

GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK:

Radio made Edward R. Murrow a legend, but television destroyed his career.

In the 1940s, Edward R. Murrow was the voice that Americans heard from London while the city was being bombed by the Nazis. His voice and style was one of candor, directness and coolness. Television was a new medium in the early 1950s, and Murrow seemed a natural fit.

Director/co-writer George Clooney has done a masterful work in creating a “small” picture illustrating a great journalist who fought almost single handedly an injustice by Sen. Joseph McCarthy, the junior senator from Wisconsin.

The 1950s were a time when our greatest fear was the threat of communism spreading, and perhaps infiltrating and taking over our country. Sen. McCarthy led the fight and ripped through the country in a witch’s hunt for members of the communist party. Most were implicated by innuendo, not fact. It was a question of free speech vs. fear and it was about habeus corpus.

It’s not so much that Sen. McCarthy had any authority to investigate; it’s that no one had the courage to stand up to his bullying for fear of being a target to his assault. Our unrelenting fear led to his power. Those who questioned his purpose or tactics feared being labeled traitors.

One courageous man Edward R. Murrow and one group of newsmen from CBS news decided to stand up to him. They did a show on McCarthy in a weekly broadcast called “Here and Now.” Murrow was its moderator.

McCarthy’s veracity was challenged. The gauntlet was thrown.

David Strathairn brilliantly plays the chain smoking, taciturn Murrow. Rarely does Murrow show his cards. His motives and ideas are held closely to the vest. When on camera, Murrow has that ever present cigarette, he is close to the camera, or a television. Strathairn has captured Murrow’s mannerisms and is terrific here capturing that distinctive look in his eyes and the angle of his stance. His pauses show him taking things in, but we learn nothing about his personal life.

George Clooney plays Fred Friendly, the news producer who works hand in hand with Murrow. It’s interesting to see them do the show. Friendly, whose last name also exemplifies his warm demeanor, worked close by. They were a tandem. It was like Murrow was his mouthpiece.

McCarthy is viewed through his television broadcasts, therefore plays himself. Filmed as a quasi documentary, the film is shot in beautiful black and white. Most of the shots are close-ups. There are only a few sets (all claustrophobic), and cigarette smoke fills the screen all the time. It seems, in an unusual way, that the smoke energizes them and makes the film surreal.

Frank Langella plays William Pahey the powerful and influential patriarch of CBS. He believes in Murrow, but he tells Friendly and Murrow that this is a business and a public-trust.

Murrow presented facts and, therefore, was objective. Alcoa Aluminum dropped its corporate sponsorship. Viewership sagged.

McCarthy falls, of course, and that is giving nothing away here. He is seen as pathetic and weak when the Army lawyer, Joseph Welch asks him, “Have you no sense of decency?” McCarthy is felled by “truth.” He self-destructs.

Ironically, while Murrow was let go, McCarthy stayed on.

Murrow predicted the early on the “demise” of television. He envisioned it being a source of information, and a powerful advocate, not just entertainment. He cited “Howdy Doody” being number 2 in viewership each week as his reason for its imminent downfall.

There is an interesting subplot running through the film. CBS television had a rule that married couples could not work at CBS. Joe Wershba (Robert Downey, Jr.) and Shirley Patricia Clarkson) were secretly married. Was this a form of “McCarthyism?” Be clandestine or else...

Ultimately, the film works not only as a morality play on several levels, but works as a glimpse into the window of early live television. It questions the rights and duties of journalism in this country, exposes corporate pressure that decides what is shown, and ponders the public’s decision to decide whether it wants information or entertainment. This is a multi-layered gem.

90 Minutes

MPAA Rating: PG

RATING: A