

# Erin Brockovich

BY MARK EVANS

Movie ideas, for some reason, seem to travel in packs. There have been numerous cases in the recent past where one movie has come out and another of very similar plot has been close on its heels. A couple summers ago we had the duelling asteroid movies, *Deep Impact* & *Armageddon*, we saw *Antz* & *A Bug's Life* duke it out at the box office, and *Volcano* went up against *Dante's Peak*.

While *Erin Brockovich* is not exactly near the release date of last year's *A Civil Action*, the two are more than a little similar. Both films concern the fight of the little guy against big business, both involve small-town America, both are based on true stories, and both are about tainted drinking water.

That said, *Erin Brockovich* is far and away the better movie of the two. For starters, Julia Roberts can act circles around John Travolta. Not exactly difficult, but it's still something. Erin's story is just as important as the case she's looking into and it gets a lot of screen time. With *A Civil Action* everything was put on the backburner except for the case, and the consequences of it were only mentioned in asides. Here it's placed front and centre with everything else.

Erin (Roberts) is down on her luck as the movie begins, having just gotten turned down for another job. As she's leaving, however, she ends up with even more troubles as her car is sideswiped by a Jaguar at an intersection.

Determined to see justice done, Erin hires a lawyer named Ed Masry (Albert Finney) to sue the car owner. The jury finds for the defendant, however, since Erin does not present a very good picture of herself in court. The defense does its best to paint her as white trash, which she is to a certain extent. She responds with some harsh language that does little to endear her to anybody.

We see Erin's family and the circumstances she has to live under, and her need to support her kids sends her to Masry's law offices to plead for a job. Once she finally gets employed she becomes entangled in a complicated real estate deal between a power company and the houses that surround it. The

company has not exactly been ecologically friendly and is trying to cover its tracks against a lawsuit.

One great thing about this movie is that it doesn't always do what you'd expect, always a hallmark of a good film. As I mentioned above, we see lots of how Erin lives and why we should care about her character. We get to watch her home life disintegrate as she becomes more and more involved with the case. Her character also undergoes a transformation in the eyes of the audience as well, as we see that Erin is far from the person she seems at first glance.

Another great aspect involves a situation that looks like it's going to become very 'Hollywood' with regards to sinister-looking individuals and big-guy/little-guy law cases. However, this goes in completely the opposite direction and it's nice to see that break from the norm at work.

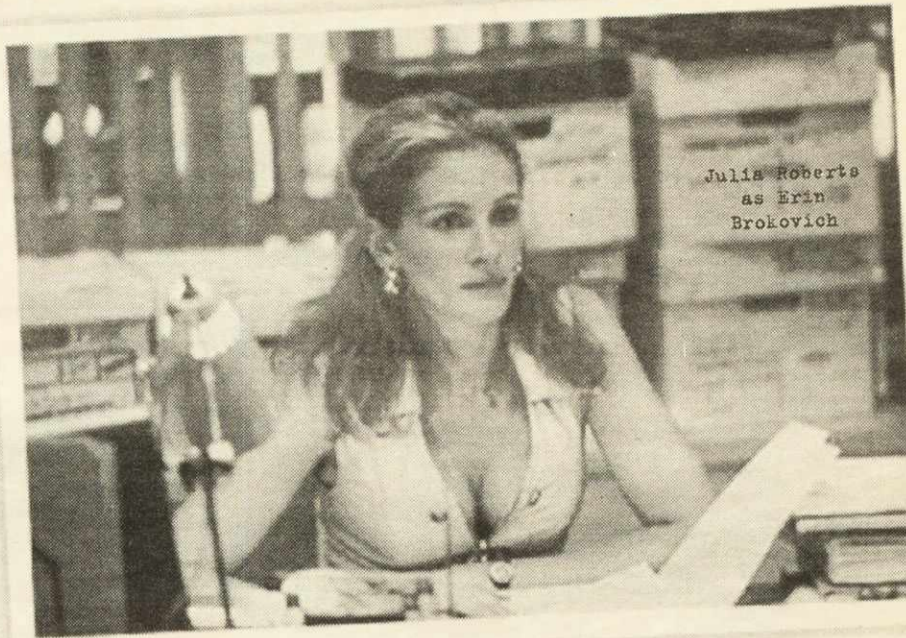
A lot of the reason that *Erin Brockovich* works stems from the great acting work. Julia Roberts does a great job with her part of Erin, easily making her into a character that is both sympathetic and worth rooting for. Her chemistry with Finney is spot on as well, the two have a great dynamic together and it's fun watching their working relationship grow and change over time.

Again like most films, *Erin Brockovich* is not perfect. There are

a couple problems I had with the film that drag down my score a little. First, a favorite theme of mine, the ending. For some reason a lot of movies in the last year have had trouble coming up with a satisfactory ending and this one comes so close to a great ending. However, just when the movie is winding everything up it leaves one huge plot thread flapping in the breeze with no closure whatsoever.

My other problem is admittedly more personal, in that this is still just another lawyer movie when all is said and done, even without courtroom scenes. The last really great legal movie that got made was *A Few Good Men*. *Erin Brockovich* downplays this somewhat in favor of the domestic side of things — a good move, I might add — but it's an inescapable part of the proceedings.

Bottom Line: Minor annoyances with the ending aside, *Erin Brockovich* is another fine movie from Steven Soderbergh. It's not quite as entertaining as *Out of Sight*, but it's darn close.



Julia Roberts as Erin Brockovich

If you've already seen *American Beauty* it's the best film in theatres right now. Three and a half stars. Oh, and I didn't mention it, but this film is wicked funny to boot.

Extra note: For anybody who

wanted to catch *Princess Mononoke* while it was in town but didn't because it was only playing during winter break, it'll be back at the Oxford theatre April 1 & 2 as part of their Film Series. Worth checking out.

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