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The Hollywood Candidate Is Not Obama



By Marty Kaplan

If John McCain wins this election, it will be because of Hollywood.

It's not that Hollywood is giving him big money (it isn't); or that big celebrities are attracting attention to him (they're not); or that star writers and directors are helping him with stagecraft and wordsmithery (again no).

It's that the gradual appropriation by Hollywood of politics, journalism and practically ever other domain of modern life is reaching its apotheosis in McCain's campaign. His persona, and the story he is telling, and the media narrative that frames and delivers it to us, all come straight from the movies.

Unfortunately, this movie may end really, really badly.

If you want to see how entertainment conquered reality (as the subtitle of Neal Gabler's "Life the Movie" puts it), don't look at Arnold Schwarzenegger or Ronald Reagan, or at Oprah or Jane Fonda. Look instead at the inauguration day of the era we now inhabit: September 11, 2001.

"It was like something from a movie." It's stunning how universal that reaction was, whether from eye witnesses or television viewers. It is entirely plausible that the terrorists themselves intended us to experience it as a movie — a disaster film, a horror picture, an epic of spectacular destruction and mass helplessness.

From 9/11 until now, we have lived in a state of suspense, wanting to know how it will all turn out. Are we living through apocalyptic times, heading toward nuclear terrorism and an "On the Beach" ending? Will the anarchy of "Mad Max" be our fate? Will the human monsters who hate us ravage us as mercilessly as the monster of "Cloverfield" or the aliens of "War of the Worlds"? Or will we be rescued by a latter-day cavalry, like the improbable heroes of "Independence Day"?

George W. Bush told us we were in a Western ("Wanted, dead or alive"), and in a World War II movie ("Bring 'em on!"). But the quagmire of Iraq, the persistence of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and the return of Cold War Russia have

prevented us from reaching — except in the President's own mind, perhaps — the ultimate victory of the white hats and the good guys that those genres promise.

At the moment when things look most bleak, in rides John McCain. Like Rambo, he has returned to rescue us, to make this war on terror end differently than that war in Vietnam. Like Shane, he is a maverick, a loner, a reluctant gunslinger who arrives out of nowhere, back from political death. Like Yoda, or the Wise Man of countless other science fiction films, he offers us wisdom and judgment accumulated over lifetimes.

Only that message didn't work. The hero of the Hanoi Hilton has used his POW history a dozen times too many to explain everything from not recalling how many houses he owns to charges that he cheated his way out of the Saddleback "cone of silence." The maverick who bucked George Bush turned out to vote with him 90 per cent of the time; the loner who denounced the "agents of intolerance" in his own party returned to Liberty University to pay honor to Rev. Falwell; the opponent of torture ended up supporting it; the sage turned out to be a hothead with a hair-trigger temper whose gut instincts are the problem, not the solution.

And then there was his opponent — the true outsider who made him look like Mr. Establishment, the young guy who made him look too much like Yoda, the leader of millions who made his own claims to leadership ring hollow. Barack Obama, to be sure, has also been the beneficiary of Americans' inclination to experience life via movie genres. In Obama's case, it's the rags-to-riches saga, the only-in-America tale, plus the crusader quests of Gene McCarthy and Martin Luther King, Jr., of Bobby and Jack Kennedy — stories so burnished by Camelot mythology and an Age of Giants romanticism that the line between legend and life hardly matters.

McCain's Rovian campaign fought genre with genre, trying everything to recast Obama into a different story. They depicted him as a false prophet with literally Mosaic pretensions; a traitorous "Manchurian Candidate"; a demagogue, like Lonesome Roads in "A Face in the Crowd"; a rock star egomaniac, a celebrity airhead, a diva, like the characters in the serial melodramas that we call People, Extra! and TMZ. But for all that, the race remained a dead heat.

In panic, McCain threw a Hail Mary pass — familiar to fans of sports comeback movies — and chose Sarah Palin as his running mate. What he gets from this self-described hockey mom is a genre lift, the Hollywood fable of the un-politician who comes to Washington to straighten things out.

She comes from a long line of movie outsiders. Jimmy Stewart's Mr. Smith starts out as the head of the Boy Rangers. "The Candidate" played by Robert Redford is a lawyer for hopeless causes. Kevin Kline, who impersonates the president (for the better) in "Dave," runs a temp agency. In "The Distinguished Gentleman" (which I wrote and executive produced), Eddie Murphy is a con man who gets elected to Congress, because that's where the *legal* corrupt money is. In "Man of the Year," Robin Williams is a comedian and radio guy who runs for the White House. Reese Witherspoon's Elle Woods, in "Legally Blonde 2," is the underestimated Delta Nu chick who turns Capitol Hill around.

So why not Sarah Palin as Vice President? To be sure, the notion that women, particularly Hillary Clinton supporters, would vote for her just because she has two X chromosomes, and despite her being on the opposite side from Sen. Clinton on every policy issue facing the country: that cynical tokenism is precisely the kind of affirmative-action-at-its-worst that the right never tires of accusing the left of committing.

But McCain isn't betting everything on the hope that self-spiting Clinton partisans and undecided younger suburban women will identify with Sarah Palin's gender. He's doing it to tap into the beloved American movie myth of the salt-of-the-earth outsider who ends up in power. He's gambling that we just can't help loving plots like that.

And what about the heartbeat-away issue? As critic Katha Pollitt wrote, "If life were a Lifetime movie, Palin would do just fine running the country should McCain keel over. Girls can do anything! And look great doing it!"

John McCain is 72, and he's been operated on for malignant melanomas — the most dangerous kind of skin cancer — four times.

At this point in the campaign, it looks as though McCain has a 50/50 chance of becoming President. And while I wish him 120 birthdays, it is no great stretch to imagine Sarah Palin ending up in the Oval Office. This is the entirely possible outcome that the Republicans are putting on the table this week.

Maybe Americans won't want to take that risk. But McCain could well win. More Americans may vote to watch the real life movie about the moose-hunting Alaskan beauty queen who goes to Washington, than to see the one about the charismatic half-black Hawaiian who ends up at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

If John McCain wins, it is entirely conceivable that whatever scares you most in the world, and whatever you care most about doing at home, Sarah Palin will be in charge of it. But by the time we realize how dystopic such a movie might turn out, it will be too late for any of us to leave the theater.

(This is my column from the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, where you can email me if you'd like.)

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