

Talk Radio ★★★

Year of Release: 1988

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

When I saw *Betrayed*, I thought the most interesting part of the movie was its opening sequence, which portrayed the 1984 assassination of Denver shock-radio jock Alan Berg. I remember thinking at the time that someone should make an entire film about Berg. Director Oliver Stone obviously agreed and the result is *Talk Radio*.

Talk Radio is adapted from Eric Bogosian's play of the same name, which in turn was based on Stephen Singular's book "Talked to Death: The Life and Murder of Alan Berg." *Talk Radio*'s rendition of Berg is Barry Champlain, an all-night talk-show host who likes to insult and abuse his callers and attack their right-wing views. His listeners call to discuss topics ranging from sticking your hand in the garbage disposal to denying the existence of the holocaust. *Talk Radio* chronicles the last four days of Champlain's life, during which his boss is attempting to cut a deal for the national syndication of his show. With a corporate big-wig observing him, Champlain is expected to be on his best behavior—a chore he finds extremely difficult. Nearly all of the film is set in the KGAB broadcast studio with Champlain on the air taking phone calls.

Talk Radio is a directorial triumph for Stone; he makes watching a talk show for two hours absorb-

ing, thought-provoking, and visually stimulating. The camera work, editing, and close-ups of Champlain raving into the microphone give *Talk Radio* a strong sense of claustrophobia and in-your-face intensity. Stone has elicited an Oscar-caliber performance from Eric Bogosian, who plays the tormented, angry, and self-destructive Champlain. Some of his broadcasts in the film are so inflammatory and passionate that they bring you to the edge of your seat. *Talk Radio* is a gripping, close-range character study of a troubled man on the verge of an emotional breakdown. Stone also succeeds in tapping the talents of the film's excellent supporting cast, which includes Ellen Greene as Champlain's ex-wife and Alec Baldwin as KGAB's general manager.

My only criticism of *Talk Radio* is that some of the issues it raises get lost under a blanket of ambiguity. The film addresses such matters as racism, anti-Semitism, freedom of speech, and the role of media—especially radio—in our lives. But I never quite could fathom the exact point of the film, or the meaning of Champlain's life and death. Bogosian's electrifying performance and Stone's masterful direction, however, more than compensate for this shortcoming.