

A Second Look – 2006

If you read this column regularly, you probably know that this reviewer likes a good “ensemble” film, a movie with no lead character or characters so much as a group of good actors—with good lines--giving palpable form to a complex social setting... a story that leaves one with a sense of fully realized and rounded life. There are never that many in any cinematic year, but at least four humdingers came along in the last year.

Junebug was one such. Taking off from the culture clash resulting when a Carolina boy (Alessandro Nivola) comes home to introduce his sophisticated Chicago bride (Embeth Davidtz), the film has the newcomer interact with a rich panoply of local folk. Wonderfully, director Phil Morrison avoids condescension on all sides and makes a parade of characters that could be facile stereotypes into complex, unpredictable beings. Amy Adams as a young bride bursting to break out of her narrow world is marvelous in a breakout role that appropriately won her an Oscar nomination.

Nine Lives tellingly presents nine women’s stories, several of them intersecting or merely glancing off each other, each told in exquisite and rich ten-minute takes. The film, delicately directed and written by Rodrigo Garcia, plays out like a superb collection of short-short stories, many of them told with a nuance and depth that some full-length movies never achieve. Some big names appear--Hollie Hunter, Sissy Spacek, and Glenn Close—but nobody hogs the screen, and all nine actresses sacrifice star turns for the good of the overall ensemble.

Loggerheads tells the story of an adoption “triad”—birth mother, child, and adoptive parents—in three interwoven stories each set in a specific region of North Carolina. One of its chief assets is the way writer-director Tim Kirkman plays with time and subtly contorts the chronologies of its protagonists to bring surprise and depth to his chronicle. That story is gracefully wrapped up in a moving scene of two mothers comparing notes on their son. The film is considerably enhanced by well-modulated, honest acting all around, led by comedian Bonnie Hunt in a serious role.

Finally, for my money, one of the very best ensemble pictures in the last decade was released locally last year: *The Best of Youth* (“La Meglio Gioventu”), a compelling film that dissects the last 40 years of Italian life through the stories of two brothers and the people that intersect their existences. The narrative begins in 1966 when the brothers, Matteo and Nicola, are primed to complete university studies in Rome, and it follows them and their families as they graze against many mileposts in post-war Italy. One slowly--but never tediously--comes to identify and root for these fellows and their life companions. Just as importantly, you get involved in these lives, and you don’t want their story to end. This sweeping, generous film, directed by Marco Tullio Giordana, was originally shown as a miniseries for National Italian Television (it runs six hours). The scope and duration of *The Best of Youth* meant it was little seen in cinemas; having it now on video (it’s one you may have to hunt for) should allow many more people to discover its magnificence as it fully unfolds—like a ripe novel--in their living rooms.

For individual acting mention, the English film *Separate Lies* displays a wonderful lead performance by Tom Wilkinson. With a firm grasp of dialogue and character, this

examination of a contemporary marriage going awry is made the more effective by a most admirable Brit restraint (it was written and directed by Julian Fellowes, who wrote *Gosford Park*). The whole cast (including Rupert Everett and Emily Watson) is smashing, but Wilkinson as an uptight solicitor is the fulcrum of the movie, its moral center around which the dilemmas gyrate. He is, by turns, sincere and stuffy, a man seeing things slip away yet earnestly trying to keep them together. You sympathize with him, yet you still understand that, yes, he could be a hard man to live with.

The Middle East crisis and terrorism are everyday concerns for us these days, and two recent, largely unseen, films aim—with restraint and laser-like focus—at showing us the personal lives of suicide bombers. In the American-made *The War Within*, we observe a Pakistani militant (Ayad Akhtar, who also co-wrote the screenplay) as he carefully contemplates an attack on New York City at the same time he is coming to regretfully admire the lives of the decent New Jersey family with which he stays. The film gets into the minds of one potential terrorist as few others films have. More distanced, but just as effective in its way, is *Paradise Now*, made by a Palestinian born in Israel, Hany Abu-Assad. It follows two close friends, Palestinians Said and Khaled, who are recruited by an extremist group to mount a suicide attack in Tel-Aviv. Their project is initially aborted, and they separate, with one still focused on his deadly task while the other begins to have his doubts. It unfolds with the authenticity of a strong documentary, bringing a piece of the amorphous “war on terror” to life.

The last few years have been great years for the documentary form, which has even produced a few real blockbusters (*Fahrenheit 911*, *March of the Penguins*). Last year was no exception with films like *Murderball*, wherein super-tough quadriplegic athletes compete in a rugged soccer-like game, and we get to know them intimately. The film uncovers a fascinating world you didn’t even know was out there, and the narrative is much aided by depicting a true world-class rivalry. People avoided this documentary because they were reluctant to see the disabled; that was a mistake since these guys DON’T need your pity and they would just as soon be in your face as in your sympathies.

Another very different kind of contest figures in *Mad Hot Ballroom*, this one a city-wide ballroom dancing competition among fifth-graders in the New York City public schools. The girls are sweet, the boys tentative, the teachers and instructors an inspiration--all leading up to the big finale (in which you root for everybody!). And, if dance is your thing, there is also *Ballets Russes*, a history of the famous Paris-based ballet company that introduced the elegant art to a good part of the world, including the U.S. Rich with vintage clips and performances, and especially enlivened by sparkling interviews with many classic dancers—most of them Russian exiles—the film is a gracious salute to a landmark company.

Then there is *Grizzly Man*, a unique documentary about an obsession revealed on video by amateur naturalist Timothy Treadwell, who spent 14 summers observing and living with grizzly bears in Alaska and whose life was ended when he was eaten by one!. His eccentric tale is told with both respectful solemnity and genuine humanity by a master of the bizarre, German director Werner Herzog, who came upon the Treadwell footage and blended it effectively with a biography of the man. Whether you will wish to accompany Herzog on his quest to plumb the psyche of a fixated soul who saw himself as a modern “samurai” is hard to judge; yet this quest carries its own singular measure

of fascination.