

Blu-ray Review: HBO's 'Game Change' Triumphs with Brilliant Performances

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CHICAGO – When the HBO film, “Game Change,” was first announced, it sounded rather unnecessary. Why would Alaska governor-turned-vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin’s overinflated celebrity deserve such a prestigious biopic? Wasn’t her TLC program, not to mention Tina Fey’s brilliant SNL parody, more than enough small-screen exposure for the oft-embarrassing politician?

Yet this film, superbly directed by Jay Roach, is less about Palin then it is about the superficial posturing that has taken over America’s political landscape. Mark Halperin and John Heilemann’s bestselling book of the same name explored how celebrity triumphed over substance during the 2008 election season, as Republicans scrambled to equal the game-changing candidacy of Barack Obama. Screenwriter Danny Strong centers his film on Steve Schmidt, the campaign strategist who backed Palin and lived to regret it.



Blu-ray Rating: **4.5/5.0**

As played by Woody Harrelson, an actor who just gets better with every successive year, Schmidt is a fascinating character. He deeply cares about the candidacy of John McCain (impeccably channeled by Ed Harris), and doesn’t mince words when informing the old man that he doesn’t stand a chance unless he’s paired with a fresh face. Resisting caricature at every turn, Julianne Moore delivers a performance as empathetic as it is scathingly brilliant. She delves into Palin’s mounting insecurity as she finds herself quickly in over her head—faced with questions that she not only can’t answer but fails to understand. Her outrage at the media’s heartless invasion of her family’s privacy is completely relatable to any viewer regardless of their political persuasions. Yet as Palin becomes more and more empowered by her newfound authority, she undergoes an unsettling transformation. Suddenly, the issues she agreed to avoid are jettisoned to the forefront of her speeches. No method is too low and too offensive to stoke the fierce support of ignorant voters afraid that Obama is a “Muslim” and a “terrorist.” Harris nails the pained glimmers of alarm that washed over McCain’s face as he heard the racist comments of his supporters. Sarah Paulson, the magnificent character actress who brought such arresting humanity to “Martha Marcy May Marlene,” is equally wrenching as Nicolle Wallace, the senior advisor who struggles to maintain Palin’s concentration as it drifts further and further away from the campaign.



Game Change was released on Blu-ray and DVD on January 8th, 2013.

Photo credit: HBO Home Entertainment

It's a shame that Roach's theatrical releases, such as last year's silly misfire, "The Campaign," aren't nearly as biting satirical and richly provocative as his made-for-TV efforts. "Game Change" is every bit as riveting as Roach and Strong's previous HBO collaboration, 2008's "Recount," which memorably featured Laura Dern's alternately hilarious and chilling portrayal of Katherine Harris, a woman arguably as addicted to the limelight as Palin. The pacing of "Game Change" falters a bit in its final act, as it attempts to tackle a few too many plot points than its running time can adequately address. It's here where Harrelson's performance truly anchors the picture, and his impassioned monologue forbidding Palin to interrupt McCain's concession speech is a knockout. Yet the film's underlying messages cut far deeper than political boundaries. It's a relevant cautionary tale for anyone in politics who attempts to sway the public with a candidate bereft of depth but doubled over with ambition. As for voters, hopefully Roach's film will motivate them to do their homework during the next election season. Smiles and winks can certainly improve one's likability on the campaign trail, but they simply can't govern.

"Game Change" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, French and Spanish audio tracks and is available in a Blu-ray/DVD/digital copy combo pack. Moore and her fellow co-stars are sadly nowhere to be found on the disc's two brief featurettes, both previously available on HBO On Demand.

'Game Change' is released by HBO Home Entertainment and stars Woody Harrelson, Julianne Moore, Ed Harris, Peter MacNicol, Jamey Sheridan, Sarah Paulson and Ron Livingston. It was written by Danny Strong and directed by Jay Roach. It was released on January 8th, 2013. It is rated TV-MA.



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