston-based conglomerate.

Bobby Walker (Ben Affleck) is a hot-shot salesman for the company, GTX. Phil Woodward (Chris Cooper) is a lifer who worked his way up from the shop floor to an executive suite. Gene McClary (Tommy Lee Jones) is the firm’s co-founder, a crusty sort who has seen GTX transformed from its original ship-building purpose into a massive multinational. Gene’s original partner, Jim Salinger (Craig T. Nelson), is smart enough—or reptilian enough—to embrace the now predatory company’s global reach. The personnel director, Sally Wilcox (Maria Bello), agonizes as she carries out the firings that all dread.

We follow each man redirecting his life, from Bobby, in a demeaning job search, through Phil, facing increasing disbelief and despair, to Gene, feeling a loss of purpose and focus. The ends are tragic for one, and partially redemptive for two, as they join to recreate a new, more modest and humane business. The latter element appears to be Well’s overall message: we must abandon an economy of financial manipulation and return to actually making useful things. This has become a bromide for the Great Recession, but the film makes it feel urgent through its rounded portrayals of the three company men.

Affleck, in a role precisely suited to his talents (even his Boston accent) moves convincingly from insouciant sales guy through frustrated ex-breadwinner to plucky self-starter. Cooper’s appropriately dour face is just right for role of the man whose entire reason-for-being has died, while Jones’ innate curmudgeon matches perfectly a grand ol’ man who has seen the world he knew spin off in a new direction.

One of the pleasures of “The Company Men” is the quality of the several supporting roles. First among them is Rosemarie DeWitt, as Bobby’s wife Maggie, who embodies the sensible, hopeful presence of a supportive wife, the kind of woman any guy who’s been laid off would want in his corner. Nelson, the conventional villain of the piece, is a character of coarse yet believable nuance. Bello mixes the toughness of one wielding the lay-off hammer with genuine sympathy for what her actions do to people. Kevin Costner, as a contractor who takes on Bobby when he most needs work, is a nice mix of up-front sarcasm and hidden compassion.

Wells, in his first feature film, has debuted with a utterly contemporary and affecting look at our society. While its finale may seem a touch sentimental (Gene offers a nostalgic soliloquy about how America has lost its capacity “to make things with our hands”), its merits are mostly very well-earned.

(Rated R, it runs 109 min.).

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