

## Molly's Game

The first directorial effort by screenwriter extraordinaire Aaron Sorkin could hardly be anything but a word-fest. Sorkin is singular in his screenplays and teleplays for displaying a torrent of dialogue, often delivered by his protagonists on-the-run (nicknamed the “walk and talk” style). More, he has the uncanny ability to produce logorrhea on arcane subjects such as baseball stats ratings, social media details, TV journalism jargon, or legislative conundrums. In his latest film, “Molly’s Game” his subject is high stakes poker—as practiced among celebrities, multi-millionaires, and members of the Russian mob—and he, as usual, can sweep you along even if you don’t understand that much of what is being talked about. Sorkin’s only recent rival for this kind of esoteric dialogue is Adam McKay in “The Big Short.”)

What Sorkin has up his sleeve or in the hole (I can’t resist the card clichés) is Jessica Chastain as his Molly. She is Molly Bloom, a real-life poker organizer who, in a memoir, wrote about her running high-stakes games for a decade in Los Angeles and New York. The film opens with Molly being rudely arrested by the FBI in the middle of the night. Her supposed mob “connections” are the trigger for the arrest, and she promptly hires criminal defense lawyer Charlie Jaffey (Idris Elba), who hears Molly’s back story as played out in flashbacks.

Unlike other Sorkin scripts, this one depends greatly on a narrator, Molly, who tells, in measured tones, the story of her gambling life. That story emphasizes that Molly was both faultless in staging her games and always punctiliously legal, never pocketing table winnings (an no-no) but only receiving tips from players and duly reporting all her earnings to the IRS! Where the walk and talk principally comes from in “Molly’s Game” is in the fencing back and forth between Jaffey and Bloom, where the exchange is in legal jargon, and the dialogues with her poker colleagues, where the language is often that of seven-card stud. Just let the words pour over you and enjoy the actors’ handling of them.

Chastain handles that dialogue and the character with cool self-possession, presenting a woman ever under pressure but who still radiates confidence. Hollywood smoothies, like Player X (Michael Cera), or lovable moon dogs, like Douglas (Chris O’Dowd), try to manipulate her, but she is too clever to be waylaid. Her assured demeanor here echoes much of her role in last year’s “Miss Sloane” but substituting poker for lobbying.

Chastain has already earned two Oscar nominations during this decade (for “The Help” and “Zero Dark Thirty”). Don’t be surprised if she nabs another this month. *(The film is rated “R” and runs 140 mins.)*

(December 2017)