



SYRIA'S FORGOTTEN CHILDREN


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Sherlock brings star quality but whistleblower film lacks subtlety

A frenetic account of the story of Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks founder, fails to impress Matt Mueller at the Toronto film festival

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Leak soup: Benedict Cumberbatch, as Julian Assange, left, with Daniel Bruhl, as Daniel Domscheit-Berg (Frank Connor)

For anyone who has been intrigued by the fortunes of Julian Assange and his controversial whistleblowing website WikiLeaks, *The Fifth Estate* will come off as a vaguely pointless exercise, delivering little we don't already know.

Even for those who haven't been following Assange's ongoing saga too closely, this is still a classic

case of trying to tell a story far too soon, although the issues it raises are salient and timely: in a world where investigative journalism has been forsaken by much of the fourth estate, who is left to keep uncontrolled power in check?

If Assange hadn't been betrayed by his own ambition and megalomania, the film argues, the job that WikiLeaks had been performing in exposing corruption in African nations and Swiss and Icelandic banks had an inestimable value. But it was the release of the "collateral murder" video, which showed US Apache helicopters killing a group of innocent men, including two Reuters journalists, and the Iraq War logs in 2010 that made Assange and his site such a dangerous pest in the eyes of governments and corporations.

Adapted from two books — Inside WikiLeaks by Daniel Domscheit-Berg, and WikiLeaks by David Leigh and Luke Harding — the film is directed by Bill Condon, who also steered the Twilight saga to its final act. He adopts a frenetic, lightning-paced approach that features characters using all forms of 21st-century communication to bring an information age pep to the narrative. But this is less skilfully made than The Social Network, David Fincher's drama about the treacherous birth of another modern-day internet phenomenon, Facebook, and thus far less compelling.

One figure does come out smelling of roses, and that's Benedict Cumberbatch. While his physical resemblance to the anti-Establishment figurehead, who is still holed up in the Ecuadorean embassy in London, isn't exactly uncanny, despite the assistance of an ice-white wig and smooth facial prosthetics, his performance as Assange is captivating and may attract awards in the coming months. The Sherlock star expertly captures the Australian speech patterns and chilly, borderline autistic personality of this 21st-century renegade.

The German actor Daniel Brühl, so good as Niki Lauda in Rush this year, fares less well as Domscheit-Berg, the German technology activist at first in thrall to Assange before becoming disillusioned by his failure to redact the names in the Iraq War logs. Not surprisingly, given that it is his take on events, Domscheit-Berg gets off lightly with an overly sympathetic portrayal. But this isn't a film in which subtleties are given much time to breathe.

Laura Linney and Stanley Tucci shine in their brief appearance as a pair of State Department officials in danger of being sacrificed at the WikiLeaks altar, while David Thewlis, Dan Stevens and Peter Capaldi portray the Guardian journalists whose publication of the logs turned Assange into an instant global celebrity.

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Matt Mueller

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