

War Inc.: Strengths and weaknesses of the Hollywood left

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Directed by Joshua Seftel, screenplay by Mark Leyner, Jeremy Pikser and John Cusack

At its best, *War, Inc.* reaches the level of a biting—and courageous—political satire. The film, directed by Joshua Seftel and co-written, produced and starring John Cusack, one of Hollywood's most vocal opponents of the Iraq war, is a dystopian work about the “first war to be 100 percent outsourced” to private enterprise.

When it stays on track as a lampoon of a war zone run by a Halliburton-type corporation headed by a Dick Cheney-like former vice president, the movie has many effective moments. However, its detours into the realms of romance and personal redemption are unconvincing, to say the least. Nonetheless, the film's passionate stance against the war and the criminals who conduct it is genuine and carries weight.

Cusack plays Brand Hauser, a CIA hit man who knocks back shot glasses of hot sauce to dull his sense of feeling “like a refugee from the Island of Dr. Moreau. Some morally inverted, twisted character from a [French writer Louis-Ferdinand] Céline novel.” He is ordered by the chief of Tamerlane—a huge US defense contractor—and former vice president (played by Dan Ackroyd) to assassinate a Middle Eastern oil minister whose plans for a pipeline interfere with the occupation of the fictional Turaqistan by the giant transnational.

In fact, the US government proves to be a wholly-owned subsidiary of Tamerlane.

Inside the heavily-fortified Emerald City, the authorities organize a huge gala, the Brand USA Trade Show, as a front for the assassination. It is a spectacle that will feature Rockette amputees with technologically advanced prosthetic limbs, “incarcerate-anywhere-anytime” inflatable Port-O-Prisons and bomb-sniffing mechanical dogs.

Hauser's right-hand woman and organizer is the hyper-efficient and cold-blooded Marsha Dillon, wonderfully played by Joan Cusack. Rock star Yonica Babyyeah (Hilary Duff) with her hit, “I Want to Blow You Up,” is to be the main attraction at the gala. (She is described by one of the film's characters as “a sad little girl who's been pimped out into a pathetic monstrosity of Western sexuality.”)

The catch-phrase of the occupation, “Democracy Light,” is driven home to the population via ubiquitous posters, advertising the supposed virtues of the occupiers—for example, friendship and trust. A Popeye's Fried Chicken restaurant is the portal that gives

access to the secret bunker of those who rule Turaqistan.

Tamerlane boasts that it has reduced reporter casualties to zero by the invention of its Combat-O-Rama theme park ride. The war experience is a virtual one achieved through embedding a journalist—with an implant. A left-wing reporter, Natalie Hegalhuizen (Marisa Tomei—some of the characters' names bring Preston Sturges to mind), who refuses to be implanted, catches Hauser's attention as the incorruptible Other to his hot-sauced cynicism. She wants the truth about what's going on. However, leaving the Emerald City is tantamount to descending into the ninth circle of hell, as crazed American soldiers shoot everything in sight.

In response to arguments for withdrawing from Turaqistan, Hauser says: “Look, we've already kicked the s— out of this place. What are we supposed to do? Turn our backs on all the entrepreneurial possibilities? Business is a uniquely human response to a moral and cosmic crisis. Whether it's a tsunami or a sustained aerial bombardment, there's the same urgent call for urban renewal.”

Flashbacks show Hauser confronting his CIA handler, Walken (Ben Kingsley), as the former attempted to break with the spy agency: “I like killing people as much as the next guy, but I signed up to kill the bad ones! Health clinics, trade unionists, journalists, agricultural coops, Catholic liberation theologians, impoverished Colombian coffee farmers, these are the barbarians that are brave opponents of civilization? We turned Central America into a f—in' graveyard! Whoever momentarily interrupts the accumulation of our wealth, we pulverize. I'm just not feeling good about that anymore, sir!”

Eventually love conquers Hauser and he turns against the occupation, exposing the identity of the Viceroy—the Tamerlane puppet—who controls the Emerald City in Big Brother style.

In interviews promoting his film, Cusack has been unsparing in his characterization of the Bush administration as a cabal of war criminals, aiming fire, as well, at its enablers in the mainstream media. In an interview with *Raw Story*, he comments that “what the Bush administration has done is criminal, should be treated as a crime, but the idea that people who call themselves journalists let these lies go on unchecked and endorsed them time and time again is [unpardonable] ... You know, Nuremberg [post-World War II trials of the Nazis leaders and their propagandists] said that an illegal invasion of a sovereign country in a war of aggression is a supreme war crime.”

Cusack also condemns the media for remaining silent about the fact that the “President of the United States [admitted] on television that he not only authorized torture but has made it a for-profit industry.”

The actor further explains his difficulty in obtaining a distributor for the film: “You have to understand the time it was made. I mean the statue [of Saddam Hussein] had just fallen. Bush was strutting around like a conquering hero and they were standing up on podiums saying ‘these people better watch what they say,’ cuing all these McCarthyism threats ... so there wasn’t anybody rushing to take on the neo-con agenda and how it is destroying this country and the whole corporatist war, this cancer devouring our society. I don’t think the financiers wanted to take the risk.”

Cusack’s anti-war sentiments and his honest opposition to attacks on democratic rights fuel the film’s anger and its most successful flights of satire. Nothing imagined here is too farfetched or beyond the capability of the American ruling elite.

However, there are too many elements in *War, Inc.* that mar the rhythm and quality of the comedy, including the introduction of various distracting and pointless sub-plots, such as the romance of Hauser and Natalie. Whether the filmmakers import these elements for marketing considerations or otherwise, they have the impact of toning down the portrayal of painful realities. They are the artistic means by which the film back-pedals and calls its own savage assessment into question. Without perhaps meaning to, the filmmakers signal to the audience: ‘We’re serious ... but we’re not entirely serious.’

There is also too much unnecessary mayhem, particularly in the scenes involving Hilary Duff and her character’s gangster bodyguards. Moreover, subtitled sequences with Arab characters who all speak an understandable English is distasteful. Hauser’s transition from killer to lover to hero is unbelievably rendered even as a development in an absurdist work.

One of the film’s principal themes, driven home in a number of ways, is that the US government and military have been taken over by big business. “I don’t think people really understand that corporations have privatized the war to the point where the war itself is the cost-plus business. They are hollowing out the very core of what it means to be a government. They’re using the State Department as an ATM,” Cusack told the *Los Angeles Times*.

The question arises: would a more directly government-run imperialist war, such as Vietnam, be an improvement? While *War, Inc.* is not arguing along these lines, at least not consciously, this is the logic. The door is left open for various interpretations, such as the one offered by the *LA Times*, which describes the film as merely making “the case against privatizing the military.”

To their credit, the filmmakers took on the task of satirizing present-day American capitalism, in all its militaristic debauchery.

Cusack has been a talented and engaging actor over the past 25 years, in a variety of genres and disparate films, such as *Eight Men Out*, *The Grifters*, *Bullets Over Broadway*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Being John Malkovich*, *High Fidelity*, *America’s Sweethearts* and more. He and his sister Joan, both of whom are probably undervalued in favor of more self-conscious and self-involved performers, are among the most appealing figures in the American film industry. Clearly, moreover, Cusack is outraged by and wants

to alter the present situation.

Nonetheless, it doesn’t help anyone to paint pretty pictures. The Hollywood “left,” even its most conscientious elements, remains extremely limited in both its social thinking and its artistry. The years of immense wealth and vapid content have not left anyone unscathed. So many questions are only touched on, but not thought and worked through in their efforts. The gaping holes in the story in *War, Inc.*, its frivolous or unconvincing aspects, are not directly linked to the political-ideological weaknesses, but they share a common characteristic: superficiality and a certain laziness in the face of compelling problems.

How Cusack has evolved, or whether he is moving leftward, is not clear, but for the moment his limitations are summed up in an attraction to a milieu in which the likes of anti-globalist Naomi Klein predominate. (“I saw a lot of Naomi Klein in Marisa Tomei’s character,” he says.) On numerous occasions, Cusack pays public tribute to Klein’s book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. This and other writings of hers were influential in the development of the movie’s screenplay.

Klein is a professional promoter of the left-liberal view that the most egregious aspects of modern-day society can be curbed by turning back the clock to the era of national state intervention and regulation. For such people, the present brutal face of global capitalism is merely a policy choice of the establishment, or sections of it (“the neo-cons,” “disaster capitalists”), which can be replaced by a more humane program, within the existing system, if a sufficiently large protest movement arises.

Cusack is an artist, not a political figure or leader. His political outlook does, however, have consequences for his art, preventing him from coming to terms with social and psychological realities in a more compelling manner. Once *War, Inc.* makes its points about the outsourcing of war with all the attendant grotesqueries, it largely runs out of steam and a sloppy melodrama takes over.

For all of its foibles, the film does tap into the deep feelings of large numbers of people, furious about American corporations that ruthlessly throw their weight around all over the world, and the demise of the US Constitution and open advocacy of torture by the political elite. It also testifies to the failings of the left-liberal milieu, which despite certain misgivings and criticisms, always finds itself running with the political pack of wolves who abet those they so despise. The pack we refer to is the Democratic Party and its apologists and hangers-on.

In the end, *War, Inc.* is a sometimes lacerating, but highly uneven, protest against the ever-expanding American war machine.



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