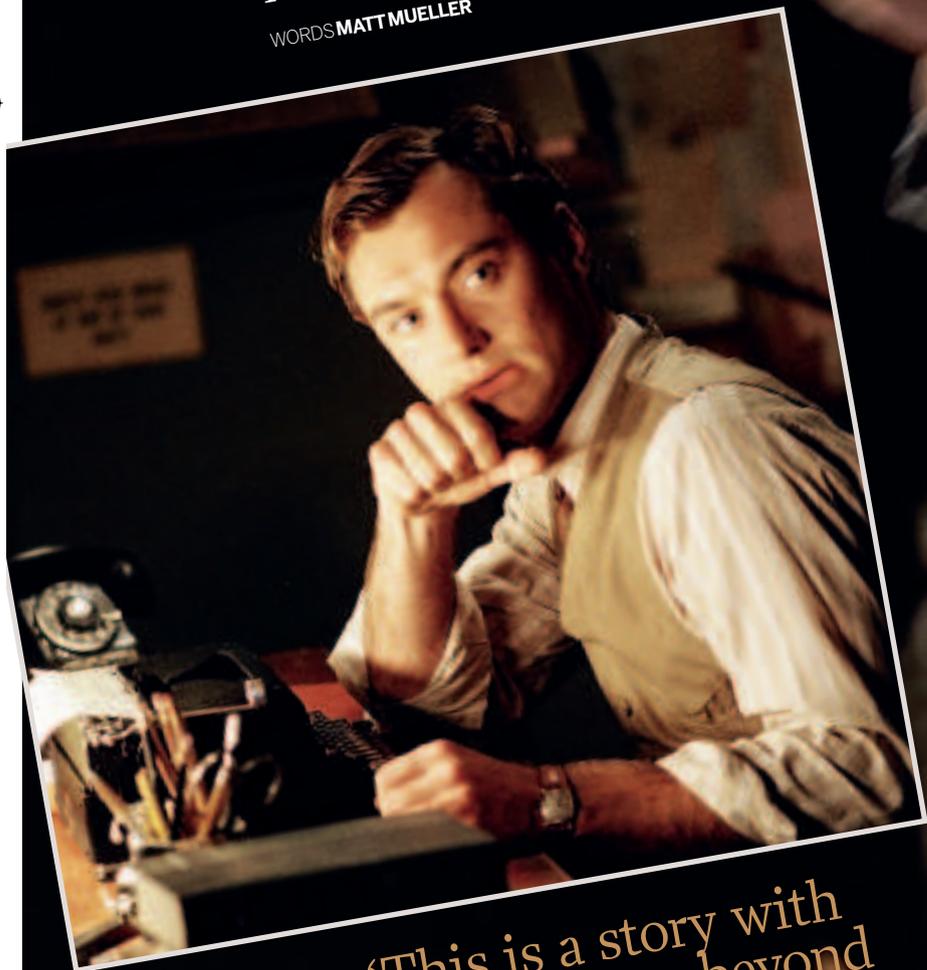


THE CANDIDATE



Corruption, politics and a lot of patience... How Sean Penn, Kate Winslet and the writer of *Schindler's List* made **All The King's Men** — a Bush-baiting melodrama pushing hard for Oscar.

WORDS MATT MUELLER



'This is a story with parallels way beyond the time in which it was written' SEAN PENN





If Sony Pictures had had their way, *All The King's Men* would have blown into LA's Kodak Theatre at this year's Oscars and emerged with a healthy clutch of statuettes. Sean Penn's barnstorming portrayal of Louisiana governor Willie Stark would have snatched that Oscar out of Philip Seymour Hoffman's grasp; Kate Winslet — instead of Rachel Weisz — would be the British actress prancing off with a Golden Baldie; Steven Zaillian's craftsmanship and the film's emotionally wrenching heft would have kept *Brokeback Mountain* director Ang Lee and *Crash*'s bickering producers glued to their seats; and we'd all be marvelling at how a prestige package about southern-fried political treachery had picked up a Hurricane Katrina-sized awards-season tailwind and puffed the competition out to sea.

That particular fantasy, of course, would have required *All The King's Men* to be an outstanding piece of filmmaking, or at least good enough to steal the march on *Crash*, *Brokeback* and *Capote*. And, in Hollywood, when best-laid plans go awry, the automatic assumption is that trouble is afoot. Sure enough, Sony pulling *All The King's Men* from its original late-December 2005 release date sent the buzzards circling. According to Zaillian — Oscar-winning screenwriter of *Schindler's List*, director of *Searching For Bobby Fischer* and *A Civil Action* — they needn't have bothered.

"I'm just slow," he insists. "I don't write fast and I don't edit fast, and I shot 900,000 feet of film. It would take about two months for me just to look at all the film I shot. I explained that to the head guys there, to [*Sony Pictures chief*] Amy Pascal, and she smartly — and I think rightly — said, 'Take as much time as you want.' It was a gutsy thing to do. I took the time and it was time well spent."

Trouble is, after a rushed shoot (juggling the cast's schedules turned out to be a Kafkaesque nightmare), Zaillian's first cut left test-screening audiences befuddled: the plot was intricate, the character machinations torturous. So, rather than hustle their \$50 million roll of the dice into the perilous, awards-season shuffle, the studio opted to hold off, relaunching Zaillian's meticulously reworked film in late 2006. Sony's game plan is the same, though: a hoped-for meeting with Oscar. Ironically, if they have their way, Sean Penn will find himself up against another *Capote*, in the form of *Infamous*' Toby Jones.

Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize-winning book about power, politics and corrupted idealism was first published in 1946; its main character, Willie Stark, inspired by real-life Louisiana state governor Huey B Long. It was followed three years later by an equally celebrated screen adaptation that snagged Oscars for Best Picture and for Broderick Crawford's performance as the Deep South demagogue. Mighty shoes to fill, then, for both Zaillian and Penn. Zaillian, however, says he still hasn't seen the original film.

"I tried to ignore it and go with how I felt when I read the book, which was that it was a humbling



Stark raving: Penn as the tub-thumping Southern demagogue. Jude Law (right, with Kate Winslet), as world-weary sidekick Burden. Below: Stark on the campaign trail with Southern gent Mark Ruffalo.

piece of writing. It's so rare that you come across a piece of writing so good; it's even rarer to be able to convince anybody to gamble \$50 million on making it," says Zaillian. "I don't like the idea of doing remakes, especially of films that are good — I just felt that this one is maybe even more relevant today."

With barnstorming speeches, impish magnetism, and back-stabbing, greasy-palmed corruption, Sean Penn greedily munches through scenes as the tradesman who rises to power by making heartfelt promises to the downtrodden and the poor. The crux of the story is Stark's switch from rampant idealist to sleazy politician, willing to compromise his integrity to stay in power.

"I don't see him as an evil character," says Penn, learning forward earnestly (natch). "I mean, the fact he makes certain compromises and corruption gets in the way of certain things doesn't qualify as evil to me. And hope doesn't live and die with the characters on the screen. This is a tragedy, but it also offers the possibility that things may change, just as the idealism at the beginning of the movie did. I don't see it as a political film in any way other than that."

"Hey look," says James Carville, *King's* executive producer and former strategist for President Clinton, "some people want a movie where, when things are messed up, the cavalry rides in and shoots up the bad guys. That's not this movie. He [Huey Long/Willie Stark] wasn't a perfect guy, but a lot of people got textbooks and bridges. That's what makes this an interesting film."

Zaillian packs plenty of thespian insulation around Penn's Oscar bid, with Jude Law as Stark's jaded right-hand man; James Gandolfini as a corridor-of-power crony; Patricia Clarkson as his acerbic aide-de-camp (and occasional bedmate);



Pushing Penn: Zaillian directs his lead.

Anthony Hopkins as the idealistic judge who opposes him; and Kate Winslet and Mark Ruffalo as sibling Louisiana aristocrats who allow themselves to be tainted by Stark's sleazy charms.

"I think I was the last person to be cast and, quite honestly, I just felt I'd won the last golden ticket," coos Winslet. "That kind of opportunity does not come around twice in a lifetime."

Zaillian's shifted his version of *All The King's Men* from the '30s to the '50s because "I could relate to the '50s better. And I'm tired of imagery of the Depression." But, beyond that, there's a heady serendipity to the story that Zaillian and his cast all acknowledge: a populist politician who speaks his mind is swept into office after railing against the endemic corruption and backhanders that lead to the collapse of a shoddily built schoolhouse, killing several innocent children. There's a clear resemblance to cheaply built levees giving way during a hurricane...

"Anybody reading the book can recognise parallels," agrees Penn. "Warren wrote it with vision that went beyond the time it was written."

But here's the question: with the seamier side of politics increasingly on our front pages, will the party sitting in the White House now pay the electoral price for the cock-up in New Orleans? Penn doesn't have a definitive answer, but he's keen to share a few typically pointed thoughts.

"Once upon a time, politics was the organisation of things to benefit the people. I think now it's the opposite. It's obvious the people who will sacrifice their talents and commitment to their countries,

'I don't like the idea of remakes — it's just that this is even more relevant today' STEVEN ZAILLIAN

and therefore their people... We know who they are and they're not currently in the White House."

Whether the movie's new-found relevance and Zaillian's extra months in the editing suite are enough to shape *All The King's Men* into a worthy Oscar contender for 2007 is another matter. When it premiered at the Toronto Film Festival, the reception was decidedly mixed. A few hailed it as a political masterpiece, its post-Katrina, post-Iraq, corruption-laced storyline sure to resonate forcefully with America's — and Oscar voters' — current malaise. More felt that Zaillian had failed to conquer the tale's formidable challenges, leaving a lavishly designed, brilliantly acted, yet oddly hollow picture.

"I'm real proud of this movie," counters Penn. "It had a great script and attracted some great actors."

"We had an amazing time making it," chips in Winslet. "It was a great collaborative experience and we had Steve to guide us every step of the way, closely followed by Sean's breathtaking performance. We all feel proud that it has turned out the way it has. We had a *scary* amount of fun."

Adds Penn, with a smile: "In Kate's trailer..." **TF**

All The King's Men opens on 27 October and is reviewed on page 42.