



The Company Men

Written & Directed by John Wells

Principal Actors:

Ben Affleck

with Chris Cooper & Tommy Lee Jones

By Guest Critic Patrick McDonald
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Synopsis: Ripped from recent headlines, *The Company Men* portrays the effect of “the Great Recession” of 2008 on three men (played by Ben Affleck, Chris Cooper and Tommy Lee Jones) and their families. John Wells, known primarily as the executive producer of groundbreaking television series like *ER* and *The West Wing*, makes his feature film debut.



Pat’s Review: In dealing with the overall economic downturn of 2008 (the one the world is still experiencing), *The Company Men* presents three individuals facing long droughts of joblessness. The frustration and insecurity that develops through this is poignantly rendered in writer/director John Wells’ *The Company Men*. Wells frames his narrative through these characters, all at 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 Walker,” 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), Bobby is simply going to work. But 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: founders “Gene McClary” (Tommy Lee Jones) and “Jim Salinger” (Craig T. Nelson). Gene, a plain speaker who tells it like it is, tries to be pragmatic regarding the circumstances. But Jim, who is now the CEO, needs the financial press to think that all is well. The major purging of “human capital” is the chief factor keeping the stock price steady, so he wants to keep feeding the numeric illusion.

<http://www.films42.com/guests/TheCompanyMenReview.pdf>

Meanwhile Bobby is thrust into a world that he has never experienced before. With only a meager severance plus unemployment benefits, trying to keep the payments up on his upper middle class lifestyle starts to wear on his personal life. Wife “Maggie” (Rosemarie DeWitt) is extremely supportive, but Bobby becomes increasingly distant from both Maggie and their son “Drew” (Anthony O’Leary) as it becomes obvious that jobs are not as plentiful as before.

Nevertheless, the company continues to purge, and the axe falls hard on “Phil Woodward” (Chris Cooper), one of the oldest and twitchiest employees. The company that offered “the American Dream” to so many people proves its ability to destroy that dream as well—with dangerous ramifications.

Wells wrote the film because someone in his family had experienced the same layoff fate. His goal was to humanize the situation, and he has achieved this by showing the “downsizing” of the psyche that occurs within each of his affected workers. Bobby, Gene and Phil are all proud breadwinners, so the sudden shift away from that role creates unfamiliar self-esteem issues. Although they each need support from their families, some of the family structures have become so tenuous that sudden unemployment becomes the blow that finally destroys them.

The main relationship depicted is the one between Bobby and Maggie. When Bobby’s non-employment extends longer than anticipated, he becomes isolated. In Wells’ scenario, Maggie is an understanding saint, taking on the toughest decisions (like moving). This is a symbolic comparison between the survival instincts of men versus women. Maggie wants to circle the wagons and evolve, but the pride wound that Bobby experiences bleeds longer.

Powerful men are exposed in this narrative. There is an “every-man-for-himself mentality” in American business, exemplified here by Jim (the CEO). After purging thousands of employees, Jim gleefully anticipates building a luxurious new office tower. When a colleague points out that they don’t need the new digs, Jim wails like a toddler denied an extra toy.

The Company Men is about our social structure and how the economic engine feeds it. What is the American Dream but a job/business that supports the sanctity of home and family by providing for that family? Are we at a point in our post-technological age, John Wells asks, where we have both the ingenuity and empathy to keep that dream alive?

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Excerpts from Pat’s interview with filmmaker John Wells

On the current state of Corporate America:

“I think the market itself will have to correct it. We have now what is called an 'anorexic' nature of companies—the focus away from the worker means that a lot of talented people just leave companies or are being forced out.

The disadvantage of that is when the workers lose a sense that there is any kind of security in their jobs or that the company they're working for is not in any way looking out for their interests, then they jump at any other opportunity.

So what will happen is that companies will end up with younger workers replacing the older workers, but will have no loyalty to the company. That means that there will be a constant trading of employees and the good ones will always leave. Like anorexia, it will eventually kill the host.”

On putting women into the archetype supporter roles in the film:

“I found that the women I interviewed, as is often the case, fit into those categories routinely. Archetypes and clichés are there because they absolutely exist. We kind of live out the things that we think we're expected to do. That's what I found in the research.

The one role that I was uncomfortable about in the film was the wealthy wife. I had to cut her back in later drafts. One of the scenes that I had wished that I shot was her divorce proceedings. She and her husband are doing a deposition and there is a break in it. They end up in the hallway talking to each other, and he asks her how did she become the person that she is? Her reply was 'I became the person you wanted me to be.' I think that is the reality.”

On his TV work writing on cop and doctor shows:

“It was a long evolution away from cops that could do no wrong, but it came to fruition with Steven Bochco [on Hill Street Blues] in the 1980s and what doctors were doing on St. Elsewhere. That here are people who make a lot of mistakes, but are trying to do the right thing most of the time. They have complicated lives and all the same type of problems that everybody else does. And that I think has been ultimately helpful to this notion that they are just people. We do a much better job of portraying it now.”

On the range of the human psyche he's explored in his scripts:

“I don't think I've touched on that much, to tell you the truth. The depth of emotion that is able to be delved into by novelists and short story writers is a form of rendition that is very specific to place, time and consciousness. And in those smaller formats, they don't have to appeal to a larger audience.

The reality in television and film is that you are trying to bring in a larger group of people, and one of things I miss from theater is that you could do something more specific and localized. Even though *The Company Men* is a smaller film, I do end up emotionally throwing a larger net.”

January 12, 2011 face-to-face interview with John Wells
conducted, condensed & edited for posting by Patrick McDonald.



Courtesy of
HollywoodChicago

Patrick McDonald is a Senior Staff Writer for the popular local website HollywoodChicago.com as well as one of Jan's buddies in the *Chicago Film Critics Association*.

After scoring a film minor from movie-mad Indiana University, Pat took a detour from his Chicago advertising career to volunteer for the city's film festival. He established an e-mail movie review newsletter in the 1990s, and as the new millennium began, cyberspace beckoned. His movie writing has also been featured in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and NBC 5 Chicago.

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Visit "HollywoodChicago" to read Pat's full interview with John Wells:

<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/13139/interview-director-john-wells-is-hired-for-the-company-men>

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