

A Second Look – 2009

This is my annual look back at the “Movies That Got Away,” good films that were relatively little seen when first released in area theaters. These mini-reviews focus on modestly-budgeted productions with sound scripts, capable direction, and stellar acting. Though I have tried to indicate pictures now available at local Hill video stores, some of them may have to be searched for via Netflix or another video supplier.

First, there are five films which boast outstanding lead performances, all superbly realized:

The Visitor - Written and directed by Tom McCarthy, “The Visitor” delicately captures a human drama about the stirring of a deadened soul, played beautifully by Richard Jenkins (Oscar nominee) as Walter. That awakening is slow and gradual, an awakening to a new intercultural couple, to a new interest in music, and to the new responsibility of caring for someone. His performance, lovely to watch, is capped by a most authentic outburst at officialdom and then a striking gesture of homage to a friend which signals Walter’s new sense of freedom and connection to others.

Frozen River - A slice of American under-class life, illuminated by a wonderful performance by Melissa Leo (best known for her role as a tough cop years ago on TV’s “Homicide”). Leo is Ray Eddy, a struggling single mom who lives from hand-to-mouth at the New York-Canadian border and who gets involved in illegal immigration smuggling with a truculent young Indian woman. The drama is grim but compelling, and Leo stands out for her terrific naturalistic acting, which earned her an Oscar nomination.

Happy-Go-Lucky - A plucky yet complex film from the usually sober English director Mike Leigh, where stellar lead Sally Hawkins supplies the pluck as an inordinately cheery school teacher named Poppy in a rough-and-ready working class London. Her perpetually upbeat persona may seem unnatural at first, but Hawkins convinces when she also shows Poppy’s tenacity and grit, especially during her encounters with Eddie Marsan, playing (splendidly) a time bomb masquerading as a driving instructor.

Ghost Town - Another fine Brit performance—by comic Ricky Gervais—that was, in my estimation, overlooked by critics and audiences. Gervais is an egotistical, cynical dentist named Bertram in New York who starts to see dead people who want to change their last moments of life through him after he has survived a near-death experience. His gradual conversion to nice guy is done convincingly and with high humor. Gervais also has great on-screen chemistry with his co-star, comic actress Tea Leoni.

Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day - In a charming film too easily overlooked, Frances McDormand comes out a winner as the eponymous Miss Pettigrew, an out-of-work governess in 1939 London who eventually finds employment as a social secretary to an ambitious American actress. The dialogue, mood, and action of the picture are all nimble, but nothing is more sprightly than McDormand, an old maid who learns to “make do.”

The past year also saw several superior foreign-language films which never received their full due. Four that are worth your attention are:

The Edge of Heaven - This forceful and intricate cross-cultural story superbly intermingles four (and more) different lives between contemporary Germany and Turkey, with nationals of each country struggling to both understand—or rediscover--the other. Its complexity requires patience, but it is a patience well rewarded. A relative newcomer, Fatih Akin, is the writer/director who brings weight and humanity to an intriguing set of Turks and Germans.

Tell No One – A French thriller-cum-who-dunnit which opens with a smash, then carefully, gradually creates a complicated and gripping tale of a might-be murder. A man loses his wife only to discover that, after eight years, she may still be alive--but how? Lead actor François Cluzet is stellar as the befuddled, groping doctor who seeks his lost love. The film also contains one of the best, and most effective (because it’s so real) chase scenes in recent movie history—Paris can be scary!

The Counterfeiters - The dilemma of life in a special concentration camp poses an excruciating moral quandary—to aid or not aid a Nazi financial scheme—and thus presents a compelling Holocaust story. The tale is much aided by the beautifully gauged, unfussy performance of the lead (Karl Markovics) who plays the cynic hustler Salomon for whom mere drudging life is all there is but who comes to see loyalty, sacrifice, and camaraderie in a new way. He becomes, ultimately, a survivor, yet not the kind of man he wants to be.

The Class - This French movie adeptly mingles fictional and documentary material and, in mingling them, gets at some deeper truths about the fitful education of immigrant populations in any urban center (nominated for an Academy Award for best foreign film). The setting is a diverse class of junior high students in a relatively poor section of Paris observed over one school year with a “real” teacher. Above all, the film demonstrates, in microcosm, the terribly hard work that teaching requires and observes it very humanely and believably.

Finally, in the world of the documentary film, there are three in particular that I would cite:

Encounters at the End of the World – One of the most original—and iconoclastic—of cinematic voices, German director Werner Herzog, conducts a fascinating tour of the end of the world, i.e., the McMurdo Sound scientific base in the Antarctic. There he finds a collection of brilliant misfits—like himself—who gradually reveal why they have come to this special place. Besides the farrago of people, there are marvelous vistas of that icy world, including some stunning underwater footage.

Man on Wire - A gripping story of a unique event—the dramatic wire-walk across New York’s World Trade Center twin towers in 1974—wrapped around a profile of the wire-walker himself, the Frenchman Philippe Petit. Standard documentary interview material with Petit (a flamboyant character) and his colleagues is interspersed with a cleverly staged and pulse-pounding reworking of the clandestine operation required to get into the Towers themselves: a thriller within a biography, and an Oscar winner for best documentary.

Young @ Heart - A triumphantly buoyant and upbeat documentary depicting the “Young at Heart Chorus” from Northampton, Massachusetts, told through several members of the group—average age 81--and their dedicated director Bob Climan. The film also gives us six weeks of the group’s rehearsals, leading up to a slam-bang end-of-season concert featuring rock and pop classics. More than a movie about “cute old people” (although many of those *are* featured), it highlights how the human spirit can be uplifted through music and community.

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