

The Paper

In the old days, movies about newspapers had to have a scream of “Stop the Presses!” at some point, usually a *Front Page* Walter Burns screaming after talking with a Hildy Johnson. In Ron Howard’s *The Paper*, star Michael Keaton gets to holler that line at a crucial point, but the build-up to it is not a throwback to old films but an ironic and contemporary bow to such films’ tradition. It is that tradition which *The Paper* upholds well, offering a very lively and winning Tale of a Tabloid.

The Paper is reminiscent of some superior TV shows depicting institutions, such as hospitals in “St. Elsewhere,” or police precincts in “Hill Street Blues,” programs following a variety of stories per episode, mixing comedy and drama, shot often with a roving camera. But *The Paper* matches and exceeds the best of these, with a smart and knowing script (from brothers David and Stephen Koeep), an attractive and felicitous cast, and a momentum that never lets up.

We witness 24 hours in the day of one Henry Hackett (Keaton), a newsman with printers ink in his veins and metro editor of the shaky “New York Sun” (modeled especially on the real city tabloid, the “Post,” with which it competes in the movie). This day is piling up for Henry. He’s trying to get the scoop on a mysterious Brooklyn murder and scoop the competition in doing so, but he’s having trouble convincing his bottom-line-conscious managing editor, Alicia Clark (Glenn Close), to give him the slack he needs. He’s also readying himself for a big interview at “The New York Sentinel” (the film’s equivalent of the lofty “Times”) for the position of assistant managing editor. If all this weren’t enough, his antsy journalist wife Martha (Marisa Tomei) is mammothly pregnant and wants to help run down the story.

The Paper spins Henry through the maelstrom, wherein he must contend also with his crusty, profane editor Bernie White (Robert Duvall), a nutty street reporter, “Mac” McDougal (Randy Quaid), as well as other mundane business like requisitioning an orthopedic chair. The pace increases as the paper rushes to deadline. Withal, Henry is able to take action and make decisions. Sometimes they get made for him, as in one frenetic scene where a slow accretion of demands starts Henry’s head spinning until...an authoritative gun shot brings the room to a dead halt. It’s a contemporary equivalent of the stateroom scene in the Marx Brothers’ *A Night at the Opera!*

Besides the Trials of Henry, there are sundry subplots, a tactic adopted by Director Howard in his films *Parenthood* and *Backdraft*, which also had multiple stories going at once. One subplot has a ravaged White, suffering with a “prostate the size of a bagel,” trying to reconnect with his estranged daughter. Alicia, meanwhile, confronts a real-life dilemma, that of a creative person (an ex-features editor) who is bumped up to a management position and must, perforce, attune herself to personnel and budgets. Martha agonizes over whether her baby will ruin her journalistic spirit, and so on.

It’s great sport to watch pros like these handle their lines and shape their

characters. Much of the fun is in watching an always barely-controlled Keaton move through the mess, trying to be reasonable and even (sort of) honorable with urban chaos all about. This is the kind of role he was meant to play: a partly hip, partly decent guy trying to make it in the big city. He has lots of good moments, but none better than a tour-de-force on the phone, when--like a manic monologist--he must deal in varying voices with three very different callers, simultaneously berating a reporter while soothing his wife and fawning to a "Sentinel" editor. Great stuff!

Duvall's performance as Bernie is tailor-made for this most natural of film actors, who also gets to state the character's--and the story's--credo: "Everyday you still start from zero." You believe he's been in that newsroom since Day One. Close makes Alicia a full-rounded person who has to be hard to be good. There is some of the fashion-conscious media celeb about her (could that Diane Sawyer hairdo be a coincidence?), but, at bottom, she represents purer journalistic values also and fights for them. By the way, Close really does fight, too, in a tough *mano-a-mano* with Keaton for control of the Sun's presses, one of the few no-holds-barred battles between a man and a woman on the screen. Marisa Tomei gives a laudable portrait of an increasingly common American type: the bright career woman torn between child rearing and passion for work. Her collapsing face as she hears an ex-colleague tell of the dreck of domesticity tells it all.

Numerous other character parts add spice to "The Paper." Spaulding Gray's supercilious "Sentinel" editor is just perfect. Jason Alexander does a neat turn as a drunken bureaucrat with a mission. Catherine O'Hara neatly delivers the goods to Martha on grim motherhood. If I have any problem with *The Paper* it is that its sometimes-legitimate sentiment is overplayed into corn. Also, with so much going on and so many characters, it cannot--even with its brightness--avoid the occasional stereotype.

Still, this is a rich comedy/drama--perhaps the best of its type on the media since *Broadcast News*--and so stuffed with characters, incidents, and good lines, that it is really worth seeing more than once.

("The Paper" is rated "R" for plenty of profanity and mature themes.)

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