Hemingway and Gellhorn on HBO: A lost opportunity

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Directed by Philip Kaufman, written by Jerry Stahl and Barbara Turner

HBO's *Hemingway and Gellhorn* is best described as a lost opportunity. As novelist Ernest Hemingway (1899-1960) and journalist Martha Gellhorn (1909-1998), Clive Owen and Nicole Kidman, respectively, offer strong performances. The performers can even be inspired when they aren't burdened by a script that seems determined to include at least one "I'm an important writer/thinker" quote (drawn from biographies) in each of its scenes.

The central figures are certainly intriguing. Born and raised in Oak Park, Illinois (suburban Chicago), to a respectable, middle class family, Hemingway came to prominence as a writer in the mid-1920s as part of the so-called "Lost Generation," which considered itself disillusioned and damaged by the experience of World War I.

His important early works include the 1925 short story collection *In Our Time* and two novels dealing with the First World War (during which he was wounded while serving as an ambulance driver with Italian forces) or its aftermath: *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). His experience covering the Spanish Civil War resulted in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), perhaps his most enduring work. Hemingway's post-World War II writings are of an uneven character at best. Increasingly beset by illnesses (physical and mental), as well as the consequences of several unsuccessful marriages and the stifling atmosphere of Cold War America, Hemingway committed suicide in 1961. (See "Fifty years since the death of Ernest Heningway".)

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Martha Gellhorn was also raised in an upper-middle class family. Novelist, essayist and journalist, Gellhorn covered many of the major conflicts of the 20th century, including the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the Vietnam War and the Six-Day War in the Middle East. Gellhorn was one of the first journalists to report from the Dachau concentration camp after its liberation. A collection of her war reporting, *The Face of War*, appeared in 1959.

The title characters' active participation in the great historical conflicts that spanned their relationship—the Spanish Civil War, the Second Sino-Japanese War and World War II—might have provided the occasion for an enlightened, critical view of history rarely found in contemporary American film and television. However, the decision to limit the television production to two and a half hours, as well as the limited outlook of the filmmakers, undermines this opportunity in various ways.

In Philip Kaufman's HBO drama, narrator Gellhorn (Kidman), speaking 30 years after Hemingway's death, recounts her first meeting with the writer (Owen) in Key West, Florida, in 1936. While Hemingway's interest seems purely sexual at first, Gellhorn talks with him about writing, but expresses no physical attraction to an older, married man.

Their relationship turns serious when they are reunited during the Spanish Civil War—she as a war correspondent for *Collier's* magazine, and he as a documentary filmmaker along with the American writer John Dos Passos (David Strathairn) and left-wing Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens, played by Lars Ulrich. (Hemingway and Ivens showed the resulting film, *The Spanish Earth*, to the Roosevelts in the White House). Amidst the fierce battles between the Republican loyalists and Franco's fascist forces and the Stalinist betrayal of the Spanish revolution, Hemingway becomes Gellhorn's mentor and discovers that she is a fearless woman and writer, and Gellhorn sees in him a serious, compassionate side.

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) began when a revolt by fascist army officers was confronted with an armed uprising by the Spanish working class. While the Western powers maintained official "neutrality," fascist Germany and Italy intervened on the side of Gen. Francisco Franco's forces. The revolutionary strivings of the Spanish working class were suppressed by the Spanish Communist Party, funded and armed by the Stalin regime in the USSR, which was fiercely opposed to a social revolution, in combination with the Spanish social democrats, the anarchist Confederation National de Trabajo (CNT) and the centrists of the Workers Party of Marxist Unification (POUM). This betrayal opened the door to a fascist victory and the 39-year rule of the dictator Franco.

For the most part, Hemingway accepted the politics and discipline of the Communist Party (both he and Martha Gellhorn were fellow travelers), although he would eventually see through its Stalinist propaganda, a fact which is at least hinted at in *Hemingway and Gellhorn.*

In the HBO production, following Franco's victory, the Hemingway-Gellhorn relationship turns sour, even before their marriage (he divorces his second wife). Jealous of Martha's growing reputation as a writer—the critical and popular success of

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his novel about Spain, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, fails to temper his mood—Hemingway drinks heavily and physically abuses his new wife.

Gellhorn's reputation (and his jealousy) increases following her assignment to cover the Sino-Japanese War. After they return to their new home in Havana, Cuba, and Hemingway learns he has been placed on a FBI list of possible Communists and sympathizers he soon becomes enthusiastic about the Second World War.

Gellhorn finally leaves and divorces Hemingway after completing her assignment in Europe and finding him with his eventual fourth wife, Mary Walsh (Parker Posey). Hemingway spends the rest of his life with Walsh vainly trying to rediscover the writer he once was while suffering from severe depression, along with many health problems. The general discouragement produced by the Cold War played no small role in his unhappy end.

Owen and Kidman do a credible job of defining their respective characters. Owen's Hemingway presents himself as the "man among men" cynical realist that biographers have portrayed. Kidman's Martha Gellhorn, on the other hand, is more passionately idealistic about the world and more sophisticated politically.

Each actor has inspired moments working from a relatively predictable and unimaginative script. Owen relies (wisely) almost solely on facial expressions to make palpable Hemingway's indignation at a Soviet journalist's false claim that famed photographer Robert Capa (Santiago Cabrera) is in fact a spy for the fascist forces.

Kidman's better moments occur later in the movie when her character takes more control over her own life. But here again, instead of the script, it is Kidman's facial expressions and her sense of timing more than the script that convey the emotional price she is paying for their continuing relationship.

The dialogue between the title characters is largely unconvincing. In nearly every scene between the two, Hemingway delivers a knowing, fatherly aphorism, e.g., "The best way to know if you can trust somebody is to trust them," or about writing, he advises her to "Get in the ring, Gellhorn. Start throwin' punches. See what you believe in."

Good advice perhaps for any writer, but aphorizing in place of honest, give-and-take conversation quickly becomes stale and unrealistic. A point underscored by the fact that as Gellhorn, Kidman has little to play off in these scenes. Furthermore, all of these words of wisdom can be found in the various Hemingway biographies, especially the latest, Kenneth S. Lynn's *Hemingway*. Such scriptwriting is little more than cut-and-paste, a poor substitute for the dialogue one would expect from two highly literate people falling in love amidst a revolution.

Hemingway and Gellhorn largely misses the opportunity to educate an audience ill-informed about the Spanish Civil War, the Second Sino-Japanese War and the effect of post-World War II, America's official anti-communism on Hemingway's career and mental health. The aforementioned incident involving the Stalinist journalist's false accusation hardly helps unravel the complexities of the Spanish Civil War, much less identify the driving forces behind Stalin's betrayal of the Spanish working class. The American Abraham Lincoln Brigade, composed of Communist Party members and supporters, is mentioned only in passing.

Hemingway and Gellhorn meet with Chang Kai-shek and Zhou Enlai (separately), but their roles in the Sino-Japanese War are reduced to identifying the former as the bad guys and the latter as "a charismatic leader."

The main characters' participation in the Spanish Civil War is graphically presented by a process of embedding them in archival footage. In the online *Hemingway and Gellhorn* commentaries, supervisor of visual effects Chris Morley explains the use of a "green screen" set to achieve this effect, i.e., scenes were shot with the actors performing against a flat green screen and then embedded within the original footage.

Seamlessly done, this technique is at first intriguing and emotionally compelling. However, the technique is overused to the point of creating a feeling of artificiality and frugality in place of the more expensive use of extras and additional sets (the film was produced for the relatively low sum of $19 million).

Overall, *Hemingway and Gellhorn* suffers from an inability or unwillingness to think through its complex subject matter seriously. The filmmakers bear a certain responsibility. Their past efforts include director Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Right Stuff*, co-screenwriter Jerry Stahl's television series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and his partner Barbara Turner's *The Company* and *Pollock*. None of these projects evince a strong interest in exploring the role of historical forces in shaping their characters' lives.

Such an effort in this case, however, even if the filmmakers had been willing or able to attempt it, would probably have required a mini-series, instead of a 154-minute movie, and a commensurate budget. HBO's seven-part *John Adams* (2008) was proof that given the appropriate support, serious filmmakers could make remarkable works about social upheavals and their effects on people. Apparently, HBO has found such works to be unprofitable, or at least not profitable enough. More's the pity; *Hemingway and Gellhorn* might have been special.

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