

Roger Thomas

“The Life of David Gale”

Robert Altman’s film “The Player,” arguably the best film released in 1992, skewers Hollywood through several different storylines, including one about two struggling writers who want to make a serious statement about capital punishment. Anyone familiar with Altman’s great film cannot help but remember it as “The Life of David Gale” plays out on screen.

Director Alan Parker’s career has been diverse. He has made entertaining films such as “The Commitments” and “Angel Heart.” He was ahead of the recent trend to revive movie musicals (a trend which began with “Moulin Rouge” and has proved itself with “Chicago”) with his excellent adaptation of the Andrew Lloyd Webber/Tim Rice musical “Evita.”

Parker has had his share of flops: “The Road to Wellville” and “Bugsy Malone,” to name a couple. Finally, he has directed some powerful “statement films” including “Mississippi Burning” and “Midnight Express.” When one hears that he is now tackling the subject of capital punishment, it is easy to hope that this too will be a bold declaration on one of the hottest debated issues in contemporary American society. Alas, “The Life of David Gale” does not meet those high expectations.

“David Gale” is an entertaining film. There are fine performances from Kevin Spacey and Laura Linney as anti-death penalty activists. Spacey is especially strong as he becomes more and more desperate. Kate Winslet proves again that she has mastered an American accent as she plays a news magazine reporter sent to interview a death-row inmate (Spacey) four days shy of his execution. A supporting cast of characters fleshes out the film, giving fine efforts to this material.

Parker includes some interesting film techniques, including delivering information through newscasts, a pattern that he used so successfully in “Mississippi Burning.” The editing of these sequences is especially good. The crisscrossing

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timeline between current and past events is handled in a way that is always clear, never confusing. The script successfully develops one's interest in the characters, ably handles several twists, and offers some insightful dialogue about a legal system that executes criminals. All this totals a film that is engaging while playing out on screen.

The problem comes when one considers the reality that "Gale" never really becomes a statement film about the death penalty. Perhaps it was supposed to be. It perhaps even tries to be. Ultimately, it is a murder mystery, more interested in surprising the audience than inspiring them to think. There is nothing wrong with that; the vast majority of films are made purely to entertain, not to enlighten.

Which brings one back to "The Player." In that film, the two young filmmakers want to show how tragic and unjust the death penalty really is. Their film will not star major celebrities, but will be a small film with a bold conclusion. They even outline elements very close to what happens in "Gale," except they plan to use those plot points to make a statement.

Then the studio gets the script and changes everything. Remembering that, one has to wonder if Parker did not start out to make a film about capital punishment that would be as powerful as his film about racism, "Mississippi Burning." Did the studio turn "David Gale" into the film it is?

If one wants a well-acted and well-made thriller, then "The Life of David Gale" is fine. If one wants a thought-provoking film about capital punishment, then there is not a better film than "Dead Man Walking" (followed closely by the great fantasy film "The Green Mile").

"Dead Man" and "Mile" are enlightening films; "Gale" is entertainment.

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MPAA Rating: R for violent images, nudity, language and sexuality

Director: Alan Parker

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Writer: Charles Randolph

Cast: David Gale: Kevin Spacey; Bitsey Bloom: Kate Winslet; Constance Hallaway: Laura Linney; Zack: Gabriel Mann; Dusty: Matt Craven.