

Review : Company Men

✘ by John Kennedy

Company Men (2010) Drama USA Cert 15.


Given that the essential conceit of this film is for an audience to empathise with a cohort of successful, but expendable US corporate executives destined for summary redundancy (or should that be the cynical euphemism, 'downsizing?'), may be stretching altruistic licence to excess.

But it is the gravitas and humanity of an outstanding ensemble cast that brings dignity and credible pathos to an unfolding narrative of isolation, compromised loyalties, denial, marital tension and impending bankruptcy. It is no more than they deserve many might feel though they are hardly the pariah bankers we have come to demonise.

Indeed, it is the frenzy to realise short term shareholder profits and rising Dow Jones stock points, that has seen the Company neglect actually making real things (ships) that make a profit. The moneymen rule. The principal narrative focus is on Bobby Walker (Ben Affleck) whose bewildered sense of injustice initially blinds him to the financial realities he and his loyal, pragmatic wife, Maggie (Rosemarie DeWitt) need to face up to rapidly. His frustrating struggle to find work leads only to escalating humiliation. Eventually, he is resigned to being his brother-in-law, Jack's (Kevin Costner) building labourer.

Both Tommy Lee Jones as Gene McClary, and an incandescent performance by Chris Cooper as the dehumanised, fragmenting Phil Woodward, are poignant and humbling. The film is observational and avoids pat moralisation or invasive symbolism.

Writer, director, John Wells, shrewdly allows brevity be the narrative catalyst. One visual metaphor, however, speaks volumes as of when Lee Jones, awaiting his inevitable fate, window gazes across the company car park as leaden-shouldered ex-employees each carry the ubiquitous tidy-box of work-desk cleared possessions. There is an up-beat ending that some may find possibly feel-good contrived, but it is the enduring message of the American 'can do' ethos that prevails and no one can deny that it is any less than the characters deserve.

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