

A true story, compellingly acted – but I don't remember



**Film 2**  
Nicholas Barber

**Fair Game**

Doug Liman  
106 MINS, 12



**The Company Men**

John Wells  
104 MINS, 15



**Battle: Los Angeles**

Jonathan Liebesman  
117 MINS, 12A



According to Hollywood's Iraq war movies, the entire Bush'n'Blair debacle was a foregone conclusion: everyone knew from day one that Saddam Hussein had as many unicorns as he had weapons of mass destruction. I don't remember it being quite that simple, but the characters in *Green Zone*, *Redacted*, *Lions for Lambs* et al are so sure of themselves that the films have a told-you-so smugness and a deadening air of preaching to the converted. That applies to **Fair Game**, too. It's one of the most propulsive and important films to have been made about the war, but you can guess which line it's going to take even before you see Sean Penn's name on the cast list.

It's the true story of Valerie Plame (Naomi Watts), a CIA agent who had her cover blown in 2003 after her husband, Ambassador Joe Wilson (Penn), wrote an article criticising the Bush administration. Wilson demanded to know which White House source had leaked his wife's secret career to the press, but the right-wing media were more intent on smearing the couple as traitors and, ironically, self-publicists. The film takes far too long to reach this turning point, but in the meantime the screenwriters sketch out the Wilsons' marriage and working lives with admirable clarity, while the lead actors are as compelling as ever. It's also one of the few films to spotlight the harm done to Iraqi citi-

zens by the US military. The others prefer to see their traumatised American heroes as the sole casualties of war.

*Fair Game* is never quite as thrilling as it should be, though, mainly because the treatment of the WMD issue is so simplistic, however heartily you

might agree with it. If the pro-war lobby's ramblings about aluminium tubes and yellow-cake uranium had been as blatantly fanciful as they are in the film, then there's no way anyone would have been fooled.

Part of the problem is that the Wilsons' persecutors don't get much of a say. Scooter Libby (David Andrews) pops up every now and then to do some bullying, but otherwise the filmmakers – or their lawyers – are frustratingly cautious about naming and shaming the journalists and the White House officials who should have been the villains of the piece. We keep hearing that the powers that be are out to destroy the Wilsons, but we don't hear who those powers that be are, or how exactly they're going to destroy anyone. It's a David and Goliath

tale in which Goliath is never seen.

**The Company Men** is another film which isn't going to rock anyone's liberal worldview. An ensemble drama that feels more like an HBO mini series, it stars Ben Affleck, Tommy Lee Jones and Chris Cooper as three executives who are laid off by a global shipping firm after years of loyal service. That's about it as far as plotting is concerned. In lieu of a story, *The Company Men* just takes its characters through the indignity of attending demeaning job interviews and – horror or horrors – realising that they might have to sell their Porsches. It's mature and measured, but also completely unchallenging, right up to its conclusion that big business is unfair and that happiness is built on an honest day's work and a loving family.

When a film is trying to get us angry about corporate greed, it shouldn't be as mild and reassuring as this.

The Iraq war, meanwhile, hovers in the background of **Battle: Los Angeles**, an alien invasion movie which

the Iraq war being this predictable

– like *Cloverfield*, *Skyline* and *Monsters* before it – adopts the perspective of the man in the street, rather than a noble American president and his hand-picked team of expert advisers. Specifically, it's seen through the eyes of a squad of US marines. When a battalion of extraterrestrials brings some shock and awe to the Californian coast, Aaron Eckhart and his men get caught in a firefight, a situation which allows the director to stage the frenetic, in-your-face combat scenes which have become de rigueur in contemporary war films.

I'm not a great fan of this stressful style, with its wobbly camerawork and split-second editing, but if you enjoy noisy footage of uniformed men shouting at each other while obscured by dust and smoke, then *Battle: Los Angeles* has plenty.

Set against that, however, is the video-game plotting, the cardboard characters, the self-parodying dialogue, and a flag-waving, gung-ho finale which turns the film into a recruitment ad for the marine corps. The question is, why make the combat seem so realistic when everything else is quite the opposite?

**NEXT WEEK**

Nicholas Barber tries not to get his hopes up before seeing Woody Allen's *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*

**FILM CHOICE**

This year's Bird's Eye View festival of women's filmmakers culminates on Thursday with



**Tiny Furniture**, an acclaimed comedy from writer-director-star Lena Dunham (see [birds-eye-view.co.uk](http://birds-eye-view.co.uk) for details). Our own Joanna Hogg's island-set **Archipelago** delivers on the promise of her debut *Unrelated*.



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Exposed: Naomi Watts as CIA agent Valerie Plame in *Fair Game*