

The Front Runner: An American political scandal

And Widows, Bohemian Rhapsody

Joanne Laurier
6 December 2018

The Front Runner

Jason Reitman's *The Front Runner* chronicles the downfall of Gary Hart, the leading contender for the 1988 Democratic Party presidential nomination whose campaign was abruptly brought to an end by a sex scandal.

The film is adapted from the 2014 non-fiction book *All the Truth Is Out: The Week Politics Went Tabloid* by Matt Bai, who co-wrote the screenplay with Reitman and Jay Carson.

Reitman, born in Montreal in 1977 and the son of filmmaker Ivan Reitman, is the director of *Thank You for Smoking* (2005), *Juno* (2007), *Up in the Air* (2009) and *Tully* (2018).

His new film opens with a prologue set in 1984. Gary Hart (Hugh Jackman), a US senator from Colorado, loses the Democratic nomination for president to former vice president Walter Mondale, who is subsequently defeated by Republican Ronald Reagan.

Shifting to 1987, the film takes place over a 21-day period. Hart, heavily favored in the polls, is preparing a bid for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 1988. Bill Dixon (J.K. Simmons) heads up a team of optimistic, dedicated campaign workers. Handsome and well-spoken, Hart seems a sure bet.

However, just as his campaign hits its stride, the US media, with the *Miami Herald* in the lead, touches off a firestorm with salacious stories about an alleged affair between the candidate and an unnamed woman, later identified as Donna Rice (Sara Paxton) from Florida, an aspiring model and pharmaceutical saleswoman. The exposure of his encounter with Rice on a Miami-based yacht, *Monkey Business*, that led to a liaison in Washington, D.C., torpedoed his campaign.

Jackman does well in *The Front Runner*, a decently executed, straightforward account of the scandal and a partial indictment of the American media. Alfred Molina

plays Ben Bradlee, executive editor of the *Washington Post*, at first reticent about covering the story, but who falls into line with the rest of the media hyenas.

Reitman has certain things right. The Hart affair helped inaugurate an era in which sex scandals have become a central mechanism in shaping the American political landscape. The film implies this was a significant moment in the right-wing evolution of the political establishment and the degeneration of the media. A decade later, Bill Clinton was impeached and nearly removed from office in a further escalation of the use of such episodes.

However, Reitman's understanding is extremely limited and his political outlook highly skewed. In an interview, the director asserted that the questions raised in the film "have gone by the wayside, because we have a president [Trump] who is completely indecent. So if you try to track that back to a starting point, here is this lovely test case," i.e., the Hart scandal.

Reitman went on, describing Hart as, in many ways, "a great candidate, really smart, really charismatic, [someone who] had great ideas. In 1987, he was saying America was addicted to oil, we're going to encounter Islamic extremist terrorism, understood everything that was coming down the road. But also he was a flawed human being."

The filmmaker says perhaps more than he wants to about this "great candidate." He, like his movie, idealizes the conventional, bourgeois politician Hart. The latter was George McGovern's campaign manager in 1972 during the South Dakota senator's unsuccessful election campaign against Richard Nixon. The McGovern phenomenon, as the WSWWS has explained, was a means of reorienting "the Democratic Party away from its former working class base of support and a professed concern for economic equality, and towards more privileged layers of the middle class that aspired to rise within capitalist society based on the politics of racial and sexual identity."

About Hart himself, the *Bulletin*, a forerunner of the

WSWS, wrote in an editorial in May 1987 that he “was a creation of the media, which in 1983-84 declared the ex-McGovern campaign director and Colorado Senator to be the spokesman for ‘new ideas’ and the rising middle class within the Democratic Party.”

In 1987, the “womanizing” issue was cynically used to tear down the candidate and turn politics further to the right, the same way the Hart “boom” was used in 1984 against Mondale, who was perceived by major sections of big business as a liberal too closely identified with the trade union bureaucracy.

Hart has gone on to show his political colors and his special concern with “Islamic extremist terrorism,” co-chairing the Hart-Rudman Task Force on Homeland Security (charged by Clinton’s Secretary of Defense William Cohen in 1998 with providing “a comprehensive review of US national security requirements in the 21st century”) and serving on the Homeland Security Advisory Council under Barack Obama, two thoroughly anti-democratic and repressive undertakings.

It should be noted that Lee Atwater, a political operative in the employ of the late George H.W. Bush during the 1988 election cycle, is rumored to have helped engineer the destruction of the Hart campaign. Furthermore, Reitman, who paints Rice in glowing terms in the movie, ignores the fact that she had connections with international arms merchant and Iran-contras conspirator Adnan Khashoggi (the uncle of Jamal Khashoggi, the journalist recently murdered by the Saudi regime).

The remarkably swift and efficient manner in which Hart’s campaign blew up indicated how little support he had in a population that did not rouse itself to come to his defense.

Reitman does little justice to these more complex issues. The film is a largely missed opportunity to explore what has become of American political life in the past 30 years.

Widows

Widows, the latest film by British director Steve McQueen (*Hunger*, *Shame* and *12 Years a Slave*), is a very poor work. Starring Viola Davis, Liam Neeson and Colin Farrell, the badly constructed heist movie set in Chicago promotes the notion that women, under the tutelage of a black leader, are better able to carry out a multimillion-dollar robbery than their male counterparts. (“The best thing we have going for us is being who we are. . .because no one thinks we have the balls to pull this off.”)

While their hoodlum husbands, led by Neeson, all get themselves killed, or so it seems, Davis and her team not only succeed, but bloodily vanquish evil politicians and local gangsters, and live happily ever after, despite a few corpses. McQueen unintentionally adds a nice touch by making the Davis character a Chicago teachers’ union delegate, no doubt unaware of, or not caring about, the very real connection between criminality and the union bureaucracy!

McQueen co-wrote the movie with Gillian Flynn, based upon the 1983 ITV series of the same name. To be avoided.

Bohemian Rhapsody

Bohemian Rhapsody, a biographical film about the British rock band Queen and its lead singer Freddie Mercury, is directed by Bryan Singer and written by Anthony McCarten.

Rami Malek (*Mr. Robot*) ably and aptly brings Mercury to life, supernumerary incisors and all. Born Farrokh Bulsara of Indian-British and Parsi descent, Mercury wrote some of the band’s most notable hits, including “Bohemian Rhapsody,” “Killer Queen,” “Somebody to Love,” “Don’t Stop Me Now,” “Crazy Little Thing Called Love” and “We Are the Champions.”

The movie is essentially an extended music video, culminating in the band’s rousing performance at the “Live Aid” Concert in 1985, with some biographical details about Mercury, who died of AIDS in 1991.

Singer David Bowie, who performed at the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert and recorded the song “Under Pressure” with Queen, praised Mercury’s performance style, saying: “Of all the more theatrical rock performers, Freddie took it further than the rest...he took it over the edge. And of course, I always admired a man who wears tights. I only saw him in concert once and as they say, he was definitely a man who could hold an audience in the palm of his hand.” Echoing these sentiments, Queen guitarist Brian May wrote that Mercury could make “the last person at the back of the furthest stand in a stadium feel that he was connected.”

For better or worse, *Bohemian Rhapsody* is the highest-grossing musical biographical film of all time.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact