

## Films We Might Have Missed

For Ripostejournal to compete with professional film reviewers would be absurd. What could we do better than those with greater experience and knowledge? As the saying goes, "If you have a dog, don't bark yourself." This series of columns is intended to let the editor and guest columnists remind us of films of merit, including "classics," which they enjoyed, and which we might have missed.

As it does in so many other areas, fashion greatly influences our view of films. One personality in films who is definitely out of fashion is Woody Allen. In an industry full of people totally obsessed with themselves, Mr. Allen is one of the champions. But neither this failing nor his messy history in family matters, should prevent us in the least from enjoying his work. He is still producing excellent stuff.

### Small Time Crooks

Written and directed by Woody Allen (2000) it is a story about inept crooks who accidentally become very rich. Their "assimilation" into high society and sudden downfall are excellently depicted by Woody Allen, Tracey Ullman, Hugh Grant, Elaine May and others. Truly amusing.

### El Norte

Written and directed by Gregory Sava (1983) the film deals with the escape of a sister and brother from the violence in Guatamala, their perilous journey, arrival in the U.S.A. and its aftermath. Portrayed by Zaide S. Gutierrez, David Vilalpando, Ernesto Gomez Cruz, Alicia del Lago and others, El Norte is co-written and produced by Anna Thomas. Leonard Maltin in his 2002 Movie & Video Guide calls it "compassionate" and "unforgettable." If he had called the film "great" he would still be on the mark.

### Risky Business

1983: Directed and written by Paul Brickman and featuring Tom Cruise, Curtis Armstrong, Rebecca De Mornay, Joe Pantoliano, Janet Carroll, Kevin Anderson, Megan Mullally and others. This is not a film about profound truths or deep and complicated characters. A youngster (Tom Cruise) who is about to graduate from high school is left to look after a spacious and well-appointed suburban house on a large, landscaped lot while his parents go on a trip to Europe. As they leave, the father tells the son to use the station wagon and not the Jaguar if he should need a car. There are no prizes for guessing which car the lad takes to impress the girl on their first date. Of course the Jaguar is badly damaged but not in a traffic accident. How will he get the money for the repairs which are not covered by insurance? The young hero finds a way and everything goes swimmingly including the visit by a Princeton admission officer which he had entirely forgotten. But just as the parents are about to return, our hero has to "buy back" their furniture from a very tough pimp. To say more would give away too much of the story. Funny, even delicious!

### Secrets and Lies

1996: A British film written and directed by Mike Leigh which features Brenda Blethyn, Marianne Jean-Baptiste, Timothy Spall, Phyllis Logan, Claire Rushbrook and others. "Video Hound's Golden Movie Retriever" calls this film too long and gives it only two "bones." That is a minority opinion since the movie garnered a number of awards and held my interest every minute. It is the story of an adopted woman's successful search for her birth mother. Once the two women are reunited, they discover that they are very different in terms of education, profession - and even of race. Secrets and Lies tells the story of the developing relationship between the two. With no violence, no murder and no sex, this movie is still fascinating. Not to be missed.

### Mumford

This 1999 movie written and directed by Lawrence Kasdan, stars Loren Dean and features Hope Davis, Jason Lee, Alfre (sic) Woodard, Mary McDonnell, Pruitt Taylor Vince, Zooey Deschanel, Martin Short, David Paymer, Jane Adams and others. In it, a youthful and attractive psychologist establishes himself in a smallish western city. He is such an exceptional listener that half the town wants to talk to him about themselves. There is also a wonderful Bill Gates type character with woman problems. The ending is bittersweet, but not tragic. This film is 'light' but as the saying goes, "Many a true word is spoken in jest." Three adults of various levels of sophistication saw the video and were in agreement that it had provided an evening of very enjoyable entertainment.

### Dead Man Walking

This movie, written and directed by Tim Robbins, was released in 1995. It stars Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn, supported by Robert Prosky, Raymond J. Barry, R. Lee Ermey, Celia Weston, Lois Smith, Scott Wilson and others. The film is based on a true story written by Sister Helen Prejean. Whereas The Video Hound gives it three and a half 'bones,' I believe it deserves the maximum four. Although there is one violent scene, it cannot be considered as a sensational or shocking film. One of its most interesting qualities is that the audience cannot determine whether the writer is for or against the death penalty. The most important element is Helen Prejean's attempt as a serious Christian to reach out to both the offender and the parents of one of the victims. Susan Sarandon is superb in this role, but Sean Penn is equally outstanding as the repulsive 'recreational' killer. This is a serious and unforgettable movie.

### Blazing Saddles

I believe the 1974 film Blazing Saddles to be a true comic masterpiece. "Everybody" has seen it, but I didn't until last year. It was directed by Mel Brooks who collaborated with Norman Steinberg, Andrew Bergman and Richard Pryor on the script based on a Bergman story. The tone is set by the title; guns blaze but saddles don't. It is an elaborate spoof

of Western films. The star, if you can call him that, is the black and extremely handsome sheriff, Cleavon Little. As is customary with all Western sheriffs, he is an incredibly good shot. The cast also includes Mel Brooks, Gene Wilder and Madeline Kahn. There is an extremely villainous villain who has a superlative line towards the end of the film when he climbs into an L.A. taxi and orders the driver: "Get me out of this movie." A parody is usually fun, but this one also has a wackiness which has to be experienced. In the style of Westerns, there is a saloon with a stage.

But who should appear but an Ersatz Marlene Dietrich, Miss von Schtrumpf! Watching her are, among assorted admirers, several men wearing WWII German uniforms and helmets. You figure this out. A Must-See-Film.

### Shine

Many films are based on real events; others have significant connections to real events, and the third group is primarily imaginary. Shine belongs to the first variety to the extent that the subject of the story, David Helfgott, a pianist, collaborated with the director and producer and played the piano for the actor who was his stand-in. This is a 1995 Australian movie which earned its star, Geoffrey Rush, an Oscar. But other actors, the director Scott Hicks, as well as the technical collaborators, garnered numerous awards in Australia, Britain and continental Europe. The story is of an unusually talented young pianist whose father, played superbly by Müller-Stahl, wants to dominate him totally. He succeeds for a while and blocks the boy from studying abroad. But the latter finally escapes. He has a triumphant concert in London followed immediately after that by a psychotic breakdown and spends many years in an insane asylum. A woman (Lynn Redgrave) who meets him helps him to return to playing music and eventually to a productive life. I saw the film twice, the second time after an interval of several years, and enjoyed it very much both times.

The films discussed below have something in common. They both deal with contests, but have nothing to do with sports. The first one is a spoof about dog shows, but since dog owners can be so crazy about their pets, it takes quite a while to realize that this is not a documentary. The other one Quiz Show is very interesting and engaging, but entirely serious.

### Best in Show

2000. A "mockumentary" directed by Christopher Guest about the antics of pet owners on the professional dog show circuit. Just as it has been observed that dogs are often better behaved than their owners, in this film you may conclude that they are, perhaps, also more sensible.\* With John Michael Higgins, Michael Hitchcock, Christopher Guest, and others.

\*As you view this movie, take a close look at the features of the animals. Interestingly, many of them bear a striking resemblance to their respective owners!

### Quiz Show

1994. There was a time in the 1950s when quiz contestants became instant celebrities and had their own fans, although it never got to the fan club stage. Viewers watched the proceedings with great suspense to see whether their favorites would make it once again. In fact, the show was carefully staged and entirely phony. There was great gnashing of teeth about this deception, but from a legal standpoint, no crime had

been committed, and no one had lost money, except on bets which were illegal in the first place. Directed by Robert Redford with John Turturo, Ralph Fienes, Paul Scofield, Martin Scorsese and others. Highly recommended.

The two films recommended below were produced twenty years apart and are different not only technically but in mood as well.

### Amarcord

Italy, 1973. Screenplay by Federico Fellini and Tonino Guerra. Directed by Federico Fellini. Cast includes Pupella Maggio, Armando Brancia. *Amarcord* is supposed to be descriptive of life in Fellini's hometown during his youth. There is a great deal of atmosphere and not that much action. Many moviegoers who are familiar with his work, think this is Fellini's most beautiful film. It is not all sweetness and light, since Fascism in the form of parades and uniforms cast a shadow on the scene.

### The Piano

New Zealand 1993. Screenplay: Jane Campion. Directed: Jane Campion. Cast includes Holly Hunter, Sam Neill, Harvey Keitel and Anne Paquin. This is a film of mystery and action, much of which takes place in or near the lush New Zealand forest. A 19th century "mail order bride" who is either mute or pretends to be so, arrives with her daughter as interpreter, and her piano which was dropped off on the beach by the small boat. There is circumstantial evidence that there is no "chemistry" between the bride-to-be and her intended husband. The latter refuses to have the piano brought to his house through the dense forest. However, his neighbour arranges for the piano to be taken to his own house. The visits of the bride to the neighbour's house to play the instrument lead to a passionate affair and the fury of the cuckolded husband. A violent scene ensues. The film is consistently interesting but the landscape alone is worth the price of admission. *The Piano* won three Oscars.

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