

## Ben Affleck, Tommy Lee Jones Are ‘The Company Men’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on January 21, 2011 - 11:32am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Dealing with an overall economic downturn, as the world is still experiencing, becomes the story of the individual. The frustration and insecurity that develops in a long dry spell is poignantly rendered in writer/director John Well’s “The Company Men.” Ben Affleck joins Oscar winners Tommy Lee Jones, Chris Cooper and Kevin Costner in telling the story.

Wells prefers to frame his narrative through the characters, as they play different levels of one company, plagued with the backlash of a falling stock price, lost business and too many “human units” for the company to “support.” It’s time to downsize.

Ben Affleck is Bobby, a happy-go-lucky director of sales for a Boston shipping company. On a day when the news is ominous, the chirpy morning shows having to mournfully report on the potential economic collapse in America 2007, he is simply going to work. When he arrives, he is called on the carpet. His position has been eliminated.

Behind Bobby’s firing is the power base of the company, the founders Gene (Tommy Lee Jones) and CEO James (Craig T. Nelson). Gene is more pragmatic regarding the circumstance, a plain speaker who tells it like it is, which freaks out the CEO, who needs the financial press to think that all is well. The major purging of human capital is the chief factor in keeping the stock price steady, and the boardroom is willing to keep feeding the numeric illusion.

Meanwhile Bobby is thrust into a world that he has never experienced. Trying to keep the payments up on his McMansion and upper middle class lifestyle, with a meager severance and unemployment benefits, starts to wear on his personal life. His wife Maggie (Rosemarie DeWitt) is extremely supportive, but the breadwinner is distant from both her and their son as it becomes obvious that there jobs are not as plentiful as before. Bobby even haughtily rejects an offer to work construction for his brother-in-law Jack (Kevin Costner).





Kevin Costner (Jack) and Ben Affleck (Bobby) in ‘The Company Men’  
*Photo credit: Folger/The Weinstein Company*

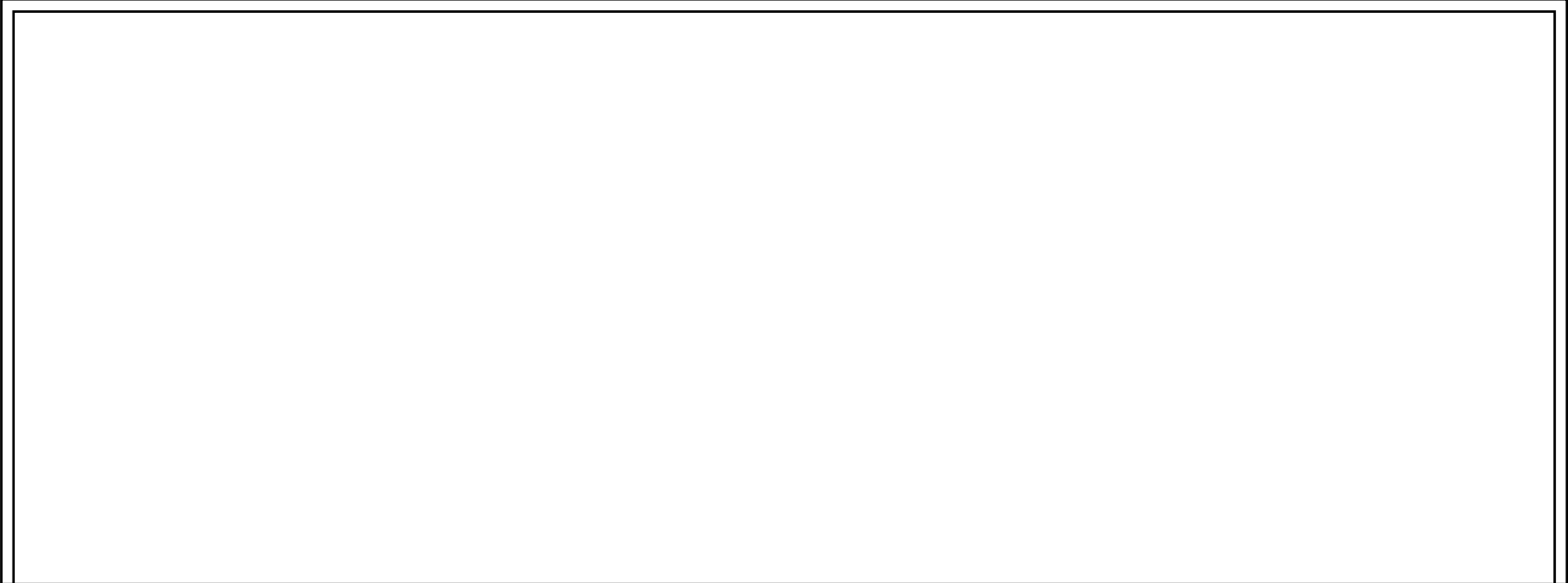
The company continue to purge. Sally (Maria Bello) is the cold hatchet woman, and the affair she is having with pragmatic Gene is turning into something deeper. The axe falls hard on one of the oldest and twitchiest employees, Phil (Chris Cooper), and his reaction has dangerous ramifications. The CEO is celebrating the uptick of the stock price by preparing a new, luxurious downtown headquarters. When Gene suggests that this might not be the right thing to do, his job suddenly becomes suspect. The company that had built in the American Dream for so many people has proved its ability to destroy it as well.

John Wells script is reminiscent of the best episodes he put together in the TV shows “ER” and “The West Wing.” It is a human story, highlighting the motivations and emotions of his various workers in transition. Despite all the callousness the company displays in chopping their payroll, the CEO is thinking of the overall survival, because the stock price is the real God. He doesn’t want to go down with the ship, so as captain he throws the others overboard. This is a stark reminder of the new American commerce, the victim of the rules we ourselves have made.

The heartbeat of the story is the performances, and all are strong. Ben Affleck, although he possibly could find work as a male model, shoulders the frustration well, as he goes through the five stages of death – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – which in their similarity mirrors chronic unemployment. Tommy Lee Jones, with his world weary demeanor, represents the folly of management indecision and is a victim for it. Only Chris Cooper, with the most difficult and melodramatic role, has a bit of difficulty. He turns up the volume on his aging character too much, and coldly allows no empathy.

Kevin Costner provided on the great surprises of the film. Eschewing his leading man chops, he opted for the supporting role of the blue collar Jack, relishing his practical realism as a blue collar small businessman. When Bobby finally does come into his workplace, his character never flags, making sure that the former sales director get a taste of the hard but satisfying work of building things.

Building things, that seems to be the point of the film. Wells seems to be asking what happened to the American notion of continuing to build things. It is the ingenuity and opportunity that Wells misses in the new America, the willingness to connect the society through the give-and-take of ideas into action (and subsequently, employment). He formulates a happy conclusion to this viewpoint, though somewhat fantasy-like. Frank Capra himself would have smiled as Affleck rolls up his sleeves in the end, asking his union negotiator to go “get him some workers.”







Chris Cooper (second right) Tries to Cope as Phil in 'The Company Men'  
Photo credit: Folger/The Weinstein Company

The ending is a wish, a hope, perhaps in a sense an act of charity. The structure of democracy ebbs and flows with its economy, the willingness of an individual worker to be satisfied with "enough" in his life, to give his being and energy to the cause of a collective engine known as the company.

And what does the company owe that individual in return? That question has become the determining factor just ten scant years into the dawning of a new millennium. What future are we willing to give ourselves?

*"The Company Men" opens everywhere January 21st. Featuring Ben Affleck, Tommy Lee Jones, Chris Cooper, Mario Bello, Craig T. Nelson, Rosemarie Dewitt and Kevin Costner. Written and directed by John Wells. Rated "R." [Click here](#) [15] for the HollywoodChicago.com interview of John Wells of The Company Men.*



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [17]  
Senior Staff Writer  
HollywoodChicago.com  
[pat@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com) [16]

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