

## Quiz Show

*Quiz Show*, directed by Robert Redford, was released some weeks ago and, while it has received strong critical praise, it has done relatively modest business at the box office. Some have speculated that it was too cerebral, too intellectual, too intimidatingly literate for the mass of movie goers. Inasmuch, too, as the film aims to carry heavy symbolic meaning about American society and its ethical underpinnings, it probably cannot bear the weight. Still, it represents an intelligent, civilized entertainment about an intriguing footnote in our mass media history.

Since it purports to portray a piece of TV history, one predictor of how you might react to *Quiz Show* is your birth year. If you were born in 1945 or before, you likely have some memory of the big-money TV quiz shows (like “The \$64,000 Question” or “Twenty One”) which dominated prime time television during the late Fifties. You may not remember much--perhaps a fleeting impression of the device of the “isolation booth”--but you may recall that “Twenty One” was eventually determined to be rigged by contestants being fed the questions and answers in advance. Depending on how much you do recall, director Redford’s recreation of this sordid episode in TV history could appear counterfeit; real events and real people with their real names are invoked, but they may not match the reality you remember.

If, however, you were born in 1950 or later, odds are you know little or nothing of these scandals, and *Quiz Show* will be as much a piece of history for you to discover as a film about the Teapot Dome scandal. For you, quiz shows--now “game shows”--are hardly prime time material but rather amusing trifles which come on after the nightly news. Used to today’s “Jeopardy” payoffs of five figures, you can only imagine how viewers were captivated by contestants vying over several weeks to win up to what would be half-a-million of today’s dollars. Whatever your birth date, the film serves as an ambitious Hollywood attempt to recast this real fable of lost American innocence. In that context, the attempt is a handsome and valiant one, with some modest cavils.

The plot may be familiar by now: we follow the trajectory of a attractive young literature instructor at Columbia University, Charles Van Doren (Ralph Fiennes), who is recruited for “Twenty One” by the shows’ producers to replace an unbeatable, but highly untelegenic, nerd named Herbert Stempel (John Turturro). Stempel is paid off to miss a simple question, allowing the more attractive Van Doren to launch a winning streak which makes him a national celebrity. The producers, led by Dan Enright (David Paymer), steer Van Doren on a slippery slope of deceit, feeding him Q’s and A’s in advance and coaching him on how to heighten drama in his responses. Van Doren, from a distinguished academic family whose reputation weighs on him, finds his fame and money compensating for any inability he might have in living up to his legacy.

Insinuating his way into this world is a young Senate investigator Richard Goodwin (Rob Morrow), who smells a rat in the quiz biz after a grand jury

investigation into the show is left unresolved. He searches out grand jury witnesses and finds the disaffected Stempel, who crassly delivers the lowdown on how the show is rigged. Goodwin, a Jewish city kid like Stempel but graced with a pedigree from Harvard, is seen wanting to act on Stempel's harsh truths while succumbing to the Van Dorens' classy lifestyle. His digging leads to a Senate subcommittee inquiry on the show, with denunciations from Stempel and final showdown testimony from Van Doren. The finale suggests that, while the rigged shows were dead, TV's manipulation of the American public was just getting started.

In earning his second Oscar nomination as director (he won the statuette for his 1980 film *Ordinary People*), Robert Redford coaxes numerous distinctive individual performances from his actors. Several supporting roles are notable. Paymer is all easy sleaze as producer Enright, doing whatever it takes for good ratings but also making a good case for his manipulations. As another producer, Hank Azaria is raw, raunchy, and just right. Playing Stempel's classic Brooklyn housewife, Joann Carlo nicely combines frumpiness with feeling.

Most winning of all is the great British actor Paul Scofield, who plays Charles' father, the poet and critic Mark Van Doren. His performance as the eminent professor who can't quite grasp his son's motivation is sure and elegant, then heart-rending when he learns of Charles's dissembling. Scofield even looks strikingly like the real Van Doren. In a cast with several standouts, this performance fully justifies the Academy Award nomination it received and has an outside chance to win.

Of the three principal actors, John Turturro is the least restrained and the most memorable. As a vengeful, irritating dweeb, he is a hoot. He also drives you nuts, even as you sympathize with him for being a put-upon Jew. You grudgingly feel for the guy, yet you know why NBC had to get him off the air! Turturro's turn was noted by several film critics as thoroughly Oscar-worthy, but he was bypassed by the Academy. Rob Morrow as Goodwin (who wrote the book from which Paul Attanasio adapted his Oscar-nominated screenplay) is more problematical. He gets some of the foxy, tenacious quality the character requires, but there is a display of quirks that undercuts the performance, including an affected and intrusive Boston accent.

As Charles Van Doren, the Welsh actor Ralph Fiennes (so memorable in last year's *Schindler's List*) looks and sounds appropriate enough, but his very smoothness washes out any complexity--or agony--this bedeviled character might have shown. A bemused smile is his principal feature, and we rarely see it leave his face. Yet Fiennes breaks through splendidly in his final big scene: his testimony before the Senate subcommittee. His confession of cheating is forceful and articulate, yet cloaked in emotion that makes it that much more compelling. The movie audience, along with the committee-room audience in the film, is taken in by a cultivated fake, just as TV audiences were with the original "Twenty-One."

Quiz Show captures impeccably the look, language, fashions and flavor of

the period, an achievement considerably due to the film's stellar cameraman, Michael Ballhaus, who delineated a very different New York just as superbly in his last effort, *The Age of Innocence*. Since we are talking Oscars, this reviewer feels the Academy blew one in not nominating Ballhaus for his effort. It also occurred to me that this is one of those films that could have been shot in black-and-white (matching the TV of the time) and been just as--or even more--effective.

*("Quiz Show" is rated PG-13 for occasionally bad language.)*

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