

Allen shines amid 'Contender's' flaws



Courtesy photo
President Jackson Evans, played by Jeff Bridges, announces his vice presidential nominee, Laine Hanson, played by Joan Allen, in the movie "The Contender."

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"Contender" then becomes a question not of guilt or innocence, but rather Hanson's principles, as she won't dignify Runyon's veiled accusations with a response, not even a denial.

Lurie's puts a good spin on it—the argument that what a woman did in college 20 years before sexually has any bearing on her ability to lead. Hanson says it doesn't; through her, so does the movie.

Allen, an A-list supporting actress for years, delivers a whopper of a performance as Hanson—equal turns of tough, motherly, sexy and vulnerable. As her adversary, Oldman steals several scenes, if only because his Illinois accent suggests a good deal more cunning than the Southern twang some might have expected from a hardline, religious Republican.

Christian Slater blends in nicely as a House Committee member who loyalties swing by the day. Bridges makes an impressive President Jackson Evans, who at first seems softer than his actions and threat-laced bouts of advice reveal him to be. Cunning commanders-in-chief are always the most provocative.

Lurie stirs this ensemble together to make a pungent brew, the kind of conversational fodder that can go on a few days afterward. The movie makes no bones about its partisanship—it's liberal all the way. It declares itself as such, vehemently so, during a scene when Hanson recites her stance on the issues.

It's at that turn, the pot readying its simmer point, that "The Contender" tilts so far left it drops into the Potomac. We find that ongoing FBI investigation concerning Hanson is actually a nice bit of misdirection, except that leads to a rather preposterous plot twist.

Other facts about Hanson's stance on the issues—she's an atheist who champions the elimination of all guns, for example—would prevent her appointment well before a sex scandal. To adhere us to a better nature is one thing. Lurie seems to take the audience for fools.

And then, a final stroke that weighs as most disappointing: Hanson reveals to one in her inner circle the details of the fraternity party. It's a downer that "The Contender" can't hold the beans that its character keeps hidden so boldly, all the while answering questions about her birth control and an affair she had with her current husband while he was married to another woman.

It doesn't even matter what the truth of it was: If the point of all proceeded before it was to establish the integrity of silence, why break it? Impassioned arguments

MOVIE REVIEW

The Contender

Director: Rod Lurie

Stars: Joan Allen, Gary Oldman, Jeff Bridges, Christian Slater

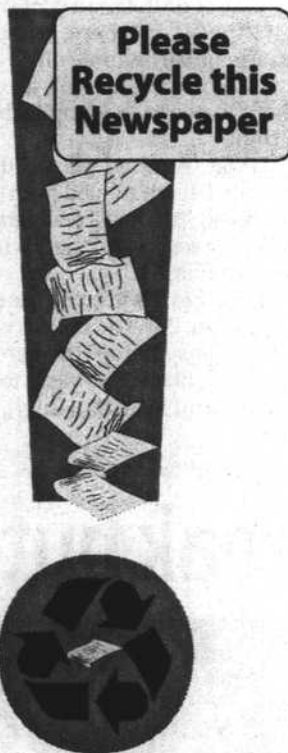
Rating: R (pictures of sex, conversation about sex, lots of dirty political language)

★★★ of 4 stars

can be made on either side. But in "The Contender's" running time, the conclusion is spent in grandstanding gesture, the soundtrack trumpeting with the glory of democracy.

Lurie wants to end on a galloping high note, so the end feels rushed. Oldman, speaking to an online magazine, claims Lurie was pressured by Steven Spielberg's production outfit, Dreamworks, to shape and mold the conclusion to more satisfyingly liberal standards.

Watching it, that assumption is not surprising. "The Contender" won't drive Republicans from the theater in animosity, but it will raise their antennae to yet another slanted approach to politics. There is a reverse side to the movie's thinking. I found myself on that side a few times during it. A shame it wasn't explored.



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