

Rusty hot off the press

THRILLER

State Of Play

(117 minutes, M15+)

★★★½

The players: Russell Crowe, Ben Affleck, Rachel McAdams, Helen Mirren.

Behind the scenes: Directed by Kevin Macdonald.

The plot: A political scandal presents a conflict of interest for an investigative reporter.

... In short: Stop the presses - Crowe drives media-savvy thriller.

THIS solid, appealing political thriller - based on a BBC mini-series - did well to escape negative press after losing its original stars at the 11th hour.

When Brad Pitt walked out on director Kevin Macdonald (*The Last King of Scotland*) due to creative differences, the usual damning speculation didn't descend.

The subdued reaction to Pitt's departure - compounded by his *Fight Club* co-star Edward Norton also leaving the project - was because of Russell Crowe stepping in as Washington newshound Cal McCaffrey.

While Pitt pulling out was a huge blow, it's hard to imagine him in place of shaggy, shrewd Crowe as the old-school McCaffrey.

With straggly locks and dedicated girth, Crowe is the reason *State of Play* continues to engage even when it becomes bogged in far-reaching intrigue.

Macdonald tips his hat to 1970s print thrillers such as *All The President's Men* and *The Parallax View*, taking a refreshingly lo-fi approach to a smart, convoluted yarn.

Much has been publicised about McCaffrey representing a dying breed of in-depth journalism in an age of instant, vapid "infotainment".

State of Play underplays its salute to quality reporting, an indication of the main obstacle to total audience satisfaction - too many tantalising ingredients, not enough time.



INSIDE STORY: Ben Affleck and Russell Crowe in *State of Play*

When McCaffrey is drawn into a salacious scandal surrounding an old friend, Senator Stephen Collins (miscast Ben Affleck, looking way too young), *State of Play* intelligently weaves in corruption, mystery, political power, corporate manipulation and media responsibilities.

The original mini-series was six hours long and it's not hard to tell why. Alongside heady themes, and around the core thrust of uncovering who killed Collins' staffer, the messy or beneficial relationships of McCaffrey wrestle for prominence.

His complicated ties to Collins and wife Anne (dignified Robin Wright

If you like these, you'll like *State Of Play*:

1. *Zodiac*
2. *All The President's Men*
3. *The Parallax View*

Penn) get short shrift, yet wanting to know more is offset by the Affleck factor. Despite working hard, he can't fight what's written all over his face - there's no way smooth Collins and aged McCaffrey could be long-

term mates. Achieving better results is McCaffrey gradually mentoring ambitious blogger Della Frye (spunky Rachel McAdams).

Devoid of sexual tension, their professional partnership champions probing journalism and exposes McCaffrey's fatal flaw - conflict of interest. As well, his not being dragged off the Collins story by editor Cameron Lynne (Helen Mirren) never rings true.

Such flaws whistle by, though, as McCaffrey and Frye pursue what are, frequently, inconvenient truths. The second half does shuffle and sag under the weight of so many threads

but, helped by a Jason Bateman cameo, the dash to foreseeable conclusions rewards attention.

Beyond a commitment to keeping it real, Macdonald doesn't display his personality through *State of Play* as he did in previous works.

That's left to Crowe, who is respectful and precise as dogged McCaffrey, despite the Oscar winner's real-life record with the media.

Ben McEachen

Ben McEachen is online editor for *Empire* magazine.

Family puts on a brave face

ANY way you look at it, this film's title is attention-grabbing. When people learn it's attached to a hot-button Australian drama (laced with everyday humour) about a family coping with mortality, will they still want to turn up to watch?

They should, as impressive writer/director Sarah Watt's anticipated follow-up to *Look Both Ways* (2005) has been done a disservice by hitting cinemas at a time when all Australian films are unfairly required to eclipse expectations.

The recent success of *Samson and Delilah*, though, shows audiences haven't abandoned home-grown flicks - and *My Year Without Sex* is of much broader appeal.

Not that this cleverly made

DRAMA/COMEDY

My Year Without Sex

(92 minutes, M15+)

★★★½

The players: Sacha Horler, Matt Day.

Behind the scenes: Directed by Sarah Watt.

The plot: A working-class Australian family is unhinged by a shock illness.

... In short: Memorable, even when it's difficult to keep going.

movie is easygoing entertainment. Divided into 12 chapters representing the months of the year, Watt's focus on life, death and the stuff in between is like the family-and-kids version of

Look Both Ways. Natalie (Sacha Horler) and Ross (Matt Day) are average suburban parents of two children, Louis (Jonathan Segat) and Ruby (Portia Bradley).

When Natalie suffers a brain embolism, the family's "normal" life is shattered.

With a gift for kitchen-table dialogue and flair for subtle infusion of social concerns - from sexualisation to financial crises and the search for God - Watt lightens the mood via flickers of levity.

But this isn't a storybook version of real-world issues, something viewers will recoil from if they want escapism.

Watt's ability to make us see ourselves in Natalie and Ross's existential melee is a double-edged sword.

Being affected by their rocky road may not stop you wanting to be let off early, especially as sobering events continue.

Horler and Day have long been under-used Australian talents, and it's great to see them get meaty, complicated roles.

Their daggy chemistry and total immersion in their roles is perfect for Watt's purposes, as are their terrific co-stars, Segat and Bradley.

Where *Look Both Ways* maintained its grip with black comedy and frank drama, *My Year Without Sex* can be closer to home than is comfortable.

Whether you embrace or pull away, being unmoved by Watt's world view is impossible.

Ben McEachen

Solemn war tale

WAR DRAMA

Katyn

(119 minutes, MA15+)

★★★

The players: Andrzej Chyra, Maja Ostaszewska.

Behind the scenes: Directed by Andrzej Wajda.

The plot: In 1940, Polish officers were massacred by Russia's secret police.

... In short: Restrained revelation of war crimes.

BRINGING a controversial story of national significance to screens is not the only intimate bond acclaimed Polish director Andrzej Wajda has with his latest feature, stately drama *Katyn*.

Wajda's father was among those killed in a World War II atrocity committed by Stalin's Russian forces, who blamed Hitler's invaders for the murder of an estimated 15,000 Polish officers in 1940.

The massacre and its cover-up hang over Oscar-nominated *Katyn* like a cloud of grief as Wajda shows remarkable restraint in presenting history that the Kremlin only officially acknowledged in 1990.

Epic in terms of production scale, appearance and content, *Katyn* loosely follows mothers, sisters and wives left behind after their Polish military men were rounded up when Germany and Russia stormed in on opposing fronts. Such matters of conflict, execution and conspiracy suggest a riot of emotions but Wajda's solemn giant inspires concerned detachment.

Reaching out and touching anyone involved is stifled by the slowly revolving troupe of characters, who never hold centre stage long enough to maximise audience engagement. Anna (Maja Ostaszewska) tries to maintain composure while waiting for her infantry husband Andrzej (Artur Zmijewski) to return, and Academy Award-winner Wajda leads us to other similar situations without introductions or explanations. Crediting his viewers with the intelligence to comprehend, Wajda sweeps across sensitive war crimes with a stiff upper lip.

Ben McEachen

HIGH FIVE

Ben McEachen's favourites now showing

Star Trek

(122 minutes, M15+)

★★★½

J.J. Abrams - the new Spielberg - steers what many thought improbable: a highly entertaining, exhilarating sci-fi blockbuster which reboots the comatose *Star Trek* franchise by finally making one non-Trekkies can also enjoy.

The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas

(94 minutes, M15+)

★★★½

This Holocaust drama centres on a German lad befriending an imprisoned Jewish boy.

Samson and Delilah

(97 minutes, MA15+)

★★★★

Exciting Australian filmmaker

Warwick Thornton's poetic, poignant observation of life in indigenous communities deserves attention.

Gomorra

(127 minutes, MA15+)

★★★★

Every level of Italian organised crime is observed in a potent study of a domestic underworld by

brave director Matteo Garrone.

Defiance

(136 minutes, MA15+)

★★★

The Holocaust-related film has Daniel Craig protecting fellow Jews in Belarussian forests. But director Edward Zwick smothered realism in cinematic showiness.