

MOVIE REVIEW

Steal This Movie!

A Vivid Portrait of Hoffman Emerges in 'Steal This Movie!'

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"Steal This Movie!" is a vital and conscientious rendering of the life and times of Abbie Hoffman, one of the most charismatic figures of the '60s antiwar movement. He emerged as a countercultural hero as one of the so-called Chicago 7, placed on trial for inciting a riot at the 1968 Democratic convention, where the police launched a brutal attack on demonstrators.

Hounded mercilessly by the FBI, and arrested for selling cocaine in 1973, Hoffman would eventually be driven underground for seven years, emerge to see his name cleared and a government conspiracy revealed and denounced. Years of harassment and flight would exact their toll, however, in paranoia and manic depression that would drive Hoffman to suicide in 1989 at the age of 52.

Society needs fearless gadflies like Hoffman, who fought tirelessly for freedom of expression and social justice with inspired showmanship and a genius for making politics personal. He has been brought to life vividly, to say the least, by the protean Vincent D'Onofrio, whose Hoffman is a brilliant, larger-than-life dynamo. Hoffman met his equal in his wife, Anita, played by Janeane Garofalo as a woman as passionate, intelligent and courageous as her husband.

"If I were a woman I would be Anita," Abbie once remarked of their similar temperaments and common beliefs. They are an admirable couple, deeply in love and committed to ending the war and transforming American society. They are people of wit, style and imagination, who realize the effectiveness of presenting protest as a form of outrageous theater. They and their followers bring a lot of highly potent prankishness to the antiwar movement but in bringing down the wrath of the establishment they would pay an immense personal price.

A substantial portion of the film unfolds as flashbacks triggered by Anita at last telling her husband's story to a trusted reporter some five years into his underground period. Screenwriter Bruce

Graham uses the reporter's interviews with Anita to put over a ton of expository material, which has the effect of making the film's action seem more reported upon than actually happening.

But Abbie's activities and the responses they provoked were wide-ranging and complex and their implications timeless. A whole generation has come along with little or no knowledge of Hoffman's activities and his lasting importance, so it is understandable that producer-director Robert Greenwald, who knew Hoffman, and Graham wanted to provide plenty of context--even if it meant preventing their film from coming fully alive until it is safely past the publication of the reporter's piece.

It would have been more satisfying if the filmmakers had come up with a less heavy-handed approach, allowing us to experience more fully Anita and Abbie's story from the inside and as they are living it right from the start, but "Steal This Movie!" nevertheless generates much impact by the time it is over.

Greenwald draws from considerable archival footage that is integrated into the film's narrative, though again rather artlessly. The period is evoked well and good use is made of the popular music of the era. D'Onofrio and Garofalo are impressive in their demanding roles--D'Onofrio's part is especially taxing. His Abbie emerges as a bravura but clear-thinking rebel who raised the consciousness of countless Americans, students in particular.

Kevin Pollak as Gerry Lefcourt, Hoffman's shrewd and determined attorney, and Jeanne Tripplehorn as Hoffman's steadfast underground companion also make strong, persuasive impressions. There might have been a better, more involving method of telling Hoffman's story, but it is expressed with a firm sense of commitment to accuracy and authenticity.

Steal This Movie!, 2000. R, for language, drug content and some nudity. A Lions Gate Films presentation. Producer-director Robert Greenwald. Producer Jacobus Rose. Executive producers Jon Avnet, Vincent D'Onofrio, Ken Christmas. Screenplay by Bruce Graham based on the books "To America With Love: Letters From the Underground" by Abbie and Anita Hoffman and "Abbie Hoffman, American Rebel" by Marty Jezer. Cinematographer Denis Lenoir. Editor Kimberly Ray. Music Mader. Production designers Richard Paris, Linda Del Rosario. Running time: 1 hour, 39 minutes. Vincent D'Onofrio as Abbie Hoffman. Janeane Garofalo as Anita Hoffman. Jeanne Tripplehorn as Johanna Lawrenson. Kevin Pollak as Gerry Lefcourt.

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