

# BULWORTH (1998)

On DVD

*While checking some old files, I came across this 1999 review of the political satire. Unfortunately, it still applies to our political system and the current supremely nasty political campaign, so I reprint it below. The only change is my addition of the Jeremiah quotation.*

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 48 min.

Our rating by content (1-10): Violence-3; Language-8;  
Sex/Nudity-5.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

*I have seen your abominations, your adulteries and neighings,  
your shameless prostitutions on the hills of the  
countryside. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will it be  
before you are made clean?*

*Jeremiah 3:27*

Warren Beatty stars in, directs, and is co-author and co-producer of this dark satire designed to appeal to the mind as well as the funny bone. During the last week of an embattled primary election campaign in California U.S. Senator Jay Bulworth has had little rest or sleep. At stop after stop he drags out The Speech, a tired, uninspiring thing that begins with words like "As we enter the new millennium." Suffering from a near nervous breakdown in which he despairs of any meaning in what he has been doing, the Senator arranges for his own assassination. But this has unexpected results. With no future to be concerned about, he now feels free to speak openly and honestly about the corrupt political system, in particular how it is wedded to the influx of big money at the expense of the welfare of the common person. And he meets Nina

(Halle Berry), a beautiful volunteer whom he invites into his limousine. Infused with a new purpose in life, and gaining in the polls despite, or rather, because of, his bizarre behavior and outrageous statements, the Senator now has another problem—how to stay alive long enough to prevent the “hit” he has called down upon himself. This becomes a bigger problem than he had thought because his contact man is stricken with a heart attack that sends him into a coma.

The satire is as dark at times as a Bunuel film, beginning with the delightful thesis that a politician must suffer a nervous breakdown to tell us the truth. (Or, in life, be trapped by a dress that never made it to the dry cleaners!) The rap lyrics which the Senator breaks into before the TV cameras are witty and right on target: Money rules supreme in Washington, and to hell with the people.

The Senator’s eye-opening mingling with black ghetto folk reminds me of other films in which a high positioned character receives a new outlook on society by traveling and living in disguise among common folk—such as the King in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* or a department store owner in a film of the late 30’s or early 40’s, the title of which I can’t recall. Funny, too, is the reaction of the Senator’s chief aide Murphy (Oliver Platt): he is horrified at first by the Senator’s on-camera remarks and tries to re-interpret them for the press. But then, when he sees that the public is accepting and applauding his boss for his forthrightness and courage, he pretends to others that it was part of his strategy.

An especially insightful scene: A famous journalist takes the Senator to task for his use of so much obscenity. “Obscenity?” he replies, and then launches into a series of denunciations of what is truly obscene about the current political system—the disparity between the lives of ghetto dwellers and rich suburbanites, the buying and selling of favors in Washington. \* His tirade would be appreciated by Isaiah and

Jeremiah, as well as the angry Jesus of the temple protest and disputes. Quoting word for word from the various blacks whom he has met, including even the head of a drug gang, the Senator begins to engender hope in them that maybe they have found someone who will both speak and act upon the truth. What a novel idea in politics that would be!!

Bulworth is a visual parable in the sense that it challenges the way things are, appealing to viewers to dream dreams again. In one sense, it is a film more in tune with the 60's than the 90's, daring to infer that the political process can make any difference in people's lives. Few believe this anymore, especially in the wake of how the Clinton Presidency has turned out. The jarring ending of Bulworth is not too hopeful, reminding me of Phil Ochs's great song about John F. Kennedy "Crucifixion." Still, that even such a film as Bulworth could even be made and distributed is a sign of hope. Only someone with the stature and resources of a Warren Beatty could have done this. The large doses of ghetto language in the film will be offensive to many, but if you can take it, the film provides a rich viewing experience, and even encourages us to think about our sick political process. Will anyone, in Congress or the White House, ever tackle the issue of campaign finance reform? The old saying of St. Paul that "the love of money is the root of all evil" still holds true for our political system.

\* You can read this powerful rant on the IMDB site at: [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118798/trivia?tab=qt&ref\\_=tt\\_trv\\_qu](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118798/trivia?tab=qt&ref_=tt_trv_qu). Be warned that is full of the F and MF words.

*This review with a set of questions will be in the Nov. 2016 issue of VP.*