

Biopic 'Snowden' informs, but suffers from lackluster dramatic twists

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of 4

Running Time: 134 min.

Director Oliver Stone has given his take on numerous events in history over the years in titles like *Salvador*, *Platoon*, *JFK*, *Nixon*, and *W.*, among many others. He is just as known for his contentious theories and button-pushing approaches to his subjects. It should come as no surprise that upon first glance, the latest from the filmmaker also lends itself to controversy.

Snowden tells the story of NSA employee and whistleblower Edward Snowden (Joseph Gordon-Levitt). Holed up in a Hong Kong hotel room in 2013, he's met by a small crew, including a documentarian (Melissa Leo) and journalists from British newspaper The Guardian (played by Zachary Quinto and Tom Wilkinson). The material he turns over to them is shocking, showing the various illegal and underhanded surveillance methods the US government uses to follow individuals from across the globe. Snowden tells the story of his rise through agency ranks, as well as his strained relationship with girlfriend Lindsay (Shailene Woodley).

The role has plenty of meat for Gordon-Levitt, displaying a turn from conservative patriot to anxious and paranoid whistleblower. However, he adopts a low cadence to emulate Snowden. It may be accurate, but it's actually distracting early on and his speaking voice takes a great deal of time to get used to. In fact, it almost sounds deeper than Snowden's actual lilt (the real life figure shows up at the end of the picture). His relationship with Lindsay is extrapolated on to add some extra conflict, but it's a very traditional "relationship" subplot. It doesn't work and isn't nearly as interesting the main plotline.

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The movie is much more engrossing when it stays at the workplace. It allows Stone the opportunity to mix film and video and create a few nifty images along the way. A video conference between the lead and his boss (Rhys Ifans) is shot with the actor in front of a looming projection screen that allows the scene to reinforce the role of the government as Big Brother-like threat. It's a bit over-the-top, but at least it makes an impression. There are some interesting macro wide angles on keyboards and energy visible when the story gets into the morally and ethically objectionable details of FISA (the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act).

In fact, there are a couple of examples to show how it can be used against average citizens. While working at the CIA in Geneva, there are some dynamic exchanges with co-workers like Gabriel Sol (Ben Schnetzer) with explanations that show the process of how everyone ends up being spied on by the government — all beginning with a search program that identifies any individual who has typed a particular word.

By following one potential subject, employees are also permitted to investigate random acquaintances. Through only a few degrees of separation, the personal lives of complete strangers end up being watched and tracked through electronic devices. Even worse, an agent (Timothy Olyphant) recruits Snowden to help him manipulate an innocent banker by taking personal info and using it to coerce him.

These sequences are powerful and result in plenty of unease from the lead character (not to mention viewers). Yet given how distressing these events are, the movie maintains a subdued approach overall. This is infuriating information and one wishes that Stone matched the revelations with more anger and fury behind the camera. Instead, it frequently jumps back to Snowden's love life and how his knowledge negatively impacts his personal connections. Perhaps a few more jarring and experimental camera moves could have helped.

Frankly, it's a far more troubling watch for those familiar with the recent, Oscar-winning documentary, *Citizenfour* (2014). Elements from that film are recreated in this narrative and it is strange to watch events that occurred only three years ago played out with Hollywood actors. I expect that *Snowden* may play better to those unfamiliar with the doc; one also hopes that this biopic inspires them to find out more about the subject. In the end, the movie is a mixed bag that certainly has some engaging elements. Yet somehow it also lacks the righteous fury and filmmaking passion one would expect to see from its director.

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