

DVD Review: Rachel Weisz Delivers Oscar-Caliber Work in 'The Whistleblower'

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CHICAGO – I have a sneaking suspicion that if The Weinstein Company had acquired this film and released it during the 2011 awards season, Rachel Weisz would currently be an Oscar nominee. After playing an assortment of vulnerable, photogenic damsels throughout her career, Weisz delivers her most potent and compelling work to date in Larysa Kondracki's fact-based thriller.

Though the actress has won an Oscar before, it was for her rather thankless role in Fernando Meirelles's downbeat drama, "The Constant Gardener." "The Whistleblower" functions as a smart follow-up to Alejandro Amenábar's equally overlooked 2009 gem, "Agora," in which Weisz played another strong-willed rebel who risked everything in pursuit of the truth. Both Hypatia in "Agora" and Kathryn Bolkovac in "The Whistleblower" are empowering figures with unsettling life stories that hit all too close to home.



DVD Rating: **3.5/5.0**

Despite some narrative contrivances and a manipulative third-act twist, Kondracki's film is a vital and wrenching portrait of an outraged woman's attempt at shedding light on unmitigated corruption. Bolkovac was a Nebraska police investigator when she was transported entirely out of her comfort zone by landing a gig as a monitor for the U.N. International Police Force stationed in post-war Bosnia. The script by Kondracki and Ellis Kirwan condenses the sprawling plot to such a degree that viewers could easily confuse the identities of various vaguely sinister male characters. Many of them display the chauvinistic leer of the miners in "North Country," and as Bolkovac starts to uncover the details of a sex trafficking ring, she discovers that her supposed allies may very well be her enemies. It isn't until the film's 25-minute mark that "Whistleblower" settles into its suspenseful rhythm, and there are a few sequences of near-excruciating tension.



Rachel Weisz as Kathy Bolkovac in Larysa Kondracki's *The Whistleblower*.

Photo credit: Andrei Alexandru, Samuel Goldwyn Films

One intriguing element in the picture is the subtle parallel that can be drawn between Bolkovac and Raya (Roxana Condurache), one of the girls who becomes entrapped in the trafficking ring. It's the restlessness these women feel in their daily lives that leads them to look for an escape route, but what they end up finding is grave danger. The abuse Raya suffers at the hands of her captors is very tough to take, but Kondracki is careful to never exploit the material. Considering the grisliness of its subject matter, the film could've been even more difficult to watch, but as it stands, it makes "The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo" look like "Murder She Wrote." Intimidation and fear are the primary weapons used against these young prisoners, and the scene when Raya refuses to leave with Bolkovac, thus dooming her fate, is absolutely heartbreaking.



The Whistleblower was released on Blu-ray and DVD on Jan. 24, 2012.

Photo credit: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment

Weisz is so good here that she completely disappears into the character without altering her recognizably radiant features. Though she looks nothing like the actual Bolkovac, she channels the real-life heroine's rugged strength and tireless determination to never compromise her morality. Liam Cunningham, Monica Bellucci and William Hope are icily effective in their roles as authority figures who see Bolkovac's muckraking as little more than a threat to their credibility. Hope (perhaps best known for his role in "Aliens") is especially good at conveying great menace without ever having to raise his benign voice.

The final act is designed to make the audience's blood pressure rise through the roof. "Democra," the private contractor that hires Bolkovac, is the script's fictionalized name for DynCorp. Since the contractor's personnel are granted immunity in Bosnia, they can't be prosecuted—even if they're crucial participants in the sex trafficking scandal. A title card in the film's epilogue states that many officers were forced to resign in light of Bolkovac's allegations, though none have received criminal charges. It's clear that the "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown" mentality taken by these officers is embodied by many Americans overseas who commit horrendous crimes during times of war. Yes, war is hell, but that fact will never excuse the exploitation, enslavement and slaughter of innocent lives.

"The Whistleblower" is presented in its 2.35:1 aspect ratio, accompanied by English and Spanish subtitles, and includes a disappointingly glib featurette that provides no indication of the dramatic license taken by the filmmakers in adapting the story. Madeleine Rees, the former UN human rights lawyer played by Vanessa Redgrave in the film, testifies to the film's accuracy, while Bolkovac says that she entered Bosnia as a "naïve Midwestern cop wanting to bring justice to a lawless world" and ended up finding lawlessness in her own ranks. For a detailed exploration of the real story, viewers are advised to check out Bolkovac's book of the same name.

'The Whistleblower' is released by Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment and stars Rachel Weisz, Roxana Condurache, Nikolaj Lie Kaas, Vanessa Redgrave, Monica Bellucci, David Strathairn, Jeanette Hain, Anna Anissimova and William Hope. It was written by Larysa Kondracki and Eilis Kirwan and directed by Larysa Kondracki. It was released on Jan. 24, 2012. It is rated R.



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