

## Truth

Hollywood periodically dips into journalism as a theme, more often for drama than for comedy. The best exemplars have a lasting impact, landmarks based on real events like “All the President’s Men” (1976) and “The Insider” (1999). The latest film to take on this cinematic challenge is James Vanderbilt’s “Truth,” a docudrama about one of the most potent political stories of this century.

On September 8, 2004, in the middle of a fevered presidential campaign, the CBS newsmagazine “60 Minutes II” aired an explosive investigative report, narrated by the network’s news anchor Dan Rather (Robert Redford), which purported to reveal evidence proving that President George W. Bush may have shirked his duty as a Texas Air National Guard pilot from 1968 to 1974. The piece asserted that Bush had not only exploited family and political connections in joining the Guard, but he may have even been AWOL. CBS News producer Mary Mapes (Cate Blanchett), in charge of the report, believed that she and her team had produced a milestone in broadcast journalism that could even affect the campaign outcome itself.

Mapes and her team of researchers, including military consultant Marine Lt. Col. Roger Charles (Dennis Quaid), freelancer Mike Smith (Topher Grace), and researcher Lucy Scott (Elizabeth Moss), had both on-air eyewitness testimony and newly-disclosed documents that made their case solid, but within days after the story broke, questions were raised about the veracity of their evidence and, quickly, “60 Minutes” itself became the focus of media and public scrutiny, leading to personal disaster for Mapes, Rather, and the others.

The whole of “Truth” is played as clock-ticking suspense, first as Mapes and Co. struggle with tight deadlines, run down leads, and breathlessly confirm sources almost up to air time. There is little relief after the story plays, however, as its troubled aftermath—led by conservative bloggers—quickly sets another time bomb as to whether the story can be confirmed or must be denied.

Working from Mary Mapes own chronicle “Truth and Duty,” Vanderbilt builds real urgency with tight, no-nonsense scripting, smart cutting, and propulsive music. Known previously as a screenwriter, this is Vanderbilt’s first attempt at directing. If his film has a flaw, it is in his casting and handling of his actors.

Perhaps the film’s pace does not really allow for nuanced performances, but several seem thin or stereotyped. Most egregious is Topher Grace as Mike, a jejune and petulant “leftist” whose every line seems telegraphed. Here he plays the standard wiseacre he has embodied since he played the vile high-school drug dealer in “Traffic” almost 15 years ago, but not as effectively. An actor capable of quality work, Elizabeth Moss here has a featureless role as an earnest drone. Several other roles of CBS suits are predictable and interchangeable (with the exception of Rachael Blake as the chilly Betsy West, CBS senior vice-president at the time, and Stacy Keach, as a retired military officer possessing damaging information).

Which brings me to Robert Redford as Dan Rather. This Hollywood icon delivers some of the anchor’s wryness, congeniality, and decency, but lacking Rather’s cornpone side and a true Texas accent, it is hard for me to see past him as Redford

rather than the famous newsman. Above all there is Blanchett as Mapes, the fulcrum and core of the film. Blanchett wonderfully captures the itchy, driven side of the natural newshound, thriving on pressure and salivating for the scoop. She also portrays splendidly Mapes' famous candor, her inability to fudge a story. This outspokenness is displayed most effectively in the final scene where, after being told by counsel to tone it down before a CBS investigative panel, she fervently defends her journalistic ethics against insinuations of poor judgment. Splendid work.  
*("Truth" is rated PG-13 and runs 125 minutes).*

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