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Denzel Washington film gets law right

What's an esquire?" asks the aunt of Roman Israel's (Denzel Washington) jailed client-to-be. She wants to hire a lawyer for her wrongly accused nephew and trusts Israel because he says what's on his mind.

"Slightly above a gentleman, slightly below a knight," explains the frumpy legal savant with the lopsided Afro and aviator glasses in the film "Roman J. Israel, Esq."

Quixotic Israel has been tilting at windmills since his days in the 1970s as an activist at University of California, Berkeley's law school. Now hidden away in a closetlike office, he conducts legal research for his "partner" and law school classmate, Henry Jackson, a high-profile civil rights attorney who inhabits the spacious wood-paneled office at the front of the firm.

Israel resides somewhere on the autism spectrum and is so obsessive that he has committed the entire criminal code to memory. He speaks his mind because he can't control his candor. There's a reason the firm hasn't let Israel go near a courtroom in decades.

When Jackson suffers a heart attack, his family winds down the firm. Israel, along with the other firm assets, eventually winds up in the possession of George Pierce (Colin Farrell), a once-idealistic law student of Jackson's who now owns a four-office criminal defense shop. It is a glittering plea mill, coasting on a pumped-up win/loss record.

Before landing with Pierce, Israel tried to lend his services, his expertise and his social commitment to a nonprofit legal aid organization.

It didn't go well.

He was unappreciated by the



**REBECCA
L. FORD**

Rebecca L. Ford is counsel to Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM. She can be reached at rford@scharfbanks.com.

young people who were there to get their resumes embossed with a stamp of righteousness and the earnest, idealistic and improbably kind director of the organization, Maya Alston (Carmen Ejogo), is cutting staff anyway.

Maya invites Israel to speak to a group of millennials, who regard his chivalrous expectations as misogynistic. Even the ethereal Esperanza Spalding, ironically cast in a cameo as Coalition Activist No. 1, churlishly hurls an epithet at old-school Israel across a room full of would-be revolutionaries.

In a matter of days at Pierce's firm, Israel finds himself deep into an ethical dilemma. He may be brilliant, but he has no filter and he is psychologically incapable of compromise.

When he comes to believe he has compromised himself, Israel is hurled into an existential crisis and becomes his own prosecutor, judge and jury.

"Roman J. Israel, Esq." is a heartbreaking and thought-provoking film for any audience, but it is particularly poignant for lawyers.

The movie captures the pressures associated with keeping a law firm alive, the fragility of the ideal of justice and the human grind of the criminal court system.

Lawyers know how ethical challenges flare up, seemingly out of nowhere. We can relate deeply when Israel snaps, explaining, "I'm tired of doing the impossible for the ungrateful."

The flawed uncompromising Israel says aloud what we all think at some time. But while speaking one's mind may be cathartic, as Israel discovers, it has consequences.

At a screening for critics, the movie's writer-director Dan Gilroy and its star, Denzel Washington, spoke to us about Israel's duality.

"Roman has no regard for his personal administration," said Washington. To connote the heaviness of Israel's life, Washington gained weight and wore Rockport shoes two sizes too large while filming. He was shocked by the negativity of the comments targeted at him while he was in character.

"We step over people like that. We mock people like that," Washington said. "This is the kind of guy who could go out and hurt people."

Gilroy's goal was to make a film about the blessings and burdens of people who kept alive "an unadulterated fervent ideal" after others have moved on.

"This world doesn't celebrate selfless acts," said Gilroy, who is optimistic about the impact of the knight-errant Roman Israels of the world. He believes the movie's ultimate message is this:

"We are all agents of change. Whatever you believe in, stand up and advocate for it."