

Ben Affleck Reaches Career Peak with Tense, Masterful 'Argo'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 12, 2012 - 9:57am

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Ben Affleck has reached the apex of his already impressive directorial career with the stunning “Argo,” a tight, tense machine of a film, a masterwork that delivers as comedy, action, drama, and more. Critics see movies all the time that we understand may produce a divided response. We get that many acclaimed films won’t make a dent with the populous. Every once in awhile, I see a film and just know that it will resonate with every demographic around the country. “Argo” is one of those films. To be blunt, I’d be stunned if you didn’t at least like it and I expect most of you will love it.

Affleck brilliantly sets the stage by opening with the assault on the U.S. Embassy in Iran using archival footage and disturbing recreations of the protesters storming the building (and it’s impossible not to think of recent similar activity in the Middle East) as six Americans snuck out the back door – Bob Anders (Tate Donovan), Cora Lijek (Clea DuVall), Joe Stafford (Scoot McNairy), Lee Schatz (Rory Cochrane), Mark Lijek (Christopher Denham), and Kathy Stafford (Kerry Bishé). They made it to the home of the Canadian Ambassador (Victor Garber) and were forced to hide out as the Iranian hostage crisis continued. As concerns grew that the terrorists would discover that there were missing Americans from their hostage plan, the C.I.A. clicked into gear and began to plan ways to extract the six. They needed a story and Tony Mendez (Ben Affleck) & Jack O’Donnell (Bryan Cranston) devised a brilliant one.



Argo

Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

Working with Hollywood producers John Chambers (John Goodman) and Lester Siegel (Alan Arkin), Mendez created an entirely fictional feature film production with the name of "Argo." They dug a sci-fi script out of a pile of turnaround junk in Siegel's office and created an entire history and planned future around it. The plan would be to convince the Iranians that the six men and women being led out of their country were merely location scouts for "Argo." Every detail needed to be precise. If they called someone in L.A. to check up on the story, someone needed to answer the phone. And all six men and women needed to have precise, unwavering false identities.

As the recently declassified plan within the film had no room for error, neither did Ben Affleck's retelling of it. This could have been such a tonal disaster if one considers how wildly the story veers from Hollywood production meetings to CIA offices to an embassy in Iran. Like the directors that so clearly inspired Affleck (William Friedkin, Sidney Lumet, among others) so often did with true stories turned into captivating entertainment, the actor/director has made such a fine-tuned, well-oiled machine of a film. It just hums as Affleck and editor William Goldenberg ("Heat," "The Insider") have paced their storytelling with such finesse that even the most disparate elements of the film seem of a whole. Working with an insanely talented crew that also includes cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto ("Babel," "Brokeback Mountain"), Affleck has made a film that features multiple locations, dozens of speaking roles, and the kind of tonal shifting that veterans routinely screw up and he's not only dodged the many potential pitfalls but made a modern classic by doing so.



Argo

Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

The technical elements are perfectly executed (and Alexandre Desplat's score is also one of the best of the year), but people will remember "Argo" for the faces, starting with the solemn, driven stare of a very subdued Affleck as a man who is purposefully nondescript (as CIA Exfiltration experts would need to be). With most of his tabloid-friendly face covered with bushy facial hair and with his purposefully quiet tone, Affleck's performance is what's most likely to be underrated about this already beloved film. It's the equivalent of Tom Hanks in "Apollo 13," a strong leader without a showy scene to put in Oscar clip packages.

The rest of his cast gets to chew much more scenery, particularly Goodman and Arkin, who look they haven't had this much fun in years. As the plan is reaching fruition, both actors perfectly capture their character's understanding and appreciation of the role they had to play. And they're both hilarious. Bryan Cranston does the best film work of his career (Affleck has a way of capturing what works about AMC leading men that other directors seem to miss as this follows Jon Hamm's best film work in "The Town"). And the film is peppered with spectacular character actors, sometimes in just a scene or two, like Kyle Chandler, Chris Messina, Titus Welliver, Zeljko Ivanek, Richard Kind, and Michael Parks. And his casting of the six men and women at the heart of this international crisis couldn't have been more precisely correct. Scoot McNairy is particularly memorable as the one who seems most concerned that this ridiculous fake movie is only going to get them killed.

From Prieto's cinematography to Cranston's performance to Desplat's score and so on and so on. "Argo" is one of those rare films where every piece is in place and could be singled out for praise. Well, that's not strong enough. They're not just in place. They're above average. Under Affleck's direction, these are men and women working together to create a stunning film experience that will produce full laughs, bitten nails, and even tears. It stands above everything else released so far this year.

"Argo" stars Ben Affleck, Bryan Cranston, John Goodman, Alan Arkin, Tate Donovan, Scoot McNairy, Rory Cochrane, Christopher Denham, Kerry Bishe, Clea DuVall, and Chris Messina. It was written by Chris Terrio and directed by Ben Affleck. It opens on October 12, 2012.



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