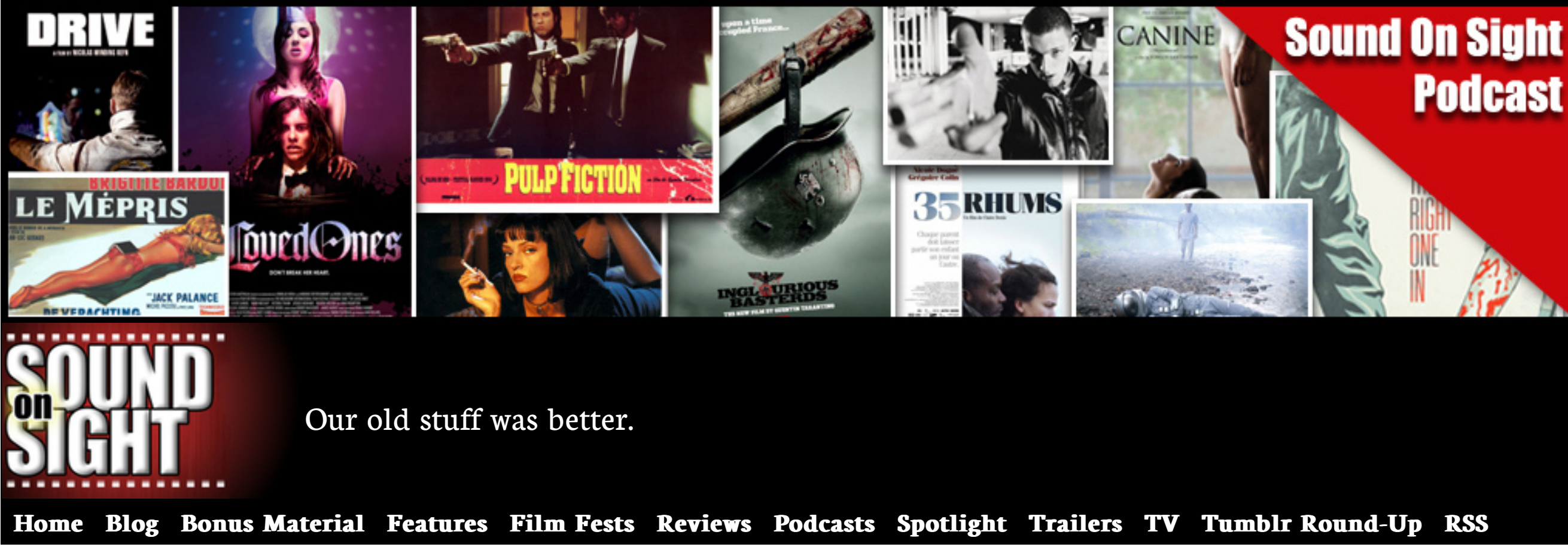




Dissecting the Miniseries: When last was the “State of Play” this thrilling?

PUBLISHED ON MAY 13, 2012 BY TOPE IN SPOTLIGHT

TAGGED: DAVID YATES, STATE OF PLAY



State of Play

(360 minutes, 6 parts)

Directed by David Yates

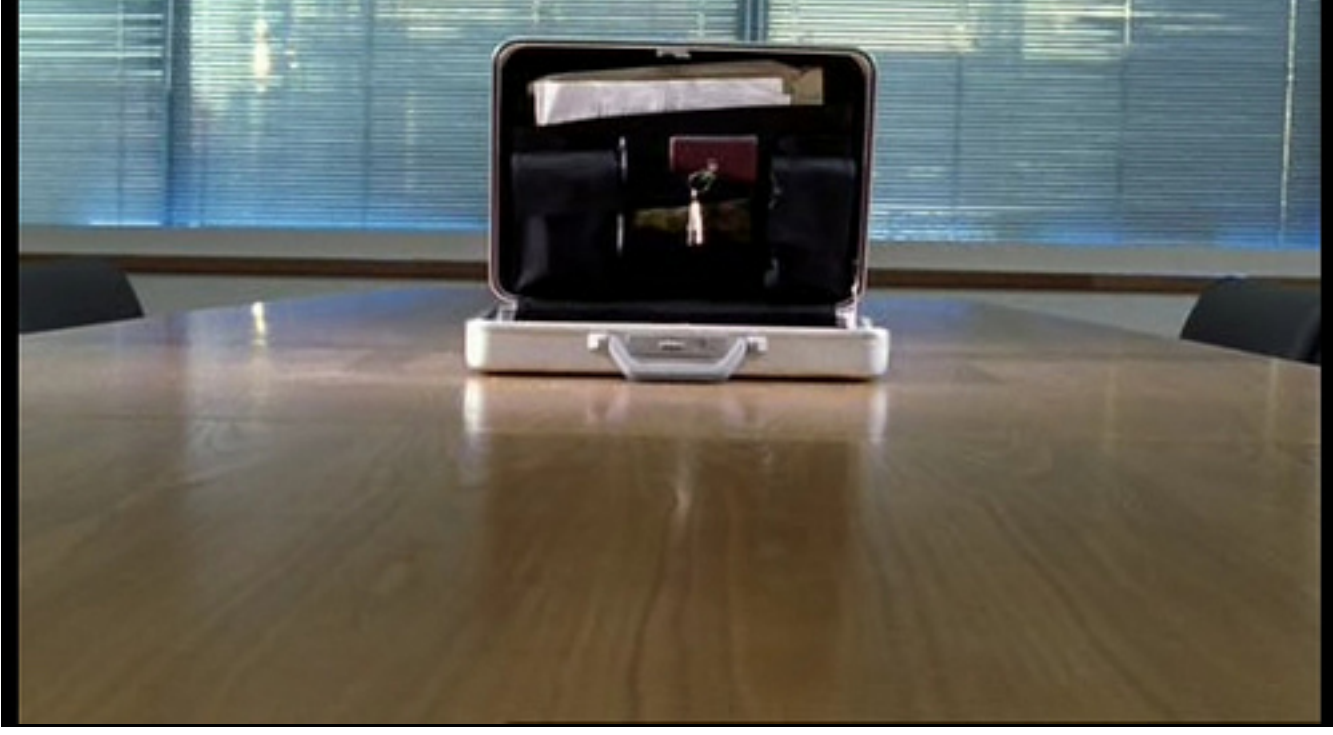
Written by Paul Abbott

2003, UK, BBC 1

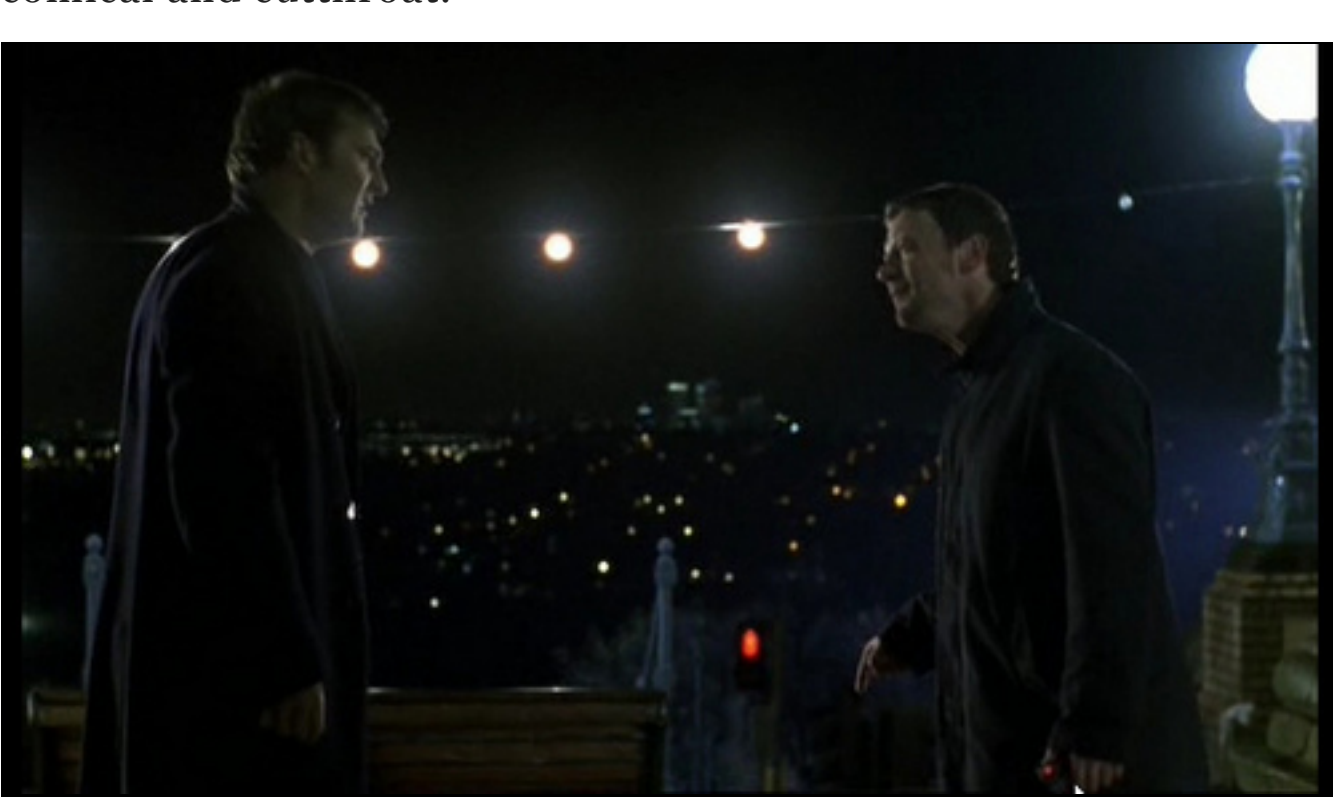
A prominent politician’s researcher falls in front of a subway car. A black youth is killed in a suspected drug-related shooting. It will later be revealed that they shared a brief cell phone conversation the morning of their demises. When Stephen Collins, the politician in question, is notified of the tragedy that has befallen his aide the grief-ridden response he produces sets off alarm bells amongst the press, one of whom is The Herald journalist Cal McCaffery, Mr. Collin’s former campaign manager. Cal soon discovers that the connection between the deceased involves a dubious silver briefcase, which is when instinct tells him that there is more than just a story here. And boy will he be proven right.



If the above is reminiscent of a 2009 American film by the same name starring Russell Crowe and Ben Affleck, it’s probably because certain studios have a knack for acquiring stellar material from any and every corner of the planet in order to produce unnecessary, if serviceable, profit machines. Yet there is something about this story that renders the decision to shrink Paul Abbott’s creation to a third its size and replace “MP” with “congressman” quite forgivable. *State of Play* is in many ways the kind of throwback political thriller that mainstream American cinema and George Clooney have been so nostalgic for of late, only here it is suffused with a post-Y2K breed of paranoia and agitation: where the press was once the protector and upholder of truth, it and its subjects are now cohabitants of the shadowlands of questionable practices and shady dealings. That is to say, this tale is populated by mild antiheroes. Weaved into the show’s intentionally scruffy tapestry are topical subjects like big business and big energy, rampant political lobbyism, intragovernmental corruption, racial typecasting, and media aggression. Around such material, a taut but intellectually frail thriller could be fashioned, yet only an extended drama could do justice to the utter density and murk of such a situation, portraying the sheer exhaustion of trying to navigate a turbid cesspool of intrigue.



Essentially the series’ protagonist, Cal is chicly disheveled with an air of disillusionment about him and is a natural at what he does. Played by a drolly charismatic John Simm, Cal obliquely recalls the noir private eye of yore: flawed and blue, willing to do whatever it takes to bring in the goods for the guy who keeps him employed, but anchored by a devotion to the truth, whatever his idea of truth may be. He is also loyal enough to support an old friend besieged, but enough of a prick to start an affair with that same friend’s wife when their marriage hits the rocks, whether or not it is out of underhanded spite or for love. *State* might have also been responsible for bumping the careers of two now famed actors: James McAvoy, who plays the cockily bright son of Cal’s boss and is a vision of what Cal might have been 15 years ago, and Kelly McDonald, doing what she does best as the fragile but tough moral centre and dishing out timid witticisms, weepy-eyed and with a sing-song brogue. She plays Della, a colleague of Cal’s and one of his main partners on the Collin’s story. David Morrissey is very convincing as a flustered and conflicted alpha male in MP Stephen Collins, proud, vulnerable, and ultimately sympathetic such that the latter third of the series delivers something of a wallop. All the bit players are great from Marc Warren’s nervously shifty informant to Polly Walker, who plays Collin’s wife Anne with sultry, brittle stoicism. Not to be forgotten is Bill Nighy as Cal’s editor and boss, brilliantly embodying the journalist as rockstar, by turns comical and cutthroat.



Interestingly, where one might attribute the show’s richness of character to its being a miniseries, it probably has more to do with Paul Abbott’s diversity of voice and literate dialogue, as well as the quality of the cast. While it may be 6 hours long, there are rarely any ‘character building’ scenes which do not in some way influence plot machinations. The pace of this BBC version is probably as breakneck as that of the Hollywood re-tread, only here there is more to digest and more in which to wallow. So if one desires insight into Cal’s childhood, they should probably campaign for a 12-hour version. With some miniseries, the question of why the material was deemed appropriate for the format often arises. For some, there is the question of funding and marketability, while others might be a prelude to a fully-fledged series, for example, *Battlestar Galactica*. Everything about *State* points to it having been conceived as a miniseries in Abbott’s head as he typed away. Even an overlong film script would require some serious content infusion to maintain this intensity for 6 hours.



State is directed by David Yates, best known nowadays for helming the final four Harry Potter theatrical installments. In this miniseries, Yates proves himself to be a director more in service of narrative tautness and pace than he is of mood and atmosphere. The mood, of which there is plenty, is maintained by the writing, the performances, and the somewhat stifling cinematography. Not a visual stylist in any sense, Yates’ hand-held, naturalistic approach nonetheless complements the material. In all honesty, if not for the intellectual ambition of this production, there is something decidedly television about it. That is to say, *State* positions itself firmly within the TV camp in its cinematic modesty, by no means an insult considering its towering contemporaries.

It’s difficult to say whether *State of Play* provides any novel insights. It’s difficult to say whether that is even the makers’ intent, because it certainly is great entertainment- smart too. To be frank, it is hard to say whether the majority of political thrillers, even the great ones, are much more than articulate, aesthetically thrilling reflections on the political climate of their day. By the same token, it never ceases to shock, to be reminded of how pervasive corruption can be, how clandestine and unassuming it is for all its viciousness. It’s a definite “press play” for this one.

- Temitope Ogundare

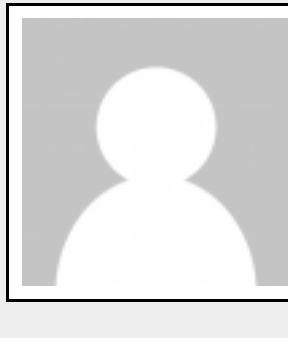


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Nigerian-Australian Sydney-based med student, film enthusiast and fledgling writer. Also a soccer fan and filmmaker in-utero.

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PUBLISHED ON MAY 12, 2012 BY JOSH SPIEGEL

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PUBLISHED ON MAY 15, 2012 BY JUSTIN LI

Let My People Go! Directed by Mikael Buch Written by Mikael Buch and Christophe Honoré France, 2011 In a small, idyllic Finnish town, Ruben (Nicolas Maury) is living a similarly idyllic life. His lover, Teemu (Jarkko Niemä), is a blonde ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

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Eureka Review, Season 5, Episode 5, “Jack of All Trades” Written by Jaime Paglia and Eric Wallace Directed by Jaime Paglia Aired Mondays at 9pm ET on Syfy This week’s Eureka provides laughs, body swapping, an emotional confession, a dark moment, a ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

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The Televerse #37- Spotlight on Parks and Rec/Nathan Barley with Chris Gore
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Game of Thrones, Ep. 2.07: “A Man Without Honor” brings Jaime Lannister back with style
PUBLISHED ON MAY 15, 2012 BY SIMON HOWELL

Game of Thrones, Season 2, Episode 7: “A Man Without Honor” Written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss Directed by David Nutter Aired Sundays at 9pm ET on HBO Not having read George R. R. Martin’s book series while ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Survivor: One World Ep. 24.14, “Perception is Not Always Reality”: A surprisingly friendly jury rewards the legitimate winner
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Sound on Sight Game of Thrones Podcast #7: “A Man Without Honor”
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The Lannisters are placed in a positive light, for once. What did we think of this image makeover? This week Beverly Bee from the SoS Doctor Who podcast joins Kate and Michael to break down the latest episode of Game ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Once Upon A Time, Ep. 1.22, “A Land Without Magic” – Outstanding close to season one
PUBLISHED ON MAY 15, 2012 BY RYAN CLAGG

Once Upon A Time, Season 1, Episode 22: “A Land Without Magic” Written by Adam Horowitz & Edward Kitsis Directed by Dean White Aired Sundays at 8pm (ET) on ABC This is how to do a finale. “A Land Without Magic,” ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

TJFF 2012 Roundup: The good, the bad, and the ugly
PUBLISHED ON MAY 14, 2012 BY JUSTIN LI

With the 20th Toronto Jewish Film Festival now behind us, it’s time to look back at all the films screened and determine which were the good, the bad, or the ugly. The Good OSS 117: Lost in Rio The most ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Burton and Depp: the hits and misses of cinema’s bromance
PUBLISHED ON MAY 14, 2012 BY KATIE WONG

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