By PATRICK HALL
Special to The Wilson Post

Sometimes stories in films are just too crazy to believe, but in the case of the based-on-a-true-story film, “Argo,” the reality is more entertaining than most of what Hollywood cooks up these days, and it finally tells a miraculous story that saved the lives of six Americans.

Directed by **Ben Affleck**, who also stars as Tony Mendez, “Argo” tells of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, where the U.S. Embassy in Tehran was stormed and 52 Americans taken hostage. But there were six who escaped the embassy to the Canadian Ambassador’s home.

Mendez devises a plan to get the six embassy personnel home, by disguising as a Canadian film producer and the six Americans as his crew on a location scout in Tehran. It was, as **Bryan Cranston’s**
Jack O’Donnell put it, “The best bad idea we have.”

“Argo” finds a balance between tension, humor and the heavily emotional events to create a narrative that is deadly serious, but breaks tension in key moments with witty humor. However, not all of its best moments actually happened.

The humor plays off the silliness of Mendez’s plan, which to the higher-ups in the CIA and U.S. State Department, seemed far less plausible than providing the six embassy personnel with bicycles and maps and telling them to bike to the Iranian border.

John Goodman is outstanding as the late Hollywood make-up artist John Chambers and partnered with **Alan Arkin** as Lester Siegel, a character based on real individuals. Chambers, however, was critical to the operation as he helped sell the phony movie, titled, “Argo” to build a false layer of legitimacy.

Unfortunately, most of the six Americans in hiding are more or less extras in the film. We don’t

learn much about them other than a CIA briefing to tell their names and jobs. However, in a key scene, **Scoot McNairy**, playing Joe Stafford, stands out among all the others.

The beginning of the film starts with a documentary-style depiction of the storming of the embassy. Affleck cuts between actual footage of the event and his own reproductions with great skill, and the danger is palpable for the Americans inside.

The film is fun in the middle as Affleck, Goodman and Arkin's characters go on tour promoting and selling the fake film. It lands Affleck's Mendez in Tehran under his cover identity and he must school the six escapees on memorizing their own covers quickly.

Mendez is determined to get the hostages out not only to redeem himself, but also to avoid the red tape and save their lives. While the CIA and government drag their feet, afraid of looking badly on the world stage, Mendez puts the escapees' lives first.

It all builds to unbelievable climax with close calls and heart-pounding tension. Affleck should be commended for creating and maintaining such a nail-biting series of events.

Of course, "Argo" suffers from the typical Hollywood "based on a true story" formula that takes liberties to create dramatic tension. The close-calls and near-escapes are Hollywood to the core and good movie-making, but disappointing when watching a film about true events.

I give screenwriter **Chris Terrio** credit for a really good script, which is based on an article written in 2007's *Wired* by **Joshuah Bearman**. Official documents of the event were declassified in 1997 by President Bill Clinton.

The film doesn't spare blame on the United States for the events that took place in Iran, noting the CIA-supported coup in 1953 that deposed a democratically-elected nationalist government. That coup put Shah **Mohammad Reza Pahlavi** in power and human rights violations that followed by his rule.

American and Iranian outrage is documented by actual footage from the time and dramatizations of real events. If anything, “Argo” looks and feels about as real as you can expect from Hollywood.

Like most films based on true stories, I’d advise you to read Bearman’s unbelievably good article after seeing the film. You can find it online easily.

But don’t sacrifice “Argo” for the other; it is still a heart-pounding good time at the movies.

“Argo” is rated ‘R’ with a runtime of 120 minutes and is now playing.

Editor Patrick Hall may be contacted at patrick@thegallatinnews.com.