

The opposite of what's needed

The Life of David Gale, directed by Alan Parker

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On the world arena the refusal by the United States to eliminate the death penalty places it in opposition to all 43 member-states of the Council of Europe and in a distinct minority on the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976, over 830 people have been executed in the US. More than a third of those executions have taken place in the State of Texas; as governor, George W. Bush presided over 152 state killings.

A film calling attention to Bush's assembly line of executions, even one in the form of a thriller involving death penalty abolitionists, might be a significant cultural event. There would certainly be no dearth of dramatic raw material, insofar as most people put to death by the state come from society's most victimized layers.

British director Alan Parker's new film *The Life of David Gale* is not such a film. Parker already has a black mark next to his name for portraying the FBI as the champions of civil rights in *Mississippi Burning* (1988).

The title character in *David Gale* (Kevin Spacey) is a prominent Texas college professor and one of the state's foremost crusaders against capital punishment. Four days away from being executed for the brutal rape and murder of his best friend and anti-death penalty cohort, Connie Hallaway (Laura Linney), Gale summons investigative reporter Bitsey Bloom (Kate Winslet) for a series of jailhouse interviews.

The interviews chronicle in flashback form Gale's professional demise as the result of a sexual tryst with a vengeful graduate student, who proceeds to accuse him of rape. The fallout from this single act is astonishing: he loses his teaching position, his marriage ends and he sinks into an alcoholic abyss, ending any hope of a relationship with his adored son and rendering him useless to the abolitionist cause. In one fell swoop, David goes from a Harvard-trained "academic stud," in the words of one character, to a gutter drunk. On top of this, his colleague Connie is dying from leukemia.

Texas's chief elected officer, a Bush clone, described as a "governor in touch with his inner frat boy," has already told Gale in a televised debate that he will not declare a moratorium

on the death penalty in Texas unless its foes can uncover a serious miscarriage of justice, i.e., that a single innocent person has been put to death. Thus, the film's denouement is telegraphed 90 minutes ahead of time, and the only element left to work out is how Gale will get himself condemned. This is where the film becomes downright disoriented and misanthropic.

Bitsey receives a video from an unknown source showing Connie's last moments—her bruised, naked body lying on her kitchen floor, in handcuffs, with a plastic bag over her head. Disturbingly similar to a snuff film, the video is shown again and again in *David Gale*, forcing the audience to repeatedly view Connie thrashing about on the floor as she suffocates. The realization that Connie's cruel death was a setup organized by Gale, Connie and another close friend who is also an anti-death penalty activist, does not lessen the assault on one's senses.

The film has the slick look of a television commercial, but a script that is riddled with grade-school clichés: a mysterious pick-up truck stalking the reporters as they arrive in town; a chase scene ended by a fast-moving train; a desperate effort to reach authorities before an execution takes place, to name a few. The first flashback to establish Gale as a brilliant intellectual offers his dime-store rendition of the postmodernist psychological theories of Jacques Lacan. In the film's production notes Parker paid homage to a narrative that could "promulgate the ethical importance of Lacan and also keep the audience on the end of their seats for two hours."

And then there is what one reviewer described as a "screenplay jammed with eye rollers": The end-of-semester college party, featuring sexy students goading their tipsy profs into reciting bawdy limericks; David Gale's rocket-speed descent into dereliction made silly by a scene in which he staggers along a street crashing into people as he spouts anecdotes about Socrates and Aristotle; Bitsey Bloom's mad run through the streets of Huntsville (car and cell phone out of commission) to save Gale's life. This twice-repeated scene is patently absurd, as Gale's trip to the death chamber was well under way with all legal avenues having been exhausted. The whole sequence is a red herring, typical of the film's approach.

Winslet's Bitsey Bloom is annoyingly and uncharacteristically shrill with her emotional responses to key

events consistently off the mark. The characterizations of Bloom and Gale in particular are merely organized around the needs of the plot's twists and turns.

More seriously, the portrayal of Connie's terminal illness and political disappointments falls far short of explaining the gruesome character of her chosen death. Connie is the most balanced of all the characters, in large part due to the acting skills of Laura Linney. It is inconceivable that she would partake in such a horror-evoking fraud.

One of the most implausible and noxious features of the film is its notion that two men in love with a humane, decent woman could stand behind a video camera and watch her suffer an agonizing death. What kind of person would be able to do that? Surely not someone involved in opposition to brutal state murder.

The Life of David Gale presents this type of unprincipled activity as the only means by which to fight capital punishment. One reviewer noted that any film that attempts to tackle this topic "needs its wits about it."

Outside of the Huntsville prison where the execution is taking place, Parker's film depicts both pro- and anti-death penalty contingents. But it is only the crude comments of the supremely ignorant that are highlighted in the movie.

It is precisely because the American political establishment and media deliberately encourage a narrow and pragmatic response to crime, that a deeply humane, profound and sensitive approach is needed when dealing with the issue of capital punishment. The task must be to sensitize and raise the level of humanity in the population as a whole. Parker's film works in the opposite direction.

Following the execution of Karla Faye Tucker in February 1998 the WSWS editorial board wrote: "In the collective action of the Texas state authorities—whose rulings were sanctioned by the US Supreme Court—and the blood lust of their supporters one sees only vindictiveness, brutality and reaction.

"But it is not only in the State of Texas that something is profoundly rotten. In its callousness and utter lack of compassion—what the Bard in his innocence called the 'quality of mercy'—the disposal of Tucker is only one chilling expression of a broader trend in capitalist politics: the selection of violence as a *preferred* instrument of policy, the deliberate encouragement of indifference to human suffering, and the general brutalization of society.

"There is a profound connection between the moral debasement, indeed the cruelty, of the ruling class and the values it has zealously championed: the celebration of the market, the promotion of greed and wealth, the abandonment of any sense of social responsibility. The deeper the economic and social crisis of the system, the more thoroughgoing the destruction of living standards and social programs, the wider the gap between the rich and nearly everyone else, the greater the need for state violence and intimidation."

The Life of David Gale barely touches upon the social factors

bound up with the death penalty. It ignores the conditions of life in America and the growing opposition to capital punishment.

Outgoing Illinois Governor George Ryan recently carried out the largest commutation of death row prisoners in US history, declaring: "In the United States the overwhelming majority of those executed are psychotic, alcoholic, drug addicted or mentally unstable. They frequently are raised in an impoverished and abusive environment. Seldom are people with money or prestige convicted of capital offenses, even more seldom are they executed." Ryan, a Republican elected in 1998 as a supporter of capital punishment, offers more insight into the issue than the supposedly anti-death penalty creators of *The Life of David Gale*. His comments are one indicator that the tide is turning against the death penalty proponents.

Instead of a serious attitude towards the fight against the barbarity of the death penalty, Parker offers a gratuitously violent sex scene between Gale and the graduate student and, most unforgivably, the ever-present and deeply repulsive snuff video. Laura Linney's Connie shows some genuine humanity and there is a certain reality in certain of the film's moments, such as a throw-away line about condemned men having been assigned lawyers who were drunk, absent or asleep. These are small offerings.

The kind of morally debased stunt offered up by the film as an argument against the death penalty could only emerge from a corrupt, unserious and unprincipled social layer that obviously considers it outlandish that the populace could be convinced by rational argument of the evils of capital punishment. Moreover, one suspects that such people may feel that under certain circumstances, there is a legitimate need for brutal state methods.

In the production notes, Parker thanks the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, which he perceived as "a surprisingly open organization. With regards to Death Row and the administration of the death penalty, they have 'a job to do,' as charged by Texas law, and are extremely transparent and helpful in explaining how it works." He describes his response to the death chamber in the following way: "I thought that I could never even enter this room, if the opportunity ever arose, creepy as I thought it to be. But I soon found myself inured to the function of this place as I chatted away amiably with the same matter-of-factness as Warden Hodges." Obviously, such a person cannot be entrusted to produce a work that offers a compelling argument against capital punishment or any other social ill.



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