

TV Review: Stunning Performances Drive HBO's Fantastic 'Game Change'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 10, 2012 - 2:06pm

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CHICAGO – You may be surprised by the angle taken by HBO's controversial "Game Change," a film already being summarily dismissed by conservative pundits who probably haven't even seen the piece and merely assume that it's another liberal Hollywood hatchet job. It's not that at all. Yes, it does not make Sarah Palin nor the staff behind John McCain's failed Presidential campaign look all that smart but it does break down some key failures of what happened on the Republican side of the ticket in 2008 in ways that take these people from "SNL" parodies to real people. It humanizes the people behind the sound bites and does so with three of the best performances on television in the last few years. It's fantastic in so many ways.



TV Rating: **4.5/5.0**

The team behind the excellent "Recount" (director Jay Roach and writer Danny Strong) try to offer some insight into what happened with the McCain/Palin ticket in 2008, telling their story primarily through the perspective of strategist Steve Schmidt (an amazing Woody Harrelson), a man brought on to the campaign just as Barack Obama was building up a lead that seemed incapable of being surmounted. How could John McCain (Ed Harris) and his team respond? They knew that they needed to make waves and the imminent decision on who to pick as the Vice Presidential candidate could be that game-changing event. Names like Mitt Romney, Tim Pawlenty, and even Joe Lieberman were tossed around but it wouldn't be enough. After watching a YouTube clip online, a call was made to Alaska Governor Sarah Palin (Julianne Moore) and the rest was election history.



Game Change

Photo credit: HBO

With little time left in the campaign, the staff who chose Palin cut some gigantic corners, including a vetting process that typically takes weeks being cut down to five days. In an amazing scene that one could argue changed the entire election, Schmidt and speechwriter Mark Salter (Jamey Sheridan) interview Palin before making the recommendation to McCain official. It's not what they say but what they overlook that's remarkable. It's almost as if they're trying to groom her immediately — telling her that she'll have to go along with McCain on key issues like evolution and abortion rights even if she doesn't agree with them — but failing to ask about what Palin thought on serious issues of the day. One wonders if Schmidt and Salter had just asked Palin one question about the economy or foreign policy if anyone would have ever heard her name out of Alaska.



Game Change
Photo credit: HBO

What is clear from "Game Change" (and I think even Conservatives would have to agree with this) is that Palin wasn't ready for what she faced in the glare of the public eye. And the team behind her, as much as they tried to teach and shape her with notecards and foreign policy lessons, never really understood what worked about Palin until it was too late. In many ways, the genius of Strong's script is in how it makes one feel sorry for Palin, something greatly enhanced by the humanity brought to her by one of our best living actresses, a SLAM DUNK for an Emmy for her work here. Especially in these early-in-the-campaign scenes, Moore is devastating as one can see the deep sadness in Palin's eyes at her inability to deliver in the ways she wanted to for her party. Watching Palin become what resembles a hollow shell as pundits and "Saturday Night Live" continued to drag her down or tabloids continued to question her family life gets pretty depressing. And, while it's hard to blame the people around her who were baffled at a major office candidate who seemed to have a sixth-grade understanding of what was going on in the world ("*she didn't know why North and South Korea were separate*"), they really had no one to blame but themselves. They never asked the right questions, trying to make a candidate instead of finding one.

By the time the campaign figured out how to use Palin — push her out there completely as she was and let her charisma make up for her lack of knowledge — it was too late. And, in one of Strong's most daring suppositions, Sarah Palin felt burned by the people around her and stopped listening to them. She felt unprepared for the infamous Katie Couric interview and unsupported by Schmidt. So, when the public started to fall in love with Palin, she RAN with it. And she couldn't be reined in or controlled, even going as far as pushing the McCain campaign to go negative (which was a truly horrible decision as it rallied the opposition) to wanting to give a concession speech, which a Vice Presidential candidate never does. This scene is simply one of my favorites in TV history as Harrelson's Schmidt has to remind Palin that the night's not about her.



Game Change
Photo credit: HBO

In this scene and every other one he's in, Woody Harrelson is absolutely amazing in "Game Change." Moore and Harris have gotten press by virtue of their playing recognizable people but it's Harrelson who owns "Game Change." It's one of his best performances. Don't get me wrong. As I mentioned, Moore is incredible, finding the humanity beneath the caricature, and Harris simply never hits a false note, finding an important gravity in his embodiment of a man who really did just want to serve his country but couldn't figure out how to get there.

If there's a logical complaint to be levied at "Game Change" it's that it tries to cram quite a bit into one two-hour film. We get glimpses of so many major events in the McCain/Palin campaign that there is the sense that a bit too much of the main action of the piece is, by necessity of time, surface level. The second act of "Game Change" sometimes approaches a greatest hits routine as one knows we're go to eventually get to the Charlie Gibson interview, the Couric one, the debate, etc. I vastly preferred the smaller moments to the recreations of the bigger ones and think that this could have been an amazing short mini-series if everyone involved could have been given the time to do it.

Ultimately, the thinness of the script is easily overlooked thanks to the incredible performances. This may go without saying but if "Game Change" was being released in theaters this weekend instead of on HBO, it would be the best movie of the year so far. Some won't see past the politics of the piece and I get that, especially in such hot-button times as we're in now. But "Game Change" is remarkable enough to transcend politics and take this incredible story back to what it always was in the first place — a human one.

"Game Change" stars Woody Harrelson, Julianne Moore, Ed Harris, Sarah Paulson, Jamey Sheridan, Ron Livingston, Peter MacNicol, and Bruce Altman. It was written by Danny Strong and directed by Jay Roach. It premieres on HBO on Saturday, March 10th, 2012 at 8pm CST and repeats consistently throughout the month.



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