

Review: High Flying Bird

This is not a traditional sports movie. There is no ragtag team of underdogs triumphing over the world champions. No tear-jerking drama that overcomes racism or a strained father-son relationship. There isn't even anyone playing basketball on screen. In his latest film "High Flying Bird," Steven Soderberg highlights the business side of sports at a pivotal moment of shifting power dynamics in the digital age.

The film opens in an upscale New York restaurant where Ray (Andre` Holland) scolds his young client Erick Scott (Melvin Gregg), for getting scammed in some shady loan deal. Erick was the number one draft pick who has yet to step foot on a professional court due to a league lockout. This also means he hasn't gotten his paycheck, hence the foolish financial move. But then Ray's company credit card is declined, forcing him to pay cash and walk to his office, which is mostly empty when he arrives. His aloof white boss (Zachary Quinto) explains the lack of revenue coming during the lockout and seems all but ready to cut Ray on the spot. The cool, blue and gray tones against the backdrop of a frigid mid-winter weekend in New York sets a somber mood that carries the dialogue filled with bitter frustration.

"High Flying Bird" is a poignant and self-aware film that focuses on its compelling message rather than a solid narrative storyline. The film is written by playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney, whose play inspired the Academy Award-winning film "Moonlight." The script is comprised of intimate scenes of chunky monologues between two characters. It reveals jumbles of exposition while only hinting at deeper characterization that the audience never gets to really see. The story plays out in what feels like a series of fragmented vignettes that lack cohesive flow and seem better suited for a stage. However, the insightful commentary that carries the film.

The film deals with the “game above the game;” the politics of capitalism and corporate control surrounding representation of professional basketball players. Soderbergh calls into question just how much power teams and player’s unions should in terms of player salary and broadcasting rights.

We see how the different stake-holder interact in these negotiations. This includes Ray, his savvy former assistant Sam (Zazie Beetz), who is working her way up the corporate ladder, Myra (Sonja Sohn), a rep from the Player’s Association juggle personal and professional stress and Kyle MacLachlan as the New York team owner. All this happens in board rooms and offices while players like Erick are left in a limbo state as their dreams and sense of security are put on hold by the very people who promised it all to them.

The notion of slavery is an underlying motif throughout the film. In a literal sense, Spence (Bill Duke), an older ex-NBA player and youth coach, will not allow any mention of slavery on his court, which in turn extends to any room he is in. In a more figurative sense, it comes to represent the relationship between young players and their corporate management. These young kids are quite literally owned by rich white men and feel trapped under their contracts. The film’s title suggests freedom and glory that one might imagine comes with being a professional athlete. But as Erick experiences in the film, this is not the case. It is actually based on an old folk song “High Flyin’ Bird” that mirrors that sentiment. The protagonist of the song is looking up at a bird freely flying overhead, while he is “rooted like a tree” dying of the blues.

Spence represents an older voice of a forgotten era of basketball. His attitude is often at odds with the youth the coaches, yet he reminds Ray about the love of the game that brought him to the court in the first place. Spence’s old ways juxtapose Ray in his quest to propel the league into a new age.

To circumvent the stronghold of the team owners, Ray orchestrates a one-on-one game at a youth event between Erick and his future teammate and current rival Jamero (Justin Hurtt-Dunkley). This is the climax to their heated Twitter feud. The audience never sees them play. The only evidence it happened comes from cellphone footage captured by middle schoolers that launches to viral status, much to the leagues' chagrin. By the next day, other "unofficial" games between professional players are organized around the county. Ray is in talks with companies like YouTube and yes, even Netflix, to stream the games, a plan that would completely cut out the layer's reliance on the league to organize and broadcast games. The risk of losing their control over players pushes the ownership to negotiate to end the lockdown.

The drive to evolve with the changing technological and media landscape extends off the screen and behind the camera. Well, iPhone 8. This is Soderberg's second film shot entirely on iPhones. This brings a unique element to the cinematography with varied angles and perspectives that follow the movement of character as they lean in and out. However, the change between angles can be as jarring as the plot development. Additionally, this film joins a long list of other features partnering with streaming sites like Netflix to house their work. Like Ray, Soderberg is breaking the limiting chain of command and exhibiting more freedom in the filmmaking process through unconventional, new age technology that expands the accessibility of filmmaking to a wider pool of people. "High Flying Bird" demonstrates that feature films can be made quickly, with inexpensive equipment and distributed on a streaming site with millions of subscribers. Like Erick, using new media can allow filmmakers to evade the control of the "business game" that presses down on creative freedom.