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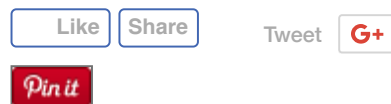


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Film Review: Chappaquiddick

A riveting recreation of the famous accident that quashed Ted Kennedy's presidential bid and the cover-up by his political fixers, anchored by Jason Clarke's perfectly pitched portrayal of a flawed man.

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Apr 2, 2018



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From the opening montage of a man's feet stumbling through marshland, then a close-up of Teddy Kennedy pleading his case on TV, *Chappaquiddick* grabs you by the throat. In those introductory moments, director John Curran (*The Painted Veil*, *Tracks*) telescopes the whole story: Kennedy flees the scene of a car accident, arguably in an act of criminal negligence, yet manages to reinstate his career as a public servant and go on to become the revered "Lion of the Senate." This haunting, doomy recreation of the accident and its fallout will surely resonate with the generation of Americans who lived through the history-shaping events of July 1969, evoked simply by the word "Chappaquiddick." Yet Curran's film should prove an eye-opener to younger viewers as well, with its timely exposé of power and corruption in the cover-up orchestrated by Kennedy's coterie.

The fateful events kick off at a cottage owned by the Kennedys on "Chappy," a short hop by ferry from Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard. Teddy—Jason Clarke, who's got his man's profile and befuddled, brooding air—and his loyal retainer Joe Gargan (Ed Helms) are boozing it up with the campaign workers known as the "boiler room girls." Teddy has shown a special interest (hinting at sexual overtones) in pert, blonde Mary Jo Kopechne (Kate Mara), who worked for Ted's brother Bobby but quit Washington after the trauma of his assassination. At the party she spots Teddy in a

deep funk, swigging from a bottle; they decide to go for a drive. No suspense here about the outcome of that drive, but, rather, that fascination mingled with dread when you already *know* the outcome (as in Greek tragedy, if that's not too hi-falutin').

Careening away from a cop to avoid getting slapped with a DUI, Teddy guns the car toward the beach. He turns to look at Mary Jo, and in that moment the car veers off a rail-less bridge and plunges upended into the murky water. Teddy manages to escape; not so his passenger. Nor are we shown any effort on his part to rescue her. Back at the cottage, Teddy's first words to Joe Gargan are "We've got a problem," followed by "I'm not going to be President."

It remains mind-blowing that in that moment they don't raise heaven and hell to rescue Kopechne. And it's worse than what's generally known: She remained alive in the car for roughly two hours before she drowned. The amazing Jason Clarke somehow conveys a man both in shock yet calculating: He delays reporting the accident for ten hours—presumably until the alcohol leaves his system. Back in Edgartown, he takes a bath. He sleeps. He phones his father. Joe Kennedy (Bruce Dern), the patriarch, disabled by a stroke, manages to rasp out a one-word command: "alibi."

The next section counts down the days following the accident, as Robert McNamara (Clancy Brown) and Ted Sorenson (Taylor Nichols), et al. spring into damage-control mode, struggling to spin the accident to limit Teddy's culpability. Flailing around for alibis, Teddy resorts to lies—"I'll say she was driving"—and pleads a concussion, donning a neck brace that convinces no one. It's all about "putting a good face on this." Teddy's cohorts delight in seeing Neil Armstrong plant a flag on the Moon, because it will occupy TV and newspaper headlines. Even so, the challenge of putting forth a plausible story about the scandal prompts McNamara to snarl, "The Bay of Pigs was a better-run operation."

A rare scene that teases out the Kennedy family dynamic reveals just how cowed by his father Teddy has remained. "I've spent my whole life chasing your dreams for you," the youngest son says. "You're the head of the family now," Joe replies. "Start acting like it." In this case that seems to involve burying the truth, which remains tantalizingly out of reach. "I have no recollection of how I got back, no recollection of how I got out of the car," Teddy says of the accident. "I dove down repeatedly. I wandered around in a daze." But did he?

Thanks to longtime affiliations with the Edgartown police, facts and timing are fudged. Teddy pleads guilty to leaving the scene of an accident and receives a suspended sentence. Towards the end, campaign workers and folks from Teddy's home state weigh in on this latest Kennedy tragedy. No one blames him.

Shooting on location, DP Maryse Alberti captures the darkness and isolation of Chappaquiddick and the white sea-light of Edgartown, lending the film the authenticity of a docudrama. It shares the seductive melancholy that marked *The Painted Veil*, Curran's underappreciated adaptation of a novel by Somerset Maugham that dealt with redemption. *Chappaquiddick* extends beyond the screen because it needs to be seen against the later Teddy, who in the Senate became a force for good, achieving the gravitas and conscience so sorely lacking earlier. It's as if he fashioned the

remainder of his life post-Chappaquiddick as an ongoing effort at redemption. Given the powerful clan behind him, he was privileged with the opportunity to redeem himself; another man might have rotted behind bars for a lesser offense.

But times change. Today, public opinion might be less cavalier about the death of a young female staffer who never stood a chance at receiving justice once that roomful of fixers rewrote the story. The film implicitly raises the question, is not America a better place because Teddy Kennedy—though a party to someone's death—worked 50 years to advocate for equality and social justice? *Chappaquiddick* stops short of answering, yet the question shadows this searing film.

Click **here** (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5270948/?ref=nm_sr_1) for cast and crew information.

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