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Directly or indirectly, political films offer history lessons that punch at the status quo

By RANDEE DAWN
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Hugh Jackman stars as presidential candidate Gary Hart in "The Front Runner." (Sony Pictures)

In theory, movies are an escape – one of the few ways to get away from the relentless

news headlines and social media quibbling over partisan politics that drive us to distraction.

But that's not going to be true this awards season. Films like "The Front Runner," "Vice," "On the Basis of Sex," "Widows," "The Favourite" and "Mary Queen of Scots" refuse to shy from the political or the personal – and that's actually a good thing. Whether unearthing recent history like Gary Hart's lost presidential bid; Dick Cheney's unusual rule as vice president; the early years of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg; or machine-style Chicago politics; or honing in on the court intrigue of queens Anne, Mary and Elizabeth, each of those films, respectively, tells a story that's as relevant, if not more so, than what's currently on CNN or Twitter.

"Politicians are the new gangsters," says "Widows" director/co-screenwriter Steve McQueen. "I wanted to bring those things to the surface."

"The dynamics of the 16th century in many ways are not so different from the dynamics we see now," adds Beau Willimon, "Mary Queen of Scots" screenwriter. "They had the Protestants and the Catholics, we have Republicans and Democrats at each other's throats. There are things that are shockingly familiar about what Mary and Elizabeth were experiencing — including mansplaining."

"The connective tissue between [Hart] and what is happening now is very strong," says "Front Runner" star Hugh Jackman. "The change in how politics is covered by the press, the separation of public and private debate. If you wonder how we got to where we are today, this is the turning point."

A black and white photograph of Christian Bale as Dick Cheney. He is wearing a dark suit and tie, looking slightly to his left with a serious expression. The background is dark and indistinct.

Christian Bale as Dick Cheney in Adam McKay's "Vice." (Greig Fraser / Annapurna Picture)

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Offering a palatable present history lesson is precisely what "Vice" hopes to achieve as well, says director-writer Adam McKay. "Clearly, there's been a bigger story at work here. We can't always see it with any real clarity, but these kinds of movies help. There's a lot of dot-connecting of people who can tell stories like these of late-stage capitalism."

Directly political films are frequent contenders in award season, though not so often

as best picture winners; 2010's "The King's Speech," 2003's "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King" and even 2000's "Gladiator" all dealt with political elements, but you really have to reach back to 1987's "The Last Emperor" for any historical telling of court behavior – and 1950 to find an American-based political story that took home the big prize ("All the King's Men"). Even "All the President's Men" lost to "Rocky" in 1977.

Yet audiences do seem to love them, and storytellers love being able to give a history lesson that punches at the current status quo.

"It makes us feel that what we're experiencing really happened," says Mimi Leder, director of "On the Basis of Sex." "These films have a power of their own – they're universal, and become deeply personal to us."

"Politics are an incredibly dramatic world in a technical sense," says Jay Carson, who co-wrote "The Front Runner" with Matt Bai and director Jason Reitman. "There's so much drama and the stakes are baked in. The future of the republic hangs in the balance! That's why we're drawn to that, the same way we're drawn to royal court movies. There's an upstairs-downstairs element I'm always drawn to."

"There's a very conscious thing that's happened in the last 40 years in this country – we kept being told that politics is boring, everyone's corrupt. The politicians love that because it disengages people from government," says McKay. "But during awards season, you see movies that crack through that and get us back to the exciting possibilities behind government and democracy."

"Politicians are the new gangsters."

— STEVE MCQUEEN, DIRECTOR OF "WIDOWS"

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Viola Davis and Colin Farrell in "Widows." (Merrick Morton / Twentieth Century Fox)

Politics are a significant side story that interacts with the main heist focus of "Widows," but McQueen says he couldn't relocate the story (which was originally set in London and aired as a TV series) to Chicago without weaving in politics.

"It's the world we live in, politics," he says. "My picture is not about politics per se, but it's about how it affects us every day — a woman who can't get a business loan; childcare. How it affects us is the most important thing."

In the case of "The Favourite," screenwriter Tony McNamara says they were not out

to give a history lesson, but that he understands the appeal of seeing the dark side of politics inside a darkened theater, especially these days.

"People are always fascinated by politics in movies, because they have coherence and visually make sense, which may be the antithesis of the time we're living in," he says. "We see how human nature plays out in the movies, and we like that because that's how we'd like to see the world structured."

For Leder, however, political movies in a heightened political time may actually spur change.

"Maybe they're a call to what we can do to make this world a better place," she adds. "What each of us can do to make it better, instead of just complaining about it. I certainly complain a lot. But we're all responsible. And we all have to vote."

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