

Julia Roberts plays whistleblower who brought down a president in 'Gaslit'



CHENNAI: The Watergate scandal was one of the murkiest in American history that brought down President Richard Nixon, and is now the focus of another dramatization with “Gaslit.”



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Some members of Nixon’s administration broke into the Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate complex in Washington in 1972. After The Washington Post broke the story, it was found that Nixon’s Republicans had attempted to sabotage the democratic process at the upcoming elections.

Many of us would have heard about two of the newspaper's reporters, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, who helped expose the crime. But there were other players, hardly known, who also played a crucial role in forcing the president to resign, and "Gaslit" explores these characters in an eight-episode series on Starz/Lionsgate Play.

At the center of this is Martha Mitchell (Julia Roberts), wife of Attorney-General John Mitchell (Sean Penn), the second most powerful man in the country after the president.



"Gaslit" was adapted by Robbie Pickering from a podcast, "Slow Burn," and helmed by Matt Ross. Supplied

What is very interesting about "Gaslit" — adapted by Robbie Pickering from a podcast, "Slow Burn," and helmed by Matt Ross — is that telephone tapping, planting bugging devices in the offices of opponents and harassing activists are common even today, 50 years on.

As we watch the early episodes, it becomes clear that Martha is not content to stay in the shadow of her husband, and begins to assert herself as she sees through Nixon's game. In fact, when John first gets the report of the Watergate break-in, she finds herself a prisoner in a California hotel where she had gone on holiday with her husband.

John was terrified that his wife, given to chatting with her journalist friends, would leak the scandalous story. But Martha was made of sterner stuff, and proceeded to blow the whistle, forcing the president to step down.

Sadly, Martha, despite her pluck, has been relegated to a footnote in history. But she sparkles in "Gaslit," incredibly transforming from a shallow socialite flitting from one party to another, spreading the gossip she hears, to an epitome of strength convinced that the president's yes-men were willing to go to any extent to serve him.



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And they included White House attorney John Dean (Dan Stevens), chief of staff H.R. Haldeman (Nat Faxon), aide Jeb Magruder (Hamish Linklater) and political adviser Charles Colson (Patton Oswalt). It is quite possible that these men would have had a free run had it not been for an alert security guard on his first night shift at Watergate who noticed a tampered lock. It was discovered that five of Nixon's men had just got in to plant the bugs and photograph sensitive material.

Although the series looks overcrowded and the episodes are somewhat unfocussed, we cannot take away the fact that it offers an insightful picture of all the unsung heroes who helped push the Watergate narrative to a point where Nixon found himself cornered. Martha's role is gloriously patriotic; and Penn, though unrecognizable in layers of prosthetics, is brilliant as ever.

Unfortunately, "Gaslit" falls short of the goalpost, failing to do full justice to the game Martha played.
