

Fair Game

Hollywood has again come to town to tell an “inside Washington” story, this one surrounding the naming of Valerie Plame as a CIA officer in the early years of the Bush Administration. With a script based on Plame’s account of her ordeal in the book “Fair Game,” it is a fast-paced and compelling docu-drama which will trigger memories of secret leaks, Niger, “Scooter,” and yellow cake among local policy wonks, especially the anti-Bush kind.

Those wonks will recall that the Plame episode involved the Bush Administration trying to get the terrorism goods on Saddam Hussein and sending State Department veteran Joe Wilson to Niger to check out an intelligence report on nuclear material. Wilson found no evidence for the report, and the White House discounted it, whereupon Wilson told his story to the New York Times. The administration, in apparent retaliation, eventually smeared Wilson by linking him to his wife, Valerie Plame, an undercover officer. Plame was then “outed” in news accounts, effectively ending her career.

This is the scenario laid out in “Fair Game,” with Naomi Watts as Plame (see photo below) and Sean Penn as her husband Wilson. The film intersperses fast-moving political events with the ongoing personal struggles of the Wilsons, trying to balance work pressures and family duties while becoming mired in a national scandal.



The film, directed by Doug Liman, gives Plame a credible back story as a competent CIA officer, showing her doing daring undercover work in Cairo, taking on Iraq intelligence assessments, and personally committing herself to extracting Iraqi nuclear scientists from the country. Still, this is a movie “based on” real events, and some license is taken by the writers, British brothers Jez and John-Henry Butterworth, to heighten the drama.

One important example of invention for dramatic effect concerns a subplot wherein Plame urges an Iraqi exile to contact her family, which includes an Iraqi scientist, then tries to extricate them from Baghdad only to have them come under bombardment from US bombers in a most dispiriting sequence. This subplot aims to humanize Valerie Plame, to show that she has a heart as well as a commitment to her job—that she is an earnest and empathetic operative, not a surly spy. The script also takes understandable liberties with the real events, though the happenings are basically told in sequence. Incidents and meetings are collapsed in time to keep the pace moving, for example, but this proves effective because it ratchets up the tension nicely. What works best about “Fair Game” is, however, the acting.

Naomi Watts nails this filmic Valerie Plame. Watts’ appealing yet intense mien, with a tincture of sadness, seems just right for this character, a sympathetic snoop who has to worry about babysitters for her twins. She’s tough when she needs to be, all

business when it counts, and caring at home. It doesn't hurt, either, that you can actually see a clear resemblance between her and the true Plame (who appears in footage at the end credits). Sean Penn, though physically similar to the real Joe Wilson only in his center part, gets enough of the spirit of the diplomat-turned-protester to be effective, and he is especially good at portraying first the weary but accepting stay-at-home dad then the fire-breathing defender of his wronged wife. Penn is often great at depicting outrage on screen and here genuinely earns all of his outbursts.

One featured player stands out: David Andrews as Lester "Scooter" Libby. While it could be argued that he is over-the-top in his imperiousness, he makes for a great villain of the piece, smarmy and supercilious at once. Andrews is wonderfully nasty in one chilling scene where he grills a cowed CIA analyst about questionable Iraqi intelligence which he wants the White House to endorse. A parade of other solid characters actors—Bruce McGill, Noah Emmerich, Michael Kelly, David Denham—are effective Agency suits.

As was done with the contemporary classic "All the President's Men," the filmmakers saved themselves some fuss and kept a more documentary feel by *not* having actors stand in for the principal political presences--like George W. Bush and Dick Cheney in this case. The latter two do appear as themselves but only in television images.

"Fair Game" is hardly perfect. The director, Doug Liman (his father was the celebrated Arthur Liman, prosecutor at the Iran-Contra hearings), has a penchant for the spy genre with films such as "The Bourne Identity," "Mr. and Mrs. Smith," and the TV series "Covert Affairs," but his work in "Fair Game" is flawed in execution.

Most irritatingly, he favors—actually over-favors—hand-held camera work, which produces a perpetually jumpy quality in far too many sequences. It is fine in scenes of close action and confusion, as in the "Bourne" movies, or here in the Baghdad bombing sequence, but it is silly and unnecessary in domestic settings of Plame and Wilson. Likewise undercutting the film's effectiveness is a common Hollywood ailment: a too insistent score. Here it is by composer John Powell and, while occasionally effective, it calls constant attention to itself with a ponderous and overweening presence. The story is compelling enough without the pounding.

(The film runs 104 min. and is rated "PG-13").

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