

## Irresistible

Written in a politically-conscious town, this column--and its author---searches regularly for movies covering political campaigns, a common theme for film dramas because they feature a **contest**, with a winner and loser to cheer for or to razz. Such campaign films have been around for decades, and the talents of writer-director Jon Stewart (from TV's "The Daily Show") and comedic actor Steve Carrell (one of Stewart's colleagues from that show) have combined to produce the latest in this genre. "Irresistible," now out on streaming sites and pay per view, surveys a taut campaign from the perspectives of two warring political consultants.

Two high-flying DC operatives, Democrat Gary Zimmer (Carrell) and Republican Faith Brewster (Rose Byrne), have just battled it out for the 2016 Presidential campaign with smug Faith having come out on top over the crushed Gary. That donnybrook has left them both hungry for the next race to enter. Then Gary discovers a paragon in, of all places, small-town Wisconsin, where word reaches him of Jack Hastings (Chris Cooper), a laconic farmer and retired Marine Corps officer who defends immigrants and possesses populist--maybe even Democratic--leanings. This Middle American icon may be just the man to turn the town's Red State voters blue. Jack's only condition for running: the campaign must play out entirely in his hometown of Deerlaken.

The race Zimmer has taken on is for mayor of Deerlaken, a town of 5,000 souls who have lost their major employer and seek a rebound. Hastings, known to everyone, is quickly convinced to take on incumbent mayor Braun (Brent Sexton), though his smart, principled daughter Diana (Mackenzie Davis) isn't so sure about the venture. Back in DC, Faith smells another good scrap with Gary and signs on to back Braun.

So turn on the campaign machine, as Gary uses his motormouth mingled with condescending charm to round up a local campaign team and make the apolitical Jack into a contender. Likewise, Faith uses her take-no-prisoners attitude mingled with a beatific, sweet manner to back the mayor. The consultants' takeover of the town is made possible by funds from the national party coffers, both seeking a landmark off-year campaign to build momentum.

Much of the film's plot is tit-for-tit scenes where Gary and Faith try to one-up each other day by day, not always using the highest standards (there is a cute Koch Brothers reference). Oddly, though most of the town is interested in the game being played out, they don't seem that invested in

either candidate. Most of the locals seem content to observe bemusedly at the big city wranglers, except perhaps Diana, who, protective of her father, seems skeptical of the whole enterprise.

That oddly distanced attitude of the townsfolk that Stewart presents is puzzling, until “Irresistible” knocks us for a loop in its last act, one showing the director’s sardonic and caustic critique of our whole political system.

This election saga can be compared to other recent campaign films. It is not a semi-documentary like the Gary Hart saga “The Front Runner” (2018), nor downright goofy like the silly Will Ferrell farce “The Campaign” (2013), nor bumbling satire like John Sayles’ “Silver Lake,” (also starring Chris Cooper running for office). Put it instead into the comedy-drama category, where two obsessive political animals, stuffed with adrenalin and calculation, churn up a town running in slow motion.

As indicated above, Byrne uses her waifish presence to play off her character as a toxic, filthy-mouthed cynic (she’s done this before, of course, in films like “Bridesmaid”). She pulls it off, though, and becomes the sweetie pie you learn to hate. Carrell is cynical, too—because, Stewart suggests, professional politicians have that in their DNA—but he exhibits a little more heart when it comes to identify with his magnanimous hosts. He is also, I sense, closer to the voice of Jon Stewart himself, mocking our democracy while gamely hoping to better it.

*(The film is rated “R” for steady profanity and runs 102 minutes.)*

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