

Dark Waters

For drama, Hollywood often turns to stories “based on,” inspired by,” or “adapted from” real events. Many are forgettable, and some are only tangentially related to the actual events depicted. Occasionally, though, such re-creations ring true, wrenching out genuine drama from significant happenings. Such a one is the new eco-legal-thriller, “Dark Waters.”

“Dark Waters” is “based on” a notable 2001 legal case where a tenacious attorney named Rob Bilott (Mark Ruffalo) uncovered a dark secret that linked a growing number of unexplained deaths to a toxic chemical in ground water produced by one of the world's largest corporations, the DuPont Company.

The case starts small, when Bilott, an corporate attorney in Cincinnati whose firm does work for Dupont, is accosted in his office by a West Virginian cattle farmer, Wilbur Tennant (Bill Camp), claiming his herd is dying because of polluted water on his spread. Reluctantly, Rob goes to visit the fellow’s depressed farm and sees for himself the wretched state of his cattle. His sympathies stirred, he appeals to his firm’s boss, Tom Terp (Tim Robbins), to take on the case, a delicate one since it involves their own client.

Dupont’s team, led by smooth Phil Donnelly (Victor Garber) initially hears out the complaints and sends out representatives to examine the evidence and report the potential damages, but offers no significant findings on an acid named PFOA (prominently featured in the compound Teflon). Their stonewalling sends Bilott, ever more passionate about the company’s responsibility, to demand “discovery” of the firm’s files on the substance, a request answered with a mountain of documents that fills a room. Painstakingly, he attacks the contents of that material, undertaking a decades long crusade where he risks everything – his future, his family, and even his own health--to expose the truth.

A legal thriller is hardly what one might expect of a challenging director [Todd Haynes](#), a distinctive and craftsman whose varied work ranges from the experimental (“I’m Not There” from 2007) through provocative character studies (like “Safe” from 1995 and “Carol” from 2015) to dreamlike period pieces (like “Far From Heaven from 2002 to “Wonderstruck” from 2017). For the first time, he tackles a ripped-from-the-headlines docudrama done in a richly-textured but straightforward style (photographed exquisitely by long time cinematographer and colleague Edward Lachman) and makes it work splendidly.

Haynes used a screenplay from by Mario Correa and [Matthew Michael Carnahan](#), whose work was reportedly based on the 2016 article "The Lawyer Who Became DuPont's Worst Nightmare" by [Nathaniel Rich](#), published in *The New York Times Magazine*.

"Dark Waters" stands or falls on the performance of Mark Ruffalo as Bilott, and he stands tall. He plays Bilott as a modest, rumped man, content with his wife (Anne Hathaway) and kids in his conventional Cincinnati home, who is then roused by injustice and corporate greed, giving his all to get to the core of the case, the company's own hidden research about its toxic product.

Ruffalo has had a lively and varied career since he was first noticed in "You Can Count on Me" (2000). In the years since he has earned kudos for films such as "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," "The Kids Are All Right," and "Spotlight," as well as his long-running role as The Hulk in the "Avengers" series. In "Deep Waters," he dominates the film, not with showiness, but with an ingrained naturalism befitting his diffident character. This is as compelling a personage as he has ever portrayed.

While Ruffalo stands out in "Deep Waters," he is well seconded by cast members such as Robbins, as his skeptical but ultimately supportive boss, Camp as the gruff but poignant farmer, and Garber as the slick corporate smoothie, among others. "Dark Waters" also runs deep. *(The film, which opened November 27th, is rated "PG-13" and runs 126 minutes.)*

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