

The Company Men: what the economic crisis has wrought

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Written and directed by John Wells

The Company Men is a sincere effort to dramatize head-on the devastating consequences of the crash of September 2008. However sharply one might criticize the results, it remains to the credit of writer-director John Wells that he is among the first to take on the subject.

Wells, until now primarily active in television (as executive producer of *ER* and *The West Wing*, among numerous other series), sets his story in and around a fictional conglomerate, GTX, one of whose operations has been shipbuilding.

The Boston-based company eliminates three thousand employees in mid-September 2008, as banks teeter on the brink and the stock market plunges. One of those is Bobby Walker (Ben Affleck), a sales executive with 12 years' service at GTX. Walker lives in a large house in the suburbs with his wife Maggie (Rosemary DeWitt), dresses expensively, drives a sports car, and generally lives the good life.

His superior, Gene McClary (Tommy Lee Jones), is outraged that cuts have been made in the transportation division without his knowledge. He crosses swords at company meetings with CEO James Salinger (Craig T. Nelson), who is strenuously attempting to raise the company's share price in advance of an anticipated merger. Salinger cold-bloodedly recognizes that job destruction will please and encourage Wall Street investors.

McClary lives in a mansion on the water, but his relations with his wife have gone cold and he is conducting an affair with the head of human resources at GTX, Sally Wilcox (Maria Bello), the woman doing the firing.

A third leading figure, Phil Woodward (Chris Cooper), began on the shop floor and has worked his way up the corporate ladder. He fears for his job, as contracts fall through and his age and salary work against him. "I won't let the bastards just kick me out after thirty years," Woodward exclaims. "I'll take an AK-47 to this f----- place first!"

Ultimately, both McClary and Woodward will lose their jobs in a further round of dismissals.

In quite legitimate detail, *The Company Men* sets out the degrading facts of joblessness, even for those who have held relatively privileged positions. Walker and Woodward pointlessly show up at a job placement center, send out hundreds of résumés, go on innumerable, fruitless interviews, while McClary, now broken up with his wife, spends his days in depression at his lover's house.

At first Walker pretends to himself he'll have a job in a few days' time and tries to keep the firing a secret. "I don't want to tell anybody till I get another job," he tells his wife. She is more realistic than he ("We're going to have cut back"), eventually returning to work as a

nurse. Piece by piece, the ornaments of their old, more opulent life disappear: the country club membership, the Porsche, even his son's Xbox, finally, their house. Walker and his family end up at his parents' home, the last place on earth he desires to be.

When Maggie tries to cheer him up at one point, Bobby responds forcefully, "Things are not going to be great again ... For three months, I've begged for a lead, anything. ... I'm a 37-year-old loser ... When did it all turn to shit?"

Woodward's situation, if possible, seems even more desperate. Expenses and bills mount. The prospect of a job at his age seems remote. On the advice of a job counselor ("You're pushing 60 and you look like hell"), Phil dyes his hair and edits his résumé to play down his age. To no avail. Meanwhile, his family continues to make expensive demands. Ashamed of the reality, his wife orders him to stay out till 6 pm so the neighbors won't know he's lost his position.

In the end, Walker, humbled and made desperate by his downfall, asks his brother-in-law, Jack Dolan (Kevin Costner), a small contractor, whose assistance he previously scorned ("I don't see myself pounding nails"), for a job. He gets one, but as a laborer to begin with.

Inevitably, the economic disaster produces a personal tragedy.

In its aftermath, McClary and Walker take a stroll in the old shipyard, now rusting and falling apart. McClary talks about the old days when 6,000 men earned "an honest wage" there, when the company built something you could "see, feel and touch ... Now everything's gone."

In the lobby of GTX's headquarters, McClary confronts Salinger, his oldest friend and co-founder of the company. Accusingly, he points out that while the thousands of layoffs were taking place, and employees lost houses and more, Salinger had raked in \$22 million. The latter tells McClary that the merger has gone through, and his stock options are now worth \$600 million. "Congratulations," McClary tells him.

As this account should make clear, *The Company Men* is nothing if not timely. The too easy reproach that the film only takes up the plight of those economically better situated—with the vindictive implication that they more or less merit their fate—doesn't hold much water. In the first place, very few deserve the damage this failing, decayed system inflicts.

Obviously, stories about every portion of a suffering population ought to be written and filmed, but a work about the impact of the crisis on a well-heeled and complacent layer is entirely appropriate, and potentially could dispel "the dominant conventional illusions" and shake "the optimism of the bourgeois world," as a great Marxist once phrased it, if such confidence can still be said to exist.

To do that, however, it would need to a more socially penetrating and artistically fiercer work than this one.

The talented cast—Affleck, Jones, Cooper, DeWitt, Nelson, Costner and Bello, along with Patricia Kalember, John Doman (*The Wire*) and others—performs uniformly well. Roger Deakins, the well-known British cinematographer, has filmed everything clearly and accurately.

However, the images are not especially rich or evocative ones. In fact, they are somewhat dull. *The Company Men* feels too much as though it were written, acted and shot according to a handbook on the various dilemmas confronting those made jobless by the recession. It is schematic and overly “sociological.” In far too many scenes, one can easily work out the particular issue under consideration—the narcissism and consumerism produced by the 1990s and 2000s; age discrimination; the impact of “workaholicism” on the family; the Death of American Manufacturing, and so forth.

In fact, if harsh truth be told, Wells has not constructed an integrated drama at all, which would establish its truth through the logic of the fictional events, but hung a series of sequences together, a good many of which could stand on their own as socially-pointed units.

Many of the writer-director’s themes—including the fantastic accumulation of wealth by a relative handful of corporate executives—are entirely valid, but they need to find more spontaneous, deeply felt, artistically worked through expression. In this case, they tend to simply sit there on the screen, somewhat baldly and flatly presented.

The result is that *The Company Men* is far less moving than it ought to be. The spectator is interested and intrigued by the goings-on, but not profoundly involved. The events are not precisely formulaic, but they are relatively foreseeable. Hardly anyone here utters an unexpected or surprising word.

Even Cooper-Woodward’s psychic disintegration, the most tragic element in the film, is not greatly compelling. This is a shame, because, objectively, these are genuinely world-historical events.

What’s the problem? A sincere approach to important problems, and yet ... the results are relatively tepid.

There may be various difficulties, including perhaps the writer-director’s limitations as a creator of drama, but, given the historical circumstances, it would seem reckless to rule out ongoing ideological and artistic problems in the American film industry.

Wells deserves credit for having taken on the question of the financial meltdown and the jobs disaster, but he takes it on—to a certain extent through no fault of his own—with certain unavoidable baggage, personally and as a representative of contemporary Hollywood.

It is impossible to engage the world fully and satisfactorily in art with certain kinds of inadequate ideas. It is necessary to be historically concrete on this issue. Every artist, in a strict sense, has “inadequate ideas” from the point of view of rigorous historical and social science—but the filmmaker or novelist is not a historian or a scientist, and sees and feels things differently. Certain things, however, must be gotten right—or the artist must be at least on the generally correct track—if the picture is to correspond significantly with reality and make a deep impression on the viewer or reader.

Wells’ view of American life is largely a left-liberal, journalistic one. He divides corporate executives into good and bad apples, and hopes the good ones will behave more conscientiously (hence the unconvincing coda to the film).

Genuine hostility to the corporate powers that be, such as one could elicit on almost every street corner in America, finds limited

expression in *The Company Men*. Many millions of people hate the banks and big companies, although they are not at all clear what must be done about the situation.

This film is still a pale reflection of the actual situation. And, worse, part of the genuine anger *The Company Men* does arouse is diverted into banalities about reconnecting “with what it is that makes our lives have value” (in Wells’ words). When Walker apologizes to his wife for letting her down, she replies, “You were never here before. And now you are.” Every cloud has a silver lining.

To treat a parallel problem, we have noted that the majority of the films dealing with the Iraq war have been “small-bore” works, limited to this and that detail, glancing blows for the most part. A film such as Kimberly Peirce’s *Stop-Loss* (2008), we argued, quite consciously pulled its punches to accommodate itself to official public opinion, with artistically detrimental results. Of course, here, too, the filmmaker is not primarily responsible for certain unfavorable conditions.

Michael Moore’s *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009) stopped far short of where it should have gone, for broadly the same reasons. *Up in the Air* (Jason Reitman, 2009) threatened to plunge into interesting territory, both in treating the victims of corporate wrecking operations and an alienating way of life, but settled for considerably less.

We are not suggesting that only “frontal attacks on the system” are needed. Indeed, such tendentious efforts can be pat and simplistic in their own way. Nonetheless, if one is handling red-hot metal, one must have the proper tools. The situation that has unfolded since September 2008 is volatile to the utmost degree and full of contradiction. Treating it on film demands considerable social insight and depth of feeling.

Wells, something of a Hollywood establishment figure (a prominent television producer and current president of the Writers Guild of America, West), has not extended himself nearly as far as our circumstances demand.



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