

## The Ides of March

George Clooney is one of the more versatile film figures of our time, a major star and national stud who also produces, directs and acts in both light entertainments and serious dramas, both big budget enterprises and “small” pictures. His latest effort as producer/director/writer/star is one of the latter, a tight and sardonic little drama about politics called “The Ides of March”

The “Ides of March” could be viewed as a very Washington story, except it doesn’t take place in DC. It is, however, a very political story, a contemporary examination of our national politics and what makes them tick.

The film treats a crucial primary election (on March 15, thus the “Ides”) in Ohio where two Democratic Party contenders are in a make-or-break contest, and, in that context, focuses in on a rising campaign star, Stephen Myers (Ryan Gosling), who is the deputy campaign manager for one of the contenders, Pennsylvania Governor Mike Morris (Clooney). Myers loves his man and desperately wants him to win, principally to slake his own ambitions. But his commitment is tested when the rival’s campaign manager, Tom Duffy (Paul Giamatti), surprisingly calls him for a private tête-à-tête to pass him privileged information indicating Morris is losing. A hint to get on the opposition bandwagon is made.

Stephen is torn and seeks reassurance from the Governor, and then, reluctantly, admits to his immediate boss, campaign manager Paul Zara (Philip Seymour Hoffman) that he had the meeting with Duffy. Zara, who prizes loyalty above all else, dismisses him from the Morris team. Myers, whose ambitions outweigh his principles, then looks for a way to undercut Morris. He finds it in a confession from Molly Stearns (Evan Rachel Woods), a callow campaign intern (oh, those interns!) whom he has bedded. He finds that she has also slept with the Governor, a professed family man, and is carrying his baby. How he plays this last card will surely determine his political future—or if he even has one.

“The Ides of March” is based on the recent play by Beau Willimon called “Farragut North,” which had a short run in New York, played at the 2009 Contemporary American Theater Festival in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, and had a local mounting this May at the Olney Theater Center. The Farragut North reference in the play—and the screenplay—refers to the general lobbying address where campaign veterans can earn the big bucks as political consultants between races. Willimon, by the way, was a political operative for a while and worked on the 2004 campaign of Howard Dean, which surely offered a trove of material for his play.

The film version diverges from the play in various ways, some small—the state in the play is Iowa—and some large, like having a major featured role in the film for the Governor, who never appears in the play. The latter is perhaps explicable, since Clooney himself, who co-wrote the screenplay with long-time collaborator Grant Heslov and Willimon, presumably wanted to give himself some of the screen action. As a producer, he has tilled the inside politics field before: several years ago, he and buddy Steven Soderbergh did a series on HBO about Washington lobbying called “K Street.”

Clooney's direction here is smart and functional, moving the plot along in what is roughly a 24-hour period. He also gives himself a decent role as the smooth—too smooth—Morris, who can turn on both charm and smarm as a liberal governor who dispenses both party pieties and romantic favors.

But Ryan Gosling is the star of "Ides," and he makes of Myers an intriguing mix of youthful naïf and cunning operative. Even at 25, this kid has seen it all already, yet he strives for some uncertain, inchoate power just beyond his reach, his yearning eyes searching for some kind of confirmation. Behind it all may just be a blankness.

The subsidiary roles are well cast. Woods is appropriately dewy and hero-worshiping, yet with the heart of a hustler. Hoffman, pudgy and avuncular, plays the rough-hewn campaign vet to a T, and Jeffrey Wright does a nice turn as a duplicitous Senator playing off both of the primary contenders. Also, there is Marisa Tomei, playing a dogged political reporter, apparently good-spirited and competent—but who will snooker anyone for a story.

Slick and timely (we are on the verge of primary season), "The Ides of March" will appeal to any manner of political junkies in this town. Outside the Beltway, it may be harder to find an audience, because its narrative will highlight for many the dark, hard heart of American politics, which so many of our fellow citizens find beyond redemption. This reviewer says enjoy it as stylish snark.

*(The film is rated "R" for language and runs 101 min.)*