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Stepping Out of The Newsroom to Help 'Play' Work

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Russell Crowe trusts his instincts, and right now he's almost certain they are dead-on. He just needs confirmation. So he darts his piercing eyes toward me.

Five days earlier I was in the Washington Post newsroom, editing articles for the Metro section. Now I'm in Crowe's Beverly Hills hotel suite, along with director Kevin Macdonald and actresses Helen Mirren and Rachel McAdams. Three Academy Award winners. A magnetic young star. And a newspaper guy you've never heard of, still wondering how he got here.

We're dissecting the script for "State of Play," a big-screen thriller that revolves around the friendship-rivalry between a politician and a reporter. It's Jan. 6, 2008, the eve of three months of filming.

Crowe's voice booms across the room. Surely, he asserts, a journalist who's been given photos that break open a sensational crime story would never jeopardize the scoop by sharing them with the police. Right?

I've known him less than 48 hours. Not long enough to gauge whether he finds me useful or a pest. Certainly not long enough to calculate whether the answer I'm about to give will earn me an icy glare or a nod of respect.

My new, surreal role as a pampered movie consultant is quite agreeable: hanging out with A-list celebrities, traveling first-class, staying near the beach in Santa Monica, fattening up on catered meals. It would be nice to stick around.

It also would be nice to leave with some integrity intact.

"In most situations, you're right," I begin, making eye contact while building the courage to drop a big "however" on Crowe, who plays the reporter. He's our meal ticket, the guy who rescued the movie six weeks earlier after Brad Pitt abruptly dropped out amid the Hollywood writers' strike. If he gives the word, I'm probably on the red-eye back to Dulles.

After explaining why reporters often have adversarial relations with police and protect confidential documents at all costs, I outline a very narrow window of exception. If lives are in peril, then your duties as a citizen trump your principles as a journalist.

Crowe pivots toward Macdonald, who had cautioned me that his leading man doesn't necessarily see the noble side of my profession. I brace for the worst. Instead, an articulate ally emerges.

The exchange we just had, he tells Macdonald, needs to find its way into the scene.

"That was fun, man," Crowe says to me later, after we spar a few more rounds over the script.

My fun would stretch from Los Angeles back to Washington, where most of the exteriors were filmed. And before the cinematic circus left me behind, this would happen:

I would end up with a two-line role in the movie opposite Mirren, who'd make me laugh and blush by whispering a slightly risqué congratulation (it had to do with losing my acting virginity). I'd become a card-carrying member of the Screen Actors Guild; take home a personalized director's chair; accompany McAdams to a play and get swarmed by her adoring teenage fans during intermission; and fly on a private jet with producer Andrew Hauptman, who became a good friend, to watch the professional soccer team he owns play a home game in Chicago.

Oh, and I'd get man-hugged by Crowe.

* * *

Like most of life's craziest adventures, this one came out of nowhere.

On a lazy Friday in June 2007, Len Downie, then our executive editor, asked whether I was free to have lunch with Macdonald, an Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker ("One Day in September") fresh off the success of his first feature, "The Last King of Scotland."

I hardly had the résumé to dazzle Hollywood. After working for two decades as a news reporter and editor on both coasts, I joined The Post in 2002 as an assistant Maryland editor and worked my way up to Metro editor. But perhaps Macdonald saw in my eyes that his project married two of my lifelong passions, journalism and movies. Because within a few months I was his guide, even touring him and Pitt around our newsroom one afternoon.

Pitt was polite and asked intelligent if predictable questions, as I pretended to be nonchalant and colleagues gawked outside my office. Two themes came into sharper focus -- both worrisome.

One, celebrities who are hounded by the paparazzi see many, but not all, of the differences between daily newspapers and supermarket tabloids. Two, while Macdonald was determined to put his distinctive imprint on "State of Play," the movie was being adapted with some degree of fidelity from a popular London-set BBC miniseries of the same name. The 2003 BBC series portrays a Fleet Street world of newspapering that, though rollicking fun, is an ethical nightmare by American standards. Its ace reporter pays sources for information (an absolute no-no in the United States), surreptitiously videotapes a source in a hotel room (a firing offense, and a felony in several states) and generally behaves like a walking conflict of interest (and in a bedroom scene with the politician's wife, he does more than walk).

Macdonald and his team -- art directors, costume specialists, property masters, and on and on --

worked tirelessly and spared no expense to capture authenticity on the micro level. They had me e-mail photos of the clothes and shoes that reporters wear. They needed to know what brands of pens we favor. They found binders like those we use to store old newspapers and then stained the covers with dirt and coffee to age them appropriately.

They arranged for me to lead a "boot camp" for scores of extras, coaching the background actors on how to pantomime phone interviews and type on their computers. How's that for action-packed drama?

Mirren asked me for a list of newspaper terms, which she jotted on a legal pad and drew from to sprinkle into her dialogue. (A front-page article became "an A-1 story.")

The paper in the movie is called the Washington Globe, a down-on-its-luck "second buy" in town, recently taken over by a media conglomerate. Mirren plays the Globe's British expat editor, and Crowe is its shambolic, streetwise reporter whose actions alternately impress and repulse the upstart blogger portrayed by McAdams.

When it was finished, the massive Globe newsroom, built on a Culver City soundstage and decorated in painstaking detail, was so realistic that you could have put out a paper if the computers really worked.

But on the macro level, my crusade for authenticity bumped into unyielding walls at times. When I repeatedly objected to the illicit-videotaping scene, Macdonald politely made clear that in the end, plot rules. He was trying to tell a dramatic story, a political whodunit, and didn't want the audience bogged down in a journalism ethics lesson. I kept arguing that if he aspired to elevate the film above mere thriller, then accurately portraying my profession's code of conduct should matter more.

The best I could manage was a hollow concession: McAdams's character objects to the sleazy behavior and is overruled.

Likewise, I fought for a year and a half to avoid the impression that a reputable Washington reporter would ever consider paying for information. Yet three times in the script, reporters are asked to do just that.

Twice, the director agreed to work-arounds. The third time? The good news is, Crowe's reporter never pays a dime, which Macdonald sees as accommodating me. The bad news is, one brief scene could lead the audience to think otherwise. As for the reporter's bedroom antics with the pol's wife . . . well, watch the movie to find out whether I was able to keep his pants on.

My experiences with Crowe turned out to be positive. Sure, I think he's deeply suspicious of reporters in his own life. But he put aside preconceptions for the most part and used his formidable talents to submerge into my world.

During his first tour of the newsroom set, he appeared jet-lagged and didn't ask many questions. A few days later, on camera, he ad-libbed a perfect line aimed at McAdams's character: "I've been here 15 years, I've got a 16-year-old computer. She's been here 15 minutes and she's got enough gear to launch a [expletive] satellite." He had noticed that the Globe's online staff enjoyed snazzy new technology

while the print reporters typed on clunky old equipment. Somehow, without a hint from me, he picked up on a gripe you would hear in any print newsroom.

In another scene, his character had to take notes. I sat by the video monitors, ready to correct him. His instincts took over. Every time a real reporter would have jotted a quote, he did. When nothing newsworthy was said, he listened.

Only at fleeting moments did he offer hints of his own feelings about journalists. Asked by Mirren, playing his executive editor, whether he could be objective on a particular story, Crowe, in character, again veered off script.

"Absolutely not," he said.

Those words didn't make it into the film, much to my relief.

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I'm not a trained critic, but in the end, I'm proud of the film, which opens Friday.

It's an outsider's perspective on American politics and media from Macdonald, a Scotsman who lives in London. It's a psychological tug of war between Crowe's reporter and Ben Affleck's ambitious congressman; they've been on-and-off friends since college, as well as rivals for the same woman (Robin Wright Penn).

Above all, the film serves as a reminder that telling the truth becomes impossible when the journalist gets too close to the people he's covering.

Like Crowe's flawed reporter, whose friendship with the politician is self-destructive, my ability to write about "State of Play" was compromised from the start. I was paid to be a consultant. Then I became friends with many of the cast and crew. I overheard things that would make for fantastic copy, but I'll never report them. To do so would make me the worst kind of hypocrite.

So is this the full story?

Not even close.