

# A little of John Reed, after all

By David Walsh  
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***Bulworth*, directed by Warren Beatty, written by Warren Beatty and Jeremy Pikser**

*Bulworth* is an angry and politically astute film. More than that, it is in many ways a liberating film. Warren Beatty has demonstrated a good deal of courage in making it.

It is 1996. Jay Billington Bulworth (Beatty) is a Democratic senator, a former liberal, from California. With only a few days to go before the state's primary, he suffers a nervous breakdown, at least in part from a sense of guilt over his own opportunist shift to the right. After having secured millions of dollars in life insurance through a crooked lobbyist, he arranges for a hit man to assassinate him.

The breakdown frees him to speak honestly. Asked by a member of a black audience why the federal government hasn't lived up to the promises it made in the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots, Bulworth, who hasn't slept or eaten in several days, cheerfully explains, "We told you what you wanted to hear and pretty much forgot about it." Before an audience of wealthy Hollywood types he wonders out loud why it is, despite the huge amounts of money being spent, that the industry's products are so much "crap." At a breakfast for corporate big shots, the senator notes that his audience is exploiting the poor and raping the environment.

Bulworth's sudden candor also brings him into contact with Nina (Halle Berry), a young black woman. The pleasure Bulworth derives from his new political *raison d'être*, as well as Nina's company, causes him to reconsider his elaborate suicide scheme. Calling off the murder, however, proves to be a little complicated. Forced to hide at Nina's house in South Central Los Angeles, Bulworth improbably dresses up like a ghetto youth and takes full-time to rapping.

In a television appearance, that climaxes Bulworth's political odyssey, he rails against the inequality of rich and poor, against the lack of decent jobs, against the present health care system, against the system's efforts to divide blacks and whites. The economic and social conditions in America are obscene, he asserts, not the four-letter words in rap music. In his rhyming tirade, he even mentions the unmentionable: socialism. In the end, Bulworth wins the primary and the woman, but he has made powerful new enemies.

The unapologetic scorn and disgust the film reserves for contemporary American politics is a breath of fresh air, and entirely deserved. Beatty takes aim in particular at the

subservience of the media and the two major political parties to big business. In one inspired scene, Bulworth turns to his stunned CNN-type interrogators and Democratic Party primary rival and says, more or less, I'm a rich guy, you're all rich guys, everything we do and say is for the benefit of other rich guys, isn't that right? Such things, the things we would all like to have the chance to say, simply aren't said in America.

*Bulworth*, at its best moments, has a reckless and liberating quality. It conveys something of the pleasure of defiance, of a slap in the face of public opinion. When, in his rapping mode, Bulworth suggests that the best alternative is for people of the various races to have sex and thus eventually eliminate the distinctions ... one can only applaud.

And this is by no means an insignificant point. Critics have tended to deride or ignore Bulworth's relationship with Nina. But the relations between the two are central to the film and the conceptions it is advancing. However one may feel about Beatty's infatuation with rap music and black culture, caricatured or otherwise, his character's affair with Nina is a deliberate blow against nationalisms of every sort. One can only imagine the outrage, the gnashing of teeth!

But here, as an actor, as an artist, as a human being, Beatty is on firm ground. If the film is certain about one thing it is that color and race and ethnicity are utterly irrelevant to the fundamental issues of human emotion. People, Beatty knows, are essentially the same in, around and under the skin. Bulworth and Nina are a little distant in some of their "intimate," one-on-one scenes. It is, on the contrary, the shots of the two of them gazing at each other, with fascination and perhaps longing, through crowds, between and around other bodies, that are as telling as any in the film.

As much as Beatty's open declarations about social inequality (in an interview with the *New York Times*, he commented, "The real issue ... is the disparity of wealth in this country"), it is this conviction that love and desire obliterate all barriers, that forms the genuinely subversive element of *Bulworth*. For if race is an accidental and superficial distinction, which it is, then where do the real distinctions in society lie?

And it is also in the manner that Beatty establishes this point that he separates *Bulworth* from *Wag the Dog* and *Primary Colors*, both valuable films in their own ways. *Wag the Dog*, while wildly funny at times, is deeply cynical, except perhaps in Dustin Hoffman's loving treatment of a Hollywood monster;

and the latter film once again confirms the suspicion that Mike Nichols, for all his obvious talent, remains, in one critic's words, "more a tactician than a strategist" and "incapable of the divine folly of a personal statement." *Bulworth* is a more deeply felt film, and one that required more commitment on the part of its creator. It gives far more of a feeling of the texture and crucial dilemmas of American life, as great numbers of people experience them.

One can raise both artistic and political criticisms of the film. *Bulworth* is hardly a refined or polished piece of work. Its plot has holes, its timing is often off, it stops and starts more often than a car in heavy traffic. Beatty will never be mistaken for Preston Sturges or Billy Wilder. He is not a natural as a filmmaker, or a writer, or even perhaps as a comic actor. But neither Sturges or Wilder ever painted a picture of American political life as devastating as this one. Confronted with a film like this, a certain kind of formal criticism verges on pedantry, or at least a severe case of missing the point.

Whether Beatty considers himself a Democrat or not is nearly irrelevant. The views expressed and concerns registered in *Bulworth* are incompatible with the social character and trajectory of the Democratic Party. Beatty may very well want a Democratic Party that espouses genuine social reformism, or even tolerates some form of socialism within its ranks, but such an organization will never exist. The viewpoint advanced in the film is angry, radical and optimistic about the possibility of going beyond the confines of the present political set-up.

In its relation to Beatty's career, is there anything autobiographical in *Bulworth's* story of a man who suddenly wakes up from a deep political sleep? Perhaps not. In any event, one has no way of knowing. One thing is certain, his film work since *Reds* (1981)-his film about the American socialist and chronicler of the October Revolution, John Reed-has not been of the most challenging variety: *Ishtar* (1987), *Dick Tracy* (1990), *Bugsy* (1991) and *Love Affair* (1994).

Or is the film merely a reminder that Beatty is a serious figure? He came to Hollywood at a time when, despite the overriding crassness and commercialism, substantial films could still be made by the major studios. Between 1958 and 1961, for example, one could cite *Vertigo*, *Tarnished Angels*, *Bonjour Tristesse*, *Wind Across the Everglades*, *The Last Hurrah*, *Imitation of Life*, *Rio Bravo*, *Some Came Running*, *Some Like It Hot*, *Psycho*, *Sergeant Rutledge*, *Spartacus*, *Wild River*, *Elmer Gantry*, *Two Rode Together* and *One Eyed Jacks*, among others.

And over the years he has worked with directors who, if they were not all first-rate artists, were at least competent professionals, including Elia Kazan, Robert Rossen, Arthur Penn, Robert Altman, Richard Brooks, Alan Pakula, Hal Ashby, Barry Levinson and Nichols. And with actors of talent and intelligence--among others, Vivien Leigh, Lotte Lenya, Eva Marie Saint, Karl Malden, Jean Seberg, Kim Hunter,

Susannah York, Gene Hackman, Faye Dunaway, Julie Christie, Lee Grant, Jack Warden, Jack Nicholson, Diane Keaton, Dustin Hoffman, Katharine Hepburn and Annette Bening.

It is possible to say that *Bulworth*, in that sense, emerges from a certain tradition, filmmaking with a social conscience, a tradition that has not been entirely obliterated by the conglomerates that dominate Hollywood and indeed, under present conditions, may find a new lease on life.

The comments of many of the critics about *Bulworth* are amusing, in their own way, and telling. A number have said, in praising the film: here is a refreshing work, *one that says what everyone knows to be the truth*. In fact, one critic goes so far as to say that the political arguments in *Bulworth* "may sound depressingly trite." Everyone knows that big business dominates the two principal parties and the mass media, that things are wretched for masses of people, that race is a diversion, that social inequality is the central issue in American life? Oh, yes, everyone knows this! Then why is no one, in these fine publications that the ladies and gentlemen of the film criticism fraternity write for, saying a single word about any of it?

Of course, there is an element of truth to the critics' response. In fact, "everyone" does know, consciously or not, that this is the reality, as opposed to the official version presented by the media and the politicians. But a truth that one only suspects, or keeps in one's vest pocket, or mutters under one's breath, is of no use to anyone. To Beatty's great and everlasting credit he has said what so few in his position have the courage to say, and said it with considerable feeling. One suspects and hopes that his example will prove contagious. This film, perhaps even more than *Reds*, has given Warren Beatty stature.

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