

Vice

Adam McKay is a smart comedy writer and director who has a long-time partnership with comedian Will Ferrell, partnering in farces like “Anchorman” and “Step Brothers.” In 2015, McKay left his comfort zone to adapt the Michael Lewis financial bestseller “The Big Short.” This was a major challenge, but McKay met it by coming up with a superb comedy-drama through ingenuity, a risk-taking script, and great casting. His effort was rewarded when he received five Oscar nominations and a statuette for Best Adapted Screenplay. Now, McKay takes on a subject perhaps as difficult: “Vice,” an intricate biopic about an hermetic politician: Dick Cheney.

“Vice” traces Cheney’s life from his time as an irresponsible 22-year-old lug, driving while drunk and going nowhere, to the power behind the throne as George W. Bush’s vice president. An early scene also throws us into the turmoil of 9/11, with Cheney being whisked away by Secret Service agents to a safe location. The film keeps returning to that fearful day and the Veep’s commandeering of the situation. Beyond those flash forwards, we observe a restive chronology of Cheney’s political life, narrated by an “unconventional narrator” named Kurt (Jesse Plemons) whose relationship to Cheney is unknown until a last big serio-comic reveal.

Cheney’s chronicle begins with a stern dressing down from his girlfriend, Lynne (Amy Adams), who threatens to leave him if he doesn’t shape up. Through her balanced cajolery and reassurance, Cheney slides into Republican politics, from staff positions at the White House--aided by mentor Don Rumsfeld (Steve Carell)--through a Congressional career, to a stint as Secretary of Defense under Bush 41, then to his triumph as Vice President for Bush 43.

Through it all, the character of Cheney evolves over 45 years from naïve simp to cagey pro to finally embody that near satanic figure of hunched posture, canny visage, and monotonic drone which delivered some of the most terrifying euphemisms of our age. The transformation of the “Vice” is fascinating to watch, with Christian Bale (and a make-up team headed by Greg Cannon) more than up to the task. For this viewer, in fact, that transformation showed a young “Cheney” that just looked like Bale to a clever impersonation of the middle-aged man into, ultimately, a convincing embodiment of the dour politician in his mature years (helped by Bale putting on 45 pounds). It is a worthy realization of the character, clearly award-bait.

Amy Adams also shines as the sweetly pressuring wife, a 1950’s girl willing to take a back seat to her hubbie but ever iron-spined in matching Dick’s instincts to her ambition (one of the cleverer asides that McKay uses is a pillow talk session between the couple where they trade verses from “Macbeth”). Adams in turn convinces as engaging domestic mom, dogged but honeyed promotor of Cheney, and ever-ready helpmate. She may not be the complete power-behind-the throne, but we see that she is often the catalyst for a rise in the family’s fortunes.

Less effective are the major featured roles undertaken by Carell as Rumsfeld and Sam Rockwell as George W. Bush. Carell is way too crass and ham-handed (compared to the real controlled Rumsfeld), seeming to do manic variations on his “The Office” TV personage rather than plumbing the nature of the politician (an exception is his intimate phone call with Cheney late in the picture, a scene that personifies treachery). Rockwell may be having fun at “W’s” expense, but I didn’t for a minute buy him as Bush II. Poorly

directed, he comes off as a witless Texas stereotype, way dumber than his real-life counterpart. Also, he doesn't look much like the man. One among many portrayals of real people in "Vice" that stands out is Don McManus as Cheney's lawyer, David Addington, who embodies the character's devilish machinations while looking strikingly like the real thing.

Thinking of other political satires, "Vice" recalls Oliver Stone's "W." (2008), another movie that exposes the flaws of a major official through ridicule and exaggeration. This depiction is just as damning as Stone's, but "Vice" is able to soften Cheney's edges with many scenes of genuine family life and real domestic crises (Cheney's health problems, for example, figure prominently). McKay also, as he did with "The Big Short," mingles his chronological narrative with funky asides, such as a surprise false ending to the film, a surreal restaurant scene, and a studied essay on the "unitary presidency theory," as well as acerbic tangents and satiric images.

To note: Much of "Vice" takes place in a Washington, DC environment, but, as with most DC movies these days, not much is made of real District locations (most of the film was shot in and around Los Angeles). The Cheney character is shown briefly in city locations, such as sequences at the Grant Memorial and at the entrance to L'Enfant Plaza, and there are several standard stock images: down 16th Street NW, on the South Lawn of the White House, and, as ever, the Capitol.

(The film is rated "R" and runs 132 minutes)

(December 2018)