

‘The Post’ Illuminates the Skills of Meryl Streep

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on January 4, 2018 - 11:45am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – For all the films Meryl Streep is privileged to make – which is remarkable considering the industry’s attitude toward older actresses – she has even admitted that the audience may be tired of seeing her. But as publisher Katherine Graham in ‘The Post’, she nails yet another great performance.

Katherine Graham was the owner/publisher of the Washington Post newspaper, taking the reins in 1963 after the previous owner, her husband Phillip, committed suicide. She stayed in that position until 1979, and oversaw the paper’s evolution into an investigative exposé of truth, including the infamous Watergate report series which took down President Richard M. Nixon. “The Post” focuses on a story that came right before Watergate, the publishing of the “Pentagon Papers.” These “Papers” were essentially a classified history of the Vietnam War, put together by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, revealing the mistakes and folly of the U.S. government for their involvement in that war... and caused a sensation when they were published. The film – directed by Steven Spielberg – is an absorbing step-by-step process behind the publishing of those Papers, and Graham’s involvement in the decisions she had to make to approve publication, which in turn took on Nixon (again) and the U.S. Government.

In 1970, President Nixon was still mired in the Vietnam War, which was being rejected by the U.S. citizens. Daniel Ellsberg (Matthew Rhys), an employee of the defense industry RAND corporation, decided to take matters into his own hands by copying the classified “Pentagon Papers,” and sending them to the New York Times, who began publishing them in June of 1971.



Meryl Streep as Katherine Graham in 'The Post'

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

The Nixon Administration got a court order to stop publication, and the Times had to kill the story. At the same time, The Washington Post and editor Ben Bradlee (Tom Hanks) received their copies of the same classified material, and publishing them would defy the court order. The owner of The Post, Katherine Graham (Meryl Streep), must ultimately make that difficult decision.

What sounds like a “how I got the story” procedural actually has nail-biting implications, as structured by Steven Spielberg. The Washington Post at the time was on the verge of going to the public stock exchange, and the moneymen behind this were hectoring Graham not to rock the boat (Nixon was famous for using government agencies against his enemies). It also parallels journalism today, where money and control of information is crucial to certain oligarchs (like defense and energy industries), and ruthlessly they desire the suppression of anything that will turn off the money and power spigot.

When I first saw the trailer, it seemed like the film was like a parody. Meryl Streep! Tom Hanks! Portraying vague and important people! To director Spielberg’s credit, he puts the accelerator down on the story, and let the performers do their thing. Hanks as Washington Post Editor-in-Chief Ben Bradlee – who had previously been portrayed by Jason Robards in “All the President’s Men” – was a bit square pegged in a round hole for Bradlee’s Mid-Atlantic roots. But Streep is damn near perfect, encompassing all the stress that a leader has to endure, but still keeping that in-control-wealthy-woman demeanor, without overdoing anything. She delivers the goods, and is the pillar of the film.



The Cast of 'The Post'

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

The reporters are heroic, a bit too much, but it's much easier to have a rosy view of the past in comparison to our relations with the media at present. There was more of an opportunity to seek the truth inside the newspapers of yesterday, with reporters doing their jobs without dire economic pressure, given that newspapers are slowly dying today. People who don't want us to know anything are having a field day in the modern era, since they are able to fund hundreds of fake news stories when confronted with any truth – plus there are websites and countries willing to help out. "The Post" is both nostalgia and a cautionary tale, especially as to what happens when power goes unchecked.

The current administration makes Richard Nixon look like Father Christmas, or at least a dignified statesman. Whenever confronted with his own hubris or truth, Donald Trump calls it lies and turns his remote toward the comfort of FOX News. That is the state of journalism today, the bells tolling a death knell for truth.

"The Post" continues its limited release in Chicago on January 5th, with a nationwide release January 12th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Meryl Streep, Tom Hanks, Bob Odenkirk, Tracy Letts, Bruce Greenwood, Matthew Rhys, Alison Brie and Michael Stuhlbarg. Written by Liz Hanna and Josh Singer. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Rated "PG-13"



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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 19 2024 - 6:23am):

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