

Arts & Entertainment

Wag the Dog full of biting satire

Hollywood has a pretty impressive record when it comes to self-deprecation. In fact, some of the best films to come out of the film Mecca have been about what a shallow place it really is and how suspect the industry that calls it home can really be.

The Player, *The Big Picture* and *Swimming With Sharks* are but a few examples.

And *Wag the Dog*, a biting new satire from director Barry Levinson, is certainly no exception.

But not content with just belittling the film industry, *Wag the Dog* is also a cynical take on politics.

In essence it's two satires in one with enough humour and provocative themes to keep audiences laughing and thinking well beyond the film's 90-minute frame.

Robert De Niro stars as Conrad Brean, a political strategist brought in by the White House administration to help smooth over a potentially fatal sexual misconduct scandal 11 days before an election.

Brean, an expert in such matters, orchestrates a mock war that will not only boost the president's popularity but more importantly take the media focus off the sex scandal.

He enlists the help of powerful



Screen Scene

Stuart Green

but insecure Hollywood producer and friend of the president Stanley Motss (Dustin Hoffman) to "produce" a war and the accompanying media campaign. Comparing the event to a pageant, they even come up with a theme song.

Part of what makes the whole thing so ludicrous is the opponent they choose, Albania, and the logic they use to justify that choice.

"They're shift," Motss observes.

It's a fascinating process that's engulfed in a veil of hush-hush drama with all the participants being sworn to secrecy or pay the ultimate price.

They create news footage of a young girl running from terrorists, invent scenarios, and eventually, when a rival presidential candidate begins to suspect something's up, deliver a hero (actually a demented jailbird played by Woody Harrelson).

Based on the novel *American Hero*, *Wag the Dog* is written for the screen by Hilary Henkin and David Mamet, who explore the book's themes with a wickedly

wry wit. And as delivered with deliciously sardonic glee by De Niro and Hoffman, the dialogue leaps off the screen.

Adding to the overall impact is the twist ending that makes perhaps the ultimate statement about arrogance in Hollywood.

Wag the Dog is one of the best films about Hollywood to come out of Hollywood in a very, very long time.

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