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## DARK WATERS RUN DEEP

MARK RUFFALO'S PASSION FOR THE ENVIRONMENT TURNS INTO AN ECO-THRILLER

WRITTEN BY KATIE CARPENTER

Mark Ruffalo is outraged—but in a good way. The passionate actor/producer channels his outrage into movies that are bold and sometimes uncomfortable. He tells stories that we need to hear, because they are about real things that scare us and bother us—things like fearless reporters and predatory priests, relentless lawyers and polluted water. Things like the health of rural families and why 190 cows fell over dead in a field in West Virginia.

His latest film, the 2019 eco-thriller *Dark Waters*, was born when he read an article about a lethal water pollution crisis in Appalachia. At the center of the story: one crusading attorney who goes up against powerful polluters and won't back down. Ruffalo had been looking for a film project that captured his own concern about environmental issues. He had already gone public with his opposition to fracking, so when he saw the article on toxic water, he knew he had his next story.

It does seem like real-life environmental crimes are coming to light more frequently these days—think Volkswagen, Monsanto, Duke Energy, Bayer, BP. As a nation, we are increasingly anxious about issues like climate change, mining spills and pesticides, yet these are rarely the basis for big-budget films or scripted television. It's a blind spot for some, but not for Ruffalo.

"I wanted to tell this story because it's probably the biggest corporate crime in history, and I couldn't believe that it wasn't on the front page of every newspaper in the world," he explains.

Ruffalo optioned the article, brought it to Christine Vachon and Pamela Koffler at Killer Films, and soon director Todd Haynes, Participant Media and Focus Features joined the project. Accustomed to playing superheroes like the Incredible Hulk, among his other famous roles, Ruffalo was going to need all his superpowers to transform this dark story into commercial success.

Fortunately, among those powers are uncanny instincts and im-



**Top: The chemical site near Parkersburg, WV, source of the waste at the center of the DuPont class-action lawsuit.**



**Bottom: Mark Ruffalo, Pamela Koffler, Christine Vachon at Produced By New York Conference**

peccable timing. He knows how to spot an underdog on the verge of beating the odds.

The movie follows Ohio lawyer Rob Bilott, who filed the suit against DuPont, the corporation primarily responsible for the pollution. The charge: They knowingly allowed a leak of the toxic chemical used to make Teflon, known as PFOA or C-8, from its plant in Parkersburg, West Virginia. It polluted local water supplies and was linked to the spread of many diseases, including cancer, to thousands of residents.

"At its heart, it is a film about doing the right thing and not giving up, even when it seems everything is against you," Ruffalo says. That's a superhero story he wanted to tell.

Bilott spent 16 years suing DuPont on behalf of everyone whose water was tainted by PFOA. After countless courtroom face-offs, the company and its subsidiary, Chemours, agreed to pay \$671 million in cash to settle more than 3,000 personal injury claims.

Three thousand people with cancer, deformities and other illnesses could frighten off a producing team, but co-producers Christine Vachon and Pamela Koffler have a history of bringing darkly powerful stories to the screen (*Boys Don't Cry*, *Safe*, *Still Alive*).

In the midst of a location scout for her next movie, Vachon talks about the prep work required on *Dark Waters*. "During development, we had to acknowledge that it was a complicated story, both in terms of the legal and the scientific aspects. We knew we had to embrace that and tell it carefully. We also wanted to make sure there was empathy for all the characters and all the angles, even though some were scary and upsetting."

Koffler adds, "When you produce a movie about the heroism of one person who truly made a difference, you may not leave the theater with your heart gladdened, but you do know you'll have something more: hope."

There's also an additional bonus: There are things you can say in an environmental movie that just can't get said in the courtroom. The hero, Bilott himself, confirms this. "In the movie, there is a scene where my character makes the comment, 'The system is

rigged. They want us to think it will protect us. We protect us. We do. Nobody else. Not the scientists, not the government. Us.' And that is unfortunately the reality right now," Bilott claims.

After a long journey of research and development, the film, which opened late last year, was admired as a sort of a cross between *Erin Brockovich* and *The Insider*. "Coolly hypnotic and bleak as the grave" wrote *Los Angeles Times* film critic Justin Chang. The movie found its audience and earned a 90% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Ruffalo, Haynes and their producing team had made an eco-thriller for the ages, both potent and illuminating.

Vachon remarks, "This is a true whistleblower story, and you can tell from all the Twitter posts, it got people thinking. There were a lot of people who said they thought it was going to be a dull procedural, but it was so much more."

One particular Tweet captures that sentiment perfectly: "A movie about real heroes. No capes. No superpowers."

David Linde, CEO of Participant, is proud of the influence the film has had. "The impact campaign Fight Forever Chemicals has worked to energize audiences around the world to demand stronger environmental protections. After launching the campaign in D.C., we worked in France, Brussels, the UK and here in the U.S. by partnering with key organizations—including the European Parliament—to ensure that the film fuels their movement to improve environmental health and safety. To date, nearly half a dozen corporations have joined our campaign's public pledge to eliminate chemicals from their shelves. States have offered new legislation to clean up legacy pollution, and through our Contact Congress tool, people have sent over 60,000 messages to federal legislators urging action."

"These kind of stories move me," says Ruffalo. "They are important stories that people need to have and hold onto, to feel that life isn't just a miserable, cynical experience. Today we're being led to believe that selfishness is the ultimate reality. And we're here to say there's an alternative to that: the truth."

With the impact of *Dark Waters*, other producers are asking whether the moment for more environmental moviemaking is here and if they should try to develop such projects.

On that point Koffler says, "No question that a movie in which a single hero goes up against all odds and actually wins the day can help people see the allure of stories like this. Be honest about the challenges, but highlight people's ability to come up with solutions."

Ruffalo sums up his *Dark Waters* experience with this reminder: "It is a cautionary tale about the magnitude of environmental damage caused when industry is allowed to set the rules and regulations. If we are truly going to protect the planet and one another, not only do we need tell more stories like this one, real superhero stories, but we also need to turn the mirror on ourselves and push our industry to switch to 100% clean energy, stop flying private jets and make sure our productions and sets are more sustainable." ■

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