

Second Look: An Annual Survey of Overlooked Films

With this column, I again nominate several “Movies That Got Away,” feature films (from 2019) less noticed or hyped upon release. This selection avoids mainstream Hollywood fare for movies which offered something distinctive, discriminating, or novel. Most of the films mentioned below had short runs and modest US box office but glowed with quality.

As in all movie seasons, there are standout individual performances that too few people saw and which were ignored during awards season. Here I cite three male performers in very distinct roles.

Dark Waters - For drama, Hollywood often turns to stories “based on” or “inspired by” real events. Some especially ring true, such as this wrenching eco-legal-thriller. Director [Todd Haynes](#) tackles a ripped-from-the-headlines docudrama done in a richly-



textured but straightforward style. “Dark Waters” stands or falls on Mark Ruffalo’s lead performance. He plays a modest corporate lawyer content with his life but roused by injustice and corporate greed to get to the core of a pollution case. He dominates the film, not

with showiness, but with an ingrained naturalism befitting his diffident character. This is as compelling a personage as he has ever portrayed. “Dark Waters” also run deep.

Mark Ruffalo shines as a committed lawyer in “Dark Waters,” a Focus Features release. Photo credit: Mary Cybulski

The Mustang -- Matthias Schoenaerts stars as a pugnacious inmate in a Nevada prison who redeems himself through taming wild horses. The symbolism of “The Mustang” may be obvious—one caged animal restores another—but the honest, unflashy depiction (in an authentic Nevada landscape) of that redemption done by French director/actress Laure de Clermont-Tonnere just rings true. Schoenaerts is a block of a man with a short fuse, but the film captures his hard-won empathy with patient resolve, and grace, especially in a heartrending passage between him and his

estranged daughter. There is no neat resolution but hope for a hard-bitten prisoner to find his humanity.

All Is True – Kenneth Branagh has filmed a passel of Shakespeare’s plays but, with “All Is True,” he takes on the very Bard himself in a sensitive speculation on Will’s last years, retired and settled back in Stratford-on-Avon. Branagh stars and directs—with aplomb--and has worthy collaborators in scenarist Ben Elton, cinematographer Zac Nicholson, and music director Patrick Doyle. Dame Judi Dench plays Anne Hathaway, the feisty counterpart to the testy genius. The most striking scene comes when two master actors, Branagh and Ian McKellen, discuss a favorite sonnet at Shakespeare’s manse. It is a masterful set-up, shot in candlelight, within which both performers recite in quiet perfection.

The year also saw the presence of three worthy ensemble films that showed versatile casts in very distinctive locales.

The Last Black Man in San Francisco – A touching and lyrical cinematic poem about a nostalgic San Francisco, wherein a young black man, Jimmie Falls, along with his best friend (played by Jonathan Majors), try to recapture his family’s legacy by re-inhabiting the classic “painted lady” house his grandfather built. Besides delineating Jimmie’s quest, the film examines the effects of the city’s gentrification—in both sober and whimsical tones. To add to the mix, the film takes off on occasional surreal or surprise trips. A terrific debut film by a San Francisco native, Joe Talbot, who created it with the help of his protagonist Falls.

By the Grace of God -- Labeled “a fiction but based upon fact,” this fine French film by François Ozon recounts a real legal case brought by three survivors against an abusive priest in contemporary Lyon. Investigating the scandal over two years, the film shows a steady, inexorable momentum, with each phase of the three survivors’ experiences played out in an even, restrained, style. It deals with the most sordid of themes yet avoids wallowing in them. The victim’s



vile experiences are recounted but in an unvarnished, and almost chaste, way. The true strength of Ozon's film is his patient directing of his three very different leads.

Melvil Poupaud (right) receives communion in the French docu-drama "By the Grace of God." Photo courtesy of Music Box Films

Everybody Knows – Director Ashgar Farhadi leaves his native Iran to take on a complex family drama filmed in Spain. The drama, turning on a child's kidnapping, involves intricate family dynamics, builds palpable tension, and includes a late-blooming reveal. The film's feel for Spanish life and relationships is a complement to Farhadi, given that he's working in an alien tongue and culture. His typically knotty plotting is in full evidence, pulling the viewer into his story effectively. Farhadi also retains his touch with actors: he fluidly guides a very accomplished cast headed by two stars, Penelope Cruz and Javier Bardem, who are fully blended into the rich ensemble.

A trifecta of quality documentaries screened last year could not have been more different but did not gain the audience attention they deserved.

They Shall Not Grow Old - This stunning documentary presents an amazing manipulation of old images to create a thrilling reimagining of the past. With more than 2,000 hours of footage married to 600 hours of radio



interviews, director Peter Jackson spent a year crafting, as he said, "an average man's experience of what it was like to be an infantry soldier in WWI." The amalgamation of the material is singularly achieved through the original film's digital enhancement, converting jerky silent footage to an

even (colored) flow on the screen. This is a unique work, one which might prove a model for future looks at history.

On left side, WWI British infantrymen appear in reconstructed, colorized footage contrasted with soldiers in original silent footage in “They Shall Not Grow Old.” Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures

The Biggest Little Farm -- This heart-warming documentary chronicles the eight-year quest of the Chester (John and Molly) family of Los Angeles to achieve their dream of a diverse, well-rounded American farm. The Chesters find 200 acres of despoiled farmland near Los Angeles to begin their experiment to live in harmony with nature. With John as narrator, we are taken year by dogged year through their revitalizing of the land, aided by a series of volunteer farmhands. Their perseverance overcomes numerous setbacks, from wolves and insects to rain storms. Still, with patience and resolve, they create an exquisite biodiverse design of magical panoramas, an Edenic farm lovingly realized on screen.

Honeyland -- This simple story is told with austere strokes, with stunning views of a ravishing landscape through which the beekeeper Hatidze moves like a lissome bird. The Macedonian co-directors took three years to film their story, but it is pieced together so adroitly that it carries the weight of a fable. Hatidze is a wonder. In her mid-fifties and sporting gnarled teeth and a weathered visage, she is both her inimitable self and an icon of the poor everywoman who has seen little but hardship. She is also smart, touching, and caustic, revealed mostly in the low-light reflections in her hut, with her mom as witness and target.

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