

Tom, Thanks (?) for Charlie Wilson's War

February 26, 2020

CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR (2007)

Directed by Mike Nichols

Written by Aaron Sorkin & George Crile

Starring Julia Roberts, Philip Seymour Hoffman & Tom Hanks as Charlie Wilson

The integrity of my own format be damned, I have half a mind to use this space to talk about the *The West Wing*, only because it's an endlessly more interesting Aaron Sorkin text which doesn't force me to excuse the canonizing of a real American politician who I'm not sure I liked very much at all. Not liking a Tom Hanks character, who's dialogue is written by Aaron Sorkin is certainly not something I would expect of myself (these are my guys), but let me say off the top: I struggled to enjoy this movie, or even understand what was so remarkable about the story it told. I thought the acting and the screenwriting were fine, but I also sensed the film was congratulating America on its history of kindness toward a nation it was and is at war with, and that seems a slightly more complicated endeavour than they saw fit to explore.

The year is 1980 and Texan Congressman *Good Time Charlie* Wilson is dodging character attacks from Rudy Guiliani, while preparing the Afghan military for expected missile attacks from the Soviets. To be fair, Guiliani's off-screen presence is depicted as hapless, but it's hard to ignore the irony of the litigator's attempt to expose a politician's less-than-wholesome private life considering what he does for a living today. Maybe this warts-and-all presentation of American politics was a welcome diversion for Sorkin, who had spent four years developing one so idealistic as *The West Wing*, but where he sheds his pristine virtue, he sheds his heart, and I'm left at a loss for whom with which I should sympathize. The most enlightened scene features a signature-style monologue where Charlie confides that his career in politics was inspired by a vendetta against his neighbour, who had poisoned his childhood dog. That retribution, he says, was when he fell in love with America. It's this kind of chest-pounding rah-rah optimism the scribe handles best, and yet it's otherwise lacking. And if it feels like a reach to draw connections between this movie and the *West Wing*, I'll point to the line, "Has there ever been a show about Washington?" which is delivered in the first four minutes of this film.

It's possible the nonfiction book on which the screenplay is based contains no more humanity to be drawn upon - I won't be compelled to read it and find out. But there's something about the bulk of this writing that feels chored and joyless. These real life figures of the public eye who are as famous for their flaws as they are their accomplishments are Sorkin's bread and butter. He designs for them believable implicit sadness, he crafts for them symphonies with which to banter, he maintains a clear artistic vision, and he is never ever sick at sea. But I just didn't get much from this movie; and that's fine because every work of art can't be for every consumer, and I won't make any assumptions about who those artists and consumers are beyond myself, but I've seen a lot of Aaron Sorkin stuff, and I've seen a lot of Tom Hanks stuff, and *Charlie Wilson's War* felt, to me, like neither.

Oh! But lest I neglect to praise the great Philip Seymour Hoffman, who's so lost behind the big sunglasses of CIA operative Gust Avrakotos it gives one hope to wonder if his genius is still out there, invisible within the next fabulous performance. Julia Roberts is decent here also, as Charlie's socialite part-time lover Joanne Herring, but I struggled to see why she was absolutely essential to the plot, beyond the purpose of showing that Charlie could be sensitive to *some* women. I'm skeptical even *that* was her purpose because the movie itself doesn't feel terribly sensitive to women in general. Charlie surrounds himself with a team of doting female assistants (dubbed Charlie's Angels), who've all been hired based on their physical appearance and the philosophy that "you can teach 'em to type, but you can't teach 'em to grow tits." Then there's Bonnie (Amy Adams), who's reserved professionalism seems to set her apart from the other executive assistants, but this doesn't prevent her scenes from beginning with close-ups on her rear-end. To be fair, we give equal opportunity to TH's butt... unless it's a double... a double-double.

It feels slightly unjust to criticize elements of this movie on the conditions of my personal feelings, but I'm not a professional critic, I'm a fan guided by his instincts, and I just didn't feel like Hanks got as involved with this guy as he so often has. It felt like he threw on some neat suspenders and a regionally vague drawl, and went to his job as Person. The choices made in this portrayal didn't offend me as much as, say, some of Nichols' direction, but I'm confident I won't remember it long after I've uploaded this blog. I still love TH and I hope he can forgive me.

What I understand least is the desire to celebrate a man who understands and empathizes with victims of war crimes, by telling a story that seems to trivialize war. By calling the movie Charlie Wilson's War, we mirror a politicians' battle against tawdry tabloid games with actual battlefield horrors - horrors they show us in explicit visuals. I guess, in a way, vain character assassinations and the frivolity of real issues is more relevant than ever. In truth, the most horrifying visual shown might be when Joanne separates her eyelashes with an open safety pin. The horrors of war have existed subtextually, in Sorkin's work, since even before The West Wing ("Did you order the code red?"). That's probabaly how he ended up on this job, but to me, it's a poor reason. Maybe the root of the problem lies in the indulgence of idealistic delusions in the first place. Maybe The West Wing spoiled me for political drama. Then again, I don't think that's my war to wage.

Thx!