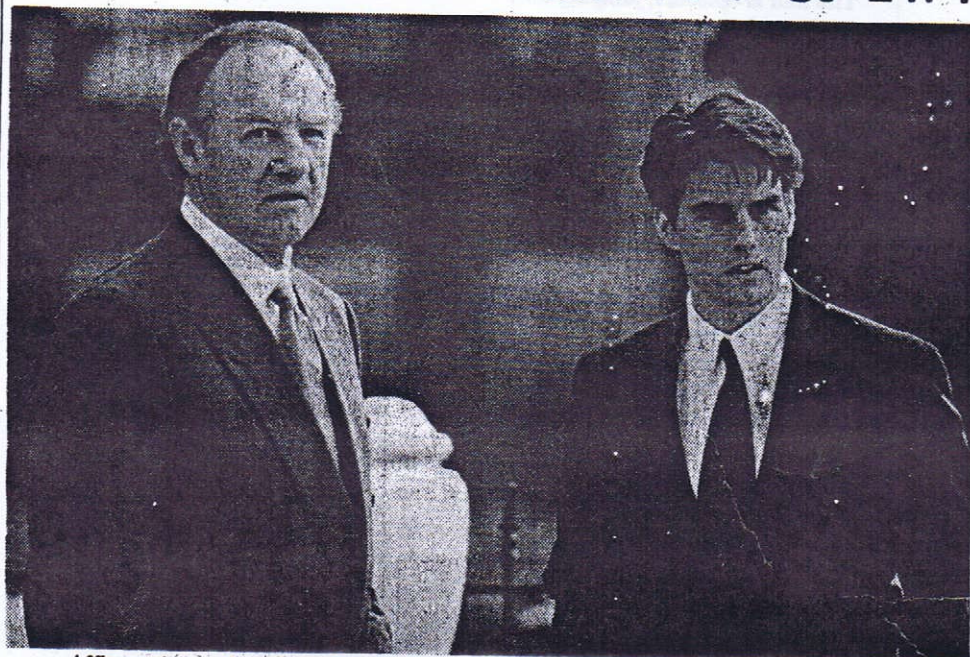


## THE WESTSIDER

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### ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



**Affirmative Action:** Gene Hackman and Tom Cruise in a scene from Sidney Pollack's thriller *'The Firm.'*

Photo: Francois Duhamel

'The Firm'

## Between the Firm and a Hard Place

BY MARK HALL AMITIN

What strikes home foremost in Sidney Pollack's new thriller, *The Firm*, is the intelligence of the writing. These days that's no small trick for a Hollywood that turns out wooden dialogue and trite plots faster than McDonald's sells hamburgers. At times one is drawn in by this cleverness and one might per-

haps be a tad too aware of a sharply coined turn of phrase; but over all, praise is in order for the trio of writers

collaborating on this near epic-length (two-and-a-half-hour) mystery. David Rabe, the playwright, has joined efforts with Robert Towne (*Chinatown*) and David Rayfiel to adapt John Grisham's best-seller for its journey to the screen.

Helping the film hold its dramatic center is the work of a stellar cast put together by director Pollack

(whose previous work includes *Out of Africa* and *Toolsie*) and starring Tom Cruise at his charismatic best with prodigious contributions by Oscar-winning actor Gene Hackman. Hackman's Avery Tolar brings depth and logic to a character we want to loathe but come to feel pity for as he guides Cruise's Mitch McDeere down a path to an oblivion of compromise and corruption. They are aided considerably by a lineup of heavy-hitters that include Holly Hunter, Ed Harris, Gary Busey, Wilford Brimley, Hal Holbrook and David Strathairn.

*The Firm* is a thriller in the true sense of the word. The twists of plot will keep you on the edge of your seat through much of the film. We know right from the get-go that there are creepy things going on, but we can't be sure what they are. Early on it's not always clear who's on whose side.

McDeere is about to graduate near the top of his Harvard law class and is being pitched to by the best law firms in the nation. The one dead set on landing him is a conservative Memphis tax specialists firm, Bendini, Lambert & Locke. They are willing to outbid all others to bag him. Mitch came from nothing. His mother lived in a trailer park and his older brother, Ray, is incarcerated for an unspecified crime. He keeps his past deeply buried from his potential employers and even from himself, having not communicated with his brother for some time. When McDeere and his wife (Jeanne Tripplehorn) first go to Memphis, she reacts as if she were about to become a Stepford wife, but all Mitch can see is the Mercedes, the house and the salary.

Only after he's on board do we begin to detect that there is something seriously amiss. Soon we discover that among the staid and stoic clients of Bendini, Lambert, et. al. is the mob from Chicago. Not only that but any other lawyer that tried to bail out of the firm wound up in the morgue. Soon

McDeere is approached by the FBI, which wants him to feed them documents and enough information to bring down these mordantly corrupt leeches.

McDeere realizes that he's caught in a nightmare that will blow up in his face and ruin his life no matter which

road he chooses. He must figure out which one he can live with. Ultimately, *The Firm* is a tale of moral choices — and degrees of

morality. The viability of the law itself wins out in the end. While there are strong traditional elements of the genre — shootings, chases, cliff-hanging escapes — they all lead us back to human choices, choices of real values over material ones. Even the irreversibly corrupt Tolar, as he faces his own demise, seeks redemption through McDeere and his wife, Abby, whom he ruthlessly tries to seduce throughout the film.

To tell you more detail than this would rob you of the essential thrills guaranteed by the plot and ruin the tension Pollack has worked so hard to devise. It is a very handsome film at the top of Hollywood's form for design, cinematography and pocket-book. It doesn't need special effects other than solid acting, a strong story, sharp dialogue and characters to root for and against. What Pollack has ultimately devised is a parable for the 1980s' excesses of greed and self-fulfillment at the cost of basic human values. ☐

Film