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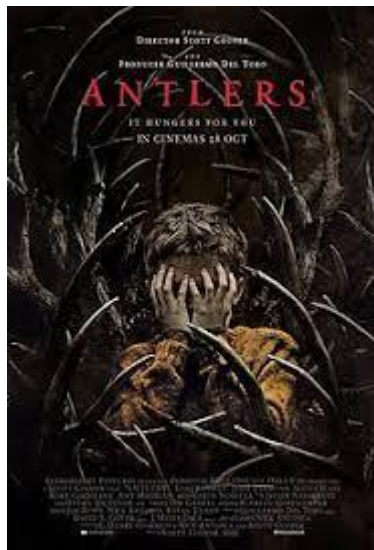
SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE

ANTLERS

US, 2021, 99 minutes, Colour.

Keri Russell, Jesse Plemons, Jeremy T.Thomas, Graham Greene, Scott Haze, Rory Cochrane, Amy Madigan.

Directed by Scott Cooper.



Antlers is an arresting title for a horror film. The attention is given to deer, their strength and power, antlers as a sign of strength and as a weapon.

This is a horror film which is above average, quite a strong cast with Keri Russell as a teacher, concerned about a student, a persuasive performance by the young Jeremy T.Thomas, becoming involved in the mysteries of his life and experience – but also listening to a Native American character, played by Graham Greene, explaining Native American myths, the power in animals, like deer, as well as evil presences taking these human and animal forms.

Which means then that there is a humane story underlying the aspect of horror, Keri Russell Julia and unhappy memories of her past and her abusive father, her abandoning home and her brother, Paul, Jesse Plemons, but returning after their father's death and coming back to the family home, but still tensions between brother and sister. Which gives some edge to Lucas's story, his brother, Frank, preparing drugs in a vast cavernous tunnel, overcome by the evil spirit in the form of a buck, Lucas confining him and he is very little brother, Aidan, into a locked cell in their house.

The first part of the film focuses on the family issues with the suggestions of horror. The grim horror takes over halfway through, especially with the gruesome killing of the sympathetic school principal, Amy Madigan.

Interestingly, while Paul is the sheriff and has his offices to support him, it is Julia who will exercise the heroics, the confrontation with the evil presence and monster, saving Lucas.

The film was directed by actor Scott Cooper (Crazy Heart, Out of the Furnace, Hostiles).

BENEDETTA

France/Holland, 2021, 131 minutes, Colour.

Virginie Efira, Charlotte Rampling, Daphne Patakia, Lambert Wilson, Olivier Rabourdin.

Directed by Paul Verhoeven.



Director, Paul Verhoeven, is no stranger to controversy. In fact, he has been courting controversy for over 40 years. And this film, about a nun in 17th century Italy, issues of sexuality, issues of power, is no exception.

From a Catholic perspective tube on, the film it raises issues of the exercise of power in the church, issues of sexual orientation, the spiritualising of power and sexuality, realities of Catholic history that cannot be ignored. More recent history of sexual abuse, clerical sexual abuse especially, means that many of these issues have lately been discussed more explicitly, more critically, and more shamefacedly at times.

And this should be the case with Benedetta. As with all serious topics, there is no limit as to the “what” can be presented in a film, any human issue, good or evil. Where the critical response comes is in the “how” the issues are treated. Since one of the main issues here is sexuality, sexual intimacy between two of the sisters, it does get something of the Paul Verhoeven (remembering his Basic Instinct). Some scenes will be too explicit for potential audiences. On the other hand, many will see them as part of telling the story and involving the audience whether the audience be sympathetic or judgemental.

In fact, just looking at the film as a period piece, Italy in the 17th century, the city of Pescia with a visit to Florence, it is quite a substantial historical film, the costumes and decor of the period, the

architecture, the music, church music. And we see the custom of young girls being dedicated to life in a convent from an early age, their growing up there, the sheltered life, the daily routines, the community, prayer, the role of the chaplain. To this extent, the film is interesting observation and involvement. But, it is also more interesting in terms of the exercise of power in the church, the role of authority, the claims for the will of God and the question as to who it is that properly interprets God's will – instead of the personal whims of the superior.

Benedetta, Virginie Efira, is a strong little girl, seemingly with some supernatural powers, but certainly, and as she grows up, in vivid connection with the person of Jesus Christ, her imagination and contact with him visualised, on the cross, or as a knight in armour avenging Benedetta. She is confident, continually praying, interpreting Jesus' will for the community. But she becomes quite emotionally tangled with a young woman seeks asylum in the convent, away from her abusive father and brothers, illiterate, bewildered, but immediately finding sympathy, attraction, sexual attraction to Benedetta.

And we are reminded of the sheltered upbringing that Benedetta has had, of the customs and moral perspectives of the period, and the effect that the young woman, Bartolomea, exercises, domination, sexual experience from her past abuse.

While this is at the centre of the film, there are also issues of church authority, of the dominating role of men in the church. The abbess of the convent is played most effectively by Charlotte Rampling, a dedicated woman, shrewd and pragmatic, a woman of peace – until convent life is changed when Benedetto has weird dreams, experiences the stigmata, cuts her forehead to resemble the wounds of the crown of thorns – which leads to her being denounced as a fraud. But, in the meantime, the chaplain promotes her, the people seeing her as a saint, and she is installed as the abbess and she herself begins to dominate the community, the town, always relying on her close connection with Jesus.

For those interested in ecclesiastical politics, there is a portrait of a papal Nuncio (Lambert Wilson), a worldly and dissolute man who wilfully exercises power, judging Benedetta, condemning her as a witch, his turning into a ruthless Inquisitor, the threat of her being burnt at the stake.

It might be interesting to consider other films on convents in historical times, disturbed nuns, issues of whether the disturbance is spiritual or psychological: Anglican nuns in India in *Black Narcissus*, issues of innocence and ignorance in *Agnes of God*. The most immediate comparison is with Ken Russell's 1970s *The Devils*, far more outlandish in its treatment of mass hysteria, askew spirituality, than is found here. But, *The Devil's* is set more or less at the same time as *Benedetta*.

Secular audiences will find this an interesting addition to Paul Verhoeven's oeuvre. Religious audiences will find it a challenge in a topic which requires challenge and reflection.

A BOY CALLED CHRISTMAS

UK, 2021, 106 minutes, Colour.

Maggie Smith, Henry Lawfull, Michiel Huisman, Jim Broadbent, Sally Perkins, Joel Fry, Kristin Wiig, Toby Jones, voice of: Stephen Merchant.
Directed by Gil Kenan.



This is a British Christmas entertainment, for the younger audiences, but with something of a classic British cast, parents and grandparents may well enjoy watching it with the children.

Here we have a different take on some Christmas origins. The perspective is that of elves, reindeers, presents and centre, rather than the Bethlehem-origins story (no mention of this). And, even St Nicholas might not be pleased with this film as it offers quite an alternative to his story, the Bishop who kindly provided gifts and allowed his name to be transferred from St Nicholas to Santa Claus!

So, this is an alert to those who might want to see something of an acknowledgement of what Christmas really is rather than just the story of elves and gifts.

A film with Maggie Smith in its opening sequence certainly commands attention. No refugee from Downton Abbey here. Off she trudges in snowclad London streets, Aunt Ruth, to babysit three children and tell them stories. They are a bit grumpy, something of a captive audience – but we are willing to listen to her. And, of course, they will too!

She tells a story of Lapland, a remote town, a father who works with his son, Nick, (Harry Lawfull). There are some cantankerous types in the town but the King comes out (Jim Broadbent) to urge everyone to hope. When his father goes north and is not heard of, Nick decides to go to search for him.

So, he sets out to find his father, accompanied by a reindeer, Blitzen, and his pet mouse, Miika whom he trains to talk (with the voice of Stephen Merchant!). He does discover Elfland, many friendly, but controlled by an almost-witch-like character, Mother Vodol, played intensely by Sally Perkins. There are some friendly elves, especially Toby Jones, and some of the children. As Nick goes

on his quest to find his father, he discovers some sinister doings, especially the kidnapping of a little elf, confined to a cage.

All kinds of adventures, Nick's father and his love for his son, rescuing the kidnapped elf, the return to Elf land, Nick put on trial, but his bringing back the little elf and a wonderful transformation. The elves are back to work making plenty of toys, Nick taking a bag full, returning to the King, ho-ho, joins with Nick and Blitzn to do the Christmas tour and a happy distributing of gifts. And there is a curious comic cameo by Kristin Wiig as the grumpy Aunt Carlotta who is a partial for chocolates, especially those we see made in Elf land.

So here we are, a Lapland alternative to North pole stories (though they are much the same), an opportunity to listen to Maggie Smith telling the story (and noticing her ears as she puts on her hat and goes on her way)!

CLIFFORD, THE BIG RED DOG

US, 2021, 96 minutes, Colour.

Darby Camp, Jack Whitehall, Izaac Wang, John Cleese, Sienna Guillory, Tony Hale, David Alan Grier, Paul Rodriguez, Russell Peters, Tova Feldshuh, Jessica Keenan Wynn, Siobhan Fallon Hogan, Rosie Peres.

Directed by Walt Becker.



For older reviewers, they need to put on their grandparent glasses! And to discover that from 1963 to 1998, there were umpteen cartoon books with Clifford, the red dog is their focus. Which means that this 2021 version, live-action, while it is made for today's younger audiences, there should be many willing parents and grandparents to accompany the children, happy memories of times with Clifford!

Clifford is part of the litter, mother and others taken in by animal rescue. He gets out and encounters a moustachioed old gentleman sitting in the park, looking a little like Frank Morgan has the Wizard of Oz, but then revealed as John Cleese, Mr Bridwell, older and more portly than John Cleese used to be! And, this is a rather benign John Cleese, friendly, touches of magic, and certainly kindly towards children.

Then we are introduced to Emily Elizabeth (a very sensible name), who is picked on at school. Actually, Darby Camp who plays Emily Elizabeth is a very strong screen presence, seemingly not the little girl and would be bullied or lack self-confidence. She loves animals and goes into Mr Bridwell's tent of exotic animals and falls in love with Clifford, bright red and very cute.

Emily Elizabeth is being looked after by her undependable uncle, Jack Whitehall, a slob, accident-prone, put down by everyone, lacking self-confidence. He can be very irritating. But, we know that by the end he is going to be lovable and heroic – which happens, more or less!

The big thing is that Emily Elizabeth loves Clifford so much, despite Clifford's touches of mischief, that overnight he increases to not just being a big red dog but a BIG red dog. Lots of comedy here, smashing things as he tries to move around the apartment, sits on scales and breaks them... Plenty of old-fashioned comedy here.

But, of course, there has to be a villain of the piece, and here is in the form of Tony Hale, a tyrant running a big business to produce more food for the world, experimenting with animals, seeing publicity and promotion with Clifford and claiming him, trying to capture him, sinister and sleazy. We just can't wait for him to have his comeuppance! E does his bit but, it is over to Emily Elizabeth to be confident, assertive, even give a speech in defence of animals.

There are lots of character actors in supporting roles, especially the inhabitants of the apartment block, African-Americans, Hispanics, Jewish. And Emily Elizabeth's best friend, Owen, is an American Chinese his millionaire father is very understanding, hospitable, trying to save Clifford.

This is one for the younger audiences, the teenagers might be tempted to think that it is below them (but they should enjoy it also). The film, like Clifford, grows on you and, even in grandparental mode, you find that you have enjoyed it.

DELICIEUX/ DELICIOUS

France, 2021, 112 minutes, Colour.

Gregory Gadebois, Isabella Carre, Benjamin Lavernhe, Guillaume de Tonquedoc, Lorenzo Lefebvre. Directed by Eric Besnard.



French cuisine! Who can resist? And the title so apt.

But, what we didn't know about French cuisine is that the restaurant was a French invention of the 18th century. Prior to that, there were inns for travellers passing by, meagre meals, watering and the tending of horses and travellers moving on. This was taken for granted.

But, in the meantime, in the palatial dining room and large kitchen is of the Duke of Chamfort, elaborate menus, 9 to 12 courses, were being prepared for the arrogant Duke and his guests. The Duke's opinion was that the plebs had no right to good food, could not appreciate it. As his guests gobble and quaffed, the chaplain gives them a little speech on gluttony as a cardinal sin (completely blind to his own arrogant pride).

The cook is Marencon, a big and burly man, Gregory Gadebois (who could pass for Anthony Hopkins larger brother). He is devoted to his work, to his large staff, including his teenage son, Benjamin, and is dependent on the Duke's favour. There is a substantial scene where Marencon is brought before the guests for judgement, initially enthusiastic favour, then the priest denouncing the specialty (a delicious) of truffle and potato, throwing it to the floor, and veering the discussion to mocking condemnation – and the firing of Marancon.

He is a sympathetic figure, dismayed at falling out of favour, eager to be reinstated. He lives with his son in an old barn with a long-time acquaintance, not wanting to cook. Then he encounters Louise (Isabelle Carre), who tells him she made jams and wants to be his apprentice. He does not approve of women chefs! She has to do all the menial work. However, she gradually finds her place in the kitchen, finally revealing who she really is and why she is working with him.

Just as Marancon later found a new lease of life, the Duke announces that he will stop by the inn, a huge menu to be prepared, instructions as regards decor for a celebration. When this doesn't

happen, there is a crisis for Marancon and complications for his relationship with Louise and a surprising revelation twist of who she really is.

In fact, this is 1789, rumours of revolution, the populace often poor and starving, reference to the King and Versailles – and the audience for the film in revolutionary vein in hostility towards the Duke.

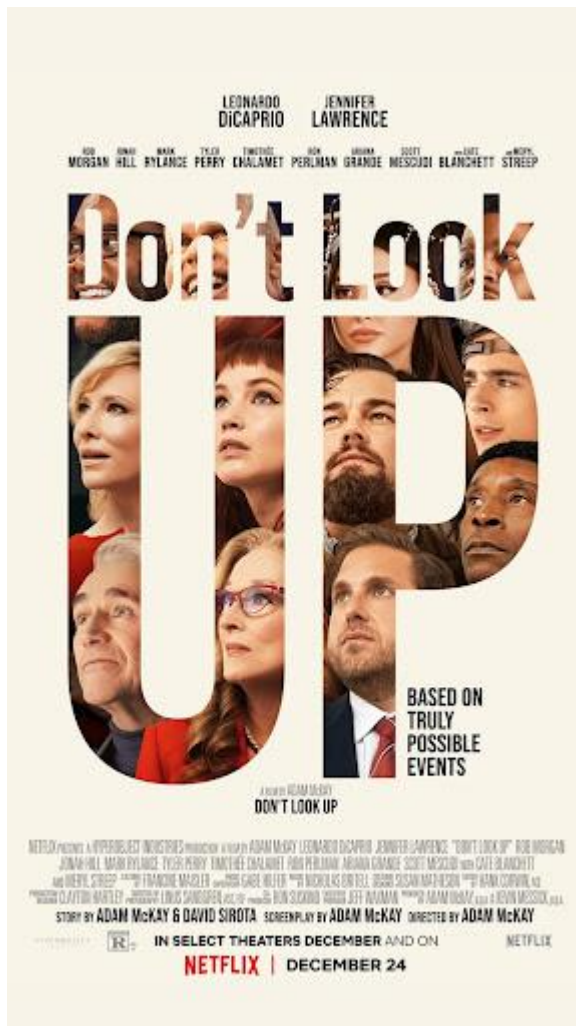
There is some vengeance on unmasking of the Duke for the audience's satisfaction. However, there is a more positive outlook for the film, the realisation that ends in stopping stations for watering horses being much more, set menu, table set, spacious room, inside and outside, personal waiters and attention, proper ordering of courses, slices of bread... And the makings of what we take for granted as restaurants. So, French cuisine and restaurants, Vive La France.

And the epilogue to the film (apart from a zesty flour fight between Marancon and Louise) is information that soon after this, the Bastille was invaded.

DON'T LOOK UP

2021, 138 minutes, Colour.

Jennifer Lawrence, Leonardo DiCaprio, Rob Morgan, Meryl Streep, Cate Blanchette, Jonah Hill, Mark Rylance, Tyler Perry, Timothee Chalamet, Ron Perlman, Ariana Grande, Kid Cudi, Himesh Patel, Melanie Lynskey, Michael Chiklis, Paul Guilfoyle, Robert Joy.
Directed by Adam Mackay.



If we do look up, at the sky at night, we see many stars. And if we do look at the cast list of this film, we see quite a lot of stars, including five Oscar winners. What are they all doing in this offbeat film?

Perhaps the film could have had a subtitle, It's a Mad, Mad, Mad (incoming asteroid) World. And, with the prospect of asteroids hurtling towards earth, 9 miles wide, due in just over six months, we remember the late 90s, Deep Impact, Armageddon. And filmmakers and audiences alike recall very seriously those decades ago, bravely going into space to destroy or deflect the asteroid, or, standing on the beach in face of a tidal wave, accepting fate. (And both of these are relevant to Don't Look Up.)

But, the millennium year has come and gone, not quite as apocalyptic as we might have imagined (though 9/11 soon to come, war in Afghanistan, invasion of Iraq...). The world has become quite blasé – but this film was made before and during the early months of covert.

Adam Mackay used to make funny films with Will Ferrell and John C Reilly (like Anchorman). More recently he has stayed with the funny but has been preoccupied with serious themes, American social and culture themes (the world of finance, The Big Short and into the Bush administration

White House, Vice). It is hard to know whether to describe *Don't Look Up* as serio-comic or comically serious.

It begins seriously. Jennifer Lawrence plays Kate, a Michigan-based astrophysicist who discovers the previously unknown threatening asteroid. And her professor is Randall, Leonardo DiCaprio. They are in earnest and contact a professor, Dr Oglethorpe (Rob Morgan) and decide that this devastating news with its imminent deadline, should be communicated to the US president. So far, so sensible.

However, after writing and directing *Vice*, and experiencing the Trump years, his view of the White House is dim, hyper-critical. The scientists are made to wait, not particularly well believed, the White House deciding to sit on it because of the impending midterm elections. And the president is played by a bespectacled Meryl Streep (remembering that Donald Trump declared she couldn't act), with her chief of staff, her son, played by Jonah Hill (remembering Jared Kushner).

So, we see the tone begins to turn comic, even farcical (as the military general charges the visitors for snacks – and then they discover that they are free!). While the President and son go to the media with Trump-like professionalism, the scientists go to the media. And this is where the parody becomes very serious, making us wonder what kind of world we live in, the world of trivial gossip, celebrities and marital breakups which are more important than doomsday, frivolous TV shows with sparring comperes, it is not dawning on them to take anything really seriously (reinforced by top comic performances from Cate Blanchette and Tyler Perry).

And, the world seems to go on. There is a presidential decision to commission an Armageddon-like confrontation of the asteroid, Bruce Willis being sent up by Ron Perlman. But, there is a sinister presence (should we be reminded of Elon Musk?), a media magnate, a billionaire with his own equivalent of NASA and space program, who discovers the mineral, re-earth riches of the oncoming asteroid. Split the comet – and profits for all. He is played by British Shakespearean actor, Mark Rylance, white wig, almost falsetto whisper voice. Both comic and sinister.

Lots of other characters throughout the film, Ariana Grande and Kid Scudi as a showbiz glossy breaking up and then proposing couple live on TV. There is a contrasting quiet background, the professor's family at home in Michigan, Melanie Lynskey as his wife, dismayed as her husband gets caught up in the ra-ra world and a relationship with the television presenter. Meanwhile, Kate is aggressive, told she needs media training, bursts out, is the butt of social media mockery – and then meets a young kind of drop-out, played by Timothee Chalamet (quite the opposite of Paul Atreides).

Ultimately, we are being asked, seriously as well as comically, how would we react as the asteroid bears down on earth to destroy it. Ignore it with drinks at a bar? Watch in dismay in the streets? Or, settle down at a quiet meal at home praying for grace and hope?

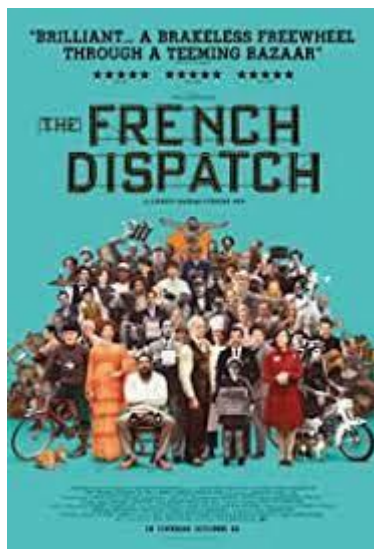
And don't rush for the exit or the stop button as the credits roll, there is an even more than farcical epilogue with Meryl Streep and her body double seen as never before! Is this a glimpse of the future?

THE FRENCH DISPATCH site

US, 2021, 107 minutes, Colour.

Bill Murray, Benicio del Toro, Adrien Brody, Tilda Swinton, Léa Seydoux, Frances McDormand, Timothee Chalamet, Lyna Khoudiri, Jeffrey Wright, Mathieu Amalric, Steve Park, Owen Wilson, Bob Balaban, Henry Winkler, Lois Smith, Dennis Menochet, Larry Pilling, Jason Schwartzman, Fisher Stevens, Griffin Dunne, Elizabeth Moss, Liev Schreiber, Christophe Waltz, Cécile de France, Rupert Friend, Alex Lawther, Saoirse Ronan.

Directed by Wes Anderson.



Indescribable is the word that comes to mind when trying to write a review of The French Dispatch. Well, not exactly indescribable – but a very, very hard to describe.

Perhaps, it is sufficient to say that this is a Wes Anderson film. For over 30 years, Anderson has been a significant figure in American cinema, always idiosyncratic, oddball characters, unexpected situations, comic and serious interactions, continually developing a very personal visual style, a combination of realism, using stylised sets to remind audiences of the artificiality of this storytelling, his films often like animation (remembering that he did direct two animation films, *Isle of Dogs*), and, while we're thinking about this, there is a sudden insertion of an animated car chase. (We remember the *Royal Tennenbaums*, *Steve Zissou*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, *Grand Budapest Hotel*.)

Wes Anderson had an admiration for the American magazine, *The New Yorker*, and it seems that this is a motivation for this story (and he does have a list of *New Yorker* contributors during the final

credits). So, he has created a magazine, which started in Liberty, Kansas, called Picnic which then became more popular, having international correspondents and a French headquarters in (and the title of the city indicates the droll intentions of Anderson), Ennui sur Blasé. And he invites us there in 1975, the imminent death of the editor, and the closure of the magazine. However, we are also invited to observe the editor in action, the wide range of eccentric correspondents, and the insertion of three short stories by key writers.

Each of the stories is entertaining in its way but this reviewer preferred the first one by far. Tilda narrates In the rates the first story, Frances McDormand the second, Jeffrey Wright the third. The first story features Benicia del Toro, Lea Seydoux, Adrien Brody – and, that is Henry Winkler as one of the uncles looking far older than we remember him! The second story features Timothee Chalamet.. The third story opens with Jeffrey Wright (interviewed on television by Liev Schreiber), with Mathieu Amalric as the police commissioner whose son is kidnapped and an odd guest spot by Willem Dafoe.

At the beginning, Anderson gives us a title page, indicating the range of the film's contents, a kind of travelogue of Ennui, the three stories which correspond to various sections of the magazine, arts, protest, culinary... And, gives a spoiler that there will be a death, a final obituary section.

The cast list just to look at is rather exhausting! So many of this cast have appeared in other Anderson films, sometimes many of them, especially Bill Murray as the editor, Tilda Swinton as the art journalist, Edward Norton as the chauffeur. And you have to look quickly to catch some of the cast, especially the journalists in the editor's room, and this reviewer missed Saoirse Ronan until he saw her name in the final credits.

And, there is always Wes Anderson's dialogue. There are not so many laugh out loud moments. Rather, there are touches of irony, touches of the droll, and smiles at the clever repartee as well as the frequent eccentric interactions.

On re-reading this review, it seems like this is how we describe the indescribable.

GHOSTBUSTERS: AFTERLIFE

US, 2021, 124 minutes, Colour.

Carrie Kuhn, Paul Rudd, McKenna Grace, Logan Kim, Celeste O'Connor, Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, Ernie Hudson, Annie Potts, Sigourney Weaver, Bob Gunton, J.K. Simmons, Bokeem Woodbine, Stella Aykroyd, Olivia Wilde, Tracy Letts, voices of: Shohreh Aghdashloo, Josh Gad.

Directed by Jason Reitman.



Ghostbusters Jr!

If that is a disturbing alternate title and, as a devotee of the original film, you might want to reconsider. However, if you go along with this 21st-century variation on the theme, help is at hand towards the end when who should turn up but the real Ghostbusters, Bill Murray, Dan Ackroyd, Ernie Hudson and, because Harold Ramis, to whom the film is dedicated, died in 2014, there is a ghostly recreation of his presence. And, these are more than cameos, the three entering into the spirit of the busting of these recurring ghosts. (And, as some compensation for those who are not exactly on the Junior wavelength, there is a credit sequence where Sigourney Weaver turns up having a psychology session with Bill Murray; and, right at the end, an extended sequence where Ernie Hudson reflects on what happened and his aftermath success!).

The film was cowritten by Jason Reitman, son of Ivan Reitman, who produces here, and who directed the first two Ghostbusters films.

We are certainly no longer in New York City. We are in a drab rundown town in Oklahoma (although the exteriors were all shot in Alberta!). Single mother, Callie, and her son and daughter are evicted from their home and travel to a very rundown dirt farm left to Callie by her father. (And, to tantalise, there are mysterious chases and goes busting equipment at the opening of the film, racing towards the farm and the death of the old man.)

For a moment, this looks like one of those single mothers and children trying to make good in desperate circumstances, the son, Trevor, aged 15, pretending 17 (FinnWolfhead who would be a strong contender in a Timothee Chalamet lookalike competition) and Phoebe, 12, McKenna Grace in a performance which really does control the whole film. She is precocious, bespectacled, articulate, scientist, sceptical of superstition, ever investigative, in command of what turns out to be the ghost busting operation. A very strong performance. And, fortunately for us and her, she befriends another 12-year-old at school, Podcast, who goes around with his camera and recorder, interviewing

people. He is played by Lucas Kim who shows quite a sense of humour and excellent comic timing. Here's hoping for a solid career for him.

And, there is school, desperate kids put in front of the screen to watch Cujo while the teacher, Mr Groobersman (Paul Rudd always enjoyably acceptable) carries on geographic investigations. A perfect match for Phoebe! There are daily rumblings and earth tremors, mysterious events...

And, by this time, we guessed it, the ghosts are somewhere there are in these Oklahoma mountains, gods from 3500 years ago, confined in an abandoned mine, ghosts and monsters ready to find the slightest excuse for erupting. And they do.

And, while Callie and Mr Groobersman are taken over by monstrous guard animals, it is up to the youngsters to do the ghost busting. But, they are apprentices and, to relief all round, Bill Murray and co-to turn up for a final confrontations. As does a ghostly re-created resurrected Harold Ramis who turns out to be Callie's father and the younger generation's grandfather.

Not sure how the older fans will manage, it is definitely for the younger, new fans.

HOUSE OF GUCCI

US, 2021, 158 minutes, Colour.

Lady Gaga, Adam Driver, Al Pacino, Jeremy Irons, Jared Leto, Jack Huston, Salma Hayek, Camille Cottin, Reeve Carney.

Directed by Ridley Scott.



House of Gucci, House of Versace, Italian fashion houses with violence in their history. (Not quite like the histories of the French Houses of Fashion.)

Ridley Scott, filming at the age of 83, with a celebrated wide variety of film topics (just remembering Alien, Blade Runner, Thelma and Louise, Gladiator) directed two films for 2021 release, the intriguing The Last Duel and the Middle Ages, and an immersion in Italian families' fashion with the Guccis.

Immersion – 158 minutes of living with the Guccis who are not always good company. They might have been good company, running a solid company, but there is always human nature and Italian passion.

The cast, of course, is an impressive lineup. Adam Driver, villain of The Last Duel, plays Maurizio Gucci, brought up in luxury, but rather unprepossessing at first, studying law, attracted by the flirtatious and oncoming Patrizia Reggiani. It would seem that for most of the film he is the good guy! But, there is that human nature factor again as he assumes arrogance and is destined for a fall, in terms of the role of CEO but, then for vengeful vendetta, target of a hit in the streets.

Researching any history of the Gucci family will quickly reveal that it is Patrizia whose desperate story this is. Ambitious daughter of the head of a trucking company, she sets her sights on Maurizio, is dismissed by Maurizio's father, the aristocratic former screen star, Rodolfo (Jeremy Irons) as a golddigger. At this stage, especially when the couple marry, and Maurizio was cut off by his father and works in his wife's father's trucking company, that she is not quite the golddigger we could have imagined.

But she is. And more. And, it is a tribute to Lady Gaga, who does not have a large list of screen roles, but prominent in the 21st-century interpretation of A Star is Born, that she comes across as a woman who is determined, takes opportunities, sets family members against each other, tries to take control, becomes entangled with family disputes (some of which she engineers), but ultimately does not have the power to achieve her goals. And she takes refuge in a television personality who foretells the future, Pina (Salma Hayek) becoming more and more dependent on her, even to arranging the hitman and the financial deal for the death of her husband.

And, there is a subplot involving Rodolfo's brother who acts as the CEO of the fashion company, uncle Aldo, played by Al Pacino (as he turned 80). Then there is his bizarre son, Paolo, a heavily made up unrecognisable Jared Leto, who is mocked by the rest of the family, considered an idiot by his father, but who is desperate to make an impression in the family and to find a place in the House of Gucci.

More than enough ingredients, one might say, but, in fact, the first five years of the marriage is played out in quite some detail but, after that, the next 12 years or more seem to be hurried through, rather difficult to know what is happening year by year because some of the developments in the screenplay are rather more sweeping.

There is a lot of information at the end of the film about what happened to the conspirators (tried and condemned to prison), the fact that there is no Gucci family member part of the current company (developed by Rodolfo Gucci's assistant, Domenico De Sole, Jack Huston, with the help of the up-and-coming designer, Tom Ford, who is still there).

So, an Italian tale of intrigue and ambition and murder as vengeance. A fall of the House of Gucci and its self-destruction.

I'M WANITA

Australia, 2021, 88 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Matthew Walker.



That's Wanita with a W instead of Juanita – Wanita explains that her mother wasn't literate, hence the W.

Wanita has lived in Tamworth for over 25 years – and prominently above the front door of her house there is proclaimed Honkytonkville. And Wanita has been proclaimed the Queen of Honky Tonk.

Which means that this lively documentary has two potential audiences.

First of all, it is for those who are fans of country music, rhythm and blues, honky-tonk, who know the festivals in Tamworth and beyond, who appreciate the songs, the singing styles, the personalities of the singers, their accompanists, the bands. Which means that there are quite a lot of songs throughout, some some with enormous verve by Wanita, many own compositions, but also versions of, especially, two singers that she admires and talks about, even with reverence, Loretta Lynn and Hank Williams.

Second of all, the potential audience consists of those who are not Tamworth fans and who may have never heard of Wanita.

Which means that this is a documentary portrait for her fans and for those who don't know her. And, what a portrait – even visually in so many close-ups, flaming red hair, not exactly petite, not exactly her younger self when she won competitions in the 90s. But, here she is, in her 40s, erratic in her behaviour, involved in sex work to make ends meet, still singing – but, with a huge ambition to fulfil a life's dream, to go to the US, to Memphis, to New Orleans and, especially, to Nashville and record an album there. The latter part of this film, after she received an unexpected financial gift, takes her to America. And, she is accompanied by two firm friends, guitarist Archer (with a pleasing song or two

during the film), who still tours Australia, and versatile musician Glennie Ray Virus who serves as her manager – not without frustrations at Wanita's tantrums, drinking...

So far there has been no mention of Wanita's married name – and this is quite an unanticipated story in itself! It is Turkish, Bahtiyar. Almost 20 years ago, Wanita went to Turkey for a possible marriage and ended up marrying the father of the intended groom!! His nickname is Baba and, at the time of filming, he has lived with his wife in Tamworth for 17 years, loving her, she seemingly smitten with him, some exchanges in Turkish, and he continually concerned about their lack of money... At the end of the film, it is noted that he died in 2020.

Wanita also has a daughter, resembling her mother in appearance, who appears in the film, appreciating her mother, but sometimes alienated.

So, this is a very colourful documentary, Matthew Walker expanding his 2016 short film, Heart of a Queen. Wanita is a very strong personality, strong and determined singer with a voice appreciated around the world. (But, we might not like to actually encounter her in real life! - rather, when she is on stage performing).

LEIGH

Australia, 2021, 100 minutes, Colour.

Leigh Conkie.

Directed by Ryan Gaskett.



"Portrait of the artist as a chainsaw sculptor". And more, much more.

The sculptor is Leigh Conkie, from Elfin (if you put his name in Google, his address, 1305 Maine Road, Eltham immediately appears!). He is a Melbourne character and Melbourne features strongly in this documentary, in his suburb to Research and Diamond Creek, at a competition for chainsaw sculptors at the top of Mount Dandenong, city sequences outside the Age building, outside the courts in William Street. And, a self-conscious confession, this reviewer was not aware of Leigh Conkie.

We are treated to quite a number of stories within stories but the first aspect to note is the range of visuals of Conkie sculptures, and seeing him at work with his chainsaw, cutting off large blocks of wood but also fine-tuning, smoothing the detail of the human characters, the animals, monuments. It is a pleasure to look at these sculptures.

But, Leigh Conkie has had many difficulties in his life. In his 40s during the making of this film over three years, he is a rough and ready type, with an effing-spattered vocabulary, something of a contrast with the interviews with his many friends and neighbours, ready but much less rough. And, in his younger days, experience and depression, taking many drugs, and in later years becoming a drinker, he admits that he is not always reliable, drinking to get to sleep to forget the pressures of life. Nevertheless, he has persevered with his sculpting for several decades, surprised at first at being paid well for his sculptures, but always wanting to sculpt for the sake of his art.

While he is a big tall man, he actually can be quite soft-hearted. There is an admirable section of this film where he speaks so well of his father, with affection, and especially so of his mother. And plenty of photos of his parents with himself and his brothers. Quite wonderful to hear this man speaking so warmly of family. On the other hand, what is revealed is that he was abused at school at the age of seven by the school principal. This becomes a major theme of the film.

Conkie eventually has some strong things to say about sexual abuse, paedophiles, recounting some of the blurred memories of his experiences, with a photo of the alleged abuser up there on the screen, later named quite explicitly. Eventually, he does go to the police, an awkward experience but one that he feels it is necessary, eventually charges being laid against the abuser, now in his 80s. There is reinforcement of this theme of sexual abuse with substantial interviews with radio campaigner, later politician, Derryn Hinch. Hinch is rather calm, seated for these interviews, but reminiscing about the stances by abusers, the use of defence lawyers, the reduction of charges, and the effect of court cases on the survivors. It is a reminder of Hinch's stances over many decades.

Eventually, some other survivors come forward and the perpetrator is found guilty, sentenced to prison. Sadly, because of his drug past, the defence lawyers are able to get Conkie's testimony dismissed as unreliable.

In between these episodes concerning the abuse, audiences are surprised that they have a tour to Japan, to climbing Mount Fuji, Conkie deciding that this is a good purpose, going off the drink, going on a health diet, walking, gym exercises... The sad thing is that for many years he has been plagued by gout, in his knees, but, especially some excruciating gout pain in one of his thumbs. He makes a worthy attempt to climb to the peak of the mountain, while enjoying Japan itself and the people.

And one other theme. He is compassionate towards refugees, those on Manus Island in Nauru, deciding to sculpt a statue of a refugee (and we watch this in some detail), with the plan to situate it,

in the early morning hours, on the grounds in front of the Age building, across from Southern Cross station. The director has his cameras watching this episode as well as people passing by, generally not noticing, and the removal of the statue. A positive ending to this story is that it was granted to the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre where Conkie visits it.

And, all of this, with sympathy and visual flair for 100 minutes. And postscript: go to the link, <https://www.3aw.com.au/photos-chainsaw-artist-honours-war-heroes/with-photos-of-more-recent-striking-sculptures-honouring-war-heroes>.

LICORICE PIZZA

US, 2021, 133 minutes, Colour.

Alana Haim, Cooper Hoffman, Sean Penn, Tom Waites, Bradley Cooper, Benny Safdie, Joseph Cross, Maya Rudolph, John Michael Higgins, John C.Reilly.



Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson.

Chalk and cheese, different as... Licorice and pizza, different as... Ugh as we might imagine what this recipe would taste like! But not Ugh as we review this journey back to 1974 under the guidance of Paul Thomas Anderson (and memories of such strong films as Magnolia, There Will be Blood, The Master).

We are taken back to the different neighbourhoods of Los Angeles, to schools, to homes, a flight to New York for a TV show, selling the new waterbeds, setting up a pinball Arcade after the machines become legal, restaurants and diners, Hollywood mansions, headquarters for a mayoral candidate's campaign... And more. There is a look at the 1970s, media references, movie references, clothes and style, hair, and, a great pleasure for fans of the music of the period, a large selection of contemporary songs by the most prominent of composers.

This is a kind of LA neighbourhood starcrossed lovers' story, comic style. At the centre is Gary, 15 years old, going to get his class photo taken, smitten by the young woman that he gazes at, introduces himself, and then the brush off! Gary is played by Cooper Hoffman (yes, we see the resemblance, he is the son of Philip Seymour Hoffman). She, Alana, is played by Alana Haim, of music video fame, who appears at the dinner sequence with her actual parents and her two sisters play her sisters here. There is the awkwardness of the age difference – she is 25, Alana awkward, still not having made up her mind what she wants to do with her life, continually encountering Gary who does give her some sense of security.

In a comically tense sequence, Alana proves that she has great skills in truck driving, even in reverse down LA Hills!

This is a kind of LA picaresque story, not exactly a cause and effect narrative. Rather, it is a series of episodes, many episodes, which also introduces a range of supporting characters, Gary and his friends from the TV show (with a sendup of a rather bitchy Lucille Ball (Christine Ebersole), his showbiz connections, and the range of characters he meets with his hustling and wheeler dealing, especially his franchise with the waterbeds (which rely on oil and this is the time of the 70s scarcity), at his pinball Arcade. Some of them are very effective, brief, like an intense conversation initially between Gary and Alana, or Gary taking Alana to an acting interview with quite an interrogation from the agent.

There are some big star episodes which seem to detract from the Gary and Alana story, an indulgence with Sean Penn playing Jack Holden (with the explicit references to William Holden), and singer, Tom Waites. There is also a bizarre episode with Bradley Cooper playing hairdresser turned producer, Barbra Streisand companion, Jon Peters. (One wonders what Paul Thomas Anderson has against Jon Peters!)

Actually, Alana helps out on all Gary's projects, is distracted by some of his friends, caught up with the celebrities, finally getting a job as a volunteer for the mayoral candidate (Bernie Safdie).

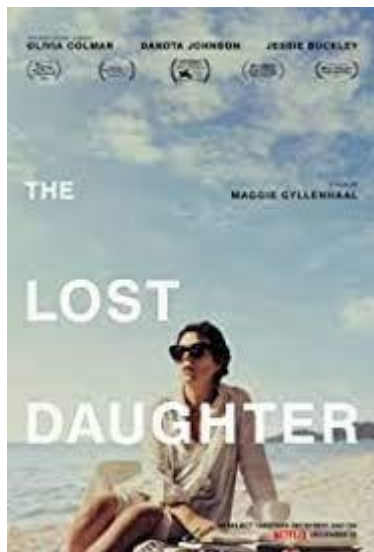
And then, a cheerful ending. And future? Perhaps Licorice Pizza 2. And, with the title, a suggestion that Alana is licorice and Gary is pizza!

THE LOST DAUGHTER

US, 2021, 121 minutes, Colour.

Olivia Colman, Jesse Buckley, Dakota Johnson, Ed Harris, Peter Sarsgaard, Dagmara Dominczyk, Paul Mescal, Jack Farthing, Oliver Jackson-Cohen, Panos Koronis, Alexandros Mylonas, Alba Rohrwacher, Nikos Poursanidis.

Directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal.



As the final credits roll, we might be asking who is, out of the many daughters, the lost daughter of the title. Is it all of them? Some of them? All, particularly by the end, the central character, Leda herself?

Maggie Gyllenhaal has proven herself in acting. This is her first film as director and she has written the screenplay as well, adapting a novel by Eleanor Ferante. The film has many award nominations and won for best screenplay in Venice, 2021.

This is a film one has to stay with, patiently sharing the experiences of Leda, wondering about her, who she really is, what her life has been, and gradual revelations – and, an increasing number of flashbacks to her early life, especially scenes with her two daughters as little children. This reviewer found it easy to move into the film because of the presence of Olivia Coleman and her performance. (Olivia Colman has had a strong British career, but came to prominence with her role as Queen Elizabeth in *The Queen* and her Oscar, as Queen Anne, in *The Favourite*.)

The audience arrives at a small Greek resort with Leda, settles into her pleasant apartment, helped by expatriate at Lyle (Ed Harris). She goes to the beach. She swims. She makes notes. She goes for walks. And back to the apartment. A quiet holiday.

But then an extended family, Americans and Greeks, arrive and rather take over the small beach. Leda observes, is a touch nasty in refusing to move spot on the beach for the family – and later apologising. She observes, has some conversations, especially with Callie (Dagmara Dominczyk), 42 and pregnant for the first time. And she observes Nina (Dakota Johnson), young, handsome and tough Greek husband, little daughter. Leda is fascinated by the daughter, mother and daughter relationship, the daughter and her little doll. When the little girl goes missing, it is Leda who finds her and restores her to the gratitude of the family – but, for some reason, takes possession of the doll, hiding it, later cleaning it, later buying clothes for it, dressing it.

And, as she observes, her mind goes back. As young she had played by Jesse Buckley, in another fine performance. She remembers her two daughters, her relationship with her husband, her academic and distinguished career, Italian literature, translator, and also analyses of the poetry of

W.H.Auden. She is easily irritated by her daughters but then makes up. And there are dolls. An extended flashback takes her to an invitation to a conference, discovering a Professor Peter Sarsgaard, who has read her work and appreciated her insights into the poetry, praising them during his lecture, inviting her to sit next to him at the dinner – and, as we anticipated, an affair but with more drastic consequences.

The screenplay consists of a number of episodes, Lyle and his conversation with Leda, cooking a meal, dancing with her. And she has a conversation with the Irish Will who works on the island during vacations – but who has a secret with Nina. She goes to the cinema and is angry with the noisy young men who enjoy disturbing the audience.

There is some dramatic climax, especially with Nina, with the doll, Leda ending her holiday but disturbed, some reckless driving, lying on the beach (which is how the film opened). It is not all tragic – but, we are left with the portrait of Leda, liking her, sometimes disliking her, definitely not always approving, but wondering whether this holiday, this opportunity for memories and reflection, is something of a catharsis for her – and a phone call with one of her daughters. Her future?

THE MATRIX RESURRECTIONS

US, 2021, 148 minutes, Colour.

Keanu Reeves, Carrie-Anne Moss, Yahya Abdul-Mateen II, Jonathan Groff, Jessica Henwick, Neil Patrick Harris, Jada Pinkett Smith, Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Christina Ricci, Lambert Wilson, Andrew Caldwell.

Directed by Lana Wachowski.



While mathematicians and philosophers were comfortable with the word, Matrix, it wasn't part of everyday language. But, 1998, the release of The Matrix, and it is part of ordinary vocabulary. Then there were two sequels, reinforcing the first, admired as welcome sequels by some, attacked as not being as good as the original by others.

Which is, perhaps, a dicey statistic when considering a fourth Matrix film, especially after a gap of 18 years. Well, here it is, focusing on Keanu Reeves Tom Anderson, best known as Neo, the One. (After

his becoming so well-known in the Matrix trilogy, Reeves has become in many film fans minds, John Wick, a trilogy there but also a fourth film in the offing.) And, the question as to whether Carrie-Anne Moss will be back as Trinity, whether Laurence Fishburne will be back as Morpheus, or Hugo Weaving as Agent Smith, black suit, dark glasses. A yes to Carrie-Anne Moss, Laurence Fishburne seen in a number of flashbacks, and the news that Hugo Weaving had a clash of commitments (glimpsed momentarily in some of those flashbacks) but was not available to resume his character.

Only one of the directing Wachowskas is back, Lana. But, the production design gathers up all the tradition of the previous films – and then some.

The issue as always been about the Matrix and the existential questions of what is fiction and what is reality. And, where do we as ordinary human beings live? Are we Digital Sentients (now there's an interesting term) or human beings trapped in the destinies of computer games. Since the screenplay raises these questions again, we are continually tantalised throughout the narrative as to what is the real world, what is the imagined world, what is personal dream, what is game programming controlling the life of the protagonists. And this is what happens to Neo/Tom throughout the action.

He has retired from prominent public action, is employed by a company of computer gamers, works away at his desk – but, some of those who knew him in the past, as well as a new generation of admirers, want to find and resurrect him, Morpheus included, younger, perhaps ageless, form (Jonathan Groff) and a hyperactive warrior, Bugs (Jessica Henwick).

Which means then that we are moving from one reality to another, seeing Neo/Tom plugged into a machine, living out his fantasies, the search for Trinity and finding her in the form of a housewife with children, Tiffany, mending motor bikes, moments of torture, moments of fighting, of power-repelling bullets, all those strengths and qualities he has had from the earlier films. At times we see Neo/Tom with his long hair and beard. At other times, momentarily unrecognisable, he has lost his beard, retaining stubble, and his head shaved. And, as always, the question, who is real?

The screenwriters exercise a shrewd wheat at the beginning (though not shrewd enough to ward off the naysayers), by referring to the previous films, to discuss sequels, especially sequels after a long period. But, this is what computer game designers can do, re-create, re-vivify the past stories. There is some humour in this self-referential discussion, meaning that we are to take this very seriously, but perhaps not too seriously.

But, there is a very serious character, a psychoanalyst, played by Neil Patrick Harris, seen at first in counselling sessions with Neo/Tom, but gradually being revealed as one of the controllers.

Those who have never seen any of the Matrix films, the plot is somewhere between lucid and incomprehensible. But, with all the effort going into this new version of Matrix with all the different resurrections, it is a pity that the fans seem to be so condemnatory.

ONE SECOND

China, 2020, 102 minutes, Colour.

Zhang Yi, Haocun Liu, Wei Fan.

Directed by Zhang Yimou.



Audiences were ready to see One Second at the 2019 Berlinale but the film was withdrawn four days before screening, allegedly post-production problems, which most understood as some form of censorship and disagreement with the contents of the film and/or its impact. It was eventually released in China in 2020.

This story of censorship is surprising since the film was cowritten and directed by veteran and acclaimed director, Zhang Yimou (Chief Director of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics). He began directing films at age 37 in 1988 with Red Sorghum, making an impact with his drama, history, photographic beauty. This continued during the 1990s, Raise the Red Lantern, Qui Ju, To Live. After the impact of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, which he admired, he made a great number of spectacular and colourful historical martial arts epics. During the 2010s, he has tackled a variety of themes and styles.

However, in 1999-2000, he made two quietly domestic but very moving smaller films, Not One Less and The Road Home. For this reviewer, they were journeys into China, quieter and emotional journeys, meeting the people, familiar dilemmas and crises. One Second is very much in this vein and all the more welcome for it.

The setting is 1975, the impact of the Cultural Revolution. It is a story of cinema, travelling movie reels to remote rural towns, newsreels and propaganda films like the 1964 Heroic Sons and Daughters, sections of which we see, the audience rapt, having seen the films before, but singing along with the patriotic songs. Zhang Yimou has noted the “collective experience” of these decades (noting that present generations are moving away to more individual experiences).

In many ways, the plot is small. We first see a ragged man walking through the sand dunes (one commentator wryly noting that this is the most desert and sand dunes we see this side of Arrakis!). The individual is so small against the dunes. Who is he? It takes some time for us to find out as he wanders the desert, arriving in the town, too late to see the movie, encountering an orphan girl who steals a reel, pursuing her, recovering the reel and then losing it. So, not only who is he, but what is so important about the reel?

We have some sympathy for the man wandering the desert, clashing with the girl, recovering and losing the reel, getting lifts in trucks, eager to drink from the local tap, hungrily devouring noodles, and people regarding him are suspicious.

So, here we are, in a remote town, the people gathering, eager to watch the film – but a long episode, where a reel has fallen off the back of the cart and lies tangled in dust on the road. The stranger is desperate. The proud local projectionist takes charge and a huge cleaning, communal effort, follows.

And then we discover what the One Second is, a glimpse of film that the stranger eagerly wants to see, desperately wants. And we learn who is one, what his experience has been, what the sequence contains – pathos for him, pathos for us, the audience.

And there is more pathos when we learn who the orphan is, her studious little brother, the custom of making lampshades from film strips and the reason for her stealing the reel. Some bonding between the stranger and the orphan, after some fights, physical, some desperation on his part, some hurt on her part for her brother on hers.

And, then, the film seems to end sadly out there in the dunes. But, in fact, there is an epilogue, two years later, the Cultural Revolution over, prisoners freed, children better clothed and educated, and the stranger and the orphan meeting again, returning to the dunes, memories of sadness but, could we hope, a better future?

THE SCARY OF SIXTY-FIRST

US, 2021, 81 minutes, Colour.

Betsey Brown, Madeline, Dasha Nekrasova, Mark Rappaport.

Directed by Dasha Nekrasova.



This brief film will be of interest to audiences who like variations on horror themes as well as those who like to see small budget independent films.

The film was written and directed by two of the actors, Dasha Nekrasova and Madeline Quinn, with Dasha Nekrasova acting and taking the central role. The main focus is on the three women, some supporting men characters, including a boyfriend played by Mark Rappaport, not a particularly sympathetic or interesting character. The film is very much presented from a female perspective.

There are variations on the haunted house theme. Two of the young women are apartment searching in New York City, find an attractive but strange apartment (and real estate agent) and move in. While friends, one is edgy with some mental problems, the other simply acts on whatever whim takes her. The third woman appears at night outside the window, comes in the following day, states she is a researcher and is warning the women to leave the apartment. Then strange things happen in the apartment.

There are variations on the possession theme, the neurotic woman having all kinds of dreams and visions, strange and public sexual behaviour, and eventual leading to deaths and bloodshed.

The secret of the apartment is that it was owned by Jeffrey Epstein and used for his bizarre sexual encounters. We see some photos of him. However, his accomplice who was later arrested and tried, Ghislaine Maxwell appears in two sequences.

The strange woman says she is investigating the murder of Epstein in prison, not accepting that he committed suicide. She is an obsessed woman, then becomes obsessed with one of the women, sexual encounters, but tensions arising, the neurotic woman dead, a fight between the two other women and the woman of whims dead.

When the researcher returns to the apartment with the boyfriend, everything is clean, as if nothing had happened. Then she finds a note warning her off her research, indicating that whoever murder Jeffrey Epstein does not want any investigations.

The date at the end of the film's 2019 – very quick moving for the screenplay and film considering that Epstein allegedly killed himself on August 10, 2019.

SING 2 site

US, 2021, 112 minutes, Colour.

Matthew McConaughey, Reese Witherspoon, Scarlett Johansson, Bobby Cannavale, Tori Kelly, Taron Egerton, Nick Kroll, Garth Jennings, Jennifer Saunders, Nick Offerman, Halsey, Bono, Pharrell Williams.

Directed by Garth Jennings.



When on a good thing, stick to it...

The original Sing was popular in 2017. We were treated to an assorted collection of animals and creatures, both attractive and grotesque, in the context of a singing competition (with a background of financial obstacles). And a strong voice cast was assembled, with the strange choice of Matthew McConeughhay voicing the diminutive Buster Moon, an expatriate koala in the United States! Many candidates, many auditions, many performances, living up to its title of Sing!

Sing 2 shows how to assemble most of the cast again, and do a bigger and splashier variation on the plot. Buster Moon is still at it, this time coordinating his odd collection of performers, rehearsals, behind-the-scenes problems, and a great desire to bring a guitar-playing singer back to the limelight after 15 years absence owing to the death of his beloved wife. He is a lion, Clay Calloway (voiced by Bono), with an original U2 song, You Saved My Life – but the recurring melodies and lyrics of his I Still Haven't Found what I'm Looking For, supported by Scarlett Johansson as the diminutive porcupine, Ash, and a huge auditorium of fans also joining in.

Buster has ambitions but the talent scout, Suki, tells him he has no talent. But, Buster is supported by his crew, an assorted range of entertaining characters, especially a full elephant called Meena.

Suggestions are made as to what kind of show would be best and the suggestion comes up, Buster unwilling, of a huge extravaganza exploration of galaxies and planets. This is all endorsed by a white wolf, a sinister, loud-mouth entrepreneur, Jimmy Crystal (voiced by Bobby Cannavale). Crystal has a self-centred fashion-played daughter, Porsha (voiced by Halsey) who covets a star role.

Well, of course, everything that could go wrong does go wrong, including the star, Rosita the pig having to do a huge dive and discovering vertigo (Reese Witherspoon).

But, the show must go on, and it does, Porsha having a show-biz conversion, Buster falling and rescued by Rosita, Clay Calloway persuaded to come back, the crowds enthusiastic – and some comeuppance for Jimmy Crystal.

While the narrative is, more or less, what we might expect, it is the range of characters and their idiosyncrasies, their performances and their singing, that keeps us entertained.

SPIDERMAN: NO WAY HOME

US, 21, 148 minutes, Colour.

Tom Holland, Benedict Cumberbatch, Zendaya, Jacob Batalon, Jon Favreau, Jamie Foxx, Willem Dafoe, Alfred Molina, Rhys Ifans, Thomas Hayden Church, Benedict Wong, Tony Revolori, Marisa Tomei, Angourie Rice, Andrew Garfield, Toby Maguire.

Directed by Jon Watts.



Sitting in the cinema, waiting for Spiderman to begin, it was intriguing that there on the screen was a request to respect not revealing spoilers. As the film went on, this reviewer was very glad that he had not heard any spoilers, was able to be amazed, continually, at the unexpected plot developments. So, a reinforcement of the exhortation not to reveal the plot. Which, of course, makes it very difficult to write a review!

And what is it about? As Dr Strange says: it is the grand calculus of the multiverse! Just what we would have thought!

Where does Spiderman stand in the Marvel Universe? In fact, he has been very popular, some television movies in earlier decades, but, for the last 20 years, eight feature films and the animated story of the Spiderverse, with multiple Spiderman in parallel dimensions. Three films with Toby Maguire. Two films with Andrew Garfield. This is the third film with the present Spiderman, Peter Parker, Tom Holland (and directed with great energy by Jon Watts). And then the news came, on its release in the US and around the world, that it had the third biggest opening of any film! How could a more modest Spiderman film achieve this? It would be a spoiler to say anything more!

But, we can say that this is not just a Spiderman superhero adventure. It is a Dr Strange story, following on his own film, with Benedict Cumberbatch in the central role and Benedict Wong as his assistant. It is a bit of a stretch to bring Dr Strange into Spiderman's New York, but as the film opens, following immediately on the previous film, the villain Mysterio (Jake Gyllenhaal) reveals Peter Parker's identity on television. Gloating on this revelation is the shock jock television journalist played by J.K. Simmons, denouncing Peter Parker as public enemy number one.

And this has an effect on his close friends, MJ (Zendaya) and Ned (Jacob Batalon) as well as Aunt May (Marisa Tomei) and her boyfriend, Happy (Jon Favreau). A welcome return by all of these characters.

What can be revealed and is not a spoiler is that Peter is desperate that people not know that he is Spiderman, making a plea with Dr Strange that he cast a spell so that people will forget who Peter really is. That would be very simple but, during the spell and the hocus-pocus which Benedict Cumberbatch can do with such aplomb, plus special effects, Peter starts thinking of all those that he would like to keep remembering him, his friends, Aunt May... Which rather spoils the effect of the spell.

The screenwriters must have enjoyed themselves thoroughly in working out what could be some of the consequences of this spell gone wrong. And we enjoy ourselves as we continue to discover what the screenwriters have cooked up.

It does mean that there are a lot of adventures, fights, special effects galore (plus galore), which makes for continually exciting and unpredictable adventure. Which continues for the best part of 2 ½ hours! (And, as usual, in the Marvel Movies, end credit sequences, Venom turning up to no obvious purpose but a joke, and a final preview, extensive, of the next Dr Strange adventure.) One always has to stay until the end of the Marvel Movie's credits.

The film has a strong supporting cast, some of the veterans perhaps surprised by getting a call back. But, it all works very well – and the word-of-mouth (one hopes without spoiler alerts) must have been instantly strong for this Spiderman film to be so successful. And it is.

STILLWATER

US, 2021, 141 minutes, Colour.

Matt Damon, Camille Cottin, Abigail Breslin, Lilou Siauvaud.

Directed by Tom McCarthy.



Stillwater is the name of an ordinary town in Oklahoma. And it appears on a souvenir necklace – visualised several times, significant for the emotional outcome of the film.

This is a star vehicle for Matt Damon, appearing here and as a mediaeval warrior knight in The Last Duel during 2021. He has been a significant screen presence for almost 30 years as well as his writing talent, especially for Good Will Hunting.

Here he is playing Bill Baker, a middle-aged labourer, handy at all kinds of hard work. His whole outlook is very American, from the South, rather isolated. However, his daughter, Allison (Abigail Breslin), her mother killing herself, her father irresponsible, has suddenly left and travelled to France, settling in Marseilles. She has been accused of killing her partner and, at the opening of the film, has served five years in prison. Her father was present at the trial and has visited.

The action of this rather long film is his visit again, now used to being in France, speaking no French, managing, a kind of determined trudge as he walks, obstinate. Matt Damon is completely convincing in this role.

Allison gives her father a letter which should lead to contact with a further suspect. The lawyers consider that the case cannot be reopened. And, as with this kind of determined American, Bill takes on the investigation himself. There are many leads, contacts, photos from phones, the narrowing down of the lead. But, in the event, with his bluntness, not always listening to advice, he does get a glimpse of the suspect but is bashed.

The first part of the film proceeds as might be expected with Bill and his determination. But, there is a humanity in the second part of the film, almost as if the solution to the crime does not matter. Bill has encountered a single mother, Virginie (Camille Cottin in an engaging performance) and her nine-year-old daughter, Maya (Lilou Siauvaud). Bill bonds with the little girl, is able to enlist the help of her mother, moving with him for translating, disgusted at the number of racists and bigots that they encounter. The bond between Bill and Virginie slowly develops, quite credibly, and his becoming an alternate father-figure to the little girl, playing with her, picking her up from school, learning some French words from her. Maya is very charming – we like her as well as Bill does.

There are some happy moments, a day's outing when Allison is allowed parole, swimming in the Mediterranean, having a home meal with Virginie and Maya.

There are some dramatic moments, which means the latter part of the film takes up the investigation again, Bill encountering and trapping the suspect, willing to break the law in order to get the evidence for the case.

We have mixed feelings at the ending of the film, some sympathy for her Bill but also impatience at his obstinate activity and the consequences for himself and for Virginie and Maya.

Back in Stillwater, Alison and Bill sitting on the porch, back where they started, but each of them having gone through life changing journeys but grimly at the end noting that "life is brutal".

(With the final reassurance that this story does not relate to any actual persons, any connection a coincidence, many audiences will be remembering the Amanda Knox story in Italy and the many similarities to be found here. Amanda Knox objected to the film – not difficult to see why, feeling that the film was an intrusion and an interpretation of her experiences.)

SWAN SONG

US, 2021, 106 minutes, Colour.

Udo Keir, Jennifer Coolidge, Linda Evans, Michael Urie, Ira Hawkins.

Directed by Todd Phillips.



This is a true story, an encounter by the writer-director, Todd Phillips, with an elderly man, Patrick Pitsenbarger, in Sandusky, Ohio. Patrick's reminiscences, stories from other people around the town, some gossip. Patrick died in 2012.

Patrick is played by German and international character actor, Udo Kier, prominent in films since the 1960s, acting in Paul Morrissey/Andy Warhol *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* films, working for Rainer Werner Fassbender as well as Lars von Trier. In fact, he has appeared in over 250 films. But, it is no swan song for him, as he has appeared in four films in two television series since completing this film!

There is an indication of Patrick's vision of himself in the prologue, an empty theatre, the curtain pulled back, the lights coming on, Mr Pat emerging to sing. However, in reality, he has been for many years in a home for the elderly, smoking forbidden cigarillos, incessantly folding up napkins neatly and storing them, going to the dining room, a touch aloof. Who is he? What has he been?

The answer comes fairly quickly – he has been the hairdresser in Sandusky, popular in the 1990s, but, in his memory, betrayed by his major client, the affluent Rita (a welcome cameo by Linda Evans of *Dynasty* fame, appearing in photos and then in a final ghostly sequence) and his major assistant, Dee Dee (played by Jennifer Coolidge in what must be one of her most laid-back performances). We discover that he is gay, has fond memories of his partner, David, an old friend, Eunice. But the main action here is that the administrator of Rita's will tells him that she has asked for him to prepare her for her funeral. There is a bequest of \$25,000, he refuses in a huff.

But, huffs not necessarily last long. Patrick escapes from the home, takes to the road into town, having changed his mind about the funeral. What happens then is a series of entertaining episodes, a friendly mechanic showing the way, a visit to his old house – to discover that it has been demolished but a friendly chat with the new owners who prepare him lunch – skipping with children,

visiting shops, shoplifting lotions and alcohol, a visit to a clothes shop and the storekeeper remembering him on her only visit to the hairdresser, age 19, then he remembering her and all her family details, her giving him a pale lime suit and hat and he goes on his flamboyant way!

But, with pathos, he visits David's grave, seeing his own name on the tombstone. He visits the club where he sang every Saturday night, a haunt for closeted gay men in the 1990s. It is to close that night and he returns, reminiscing, helping one of the Drag Queens with his hair, finding the old chandelier in storage and putting it on his head, dancing before he collapses.

Which means that *Swan Song* has an appeal to a camp sensibility.

Patrick does go to work on Rita's funeral preparation, has an imaginary confrontation/discussion with Rita, reveals how strong their friendship was and how he had a sense of betrayal when she did not attend David's funeral, after he died from AIDS. But, Patrick decides to forgive her, lovingly tends her hair and make up. And he receives some unexpected moral support from Rita's grandson, Dustin (Michael Urie) who reveals how his grandmother listened to his declaration of his sexual orientation, quoting Patrick and David to her grandson.

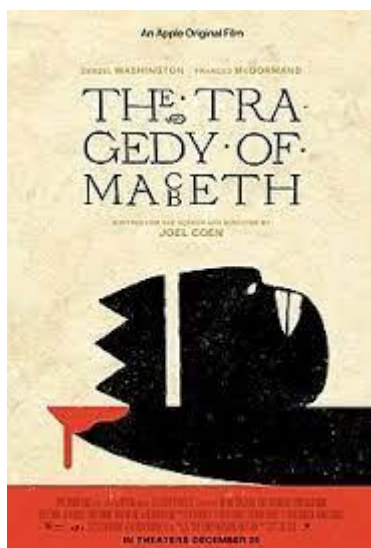
Todd Phillips clearly wants us to experience something of the Patrick Pitsenbarger whom he met those years ago in Sandusky.

THE TRAGEDY OF MACBETH

US, 21, 107 minutes, Black and white.

Denzel Washington, Frances McDormand, Alex Hassell, Bertie Carvel, Brendan Gleeson, Corey Hawkins, Harry Melling, Miles Anderson, Matt Helm, Moses Ingram, Kathryn Hunter, Stephen Root, James Udom.

Directed by Joel Coen.



Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is so well-known. And there have been many screen versions. Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* is a welcome addition. As can be seen by the running time, 107 minutes, and Joel Coen deciding to add *The Tragedy* to the title, this is something of an abridged version of the play, going to the core of the drama, to the core of the characters.

While audiences are familiar with many of the passages, key and often-quoted lines, the interest is in the performances, of course, but also in how the drama is staged and photographed. For most audiences who watch this version, there will be several revelations. The black-and-white photography is striking, to say the least. The black-and-white design, light and shadows, fading in and out of fog, falcons and ravens scouring the sky, and the final shocking outburst, reminding us of the image of a murder of crows. And the sets are quite stylised, interiors of the castles, pillars and vastness, long corridors, staircases. And eerie exterior scenes, the pool where the witches will appear, the bleak moors, and the forest of Burnham wood. Watching the film is a constant excitement and delight.

As mentioned, this is an abridged version of Shakespeare's play. However, the familiar scenes are present, (even to the comedy of the Porter, Stephen Root) as well as the well-known lines. Denzel Washington is a powerful presence as Macbeth, initially pleasant, loyal to the king, flattered by his promotion. But, there is encounter with the three witches (imaginatively portrayed by actress Kathryn Hunter, draped in black, arms akimbo, resembling the wings of the crows and ravens, harsh voice, aged androgynous, memorable). Doubts and possibilities in Macbeth's mind, the discovery of a lurking ambition, and the presence of Lady Macbeth. Frances McDormand's performance is an interpretation of Lady Macbeth with no redeeming qualities. She has stood by Macbeth and loved him, is ambitious for him, and, amorally, she has no scruples in orchestrating the murder of the King and blaming on the guards.

Brendan Gleeson, Irish accent, is Duncan. Harry Melling is Malcolm. But, ever-present is a character that one might vaguely remember from reading the play or performances, the messenger, Ross. Coen has made him much more significant in this version, certainly a messenger, present at key moments, but a Machiavellian figure, also in black with arm flaps, ever treacherous, with Banquo, with Macduff, ingratiating himself, discussing the situation and manoeuvres, yet finally sharing in Malcolm's triumph. A very interesting reading and performance of this character by Alex Hassell.

One of the other advantages of this version is that many of the speeches and soliloquies, with many close-ups, are spoken as the characters walk with energy along long corridors or ascend and descend staircases. Another advantage is the delivery of the well-known speeches in rather quieter tones, sometimes semi-conversational, effective by being intimate, confiding in the audience, rather than the rhetorical theatrical style in the Olivier vein.

Frances McDormand is a steely determined Lady Macbeth, strongly single-minded – until she sleepwalks and she crumbles from the interior challenges to her conscience.

There is a touch of the American in the production, many of the cast, including African-American actors, for instance, as Macduff and lady Macduff. Also touches of American accents.

What Coen has done is laid out for us the development of Macbeth's tragedy so that by the end, a man who had some morals becoming more and more guilt-ridden, seeing ghosts, arguing with his wife, finally bellowing in madness as Burnham wood approaches Dunsinane. (And, a commendation

to how the Burnham Wood advance is handled, soldiers carrying branches, crowded, and Macbeth suddenly overwhelmed by gusting leaves as he opens a window to look on the advancing troops.)

And, with such a comparatively brief running time, one is tempted to watch it again.

WEST SIDE STORY

US, 2021, 156 minutes, Colour.

Ansel Elgort, Rachel Zegler, Arianna DeBose, David Alvarez, Rita Moreno, Brian d'Arcy James, Stoll, Mike Faist, Josh Andres Rivera, Iris Minas.

Directed by Steven Spielberg.



For many audiences, especially audiences who remember the wonder of 60 years ago, West Side Story was a key cinema experience, the music of Leonard Bernstein, lyrics of Stephen Sondheim, the choreography of Jerome Robbins, Oscar for best film, the director, Robert Wise, for cast actors, Rita Moreno and George Chakiris. It was a landmark film of the 1960s. It was New York, social issues, Americans being threatened by Puerto Rican migrants, Anglo-Hispanic clashes, and a Romeo and Juliet adaptation to New York City.

And now, 60 years later, Steven Spielberg acknowledging that it was the key musical of his growing up, directs his first musical film. And, so many critics and audiences wary of a remake, have praised this new version. For those who treasure the 1961 film, they will be happily reminded throughout this version of why they enjoyed the original so much.

But, 60 years later, with the developments in technology, effects, cameras, editing, this is very much a 21st-century version. Arthur Lawrence's original book has been adapted by Pulitzer-prize-winning, Tony Kushner.

The audience is immediately taken into the rubble of New York, demolition of neighbourhoods around 68th Street (and an image of the about to be built Lincoln Centre). And, in the open spaces where homes once stood, the Jets and the Sharks begin immediately to rumble. And, we are reminded of the gangs' music and rhythms, the confrontations of Americans and Puerto Ricans, vicious, insulting, violent. And, with the rhythms starting, we begin to anticipate all the rest of the familiar music, the songs.

One of the strengths of this version is that Tony, played by Ansel Elgort, who sings his songs, is given a much stronger and credible background than earlier, the fact that he established the Jets with Riff, that he was very violent himself, has spent a year in Sing Sing, but has looked into himself and wants to change. Riff and the others certainly don't want to change. They are full of resentment. They want to fight, they want to rumble. And there are the police, the chief, as well as the officer immortalised in the song, Officer Krupke.

And, Rachel Zegler, with her Hispanic background, is more realistic than Natalie Wood was. However, Arianna De Bose, already winning awards for Best Supporting Actress, is a powerhouse as Anita, singing, dancing, dramatic, and the whirlwind exuberance of the song and dance, in America (now with crowds in the streets). As we watch her, we are reminded of Rita Moreno and her vitality in that role.

And Spielberg has invited Rita Moreno, turning 90 December 2021, to play a significant role, Valentina, widow of the drug store owner, who gives shelter to Tony, who supports Anita and Maria, who defies the Jets. She has several powerful scenes and it is she who sings Somewhere...

The familiar scenes are there, the fights, the police interventions, the attempted harmony with the dance where Tony and Maria see each other, a Romeo and Juliet neighbourhood balcony sequence, some religious aura as they make vows to each other, the inevitable rumble, knives drawn, deaths.

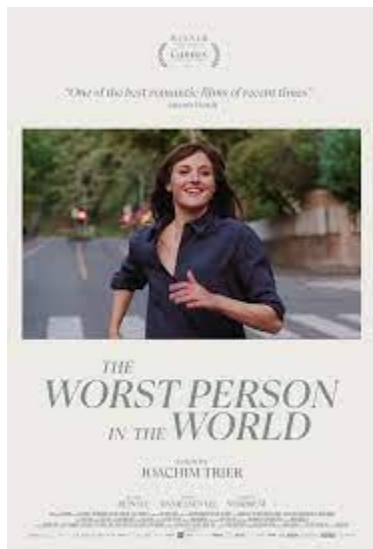
And, as Shakespeare once told the story, wrong messages, deaths and tragedy, star-crossed lovers.

There is certainly a place for both versions of West Side Story.

THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD

Norway, 2021, 127 minutes, Colour.

Renate Reinsve, Anders Danielsen, Maria Grazia Di Meo, Herbert Nordrum, Hans Olav Brenner.
Directed by Joachim Trier.



Norway's nomination for Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. Renate Reinsve won the award for Best Actress at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival. The film has received general acclaim.

It is very much a film for audiences in their 20s, 30s, 40s. Younger audiences will probably not identify with characters and situations. Older audiences will look back, sometimes with regrets, sometimes with irritation at the character of Julie, her life and choices.

Julie is not the worst person in the world. She is certainly not the best person in the world. But, as we go through the situations with her, she could certainly improve. The film is divided into 12 chapters with the prologue and epilogue – and the heading of one of the chapters includes the word narcissistic. Julie is self-absorbed, flits from one occupation to another, plunges headlong into a relationship and tires of it before she explains the reasons for breakup. She really doesn't want to marry. She doesn't want to have children. She is satisfied with coasting along, initially happy in relationships, then, not necessarily unhappy, but distracted into a new relationship.

The setting is the city of Oslo, plenty of views to make the audience feel at home or interested in a visit there.

Julie is supported by her mother, alienated from her father, studying surgery, then on a whim deciding on psychology, then in flighty mode deciding on photography. She does continue to take photographs but works in a bookstore.

At a social, she is attracted by Aksel (a very sympathetic portrayal by Anders Danielson Lie), who creates graphic comics, a disrespectful but cheeky character, Bobcat, who is being adapted for the movies, Aksel not satisfied. He is in his 40s, has a desire for children, while Julie is 29 and still freewheeling. The couple do have some intimate moments but not enough to contain Julie's roving eye, attracted to a young man who serves coffee and a bar, Eivind (Herbert Nordrum). For him the relationship is important. For a time Julie thinks it is but it is really only just a step to the next relationship, her wounding the feelings of both Aksel and Eivind in her seeming carelessness.

The film does express some hope in Julie and her future, most movingly in some final sequences where she goes to meet Aksel in hospital, is moved by his illness, remembers their past intimacy, has regrets.

But, since Julie is entering her 30s, her life before her, her mistakes behind her, the audience is left to wonder what kind of life she will have, not the worst person in the world, and certainly not the best.

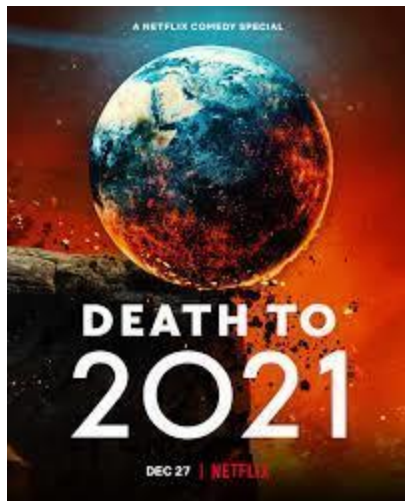
STREAMING

DEATH TO 2021

US, 2020, 60 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Grant, Tracy Ullman, Samson Kayo, Hopper Jackson, Diane Morgan, Cristin Milioti, Joe Keery, Stockard Channing, narrated by Laurence Fishburne.

Directed by Jack Clough, Josh Rubin.



As one commentator put it, 'I enjoyed it much more than I expected'.

In checking out the review of Death to 2020, the response was much the same – and, so, incorporating some of the same comment.

While the title sounds universal, and there are some sequences from other countries in the world, this is a film very much for an English-speaking audience, focusing principally on the United States, giving attention to the United Kingdom.

For those of a liberal persuasion, it is very funny indeed, hitting so many of the right targets! For those of a more conservative perspective, it will not be very funny at all, especially in its targeting of Donald Trump.

In 60 minutes, a team of writers have been able to assemble key sequences from 2021, highlighting each month in which they occurred, edited well and with punch, so that there is an overview of what the year was like, especially in the United States.

While the whole film has been narrated by Laurence Fishburne, reporter played by Samuel L. Jackson last year has been taken over by a hard-drinking journals, Stockard Channing. Hugh Grant is, again, disguised as an eccentric British historian, Tennyson Foss, delivering all kinds of opinions, prejudices, irritations in the inimitable Hugh Grant fashion.

And, there are a number of returning guest cameos throughout the film, Samson Kayo as a put-upon scientist explaining the covid situation while his words are accompanied by incongruous music; Tracy Ullman sends up all those Fox News commentators. Two fictitious characters return with very strong satirical message, played by British comedian Diane Morgan, and Kathy Flowers, played by American comedian, Cristina Miliotti, provide a kind of dumb chorus, Morgan as Gemma Nettick in England, very limited in her knowledge and expression, sitting on lockdown with her television set and Cristina Miliotti as Kathy Flowers all gush, innate prejudice, believing every conspiracy theory, even participating in January 6 riots. Joe Keery appears again as the young man exploiting it all on social media.

The screenplay abounds with verbal jokes which come through very quickly “and, there are some visual jokes, especially when an Internet page or You Tube clip is shown and there are funny indications of further videos on the side.

But, the film is very telling about President Trump in 2021, his refusal to admit defeat, and a focus on the January 6 uprising in Washington. One notable omission is any treatment of China and his relationship to the US.

This film should have an important place in every archive as a reminder, in mockumentary style, of course, of what 2021 was like, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom.

THE FOREVER PRISONER

US, 2021, 120 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Alex Gibney.



Alex Gibney is one of America's finest documentary makers, prolific in the range of topics that he explores, from Lance Armstrong and his drug deceit to sexual abuse, Mea Culpa... to Scientology.

This is a film about American torture, specifically in Guantánamo and in the various secret locations set up by the CIA, here specifically in Thailand. It is not the first time that Gibney has taken up the theme of American politics, the CIA and American torture. It was the theme of his Oscar-winning *Taxi to the Dark Side*, probing during the 2000s, torture in Bagram, and Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo. This documentary spans a decade, the establishment of torture, especially waterboarding, the subsequent use of this torture and, in 2017, interviews with several authorities who promoted the torture or who approved it.

The particular focus is on the well-known subject of waterboarding, Abu Zubaydah, the Palestinian terrorist who worked during the 1990s, linked with Al Qaeda, arrested, imprisoned, tortured – and still in prison, forever, even though never charged. And he is known for his sketches of his experience – which are featured in this film.

On the one hand, there are interviews with military officials, political officials, clips of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, discussing the atmosphere after 9/11. And, much is made of the planning of 9/11, of the effect on the American public, on public opinion, on political decisions, on the war on terror, on the approval of torture for prisoners, allegedly beyond the Geneva Convention. Particularly strong – and alarming – is a television interview at Camp David with George Tenet, head of the CIA at the time, no holds barred concerning torture.

A great deal of the film is given to explanations of waterboarding, how it is done, the various effects of the person being interrogated, the amount of water, the time pouring, absorption by the victim, brought to panic and almost drowning. And with the sketches and diagrams.

Of particular interest and moving beyond Taxi to the Dark Side, are the detailed interviews with José Rodríguez, head of the Centre for Counterterrorism at the time of the torture, his being questioned in 2017, his answers, his shifting of responsibilities, his rather calm responses to what are the equivalent of accusations. And, of particular interest, are the interviews with James Mitchell, a psychologist, brought in with his associate Dr Bruce Jessen, to oversee the treatment of prisoners, especially the waterboarding. There are excerpts from Mitchell at the time of the torture as well as of interrogations in 2016-2017. He explains himself as a patriot, working on the waterboarding with the approval of the American government, cautious at times as regards the procedure, water and danger of drowning, suggesting limits. After the abandonment of waterboarding, he and his colleague received an \$81 million contract with the American government to explore methods for interrogation and security. Mitchell justified his work because it saved American lives.

Most audiences will be repulsed by this story of torture and waterboarding, a reminder of American torture in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and...

One of the key interviewees of the film is Daniel P. Jones, given the task by the government for Senate investigations into torture, working over several years, finally presenting a report. His work was dramatised in the, unfortunately, little seen drama, *The Report*, featuring Adam Driver as Jones and Annette Bening as Senator Dianne Feinstein. In the film, James Mitchell was played by Douglas Hodge.

Themes of torture have been the feature of a number of feature films, allegations of justification in *Zero Dark Thirty* (as in this documentary), the torture in *The Mauritanian* and, ultimately, going back to Abu Ghraib and scenes of torture in Paul Schrader's *The Card Counter*.

This is the kind of documentary that every American should see, that audiences concerned about American behaviour, CIA, torture, Guantánamo, should see and reflect on.

HARRY POTTER: THE RETURN TO HOGWARTS

UK/US, 2022, 90 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Eran Creevy, Joel Pearlman, Georgio Testi.



On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the release of the first Harry Potter film, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, here is an opportunity to meet Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, Rupert Grint, in conversation, reminiscing about the 10 years of their lives in making the Harry Potter films.

There is some complaint about the presence and non-presence of J.K. Rowling, especially in view of the more recent controversies and her views on gender. However, the filmmakers have incorporated some comments from the archives on the making of Harry Potter.

Interestingly, the four directors who participated in the making of the film have significant interviews, especially American Chris Columbus, director of the first two films, in conversation with Daniel Radcliffe. There are clips of his direction. This is also true of Mexican Alfonso Cuarón, director of the Prisoner of Azkaban, jovial interviews with Mike Newell and his humorous wrestling match with one of the Weasley twins and breaking his ribs, and rather more serious comments from David Yates, the Director of the final films. Also present is the producer, David Heymann.

Everybody will have hopes for who will be present and interviewed. Other characters, like the deceased Alan Rickman as Snape, Maggie Smith, Michael Gambon, are seen in sequences. However, there are substantial interviews with a very genial Robbie Coltrane, an intelligent Ralph Fiennes and his interpretation of Voldemort, Jason Isaacs on how to interpret Lucius Malfoy, the presence of Tom Felton in scenes as well as his reflections on his 10 years of filmmaking. Gary Oldman appears, in conversation with Daniel Radcliffe, remembering the making of the film as well as a plot development. And Helena Bonham Carter turns up full of expected vigour and mischief.

Mark Williams is there commenting about the Weasleys, but only glimpses of Julie Walters, the twins who played the twins, Bonnie Knight who played the daughter. Some comments from Toby Jones and Ian Hart.

With the film going over the making of each of the films, the development of the plots and characters, the film serves as a happy reminder of the plot of the Harry Potter series. A chance to relive these stories, however briefly.

In reflecting on the Harry Potter films and their enormous success as well as the effect that they had on children reading in the 2000s, J.K. Rowling has contributed a great deal of imagination to a generation (and their parents and, to follow, their children).

Of the three central characters, it is Rupert Grant who comes across most effectively, pleasant, humorous, down-to-earth, most likeable. Emma Watson is, as might be expected, rather Hermione-serious. And Daniel Radcliffe comes across as might be expected.

With its comparatively brief running time, many audiences will be tempted to watch the documentary again – and again.

SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE

US, 2021, 5 episodes, 280 minutes, Colour.

Oscar Isaac, Jessica Chastain, Sofia Kopera, Nicole Beharie, Corey Stoll, Tovah Feldshuh, Michael Aloni.

Directed by Haggai Levi.



Scenes from a Marriage is based on the 1973 Swedish television series of the same name, written and directed by the classic film director, Ingmar Bergman, starring Liv Ullman and Erland Josephson.

This version has been adapted for the television screen by Israeli director, Haggai Levi, the originator of the Israeli television series which became the American In Therapy. He has directed both in the US and in Israel.

This time the stars are Oscar Isaac and Jessica Chastain, working excellently with each other and off each other. They portray a husband and wife who have known each other for 12 years, married for 10 years, with the young daughter. The action takes place over the succeeding five years.

The American version has five chapters compared with the Swedish version's six. And the five American chapters retain the same names for each scene from the Swedish titles. However, the series opens, especially the first three scenes, showing the actors, the sets, the actors proceeding to the sets with make up... And then moving into action. And the series ends with the two actors leaving the set, walking together towards their dressing rooms.

The first scene offers a lot of information, a marriage researcher questioning the couple about the qualities of their marriage, then a sequence where friends come for dinner and there is a clash of moods and opinions about fidelity in marriage, and then a final sequence where the wife, Mira, tells her husband, Jonathan, that she is pregnant.

The second scene is something of a surprise, Mira having gone back to work, successful and being promoted, and beginning a relationship with a younger fellow worker. The news and Mira's explanations have quite a devastating effect on Jonathan, intense clashes. And this continues into the next two scenes, Jonathan's reaction to his situation, his devoted care for his daughter, Mira explaining that she has been offered another promotion. However, the next scene moves on to preparations for a divorce, the selling of their house and packing up all the possessions, issues of signing contracts or not.

The final scene is brief, Jonathan returning from his father's funeral – one of the few sequences outside the house. But, then the film returns to the house, the final meeting between Jonathan and Mira, and the realisation that despite their love for each other there will be no marital reconciliation, something of a deranged and complex devotion to each other.

Intense viewing.

FILM REVIEWS FEBRUARY 2022

355, The

BEING THE RICARDOS

BELLE

DRIVE MY CAR

EMPEROR

EYES OF TAMMY FAYE, The

GOLD

HATING GAME, The

INDIA SWEETS AND SPICES

KING RICHARD

KING'S MAN, The

LIMBO

MUNICH – THE EDGE OF WAR

NIGHTMARE ALLEY

PARALLEL MOTHERS

PROCESSION

QUEEN BEES, The

SCREAM

SPENCER

TENDER BAR, The

THE 355

US, 2021, 123 minutes, Colour.

Jessica Chastain, Diane Kruger, Penelope Cruz, Lupita Nyong'o, Bingbing Fan, Sebastien Stan, Jason Fleming, Edgar Ramirez, John Douglas Thompson, Sylvester Groth, Jason Wong.

Directed by Simon Kinberg.



The 355 sounds like an interesting code reference. In fact, at the end of the film, it is explained that this was the number given to an anonymous agent at the time of George Washington. And she was a woman – and that was a reason for her anonymity. The women in this film begin as individual agents but band together choosing 355 as the code for their working.

It is noted that this is a feminist action film or, as some commentators say, a post-feminist action film. Be that as it may, whatever the intentions about promoting women in action starring roles, this is a female variation on James Bond films (and some reference to him in the screenplay) or some Mission Impossible adventures.

This is quite an international venture, the different nationalities of the leading actors, American Jessica Chastain, German Diane Kruger, Spanish Penelope Cruz (though her character is from Colombia), Lupita Nyong'o from Kenya, Chinese Bingbing Fan. And the supporting characters of men are also international, especially with Jason Fleming as a British Mr Big. And the locations are quite international – opening in Colombia, scenes in Washington DC, transition to Paris, a move to Morocco, and then Shanghai.

So, popular ingredients for this kind of action film. And it achieves what it set out to do, focus on the cast, focus on their action, remind us of international intrigue and espionage - not planning to be an intellectual exercise!

The Colombia opening introduces extraordinary developments in technology, huge potential for communication, huge potential for international surveillance and, more drastically, potential for international destruction. In the crisis in Colombia, the device is stolen, the Colombians behind the developments killed, and Mr Big thwarted. A Colombian guard steals the device (Edgar Ramirez) and proposes to sell to the CIA.

Enter the agents. Jessica Chastain, Mace, is tough-minded, ambitious, no slouch in martial arts. She works with her partner, Nick, Sebastien Stan. In Paris, their action is interrupted by Marie, Diane Kruger, a German agent. This leads to chases throughout Paris, through the Metro, the tunnels, the action is on. Meantime, the guard who stole the device is shot in company with his therapist, Graciealla, Penelope Cruz, who has been flown in from Colombia. Penelope Cruz turns out to be the

most human and engaging of the women. The man who killed the guard and absconded with the device is then pursued by both Marie and Mace. In the meantime, Mace had gone to London to look up a former MI6 agent, Khadijah, Luptia Ngyong'o, who has all the surveillance skills needed for this kind of operation.

And then we are in Morocco, the device passed from contact to contact in the crowded streets, the women able to create all kinds of diversions and eventually get back the device. Handed over to the CIA. The women relax. A bad assumption – the CIA head is killed and the device taken by a Chinese agent!

So, although we have had international chases and intrigues, there is more, especially when an auction is set up in Shanghai as a cover to sell the device to international bidders. Quite a sumptuous affair, the women infiltrating, and some truths about the Chinese agent shifting perspectives on who the goodies and who are the baddies!

Needless to say, more action, much more action, confrontations, betrayals, and all the audience expects and more.

BEING THE RICARDOS

US, 2021, 131 minutes, Colour.

Nicole Kidman, Javier Bardem, J.K. Simmons, Arianda, Tony Hale, Alia Shawkat, Jake Lacey, Linda Lavin, Ronny Cox, John Rubenstein, Clark Gregg.

Directed by Aaron Sorkin.



Once upon a time, more than half a century ago, every American, every American family knew who the Ricardos were. They were the couple at the centre of that most popular television show, everybody staying home on Monday nights to watch it, I Love Lucy.

The framework of the screenplay of this portrait of Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball in real life, this opening up of their creation of the Ricardo family and its comic episodes on television, is a

significant week in the life of Lucille Ball. It is the time of the House of Un-American Activities investigations, and Walter Winchell, popular television commentator, has announced that Lucille Ball was Communist.

But, this was not the main problem for Lucille Ball. It was the quality of her marriage to Desi Arnaz and issues of his fidelity.

And, the screenplay offers a close-up of the filming of an episode of the series, the meetings, the producers and the sponsors, Philip Morris and their discussions, the pressures on the cast, the initial readings with the producer, Jess Oppenheimer, and the writers, Bob Carroll and Madalyn Pugh. A new director is there, whom Lucille Ball disapproves of. Which means there are enough tensions in this focus besides those of the Red issue and marital issues.

Nicole Kidman has won awards for her portrayal of Lucille Ball, an unexpected choice for the role. However, she handles dramatics effectively but is surprisingly funny in her impersonations of episodes from the series, change of appearance, voice, comic timing – and the device of having Lucille Ball listen to the readings and discussions and imagining how she would work on the sketches and the comic styles, judging audience laughter and support. Javier Bardem is a surprising choice for Desi Arnaz, having to sing, perform in the series, and show what Arnaz was like as a businessman, competing with his wife and her sense of business as well.

The film boasts an excellent supporting cast at their best. Tony Hale brings to life the exasperations and loyalties of producer, Jess Oppenheimer. Jake Lacey and, particularly, Alia Shawkat are very good as the writers. And, J.K. Simmons is a scene stealer at readings, and in earnest discussions with Lucille Ball, as the actor who appeared in the series, William Frawley. Nina Arrianda is also effective as Vivian, a regular in the series. (And the film has an interesting device of showing producer and writers later, with veterans John Rubenstein, Ronny Cox, Linda Laven).

And, within the framework of the week, there are extensive flashbacks filling in Lucille Ball is acting background, films and radio, Desi Arnaz from Cuba, singer, musician, or service, his being dismissed as Hispanic. However, he vindicates himself in an entertaining dramatic finale as he vindicates his wife and the attack on her as a Communist (with the help of J Edgar Hoover).

In this film is the work of Aaron Sorkin, writing and directing, an admiration for going into American television's past, and his always interesting touches on political issues.

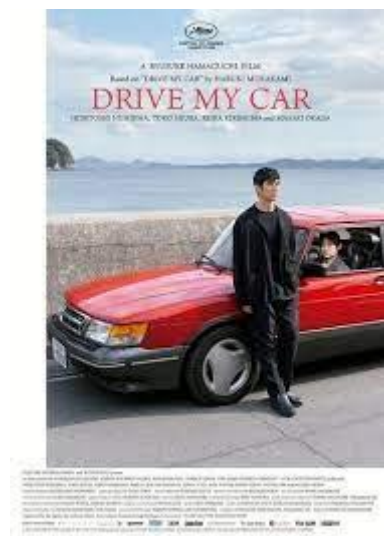
Surprisingly interesting and entertaining.

DRIVE MY CAR

Japan, 2021, 179 minutes, Colour.

Hidetoshi Nishijima, Toko Miura, Reika Kirishima, Yoo-rim Park, Dae-Young Jin, Sonia Yuan, Perry Dixon.

Directed by Ryusuke Hamaguchi.



A multi-awarded Japanese film, Best Screenplay in Cannes, 2021, as well as winning the Ecumenical (Catholics and Protestants) Prize. It is based on some short stories in a collection entitled Men Without Women. And, this is partly the theme of this film version.

It needs to be noted that the film runs for three hours. Some audiences have been exhilarated. Some have found the film hard going – and the suggestion might be that the film is an interpretation of Anton Chekhov's Uncle Vanya, the director listening to tapes as he is driven to work, cast readings, rehearsals, some scenes of performance, the screenplay relying on the audience identifying with the text, finding the text a way into understanding the characters and their personal crises and dilemmas. And, part of the finale is quite a moving ending of the play.

In fact, the film opens with a 40 minute prologue, introducing the central characters, the actor and Director, Kafuku (a pleasingly restrained, and often understated performance by Hidetoshi Nishijima) and his wife, Oto, who shares stories and details with him as she writes screenplays for television. There is a loving relationship between the two, but some sad undertones, the death of their daughter from pneumonia at the age of four, the effect on Oto and her relationships with men.

For a moment, with a scene from *Waiting for Godot*, suggestions are that the film is going to be tragic. It does have some tragic moments but, as with *Uncle Vanya*, there is a long and complex road towards peace and some redemption.

After the prologue, the action takes up, two years later, in the city of Hiroshima (and the audience is treated to various vistas of the city as well as the local countryside and an island with a beautiful view of the sea). Kafuku has been invited as guest director at a local theatre festival, intending to put on, as expected, *Uncle Vanya*. Applications for auditions have been made by cast from Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines and there are various readings. Striking is an audition by a young woman who is mute but can hear, Korean background, acting through sign language (and, with subtitles at performances, we see her acting skills, empathy and pathos).

The host for the festival is also Korean and we meet his wife who entertains the director and his driver to a meal.

Speaking of the driver, she is a young woman (perhaps many in the audience, like this reviewer, presupposing that the driver would be male). A condition of the festival is that guests must be chauffeured because of previous legal difficulties with an accident. The director, who does suffer from glaucoma, loves his car of 15 years but entrusts himself to Masaki, Toko Miura, a 23-year-old from the country, who gradually reveals her rather sad story, a harsh mother who may have suffered from mental illness, a landslide and disaster on the house, her skills in driving. Gradually, Kafuku and the chauffeur become comfortable with each other, the director trusting the driver, the driver becoming more interested in his work, listening to the tapes during the travelling, being invited to watch rehearsals.

The film works well on the level of performances, emotional complexities, especially the director's wariness of a young actor with whom his wife had previously been familiar. This leads to an unexpected crisis.

Not a spoiler, but happy to note that the film has two endings, bringing to a satisfying conclusion the *Uncle Vanya* theme as well as a covid-2020 sequence, reminding the audience that life does and must go on.

EMPEROR

US, 2020, 98 minutes, Colour.

Dayo Okeniyi, James Cromwell, Kat Graham, Keann Johnson, M.C. Gainey, Bruce Dern, James LeGros, Mykelti Williamson, Harry Lennix, Naturi Norton, Ben Robson, Paul Scheer, Brad Carter, Trayce Malachy.

Directed by Mark Amin.



Emperor is the story of the South Carolina slave, Shields Green. The origin of his story is in articles by the black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass. Some license has been taken with the actual Emperor, name given to her baby by his mother because of their royal ancestry and this becoming his name, the real Emperor being much younger, the reality of his being in the attack on the Harper's Crossing Arsenal, but not about his being hanged. The device is used here of the son telling the story, writing it down and, in 1890, taking it to a publisher in New York City. (There is ample information about Shields Green in Wikipedia articles.)

The story opens with John Brown, the intense abolitionist, with his sons and forces, attacking the Arsenal at Harper's Crossing. Shields Green is part of the attack. Then the narrative goes into flashback, and the episode with the mother naming her baby son, Emperor.

In the action in 1859, a plantation in South Carolina, and a gambling plantation owner who loses the plantation at cards, the new owner coming in, imposing bully and sadistic bosses. Emperor had been part of the management of the plantation but is now demoted, blamed for inadequate seed buying because of the incompetence of the arithmetic of the supervisor, Emperor being strung up and branded. And, his young son, Tommy, an eager reader, is discovered by the overseer and whipped.

This attack on his son is the crisis point for Emperor, confronting the men, shooting, and escape, his wife being shot. The film shows the detail of an escaping slave, in the woods, hiding under water, taken in by a seemingly kindly black worker but betrayed, tangling with very young and inexperienced bank robber, and a bounty hunter continually pursuing him.

The film also highlights the steps on the Underground Railway, and a kindly man played by Bruce Dern (white-haired, looking old, in his early 80s at the time of filming).

And then the return to the attack at Harper's Crossing, Robert E Lee taking the Fort, John Brown taken (and, as we know from the patriotic North song, his body lies mouldering in the grave but his soul goes marching on).

The climax of the film is the bounty hunter pursuing Emperor, a confrontation in a church, and a spectacular explosion in the church steeple and Emperor leaping to safety.

A comparatively brief film, some action, some discussion of civil rights issues, especially with Frederick Douglass. And the black perspective on pre-Civil War slavery and abolition.

THE EYES OF TAMMY FAYE

US, 2021, 126 minutes, Colour.

Jessica Chastain, Andrew Garfield, Cherry Jones, Vincent D'Onofrio, Mark Wystrach, Sam Jaeger, Louis Cancelmi, Gabriel Olds, Frederic Lehne, Chandler Head.

Directed by Michael Showalter.



With this focus on evangelical Christianity, on pastors and ministry, especially television ministry, this portrait of Tammy Faye Bakker will elicit a variety of responses.

There are those for whom religion is not important and will review the film as a biographical study, looking at it in the context of American culture. There are those who are hostile to evangelical Christianity, especially in the United States, its moral and political stances, their perspective being confirmed by this story. And, by contrast, there are the evangelical Christians themselves, who might find themselves targeted at times, but who will identify with some of the characters, the development of the television ministry, a belief in the central characters and a willingness, perhaps, to forgive them. In fact, there are also Christians who find evangelical Christianity difficult, some of the severe moral stances as well as the exuberantly extroverted way of worship and will review this film with some curiosity.

Older audiences may remember the scandal in the 1990s when television evangelist, Jimmy Bakker, was exposed as having embezzled millions of dollars from his Christian television company. But, in fact, the face of the scandal was his wife, Tammy Faye, something of a dominating personality, especially on the television shows, always made up, reminiscent of the Dolly Parton style of country and western singer and presentation.

And, as portrayed by Jessica Chastain as Tammy Faye, this is who she is. We are taken back to her childhood, her mother playing the piano for the church, Tammy Faye wanting faith, converted, an

experience of speaking in tongues. And then, to ministry training where she encounters Jimmy Bakker (Andrew Garfield) rehearsing a sermon on prosperity Christianity, God blessing those who hope for success in this world. They click, they begin a ministry, building up quietly, encountering evangelist Pat Robertson and joining with him, moving to the world of evangelical television. And the smiling repetition on screen of their final good wish, "God loves you".

The couple work well together, Tammy especially with her puppets attracting a children's audience and then their parents. But, Jimmy becomes involved in financial deals, donations rapidly coming in, his setting up homes for various charities, even an ambitious plan to build a Christian theme park. But, especially with some of his associates, there are suspicions. The question throughout the film is how much Tammy Faye knew about her husband's wheeler dealings or whether she just simply bypass them, accepting them and success and possessions as the fruit of her husband's success ministry.

Vincent D'Oonfrio appears as Jerry Fallwell, so prominent in the 1980s and 1990s with evangelicals, a very stern moralistic critique of American culture, wary of Tammy Faye, trying to bail out the television network from its financial woes.

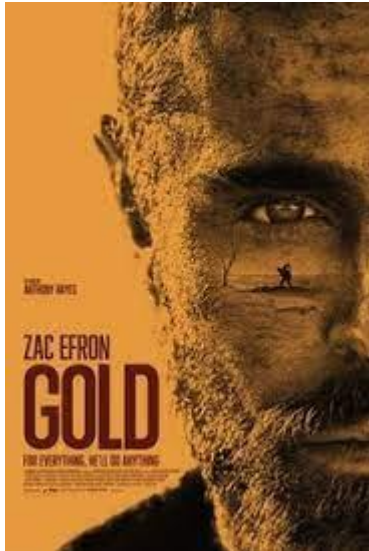
The film takes us into the world of evangelical media religion, many sequences of the shows, the appeals, Tammy Faye and her folksy presence, and the development from Sunday shows, to shows during the week, to 24 hours, to satellites and worldwide streaming.

By the end, Tammy Faye has become disillusioned with Jimmy, caught up in some sexual issues and scandals on his part, a divorce, him in prison, her children (who collaborated with this production), her dependence on sleeping pills and other prescriptions, and attempted rehabilitation – and, symbolic of the perspectives of American evangelical religion, Tammy singing at Oral Roberts University, accepted by the audience, The Battle Hymn of the Republic, the flag, saluting, Tammy Faye praising the United States.

An interesting and sometimes intriguing look at US Christianity – evangelical.

GOLD

Australia, 2022, 97 minutes, Colour.
Zac Efron, Anthony Hayes, Susie Porter.
Directed by Anthony Hayes.



There have been several films with this title, usually action adventures with Roger Moore and Matthew McConaughey. This is definitely not one of those films.

This is a grim film. It has been written and directed by Anthony Hayes, prominent Australian character actor (Total Control, Animal Kingdom) and it has been filmed in the outback of South Australia, vast open spaces, deserts, mountains, dead trees, rocks, wolfish wild dogs, scorpions and snakes.

And the star of the film is that Efron, in the film the whole time, often by himself. First seen as a train and carriages move through the desert, he is in a carriage, kindly giving some food to a mother and child, arriving at a destination, a rather derelict outpost where he is picked up by the driver who is to taking to a new job, hard work, at The Compound. Anthony Hayes is the driver.

This is a Zac Efron quite a long way from high school musicals, Baywatch and even his rather raucous comedies. He is bearded, unkempt, a scar across his face, spending most of the time unwashed, dingy clothes, an old cap. We never know his name. Which means then that he is some kind of Everyman figure.

The film opens with the caption 'some time, some place, not far from now'. Which sets something of post-apocalyptic tone, with image and desert references to such films as The Road and The Book of Eli. The two men drive through the desert, some vehicle mishaps, unexpectedly discovering a huge nugget of gold. The main drama is as to who will stay and guarding the gold and who will travel back to the towns for an excavator. Efron stays. Hayes goes.

Which turns the film into something of a desert Castaway, the man having to make shelter, ward off the heat, preserve the food and water. He does discover a plane wreck which enables him to scavenge some parts, drag them back to his shelter and build something a little more substantial. He also encounters a strange character, a woman with something of an Irish accent, suspicious, sinister, with dire consequences.

Anthony Hayes seems to have dosed on the classic *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), perhaps over-dosed a little. That was a film about search for gold, discovery of gold, greed, madness, violence. And that is what happens here.

Most stories, no matter how hard and harsh, have some kind of hope even as they cry “out of the depths”. Other films illustrate the theme, “Enter the Void”. This version of *Gold* is that kind of film even to the unexpected last half minute. Grim.

THE HATING GAME

US, 2021, 12 minutes, Colour.

Lucy Hale, Austin Stowell, Damon Daunno, Sakina Jaffrey, Corbin Bernsen,
Directed by Peter Hutchings.



Hate at first sight! Love and hate – and the whole damn thing! And with the business setting, perhaps, *Hates Labours Lost*! But, continuing with the Shakespeare allusion and listening to the two characters, methinks they do protest too much.

We are introduced to Lucy (Lucy Hale) in the office, sitting directly across from Jonathan (Austin Stowell), and you could cut the air with a knife. And, silently, they mimic everything that the other is doing. Not exactly the best beginning for a romcom.

Lucy and Jonathan are in their 30s, more or less. Which means that this is very much a film for 30 somethings, mirroring what might be happening in their own lives (or, if not in their own lives, in the lives of their friends). For audiences who are twentysomethings, they may not identify except in anticipation of what might come. And, 40 somethings may have well been through these crises and look back with satisfaction/regrets. For audiences over 50, this behaviour will seem to be stuck in the past, learning experiences of those days, long gone by.

With the rivalry, the competitiveness, each of them in a managing position in a book company, they are invited to submit proposals for a promotion. So, the screenplay becomes competitive.

But, as in romantic comedies, there are ups and downs, moments of romance, moments of regret, embarrassing situations, especially when Jonathan invites Lucy to attend the wedding of his brother, Lucy discovering that Jonathan is looked down on by his surgeon father, the marrying brother, also a surgeon, his favourite. And that the new wife was once romantically linked with Jonathan! In fact, the scene where Lucy tells off Jonathan's father is one of the best in the film, no holds barred!

So, romance on again, off again, Lucy dismayed to find that Jonathan may well be plotting against her for the promotion, she relying on her friend, Danny, an artist designer for help (and her pitch is actually quite interesting, online discussions between readers and authors).

But, we admit we didn't see how the competition between the two would actually pan out – so, whether is that this is an incentive for you to see the film or not, remember that it conforms to the conventions of the romcom, love and hate.

INDIA SWEETS AND SPICES

US, 2021, 101 minutes, Colour.

Sophia Ali, Manisha Koirala, Rish Shah, Adil Hussain, Deepts Gupta, Ved Sahu.

Directed by Geeta Malik.



More than probably some reviewer or blogger has said this is a Crazy Wannabe Rich Indians, via New Jersey. Most of the characters, especially those born in India and migrating to the United States have put a great deal of their life effort into appearances and keeping up appearances. So, one of the underlying themes is Secrets and Lies. (Just checked, the first blogger on the IMDb made the connection but was caught up less in the plot – a pity – but more on the gorgeous costumes!)

While the film is an American enterprise, the writer-director and the star have Indian background. Many of the supporting cast have the same although Sheila, the mother character (Manisha Koirala), is from Nepal originally and the other main character, Bhairavi Deepta Gupta, is from Pakistan.

As regards the title, it would seem to indicate that this is a “foodie” film. While there are a number of parties, and some more than passing glances at some of the food being served, it is not a focus on the kinds of food, preparation and cooking, serving. That is taken for granted.

Rather, this is the story of Alia (played most engagingly by Sophia Ali), American born, comfortable in American style and culture, respecting the Indian traditions. She comes home for the summer break from UCLA, finding the Indian traditions somewhat oppressive, respecting her father, rather alienated from her snobbish mother who seems to embody the haughtiness of the Indian tradition and preserving appearances.

There is a complication when Alia goes down to the popular store and market, Indian supermarket where everybody shops – but the women would not be seen socially with the owners! Alia notices, quite instantly, Varun (Rich Shah), the owner’s son working during the holidays. Love story elements at once – although, the community has expectations for Alia and the son of a prominent family, Rahul. Impulsively, Alia invites them to her family’s party.

And, then the plot changes, quite unexpectedly and dramatically challenging and satisfying. It means a shift of attention from Alia’s father to her mother, on unmasking, so to speak, revelation of secrets and lies as well as an admirable history of feminism in Delhi in the past decades.

So, not exactly comic. Rather, a delving beyond the appearances, and unmasking of the hypocrisies that the somewhat closed community are determined to preserve. But, unmasking, removing the mask, seeing the real face and the humanity becomes liberating. As it does for Sheila. As it does for Alia.

KING RICHARD

2021, 144 minutes, Colour.

Will Smith, Aunjanue Ellis, Jon Bernthal, Saniyya Sydney, Demi Singleton, Tony Goldwyn, Dylan McDermott,
Directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green.



No, not the Crusades and the Lionheart. Although this King Richard, Richard Williams, certainly has more than a Lionheart concerning his crusade, or in his words, “plan”, for two of his talented daughters and their tennis careers, Venus and Serena.

As we watch this film and wonder what the real Richard Williams was like and how he communicated with his daughters, there is satisfaction during the final credits with actual footage of Richard and the continuing success and unprecedented achievement by his daughters.

While the two young actresses bring the two children, early teenagers, Venus and Serena, alive as characters, as determined tennis players, as dedicated sports players, the focus of attention is, of course, on Richard Williams himself. And, as played by Will Smith, with his long TV and film heritage behind him, he is something of a power force. And, while we do have a lot of sympathy for him, he is not always a likeable character. And the screenplay highlights this, some conflicts between Richard and various coaches, working with his wife, Brandy (a persuasive performance by Aunjanue Ellis), disciplinary demands and good conduct for his daughters but also some very strong confrontational sequences about motivations, methods, ego. (And, on the basis of several sequences, we are not surprised to learn after watching the film that the couple did separate and divorce.)

For tennis fans, there is plenty to enjoy. Quite a lot of practice sessions in detail. Quite a number of matches illustrating styles and techniques. And, culminating sequence for the film, Venus at 14, her first competition in three years, taking on the world champion, Arancia Vicario Sanchez in Oakland in 1994. This is the dramatic end of the film, a young teenager facing the challenge, disappointed in performance, but suddenly finding an enormous acclaim for the courage and strength of her game as well as character. She is played by Saniyya Sydney. And, while the focus is on

Venus, there is sufficient emphasis on Serena, younger, idolising her sister, later her competitor and co-champion, Demi Singleton.

Also for tennis fans, there is a lot of background about coaches, Richard Williams working with his daughters from a young age at the local tennis courts in Compton, California, thugs and muggings, protection support, the era of the Rodney King case, police and race prejudice. We are introduced to Paul Cohen who coaches John McEnroe (an amusing incident) and a more cooperative Pete Sampras.: He allows the two sisters to demonstrate their skills and takes them on for several years, promoting them in young players' competitions. Later there is Rick Macci (Jon Bernthal), talented with coaching young players like Jennifer Capriati, no match for the wiles of Richard Williams in working out the best of all possible contracts and independence while Macci coaches Venus.

For those who enjoy dramas, whatever the subject, there is much of interest here, Will Smith at his best, an excellent supporting cast, family drama and conflicts, the world of tennis, sport, competitiveness, tournaments.

THE KING'S MAN

UK, 2021, 131 minutes, Colour.

Ralph Fiennes, Harris Dickinson, Gemma Arterton, Matthew Goode, Tom Hollander, Charles Dance, Rhys Ifans, Daniel Brühl, Aaron Taylor Johnson, Alexandra Maria Lara, Alexander Shaw, Valerie Pachner, Ron Cook, Alison Steadman, August Diehl, David Kross, Stanley Tucci.
Directed by Matthew Vaughan.



If you saw the previous two adventures focusing on The King's Man and the Saville Row gentlemen's shop which covers the behind-the-scenes espionage and action, the prospect of watching a film about the origins of this organisation is probably top of your list.

Whether it will stay in the top of the list is another matter! There is a lot to entertain. There is a lot of action. In fact, there is a lot of early 20th century history and World War I. But, it is a mixum-gatherum of all kinds of ingredients, many serious, many humorous, many satirical, and many, many, far-fetched and beyond.

The tone is well set in a prologue during the Boer War, the visit by the Duke of Oxford, his wife and son, representing the Red Cross, to a concentration camp, managed by General Kitchener. The Duke of Oxford is played by Ralph Fiennes, very uppercrust, very serious, important at the beginning but when he has to lighten up (understatement) Ralph Fiennes stays very serious, if not solemn, even at times with a bowler hat like John Steed whom he played in the remake of The Avengers. There is a sniper outside the camp with dire consequences for the Duke and his further protectiveness towards his son, Conrad.

So far, so interesting. 12 years later, the eve of World War I, the grand Duke in the Balkans, plots for his assassination and plunging Europe into war. But, while we see the three cousins, grandsons of Queen Victoria, playing when they are young, but great hostilities as they grow older, and all now played by Tom Hollander, we see the Kaiser is rather idiotic, the Tsar under the influence of Rasputin, and George V as very, very serious.

The first task is to protect the grand Duke which means the Duke of Oxford and Conrad (Harris Dickinson), now 18 and eager to flex his muscles and move from his father's over-protectiveness, travelling to Sarajevo, saving the grand Duke at first, then his assassination.

But, the value of the screenplay is to reveal to us that there was a huge mastermind behind this plot, and an aspiration to world power. On a huge elevated rock, where special goats graze, lives The Shepherd, not seen fully by the audience until the end, hearing only his Scots accent and his vehemence against British persecution of Scotland! He has a group of international agents assembled, sending them out to do dastardly deeds and provoke the war. He is something like a pre-Blofeld in his mountain eerie.

So, a shift from some serious history and upper-class Brits, to a James Bondish approach to World War I. Then, unexpectedly, there comes a kind of pantomime intermission focusing on Rasputin, a heavily disguised Rhys Ifans, who tricks the tsar and tsarina in healing their child, then a guest at a huge banquet, the Duke and his son present, his son even as a sexual lure to Rasputin, and a somewhat different interpretation of his poisoning (a greedy devouring of cake then vomiting), the healing of the Duke's injured leg, sword fighting, then the fatal shot (this time from Polly, Gemma Arterton, the family nanny, who in fact, along with Shiloh, the African servant and companion from Boer War at war days, Djimon Hounsou, forming a behind-the-scenes network of servants around the world who gather and communicate political information!)

Suddenly, there is an ultra-serious sequence on the Western front, some moving moments.

The climax is mainly on that high eerie, all kinds of derring-do (and, noticing that Ralph Fiennes has a personal trainer listed in the final credits), some bad tampering with history concerning Woodrow Wilson and America's entry into the war, some Mata Hari intrigue, and indications that they will could be more to come!

LIMBO

UK, 2020, 104 minutes, Colour.

Amir El-Misry, Vikash Bhai, Ola Orebinyi, Kwabena Ansah, Sodiene Ojewuyi, Sidse Babette Knudsen, Kenneth Collard, Cameron Fulton.

Directed by Ben Sharrock.



While the Christian theological tradition of a limbo, between Heaven and Hell so to speak, has been let go in more recent times, the word limbo has taken on a highly significant place in the English language and in metaphors.

In more recent times, with enormous mass migration, especially from countries which are battle-torn, refugees not being immediately accepted by other countries, the word that is used is limbo. To that extent, any film about refugees and their limbo is a challenge – and audiences, in whatever country they view the film, being asked to reflect on refugees and their status, the nature of their limbo, and how eventually they might be released from that limbo.

The director of this film, Ben Sharrock, did studies in Arabic culture and spent many years in social work in countries outside the UK. He brings that sensitivity and experience to his screenplay and his direction. He has opted for a rather quiet drama, touches of comedy, touches even of the absurd, rather than a diatribe against authoritarian discrimination against refugees. He invites us to share the experience so that we know and feel more of what living this limbo, day by day, is like.

The setting is Scotland, on a small island, more than a touch of the desolate. There are open fields, the waters, a few houses, a small village with a very limited supermarket, shared accommodation for the refugees. They don't seem to be many authorities on the island, although there is a scene where the police to arrive to take a refugee away. There is one payphone, few outside communication possibilities post.

We are introduced to the refugees with two of the locals, sympathetic, sensitive/insensitive, doing a dancing role-play to illustrate what is appropriate for the men when dancing with women. Later they do a role-play with one of the men doing an interview for a cleaning job. Sometimes the men and so some questions but by and large they sit and watch.

At the centre is Omar, a young man, refugee from Syria, going to the phone box to have conversations with his parents who are in Turkey. He has brought his father's musical instrument, the oud, but his hand is in a cast and he has not played. Omar shares a room with Farhad, older man, sympathetic, fascinated with a rooster which he steals, calling it Freddie Mercury. Omar and Farhad do communicate as they sing popular songs with each other (like Hot Chocolate's It Started with a Kiss).

So, what are these refugees to do, older men who regret what has happened to them, one wanting to be a footballer but ageing. Some of the others are very young, even 17, telling their stories of loneliness.

We follow Omar in various actions, getting a boat ride with the locals who love to drive on the beach and spin their car, digging a grave in going through Muslim rituals, talking at length and going out to watch the northern lights, going to the supermarket and wishing that a favourite Syrian spice was there (and the spice does provide a moment of happiness towards the end).

Ultimately, Farhad will get papers to enable him to go to society, but not before he acts as an agent for Omar to put on a concert for all the locals, bringing out the oud and moments of joy as he plays.

But, at the end we are invited to look again at the desolation, the limbo.

MUNICH – THE EDGE OF WAR

UK, 2021, 130 minutes, Colour.

George MacKay, Jannis Niewohner, Jeremy Irons, Alex Jennings, Liv Lisa Fries, Jessica Brown Findlay, Mark Lewis Jones, Sandra Huler, Nicholas Farrell, Robert Bathurst, Ulrich Mathies, August Diehl,

Directed by Christian Schowchow.



This morning's news said that one in four Australians has little or no knowledge of the Holocaust. So, what percentage would know anything much about the lead into World War II, the role of the UK, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain going to Munich and the accusations of Appeasement?

Feature films on the 1930s continue to be released, a source of some information about this era. And, as the title suggests, this is one of those films. It is based on a novel by Robert Harris (always an exciting author with interesting film versions of his novels including *Fatherland*, *Enigma*, *Ghost Writer*). This reviewer had read *Munich* and found that the film version brought back solid memories of characters, atmosphere and the incidents in Munich in September 1938.

This is a British-German collaboration. While Neville Chamberlain appears as the central character and is significantly portrayed by Jeremy Irons, the focus is on a young British civil servant and a young German who works in offices in Berlin. We see them initially, rather carefree at Oxford in 1932 – though the German, Paul (very effective performance from Jannis Niewöhner) has been enthused by National socialism. Then, six years later, each of them very serious, the British man, Hugh Leggett (George MacKay who has emerged as a significant screen presence, *Pride*, *True Story of the Kelly Gang*, 1917), personal secretary to Chamberlain. Tensions at home, his being unable to reveal to his wife any details about his work. He is to go to Munich with Chamberlain.

On the other hand, Paul has become disillusioned with Hitler and National Socialism, is linked with an anti-Hitler military group, his associate, Mrs Winter (Sandra Hüller from *Toni Erdmann*) has provided him with a top secret document outlining Hitler's plan to go beyond annexing the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia, but his more supremacist ambitions for land grabbing.

So, the core of the film: how to get this German document to Chamberlain to stop him signing the peace agreement, to help him see the true ambitions of Hitler.

Which means that there is some cat and mouse drama during the Munich meeting, the two friends meeting, exchange of documents, concealing of documents, attempts to bring them to Chamberlain's attention, even Paul getting Hugh to persuade Chamberlain to see him. And, behind-the-scenes, there is Paul's friend from the past, France (August Diehl) now bodyguard suspicious of the two men.

So, while there is interesting action drama, some split timing, the screenplay also offers an opportunity for audiences to understand Hitler and his ambitions, the esteem of the German people, his shrewdness in dealing with Mussolini and Chamberlain. And, for further impact for the film, veteran German actor, Ulrich Mathies, plays Hitler, rather older and more gaunt than usual, proud of his ability to stare fixedly at people and to read their characters, as he does with Paul who has an opportunity with a hidden gun to kill the Fuhrer.

Well written, well acted, taking us back into some of the complexities of the prewar period, and, perhaps, a bit more sympathetic towards Chamberlain and his intentions.

NIGHTMARE ALLEY

US, 2021, 150 minutes, Colour.

Bradley Cooper, Cate Blanchette, Tony Collette, Willem Dafoe, Richard Jenkins, Rooney Mara, Ron Perlman, Mary Steenburgen, David Strathairn, Mark Povinelli, Peter MacNeil, Holt McCallany, Clifton Collins Jr, Tim Blake Nelson.

Directed by Guillermo del Toro.



This film was based on a 1932 novel by William Lindsay Gresham,. It was made into a striking film noir in 1947, with the same name, and with the same names of the characters, the ending is softened somewhat because of audience entertainment expectations in the postwar period. However, it was not a box-office success. Now Mexican director, Oscar-winning for *The Shape of Water* (but whose films range from the war fantasy, *Pan's Labyrinth*, two *Hellboy* films), Guillermo del Toro. He brings his distinctive vision, his eye for the fantasy and the unusual, the darkness, for magic and the mysterious.

The film runs for 2 ½ hours, the first hour focusing on life in a carnival. The central character, Stanton Carlisle (the distinctive performance from Bradley Cooper) is seen burying a body in an old house and setting the house alight – explanations emerging later during the film. He catches a bus, arrives at a destination, discovers the carnival, persuades the manager (Willem Dafoe) to give him a job, any job. And, we are introduced to the life of the carnival, the unusual characters who frequent those old carnivals often labelled as “freaks”. Most distressing of all is The Geek, the owner hiring down and out vagrants, drugging them, keeping them in a cage, urging them to bite chickens’ necks to survive – and the amazed crowd gazing and gawping on. There are mind readers. There is a young woman who has electric powers. There is the traditional strongman and his dwarf, The Major.

The cast is quite extraordinary, Tony Collette and David Strathairn as the mentalists, Rooney Mara as the electric girl, Ron Perlman as Bruno, the strongman. Stan fits into this milieu, learning from the mentalists and becoming skilful himself, in love with Molly, the electric girl, planning to run away with her – and, at a crisis moment when a sheriff wants to move them on, exercising the mentalist skills shrewdly, gaining sympathy as the sheriff understands his own life, their being allowed to stay.

The latter, longer part of the film takes place two years later. The action has moved from the darkness and the nightmare alleys of the carnival to New York City, a fashionable hotel and clientele, comfortable apartments, connections with rich families of the city, and a connection with a psychiatrist. Once again, interesting casting with Cate Blanchett as the psychiatrist, Richard Jenkins as a millionaire, Mary Steenburgen as a grieving mother.

While Stan has success with his mentalist show at the hotel, assisted by Molly who has to keep revising the tricks of the trade to help Stan, the psychiatrist comes to the show, a femme fatale in her style, challenging Stan. But, this leads to something of a deal with the devil, the psychiatrist offering

him information about her clients so that he can insinuate himself into their lives, but her asking for psychoanalytic sessions so that she can understand him and he reveals his own inner secrets and are more.

At first, success, Stan becoming connected with millionaires, paid exceedingly well, and the psychiatrist holding the cash in her office safe. But, deals with the Devil bring their own hellish consequences – and, we trace the downfall of Stan, Molly wanting to leave him but persuaded to participate in one final confidence trick, confrontation with the millionaire, betrayal by the psychiatrist.

So, ultimately, Stan escapes, goes on the run, visits vagrant camps, eventually arrives at the carnival, under new management, but still with the act of The Geek. Stan is back where he started, only worse, a decline and the deepest fall. Which means that Nightmare Alley is interesting, dismaying, and a strong moral fable.

PARALLEL MOTHERS

Spain, 2021, 123 minutes, Colour.

Penelope Cruz, Milena Smit, Aitana Sanchez- Gijon, Rossy de Palma, Israel Elejalde.

Directed by Pedro Almodovar.



It is now 40 years since Pedro Almodovar (recognisable always as simply Almodovar) has been making films commenting on Spanish society, harking back to the Franco decades, commenting on trends in Spain, some satire, some parody, some melodrama, and many very serious dramas.

He has been preparing this film for some time. While it is a film very much about the present, the story of the parallel mothers of the title, it also does some harking back, very seriously, to the Franco years and some atrocities.

In fact, that is how the film starts, a focus on Janis (named by her hippy mother after Janis Joplin), a commercial photographer, busy with covers for popular women's magazines. She is played by Penelope Cruz, who has been working with Almodovar since the 1990s. She won the Best Actress award at Venice 2021 for this performance.

But she is also interested in making contact with an archaeologist that she is photographing, trying to persuade him to do excavation work on a mass grave in the village where she came from, many dead, including her grandfather. The people of the village are united in wanting to know more of the truth about the deaths, to recover the bodies, to mourn and to bury. The archaeologist becomes more involved, starting a relationship with Janis.

And, suddenly for the audience, Janis is nine months pregnant, hospital, sharing a room with a pregnant teenager, also about to give birth, Ana (well played by Milena Smit). There are two strenuous birth sequences, then delight in the babies, and their being taken away for observation. And there are visits from Ana's actress mother, an effective Aitana Sanchez-Gijon (who soon gives an opportunity to show her acting talent with moving auditions for a role in a play by Lorca).

Concern about the mass grave seems to go into abeyance.

The emphasis is on the two mothers, their exhilarating love for their daughter's, all kinds of domestic detail, for Janis with an unsatisfactory au pair, Ana in some depression, her mother going on theatrical tour, rejected by her father. So the parallel mothers have a lot in common, but are very different in age, temperament, situations. However, a surprise occasion brings them together again, closer than each of them might have imagined, highly dramatic and emotional issues about their babies, and an intensity of personal relationship.

The drama is intense for Janis, Penelope Cruz at her best. Huge emotional demands.

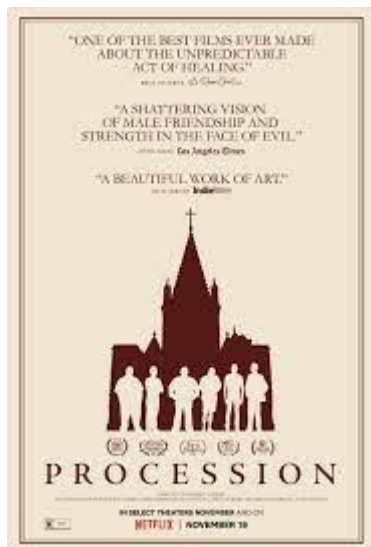
Ultimately, the film returns to the excavations, grim reminders, visually grim reminders of the antagonisms of the Spanish Civil War, the taking of sides, viciousness of reprisals and the consequences.

This is Almodovar serious, a Spanish director with his finger on the pulse of contemporary Spanish life but also conscience-raising about the Civil War enmities and past.

PROCESSION

US, 2021, 116 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Robert Greene.



At first, the title seems to suggest liturgical processions (and there are some re-acted in this documentary) but the title is linked to Process, Processes, and, in this case, to clerical sexual abuse cases.

Over the years there have been many films (features and documentaries) dealing with the realities of abuse church-wide. (For an overview, see the chapter in Screen Priests by this author.) These films are not comfortable viewing and many audiences have chosen not to watch. But, whether we watch or not, we know we have to face the realities. This is especially the case for empathy with the abused, especially underage boys and girls, the prey of paedophiles.

This is very important for *Procession*, especially as it has been available for worldwide viewing since November 2021 on Netflix.

Many who do not share Christian faith will be appalled. And Christians too. It can be said we need to be appalled. I have watched *Procession* twice. Once where the impact was overwhelming. A second time to try to appreciate more realistically and sympathetically the real stories of the six American men, their experiences of abuse in Kansas City, Missouri and Cheyenne, Wyoming, and not just read their stories but listen to their voices, tones, emotions, bewilderment, hesitations, rage, and their lifelong regrets at their loss of innocence so young and their being dominated by clerics who claim to be men of God.

And, the great advantage of the film is that we can see and respond to body language: faces, passive and impassive, frowns, smiles, pauses, bloated comments, outbursts seen in the body and not just heard in words.

One of my regrets is that the South African model of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation was not a feature of the church's experience of ministry to the abused (and pastoral care for the abusers). Instead, the approach taken has been legal, concerned with finance and compensation, adversarial (despite the principles of Towards Healing). An adversarial model, court cases and prosecutions, settlements, has taken predominance.

In more recent decades, in connection with assault cases, injury, burglary and theft, methods of Retributive Justice have been encouraged, assailants and those attacked meeting for some meeting of minds with a facilitator.

However, Procession takes a different approach, an innovative approach: drama, re-enactments. The film's director, Robert Greene, saw a press conference on television with four of the men with their lawyer, Kansas City prosecutor for many years, Rebecca Randles, with her assistant.

Greene had the idea for the men to meet, share their experiences, regrets, rage, frustrations and then for them to work together, write brief screenplays – and perform them. A risky project. However they employed a skilled drama coach, Monica Phinney who is present for all the discussions and filming.

Over the running time of almost 2 hours, we get to know the men very well. Ed, marriage, eager to explain his situation to his daughter. The angry Mike, never having an intimate relationship, unmarried, still enraged, swearing, condemning the willingness of the Archbishop of Kansas City and the independent tribunal to give credence to his stories.

There is the large 62-year-old Tom, case still pending, who volunteers to role-play bishops and priests and baptisms, the confessional and standover commands to the boys. Joe is more quiet, tormented by nightmares, trying to rediscover his child-self, an interior grief. Dennis' memories have surfaced, his older brother also being abused, and filmed excerpts of conversations now with his mother. Finally, there is Mike Sandridge, quiet, devout, intense, a listener, an actor, but also working with others on their screenplays. The films we see have evocative titles: Altered Boys, Confessional, Blatant Lies in the Name of the Lord, God Switches Sides, Letter to Joe, some of them are emotionally intense, the men reliving those experiences.

Part of the men's therapies consists of visits locations, churches, holiday camps, and reconstructing sets in churches and a studio.

Offending priests (and a Bishop) are named and photos shown. The credits show help from Catholic offices in Kansas City and Cheyenne and participation of the current local Bishop. Most of the cases are still pending.

A young boy Terrick has agreed to appear in each of the films, under the care of his parents and the concern of the men that Terrick not be traumatised by the films – and care in debriefing him after the episodes.

There is a rueful comment as Ed writes to Pope Francis and is happy to receive a personal reply. But his abusers have not yet been condemned. And he says that perhaps the Pope didn't have quite the clout he thought he had.

One hopes that Procession and its being seen widely on Netflix will move cases on and help the church to develop more clout in both compassion and justice.

QUEEN BEES

US, 2021, 104 minutes, Colour.

Ellen Burstyn, Ann Margaret, James Caan, Jane Curtin, Loretta Devine, Christopher Lloyd, Elizabeth Mitchell, Matthew Barnes, Alec Mavor, French Stewart, Rick Russert.

Directed by Michael Lembeck.



A film for octogenarians. It is definitely the target demographic. However, a number of the characters are in their 70s. Which means that septuagenarians might also enjoy the film

with some kind of hope and anticipation. For audiences under 70, an opportunity to try to understand and appreciate grandparents and parents. So, possibly, something for everyone.

However, the film is not an analytic study of ageing. Rather, it is more of a romantic comedy (yes a romantic comedy of octogenarians). Which means then that the film is something of a fantasy/reality imagining of what life could be like after 80. And, it is based on the experience of the writer, Harrison Powell, with his grandmother.

The grandmother figure of this film is Ellen Burstyn (turning 90 in 2022). She is central to the film, dominating it, Helen, a strong-minded widow, tangling with her strong-minded daughter, but with a great fondness for her grandson. She locks herself out of her home many times, accidentally sets fire to the kitchen, the need for her to have somewhere to stay during repairs – so the residential village for the aged that her daughter has been promoting seems just the place. In theory, rather than in practice.

One hopes that residential villages for the aged are something like the one on the screen – it is a village rather than a place for aged care for those who are ill or debilitated. Which means then that it is pretty lively in an extroverted American kind of way. All kinds of things to do, bridge groups, massages, Helen indulging her passion for flowers in the flower shop.

There is also a cantankerous mean girls, or mean old ladies, led by an obnoxious Jane Curtin (but we hope that change is always possible), with Ann Margaret and Loretta Devine, nice and cheerful, as other members of the group. There is also Christopher Lloyd with a strange wig (eventually removed) as an amorous widower who is living in the past. And then there is James Caan, the charming widower who befriends Helen and, of course...

Helen can stand her ground but she also learns that she needs to be with other people, relate to them, go out of herself, become her better self. And so do all the others.

So, some charm for the octogenarian audience – and some happy moments for those who are younger!

RED ROCKET

US, 2021, 30 minutes, Colour.

Simon Rex, Bree Elrod, Brenda Deiss, Suzanna Son, Shi-Ching Tsou, Ethan Narbone, Parker Bigham, Brandy Kirl, Dustin Hart.

Directed by Sean Baker.



Red Rocket was in competition at the Cannes film Festival, 2021, as well as screening and a number of other festivals and winning awards. It was well received by many critics. On the other hand, many audiences found it too much of a sleazy story with a sleazy central character.

Simon Rex (who had his own police troubles in real life), plays Mike Sabre, returning to his small Texas home town after seven years' absence – he has been an adult entertainer (read porn star) in Los Angeles, winning those awards, but falling on hard times, arriving battered and bruised and pleading with his former wife, Lexi, and her harder than nails mother, Lil, to stay with them. Definitely refusing at first, they respond to the certain charm that he is able to exert.

Eventually it would seem that he has returned home to try to re-generate his career, even to find some local talent. Which he does, in the form of a young woman working on a doughnut shop, Strawberry, (Suzanna Son). She is underage – but with an approaching 18th birthday, rather precocious and forward in herself, beginning a liaison with Mike. He grooms her and encourages her hopes to be a porn star.

There are some more interesting characters in the background, including Lexi, the ex-wife who was in the industry but also is a prostitute in the town. Lil is definitely a harder than hard case. Then there is Lonnie, next door, becoming friendly with Mike, accompanying him to the adult club, admiring his porn work, but eventually driving Mike to an appointment and, when Mike makes a mistake about a turnoff, Lonnie swerves in front of the highway traffic following and causes an enormous pileup. Mike persuades him to keep silent about his presence and take the blame completely.

Then there is a drug family in the town and Mike offers to work for them, they suspicious, especially the daughter, June, also a harder than hard case. Mike sells drugs to the workers at the local refinery, who also have their doughnuts at the local store. The owner of the store, Asian background, strict, is also an interesting character.

Some have seen it as a serious portrait of Mike. Others have seen it as something of a raucous comedy. Whether one approves of the film or not, it offers a sleazy story and a very self-centred, self-protective, sleazy character.

SCREAM

US, 2022, 114 minutes, Colour.

Melissa Barrera, Jenny Ortega, Jack Quaid, Neve Campbell, Courtney Cox, David Arquette, Marley Shelton, Dylan Minette, Jasmin Savoy Brown, Sonis Ammar, Mikey Madison, Mason Gooding, Heather Matarazzo.

Directed by Matte Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett.



Back again! And Ghostface is back! And the oldies, Sidney, Dewey and Gale (Neve, David and Courtney) are also back – welcome. And all those clever tangles, enunciated and elaborated in the original Scream, rules for horror films, phrases that should never be added, then, as in the later films, relatives of the victims and perpetrators inheriting the situation yet again – as well as watching the previous films and their relatives! For Scream fans, who could ask for anything more!

Actually, it is 25 years or so since the first Scream saga, from characters and ideas by Kevin Williamson (who produces here) and directed by the talented Wes Craven (to whom this film is dedicated) made such an impression. Two sequels came in more rapid succession and a fourth film in 2011 with mixed, and many negative, reviews and responses.

In the discussions there is reference to a redo, a reboot and, best of all, a “requel”.

So, now seems to be the time to resurrect the original, play with variations on the styles and themes, the young adult characters all under threat, the mysterious Ghostface and the slashings, how to discover whether there is one Ghostface or two (as in the previous film) and what are the police going to do – as well as Dewey, memories of so many stabbings in

the past films, giving advice and deciding to help, is one Weathers (who eventually wrote about the events) coming home also bringing a TV team, and the recruitment of the original victim, Sidney Prescott.

And the film opens in the familiar way, a young woman, a mysterious phone call, sinister threats, the playing of deadly games and a slashing.

But, and this will be appreciated by *Scream* and film fans but, maybe, lost on any non—horror fans coming upon *Scream*, the two screenwriters are obviously film buffs, horror buffs, always ready with a film reference (and some praise for Australia's *The Babadook*), making the characters enunciate all the principles required for this kind of horror film, what should be said and done, what definitely should not be said and not done, indicating that the Ghostface killer has to be one of the young people. So, the characters trying to work it out after the various slashings. The audience trying to work out who are the most likely – and mostly, they would not be wrong!

So, a motley group of friends, the sheriff from the past reappearing, memories of the old days, even some of the characters actually watching the *Scream* films, and mutual fears and suspicions.

There is enough plot developments to keep audiences attentive, and of clues to keep the mind busy, suspicions alert.

Judging by the immediate box office success of *Scream* in the US, it looks as though there are more *Scream* fans than we might have estimated, but, the fans of the original, maybe 25 at the time, are now 50 – so, multi-generational fans!

SPENCER

UK/US/Germany/Chile, 2021, 117 minutes, Colour.

Kristen Stewart, Timothy Spall, Jack Nielen, Freddy Spry, Jack Farthing, Sean Harris, Stella Gonet, Richard Sammel, Elizabeth Barrington, Amy Manson, Sally Hawkins.

Directed by Pablo Larraín.



There has been a film about Diana, Princess of Wales, called Diana and starring Naomi Watts – with mixed reviews and responses.

Perhaps in order to avoid an initial focus on Diana, writer-director from Chile, Pablo Larrain (some striking films in Chile but also the portrait of Jacqueline Kennedy-Onassis, Jackie), this portrait emphasises Diana's family background, the Spencers, and her memories of growing up near Sandringham Palace.

Larrain introduces his film by saying that it is a fable based on a true tragedy. This allows him to speculate, create sequences with references to sources, reportage, public information, as well as his own interpretations. And the action is confined to Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day, 1991, the Windsors celebration of Christmas at Sandringham.

A lot of discussion before the film was released about how appropriate it was for American Kristen Stewart to portray Diana. Judging on her performance, intense, some incorporation of Diana's mannerisms and style, embodying Diana at this critical stage of her life and marriage, this is a very striking performance, audiences able to forget the actress and focus on the character.

At the film's opening, she is driving to Sandringham, but is lost. And lost is a key element in this portrait. She has become lost in the Royal household, some quiet disapproval from the Queen as well as the security chief and members of the staff. She has lost her husband to his mistress, referred to in the film twice as "her" (and she is glimpsed looking at Diana at the Christmas Day service) and, to Diana's hurt and disgust, Charles has given them both the same Christmas gift, a large string of pearls.

And Diana is lost in herself, bulimia, some suicidal thoughts, dramatised in a night excursion across the fields to her now dilapidated and decaying family home, bringing up happier memories, and reminding audiences that she was married at 19, a young and somewhat inexperienced girl, and now, at this Christmas family gathering, she is approaching 30.

This film is not going to encourage sympathy for the Royal family, their aloof manner, the centuries long protocols, everything in order and on time, stylised celebrations, the most elaborate of meals from what seems a highly over-staffed kitchen employees/servants, all fastidiously served with pomp. The film reminds us that free time for the Royals is extremely limited, everything kept under security, controlled by the servants – even to the rack of clothes for Diana, each labelled for the various occasions during the day, wearing them like a Royal command.

However, there are some moments of joy, Diana and her relationship with William and Harry, playing with them, but also William's concern about his mother's state. There is a highly dramatic moment when she crashes the pheasant hunt where Charles has decided that William has to learn to shoot. She holds up the proceedings, demanding her children. (And, in a final moment of freedom, they are seen enjoying KFC on a seat by the Thames.)

Timothy Spall is very strong as the head of security, some intense interactions with Diana (and the question as to whether he left the biography Anne Boleyn for her to read which leads to some strong fantasy sequences, Diana imagining Anne Boleyn who rescues her from some despair. There is also Sally Hawkins as the dresser, Maggie, completely devoted to Diana, the point of rescue and refuge.

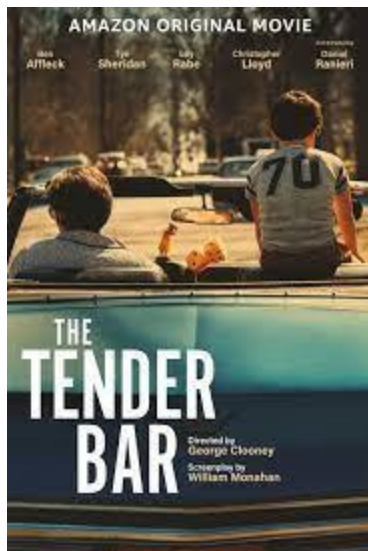
Everybody knows how Diana's story ended so there is an element of pathos right throughout the film. For those who do not know Diana or did not respond to her, this film portrait can serve as something of a revelation. For those who knew, admired and love Diana, much to appreciate, and sadness and regret.

THE TENDER BAR

US, 2022, 104 minutes, Colour.

Ben Affleck, Tye Sheridan, Daniel Ranieri, Lily Rabe, Brianna Middleton, voice of Max Martini.

Directed by George Clooney.



A film directed by George Clooney is always welcome, always the humane touch.

This personal drama, blended with comedy, is based on a memoir by the journalist and writer, JR Moehringer, published in 2005. The author is played as a young boy by impressive young actor, Daniel Ranieri, very sympathetic. He is played adult by Tye Sheridan, who has proven himself a strong presence from his beginnings as a child actor in *Tree of Life* and *Mud*.

The first part of the film is set in the 1970s, the latter part in the 1980s. And the bar of the title is in Long Island.

While the film is entertaining to watch, it could be said that it is not necessarily essential viewing. In fact, the entertainment is a touch lopsided. The first part of the film with the young actor is both interesting and enjoyable, challenging, the audience wondering how this little boy is going to develop into a successful writer. The second part of the film, though well-acted, is rather more standard material. It is the story of a young man going to Yale, his education, relationships, friendships, prospects. More familiar material.

But, the film is enhanced by one of Ben Affleck's best performances. He plays young JR's Uncle Charlie, sports coach, running a bar, the Dickens Bar, a self-educated man, a reader and loving books, worldly-wise, living with his father at home (and, surprisingly, no significant personal relationships).

There is puzzle about JR's name, what it stands for or simply Junior. His father has disappeared long since, a disc jockey on a New York radio station. The father does turn up

one day unexpectedly but is an alcoholic, touch of violence, no real feel for his son. (And he does turn up at the end of the film, even more unexpectedly, leading to quite a dramatic confrontation between father and son and JR making a final decision about his father.)

With that, Uncle Charlie is JR's father-figure – with some supportive and engaging help from a group of Charlie's friends who frequent the bar, supporting JR at every stage of his life, education, graduation, jobs.

The early part of the film shows a great deal about life at home, the cantankerous grandfather (a welcome role by Christopher Lloyd), his family descending to stay with him and grandmother when in trouble, which happens to JR and his mother (Lily Rabe). Home sequences, a school sequence where the grandfather decides to dress himself up and accompany JR to a father's breakfast, tensions, happiness, meals, conversations.

And so, the issue of what JR is to do with his life, supported in his love for reading by Uncle Charlie, starting to write. And then a transition to a decade later, JR on a train going to an interview at Yale (and conversation with a friendly priest and whom he will later meet on another train ride), going to Yale, sharing a room, attracted to a fellow student, in love with her, going to her family (very aristocratic and blunt interrogations), her continued friendship but her seeing others, JR always hopeful.

One of JR's decisions is to approach the New York Times, offer his writing, getting some experience at the paper.

At this stage, he is ready to set off on the adventure of his life, to be a writer, supported by his mother, given the gift of a car by Uncle Charlie.

It is significant, given the nature of the memoir, that the many sequences shown throughout the final credits are not of the adult JR but that excursion to the beach with Uncle Charlie and his friends. Those were the memories.

REVIEWS MARCH 2022

ALINE

BATMAN, The

BELFAST

BLACKLIGHT

CHEF ANTONIO: RECIPES FOR REVOLUTION

C'MON C'MON

DEATH ON THE NILE

DUKE. The

FLEE

FOREVER PURGE, The

HERE OUT WEST

HIVE

JE SUIS KARL

MAGIC

MARRY ME

MIRACLE MATT

PARALLEL MOTHERS

QUEEN BEES

QUO VADIS, AIDA?

STITCH IN TIME, A

STUDIO 666

TINDER SWINDLER, The

UNCHARTED

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE JEWISH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

I AM HERE

NEIGHBOURS

TAHARA

TIGER WITHIN

WET DOG, A

ALINE

Canada, 2020, 126 minutes. Colour.

Valerie Lemerrier, Sylvain Marcel, Roc Lafortune, Danielle Fichaud, Antoine Vezine, Jean-Noel Broute. Voice of Vistoria Sio.



Aline Dieu. See and hear Celine Dion.

Why the change of name? One thought would be that an audience for a documentary on Celine Dion might be limited in its appeal. Rather, a fictionalised account of her life and career would draw on a wider audience, her fans, those who know of her, those who like storytelling rather than documentation. However, a documentary would include quite an amount of footage of Celine Dion singing. Not that there are not songs and singing in this story.

An assurance for those who expect to hear “My heart will go on...”. It does appear – in a re-enactment of her singing the song at the Oscars when Titanic won Best Picture.

French-Canadian actress, Valerie Lemerrier, must be Celine Dion’s biggest fan, number one fan. Not only has she written the screenplay and directed, she appears as the singer (and with some strange special effects, even as the singer age 12 –, at the time of making the film, Valerie Lemerrier was 55).

What we have here is a straightforward story of a singer, life within her very large family, family bonds, an ambitious mother, a genial supportive father, her being brought to the attention of entrepreneur, Guy-Claude Kamar when she was 12. And, as they say, and they say it often, and here we say it, the rest is history!

The Dieu family is very large, 14 children. But, Aline has a singing talent and the family is not afraid of pushing her forward. And Aline is not afraid of being pushed. So, the early part of the film shows her as something of a child prodigy, making her impact on television, then in concerts, an ever-growing public following.

There are some emotional complications when she falls in love – or, rather, a gradual deepening of her love for Guy, considered far too old for her. And her mother, always interfering to protect her daughter as well as promote her, disapproves. But, Aileen has a strong personality and wants to make decisions for her own life, marrying Guy. He is continually present, managing her, urging her on, loving her.

Aline learns English, gains an audience in the English-speaking world as well as the French speaking world. She has some difficulties, not allowed to speak let alone sing for three months, not endangering her vocal chords. She wants to become pregnant, eventually does, the couple having the son on whom she dotes. Then, seemingly unexpectedly, pregnant again, and twins. There are some family dynamics, the son with his moments of jealousy towards the twins... But having the delight of his first concert seeing his mother perform on stage.

The action moves rather rapidly in the latter part of the film, months flying by, then some years, especially as the children grow up, Aline continues her singing. There are some griefs, her mother's illness, but recovery, eventually her father's death and, ultimately, the death of her husband after 21 years of marriage.

The final song of the film is worth listening to, a recapitulation in its lyrics of her own life, ups and downs, career, family, love, and ordinary woman, she sings, whose appeal is basically for her public. (And, to note, the voice of the songs is not that of Celine Dion but dubbed by Victoria Sio.)

THE BATMAN

US, 2022, 175 minutes, Colour.

Robert Pattinson, Zoe Kravitz, Colin Farrell, Jeffrey Wright, Paul Dano, Barry Keoghan, Peter Sarsgaard, John Turturro, Andy Serkis, Rupert Penry Jones, Jaymi Lawson.

Directed by Matt Reeves.



Quite an achievement. Quite a significant cinematic achievement.

Bob Kane's original comic strip, Batman, has had a long life on television and in the movies, from the fun and excitement of the 1960s, to Tim Burton's vision with Michael Keaton, to lighter touches with Val Kilmer and George Clooney, Ben Affleck and the Justice League. Now we have British actor, Robert Pattinson, the most serious Batman of them all. (In fact, this version might appeal strongly to Christopher Nolan and his Christian Bale series but not so much to Zack Snyder with Ben Affleck seeming like a benevolent uncle compared with Robert Pattinson!)

This is a very dark version, not only in characters and themes, lawlessness in Gotham city, political corruption, Gotham's equivalent of the mob, money, graft and assassinations, but, in its two hour 55 minute running time, practically every sequence is at night, in the dark. There is a daylight sequence at a funeral commemoration, a relief to see some daylight, but it is soon overwhelmed in disaster, chaos, and a huge chase throughout the city (with compliments to the skills of the editor to make the chase so adrenaline-exciting, putting together brief shots with accumulated dramatic effect like the chases in the Mad Max films). There is also a brief dawn sequence at the top of a high building where Batman encounters the mysterious character, Selina (Zoe Kravitz). Otherwise, ever-dark.

The visuals of this Gotham more than ever resemble those of New York City. But, there is a focus on churches, Gothic architecture, even within Bruce Wayne's hermitage home. And, the film opens with a version of Schubert Ave Maria, recurring throughout the film as a kind of motif to alert the audience to potential tragedy, even sung at the end by the mysteriously villainous, The Riddler (generally seen masked but a virtuoso performance by Paul Dano at the end).

The film opens with the assassination of the Mayor, the opening up of a new campaign, a young African-American female contender. Further killings, the introduction to a mob boss in his nightclub, The Penguin (this reviewer was jawdropping at the final credits to discover that he is played by Colin Farrell – disguised to look rather like Al Pacino's character in Dick Tracy). Then there is the mob boss, smooth-talking and arrogant, dominating the city and its past, an effective John Turturro.

And, what about The Batman himself? When the sign goes up in the sky, it is his chance to rendezvous with police Commissioner Gordon (Jeffrey Wright efficient in the role). The Batman is big, brawny, full of vigour and, when he goes into action, initially against a group of louts mugging an Asian American, he is a vigorous and violent fighter. And we see this throughout the film – reluctant to kill, ready to maim, a masked vigilante. And denounced by many as such.

We do see him at home, with Andy Serkis this time as Alfred.

The development of the plot, as so often with Batman films, takes us back to Bruce Wayne's parents, their role in Gotham, politics, finance, philanthropy – but this time with some sinister twists. And they reinforce the basic stands of Bruce Wayne and his disguise, initial fears, violence and vindictiveness,

relentlessness. We might say that Robert Pattinson's version of Bruce Wayne (and that of director and co-writer, Matt Reeves) is one-dimensional as described. However, with his interactions and the encounters with Selina, there is a further reticent emotional response – perhaps he is a half dimension character.

The film is strikingly photographed, many strong close-ups dominating the action, yet quite an amount of action and effects.

The long running time passes quite effectively, the action intriguing, as is the mystery of who was behind the corruption and the identity of The Riddler, sinister atmosphere making the film something of a parable about contemporary cities, government, corruption and the victimisation of ordinary people.

BELFAST

UK, 2021, 98 minutes, black-and-white/Colour.

Jude Hill, Jamie Dornan, Caitriona Balfe, Judi Dench, Ciaran Hinds, Lewis McAskiel.

Directed by Kenneth Branagh.



This is Belfast 1969. The Troubles. Three years before Bloody Sunday. Separate areas for Catholics and Protestants – although here we visit the street with families both Catholic and Protestant. There are riots. There are attacks on Catholic families, wanting them out. Over the next 20 years or so things were to become much worse before they became better and agreements made. This is Northern Ireland.

But this is also the story of Kenneth Branagh as a boy. Branagh was born in 1960 in this Belfast. This is his memoir of childhood. He has written the screenplay, and directs. This is a heartfelt story – and is dedicated at the end to those who stayed, to those who left, to those who lost their lives.

While the film opens and closes in contemporary Belfast, filmed in colour, the story is told in strong black-and-white, bursting into colour only when the family go to the pictures, One Million Years BC with Raquel Welch, exciting shenanigans with Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. No doubt that Kenneth Branagh had and has a love for films.

Jude Hill, who comes from a village outside Belfast, embodies the young Buddy perfectly. We see everything through his eyes, feel everything through his feelings. Life is exciting, going to school, attracted to the girl across the street and wanting to do his school project with her, he lives at home with his older brother, is friendly with neighbours and cousins who live locally. His Pa (a sympathetic Jamie Dornan) works over in England, returning home fortnightly, raising the possibility that they should move to England, something his strong wife, Ma (Caitriona Balfe) is against, settled at home with relatives and friends. And, continual backup from Pop (Ciaran Hinds) and Granny (Judi Dench). Both are Dornan and Hinds come from Belfast, Balfe from Dublin, and, of course, Judi Dench from England but, with different hairstyle, glasses, she becomes Granny rather than any other Judi Dench character.

A lot of playful sequences, the world of children, games in the street, going to school, ordinary life. But, with the attack on the Catholic houses, the setting up of barricades at the end of the street with an old codger sitting there to check identities for those passing through even though he knew them well, the children included, the sectarian views being expressed, local leaders menacing and threatening those who did not comply, life is not easy in this area of Belfast.

Branagh's the screenplay, however, has several moments advocating peace and understanding.

There are some climax moments, a raid on a local supermarket and frenzied looting, But his young girl friend urging Buddy to join in the raid, and his grabbing some Omo. Ma is dismayed, takes him back, but is caught up in the powerplay of the various leaders of the raid. And, Pa is eventually forced to confront the menacing leader. It is time to consider more seriously moving from Belfast.

There is a deep humanity in Kenneth Branagh's screenplay, especially in some wonderful scenes where Buddy has enjoyable conversations with Pop and, later, conversations with Granny (Hinds and Dench at their best).

Obviously Kenneth Branagh has a lot of regrets about Belfast in the past – but he has made a significant life for himself, contributing to the theatre and cinema at a world level, but, obviously not forgetting his Belfast and Northern Ireland roots.

BLACKLIGHT

US, 2022, 108 minutes, Colour.

Liam Neeson, Aidan Quinn, Taylor John Smith, Emmy Raver-Lampman, Claire van Der Boom, Yael Stone, Andrew Shaw, Zac Lemons, Tim Draxl, Mel Jarnson.

Directed by Mark Williams.



Liam Neeson as action hero again. In fact, since 2008 when he appeared in the original Taken and proved his credentials for taking on this kind of role, he has averaged an action adventure movie every year since. (And, while Blacklight is for 2022, he has already another two films like this waiting for release – and then, he will appear as the classic private investigator, Philip Marlowe.)

In many ways, this is standard Liam Neeson action. He plays Travis Block, whom we first see being a doting grandfather, his daughter wary of him, fearing that he is going to turn the little girl into a security expert – she is already alert to dangers in situations, her grandfather tutoring her. And, throughout the film, there are some very pleasant grandfatherly sequences, Travis doting but then caught up in action and forgetting to turn up for the little girl's play at school.

And, Travis has every reason to be distracted. The film is set in Washington DC and opens with a protest rally, a type which Donald Trump would not have approved of. The speaker is a passionate young woman and while we look forward to seeing and hearing more of her, she is set up and killed, appearance of a hit run accident. So, sinister beginnings.

A young man is seen at the rally and it emerges that he is the speaker's boyfriend, Dusty Crane (Taylor John Smith). And, he is on the run, pursued by Travis, interrogated by him, revelations that he has been working undercover – which means then that we are on the way to a deadly conspiracy.

Dusty Crane has been in contact with an ambitious reporter, Vera (Emmy Raver-Lapman) who dismisses him but is forced to take everything seriously, Travis interrogating her, enlisting her help to track down the assassins.

It is also revealed that Travis has been working for years with the head of the FBI, Robinson (Aidan Quinn looking older and not immediately recognisable). Travis has been doing undercover work for Robinson because of the debt when Robinson saved him from court-martial in Vietnam.

So, it all builds up to a confrontation, revelation of a make America great again moral disapproval of American culture, justice being done, the rescue of daughter and granddaughter in witness protection and a happy reunion.

This is a film that Liam Neeson made in Melbourne in 2021. While the four central roles are played by Americans, the quite long list of supporting characters is all played by Australians.

The director, Mark Williams, created the television series Ozark – and clearly has a dislike of some of the triumphalist aspects of the Trump years.

CHEF ANTONIO's RECIPES FOR REVOLUTION

Italy/Australia, 2021, 99 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Trevor Graham.



Looking for a positive story, frequently heart-warming, then why not go to visit the Alpine Italian town of Asti? There you will find a big jovial chef, Antonio Benedetta, often smiling at camera, a cheerful presence in his kitchen. And, there are quite a few cooking sequences, of course, and actually, for those with a love for tastes Italian, the tagliatelle and the special pizzas look pretty good.

But, there is much more. Chef Antonio's recipe is for food to change life, even to change the world.

And his recipe? An idea that he realised in a kitchen, working with his brother, that he should train and employ young people. Nothing startling in that. Except that these young people all had Down Syndrome. Over a period of time, he trained them at a restaurant in Asti, finding enough money, eventually, to buy a hotel in the city and use it as accommodation for the trainees as well as an opportunity for skills in hotel management, changing and cleaning rooms...

So, we are introduced to several of these young people, especially Nicola who was there at the beginning, with Mirkos and some detailed sessions of how to train for kitchen work, from learning how to sharpen knives, slice tomatoes and vegetables, mix ingredients, prepare cakes and delicacies. And, then smartly dressed in waiters' attire, discipline with hands behind their back, knowing how to serve tables and make the right remarks, pour the wine, be attentive.

The screenplay describes this as "social inclusion".

While the film shows the story of Antonio and his family, as well as Fiorella who shares in the training of the young people, we get the background, with photos, of Nicola, Mirkos, and their girlfriends Jessica and Francesca and Irene. There is the pathos of the mothers discovering the children had Down Syndrome, some escaping from the responsibility, others taking on the responsibility (with one mother forever dominating, cheerfully, her son and his girlfriend).

Antonio's aim, after opening the Albergo Etica in Asti, was to have similar hotels around Italy, travelling to Rome to receive an award and acclaim, to open a hotel in Rome – with the trainees/employees enjoying the sights of Rome (as we do with moving postcard glimpses of all the popular sites).

Information is given that similar hotels have been opened in Argentina and Slovakia.

And the Australian connection? The writer-director, also involved in cinematography and editing, is veteran Trevor Graham, whose documentaries go back to 1980s with politics, Red Matildas, to the 90s with a documentary about Eddie Mabo, and more recently the rather exotic kitchen documentary, Monsieur Mayonnaise. This film has investment from Screen Australia as well as from Film Victoria and the Victorian government.

And, at the end, the good news that recently a similar hotel was opened in the Blue Mountains. Here's hoping.

C'MON, C'MON

US, 2021, 110 minutes, Black-and-white.

Joaquin Phoenix, Woody Norman, Gaby Hoffman, Scoot McNairy, Molly Webster.

Directed by Mike Mills.



A commentator has pointed out that there are a number of films showing the powerful relationship between an adult and a child, citing Charlie Chaplin and The Kid, the Czech film, Kolya, winner of the Oscar for Best Language Foreign Film. C'mon, C'mon has been acclaimed, already, with 12 wins and 49 nominations.

Joaquin Phoenix is Johnny, uncle Johnny, the adult. British-born Woody Norman is Jesse, the kid. Gaby Hoffman, who entered into film and television while a child, gives a strong performance as Viv, Jesse's mother.

First of all, a comment about Joaquin Phoenix. In recent years his casting has been as diverse as his Oscar-winning Joker and his appearance as Jesus in the film, Mary Magdalene. And, looking back at his diverse career, who would have thought that at this stage of his life he would portray such a humane, generally agreeable, even smiling, adult? He seems to be really enjoying being cast in this role and in his performance.

The basic plot outline is very simple – and some audiences have tended to dismiss it as slight, that could have been got over in 30 minutes, it is over-padded. Johnny and his team cross the US interviewing youngsters, asking questions about their understanding of life, hopes, the US. He has

previously clashed with his sister, Viv (flashbacks to their coping with their terminally ill mother in care). Viv's husband is a musician but prone to strong bouts of depression. And their son Jesse is nine. When Viv has to spend face-to face time with her husband, she asks her brother to look after Jesse. He agrees. Seems rather pleased with the request.

To say the least, Jesse is a handful. At nine, he has had a difficult life, devoted to his father, upset at his father's illness and absence, relying on his mother and her constant attention. He is intelligent. He can also be quite manipulative. Johnny at one stage wonders whether he is spoilt. In fact, he is, but this highlights his neediness. He has his moods, he has his mood swings. And he likes to imagine himself in alternate stories, as an orphan, getting Johnny and his mother to join in his dialogue and role-plays.

Of course, we see the repercussions for Johnny, asking questions all over the US but reluctant to answer questions about himself and his life, at one stage Viv talking to him on the phone, all getting him to open up about his partner is leaving him, the relationship between brother and sister and the treatment of their mother. He quietly admits a little.

Jesse on the other hand is very selective in his replies, able to ward off what he considers intrusions, making demands of his uncle, throwing back at him his uncle's comment about a lot of responses being simply blah blah. Jesse is happy to go with his uncle back to New York and accompany him on the interviews, even getting the microphone to record sounds all about the city. But, the deep neediness leads to tantrums, momentarily running away from his uncle intense on the phone, arguments, sullenness, reconciliations.

Johnny has to go to New Orleans for his job, Jesse being particularly obstreperous and hindering, eventually going with him to New Orleans, opening up, confiding in his uncle, trusting him, and happy reuniting with his mother. At the end of the film, his uncle does a recapitulation on tape of what they shared so that when Jesse starts to forget the details, there will be a literal record.

Mike Mills has made idiosyncratic films, *Thumbsucker*, *Beginners* (for which Christopher Plummer won his Oscar), *20th Century Women*. This film is in black-and-white, striking vistas of Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, New Orleans. It is also a strongly worded-packed film, a long range of interviews, a great number of responses, and quotations from books read to Jesse, from the *Wizard of Oz* and other children's books and a great deal of verbal wisdom.

DEATH ON THE NILE

UK/US, 2022, 127 minutes, Colour.

Kenneth Branagh, Tom Bateman, Annette Bening, Russell Brand, Ali Fazal, Dawn French, Gal Gadot, Armie Hammer, Rose Leslie, Emma Mackey, Sophie Okonedo, Jennifer Saunders, Letitia Wright, Susannah Fielding.

Directed by Kenneth Branagh.



Most audiences will enjoy this version of Death on the Nile – purists critical of the film versions of Agatha Christie's novels will have some difficulties with changes in the plot and with Brenner's portrayal of Poirot. And, possibly, audiences think that Peter Ustinov's Death on the Nile should not be remade. (And, there was a version with David Suchet in the television series with all the Poirot novels.)

For audiences who were not taken by Kenneth Branagh's interpretation of Poirot on the Orient Express, nor of his luxurious moustache, there is a transition here. In fact, there is a very interesting interpretation of his moustache, its size and his wearing it (and a surprising momentary revelation in the final minutes of the film).

The film actually opens in the trenches of World War I, quite an elaborate re-creating of the trenches (echoes of 1917), a planned attack on a bridge, seemingly a death sentence, but a younger Poirot advising an immediate attack, given the clue of the flight of birds and the setting of the wind. The attack is a success but his commander and Poirot are wounded, Poirot in the face – and some poignant moments as his fiancée come to visit him in hospital. Poirot is capable of love.

Shift to 1937, the period for the murder mystery. We visit a London club with a singer, Salome von Otterbourne (Sophie Okenado) in the Josephine Baker style. We also see a devoted couple, Jacqueline and Simon (Emma Mackay and Armie Hammer) eagerly dancing. Then, spotlight, Linnet arrives, and imposing Gal Gadot – and then a switch to the Nile with Linnet and Simon married, and an intensely jealous Jacqueline pursuing them.

Audiences will enjoy very much the photography of Cairo, Pyramids and Sphinx, the Nile, the Valley of the Kings, the interiors of the monuments, the vastness.

But, at the hotel in Cairo, no sign of World War II imminent, the lavish and indulgent lifestyle of the very rich and careless, Poirot is on holidays. In fact, we discover that he has been commissioned to follow up on his good friend, Bouc (Tom Bateman) because his mother (Annette Bening) is not happy with his love for Salome Von Otterbourne's niece, Rosalie (Letitia Wright). And then Jacqueline reappears, haunting, menacing, and on her tour of the ruins, Linnet is almost killed by a falling boulder.

The solution, everybody to go on a cruise up the Nile. Jacqueline again, the shooting, Simon wounded, the discovery of Linnet shot in her bed – and everyone having an alibi.

Actually, Poirot is much more human, humane in this film than in the others, relating better to people – although, Rosalie has an extraordinary outburst criticising him (in the vein that Agatha Christie was feeling at the end of her career and disliking Poirot!). Many in the audience will know the solution from reading or the previous films so it is not a matter of whodunnit or but, rather, watching how clues are presented and the final explanation.

The cast is strong, not quite as spectacular as the 1978 version, but there is the pleasure of seeing Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders as well as an almost unrecognisable Russell Brand as the doctor.

Except for purists, an enjoyable visit to Agatha Christie land.

THE DUKE

UK, 2020, 96 minutes, Colour.

Jim Broadbent, Helen Mirren, Anna Maxwell Martin, Fionn Whitehead, Matthew Goode, James Wilby, Richard McCabe.

Directed by Roger Michell.



There was a joke at the time, 1962, which is reprised in this drama, Kempton Bunton and his wife in the cinema watching James Bond in Dr No. Bond admires Goya's portrait of the Duke of Wellington, stolen by Dr No. In fact, the public knew that it had been stolen from the National Gallery. The Duke tells the story of what happened behind the scene as well as the media response.

The film opens with Kempton Bunton in court, charged with the theft of the portrait. Bunton is a cheerful man, pleading not guilty, starting to make his case. And then the screenplay goes back six months, offering a portrait of Bunton, defying the police concerning everyone paying the television licence, eliminating BBC reception so that he was within the law of not paying. Bunton is a working class man, committed to the cause of humanity, standing on street corners seeking petitions, to claiming his stances in public. His played marvellously by Jim Broadbent. Meanwhile, at home, there is his long-suffering wife, reminding us that Helen Mirren can play cleaning ladies as Well Is Queen Elizabeth convincingly, and a young son, Jackie (Fionn Whitehead). And there is grief for and daughter, long dead in a bicycle accident, reticence at home, but Kempton writing plays (never produced) about his daughter.

Then the theft of the painting and its finishing up in Kempton's cupboard, a forced cupboard back supplied by his son.

Headlines, police intervention, Home Secretary concerned, speculation about gangs of professional art thieves... The media taking up the case.

Meanwhile, at home, Kempton getting jobs, losing them, standing up against worksite bullying, sending his plays to theatres... And the big plan that giving back the painting would mean a reward of £140,000 to be devoted to charities (and just think how many television alliances licenses that would cover).

Kempton returns the painting, arrested, and his trial, his defence lawyer played by Matthew Goode. Kempton, of course, can be quite the orator, which means that the Gallery, the jury, and some of the lawyers are entertained. While being acquitted generally of the crimes, he does receive a three month sentence because the frame had disappeared, meaning that he was guilty of this theft.

There is quite an unexpected twist towards the end which makes Kempton an even better man. It can be said that his family collaborated in giving information for the making of The Duke.

In a way, the film is slight, perhaps parochial in its portrait of Britain in the early 1960s, the heritage of the Duke of Wellington and Waterloo, the British spirit – manifested after the jury's decisions with the Gallery and everyone bursting into national spirit singing Jerusalem. But, with Jim Broadbent and Helen Mirren, this is a reminder that even with slight stories, we can be impressed as well as entertained by expert performances.

FLEE

Denmark, 2021, 89 minutes, Colour.



A film about refugees from Afghanistan, its release made more poignant by the collapse of Kabul and the taking over the country by the Taliban in 2021.

This is a striking film, Oscar-nominated in three categories: Best Documentary, Best Animation, Best Foreign Language Film. And it has won quite a number of nominations and awards in festivals.

But the refugee at the centre of the story, Amin, takes us back to 1984, some seemingly ordinary life in the capital, an amount of freedom. However, the monarchy has been previously toppled, the Mujahadin are exercising power, there is the Communist influence. Amin's father is arrested, imprisoned, disappeared. His family suffer oppression, an older brother drafted to the military but escaping, the family relying on help to escape to Moscow. By the mid-90s, after years in Moscow, Amin leaves Russia, with the help of a refugee trafficker, a teenager finding that instead of going to Sweden to meet with his brother and family, he is sent to Denmark, having to keep quiet about his identity, a fabricated story about the death of the rest of his family, something that he conceals for many years.

While we might say that this is a familiar enough story, repeated over the decades and relevant to 2021, it is the way that the story is told that continually demands our attention, keeps us fascinated.

While there is a voice-over from Amin, narrating his story throughout the film, the visual method used is that of animation. The style is direct and broad, bringing to life the many episodes in Amin's life, as a little boy (prone to wear his sister's dresses), playing in the streets, his home life, the older sister telling heroic stories about their father, then the arrest, imprisonment, oppression and fear, the effect on the mother and her going prematurely grey.

This animation device means that we probably pay more attention to Amin and his story than we might have in a direct biographical documentary. The narrative has its moments of pain, uncertainty, relief.

Intercut with Amin telling his story is the revelation that until now, even with friends and his partner, he has not revealed the truth, that his family are still alive. The director has him lie down on the carpet, interviews him like a psychologist, eliciting more and more truth from Amin.

We also learn that Amin has had a successful life, an academic career, time in the United States. He also reveals his sexual orientation, his uncertainties, the grim view of homosexuality in Afghan society, the family accepting him as he was. And, there is relationship with his partner, the buying a house, settling down, moving in, a wedding ceremony.

The animation is made all the more effective because of the wide range of newsreel and television footage inserted, bringing a heightened sense of reality to situations in Afghanistan, war, suffering and escape.

A moving story inviting audiences to be more understanding and sympathetic to refugees and appreciate what they have experienced and suffered.

THE FOREVER PURGE

US, 2021, 103 minutes, Colour.

Ana de Reguera, Tenoch Huerta, Josh Lucas, Levin Rambin, Cassidy Freeman, Alejandro Edda, Will Patton, Will Brittain, Sammy Rotibi.

Directed by Evarado Valerio Gout.



James de Monaco wrote a screenplay about a political situation where the government, the American government, declared that on one night of the year, all laws were suspended, that there would be no crimes, giving license to any citizen to wreak violence and vengeance, even death, on their enemies. This was The Purge.

The theme proved very popular and there were two sequels.

Many audiences would be surprised that in 2021 there would be this kind of Purge film. The previous films were all set in the cities. However, the setting for this version De Monaco takes his audiences to the state of Texas, on a ranch property, in a local town, and, in the city of El Paso, on the American-Mexican border.

Which means then that the Purge elements are all there but the variations on the theme are interesting. In the previous films, there were urban problems, poverty problems, racial problems. This time there are some similar issues but basically there is the issue of the relationship between traditional Americans (Donald Trump's followers) and the Hispanics who have migrated, legally or illegally, into the United States. There is also an emphasis on the American treatment of Native Americans.

The Purge situation gets out of hand, not limited to the night hours of the official Purge – but continuing on, day and night.

In fact, this drama could be seen in the light of attitudes in legislation, especially the wall between Mexico and the US, in the four years of the Trump administration. Ironically, it is the Texans who have to take refuge from the Purge in Mexico.

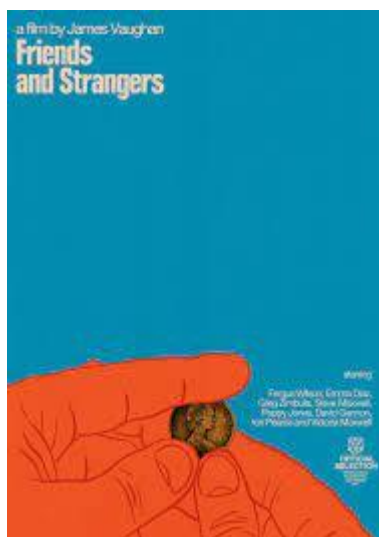
There are two Mexican leads, strong characters who take stances against the Purgers, exercising leadership. There is also the American family from the ranch, led by Josh Lucas, rather single-minded, not understanding Hispanic culture and not wanting to, but forced into difficult circumstances, life-threatening, and having to be dependent on the Mexicans. In his party are his pregnant wife, his sister, and some sympathetic Hispanics from his ranch and others who work in the local meat processing firm.

There is also a sympathetic performance by Will Patton as Lucas's father, voicing good principles, a lot of common sense – but the victim of the Purge by Hispanic workers, resentful of their treatment on ranch.

By transferring the action to Texas, it means that the Purge could go on forever.

FRIENDS AND STRANGERS

Australia, 2021, 82 minutes, Colour.
Fergus Wilson, Emma Diaz, Greg Zimbalist, Malcolm Kennard.
Directed by James Vaughan.



This is the kind of film that challenges a reviewer, who wants to mediate the experience of the film to potential viewers, but offers great scope for a critic, to analyse the film, techniques, content, cinema references...

And this is what has happened here. *Friends and Strangers* was very well received by critics, with comments like the following: Part absurdist comedy, part satire of colonial accidie, the film follows directionless twenty-somethings Ray and Alice as they navigate a series of prosaic but increasingly agonising situations.

And, in many ways, this is what the film is – although Alice disappears rather early in the film and the focus is on Ray, a series of encounters and meanderings. He is not the most proactive of film heroes.

And, one critic commented on the films of French director, Eric Rohmer, with his focus on individuals in their context, meaning of life, many of relationships – and suggested that *Friends and Strangers* is an Australian film in that vein. There are long takes of some very attractive scenery and locations, a lake in the country, vistas of Sydney CBD, the harbour at harbourside mentions (and, starting from the credits and with verbal references to the history of Sydney, 1788, the early settlement, flora and fauna...).

On the other hand, one blogger's reaction to the film was – and here is an interesting word – a discombobulation of episodes.

Ray and Alice meet by chance, decide to go camping together, encounter an old codger who warns that they should move on, a meeting with a young girl who is on a trip around Australia with her widower father who is home educating her – and a conversation about Australian art and culture, and a connection with the artist Boyd family. Ray then meets a friend who will work with him on videoing a marriage ceremony, a long sequence in a car, the camera inside and at the back of driver and passenger (and, probably, some will reference the films of Iranian, Abbas Kiarostami, inside cars – as has been referenced here!). This is a rather long sequence and, for the impatient viewer, it does get a bit exciting when smoke emerges from the engine.

There is also an encounter with an eccentric neighbour who plays loud atonal music and the arrival at the home of the family, filled with art, which is to be the venue of the wedding – and long, eccentric conversations about art and neighbours – and Ray's mother coming to his rescue as the film ends.

So, for audiences (most?) who are eager for a story, for some kind of narrative which will interest them and, perhaps challenge them, this will not make the top of their list. On the other hand, critics who admire cinematic experiments (and some have described *Friends and Strangers* in this way), it will be an arthouse must see. And then we find this information: Ranking in BFI's Sight & Sound's **Top 50 Films of 2021**, James Vaughan's debut feature, *Friends and Strangers* explores displacement and disconnection in contemporary Australia.

HERE OUT WEST

Australia, 2022, 106 minutes, Colour.

Genevieve Lemon, Gabriel Chan, Lena Cruise, Arka Das, Jing Xua Chan, Christine Milo, Christian Ravello, Jaime Ureta, Khoi Trinh, Leah Vandenberg..

Directed by Lucy Gaffey, Ana Kokkinos, Leah Purcell, Julie CalceffL Seth, Fadia Abboud.



The west of the title is the western suburbs of Sydney. But, the stories and characters could equally appear in a film about the western suburbs of Melbourne. Or in so many of the different areas of Australia's capital cities.

We have a mixture of characters and stories, especially from different ethnic backgrounds, from the Middle East and from Asia, the subcontinent, south-east Asia, whose stories interconnect, centred on a major hospital in the western suburbs.

Each character and story is indicated with a heading. The first is quite striking, Genevieve Lemon as a grandmother visiting her daughter who has just given birth in the hospital and, with a grandmotherly impulse, snatches the baby, accompanied by a little Lebanese girl whom she is minding, and drives away. We see them at various stages as we follow other stories.

One of the strongest stories focuses on some Bengalis and an African friend, some disputes amongst themselves, one of them injured and going to hospital, cared for by a sympathetic Filipino nurse who is also crucial to the baby kidnapping story. And clashes with a severe white nurse, sometimes intolerant and hurtful. The young man is also drawn into another story, an elderly man dying in hospital, his daughter not understanding him as he speaks in Bengali as he dies. The young man serves as a translator – and there is some pathos as the daughter, who had been a singer working overseas, is able to sing a local Indian song as her father dies.

So, already we have a feel for Sydney's western suburbs, enhanced by all kinds of views of the suburbs, from the overlapping freeways to the ordinary streets.

Towards the end of the film, the Vietnam theme is introduced, a young man, ambitious, calling himself Tom instead of Tuan, challenged by his family and his rather rebellious younger brother to

face his origins as he tries to make a success of himself in local business. And, a strong focus on the Chinese, a dominant mother, her proud running of a restaurant which is about to close, the dilemma of the daughter and her boyfriend and moving interstate or the challenge of family and cultural loyalties demanding that she should stay.

This composite film was written and directed by five directors, all of them women, the more prominent, Ana Kokkinos, successful Dir of film and television for 30 years, and Leah Purcell (actor and director of *The Drover's Wife*).

At just over 100 minutes, this is an interesting and entertaining introduction to life in the western suburbs, the range of characters, the range of ethnic backgrounds and languages, and each of them finding their place in multicultural Australia.

HIVE

Kosovo, 2021, 84 minutes, Colour.
Ylika Gashi, Cun Lajci.
Directed by Blerta Basholli.



We are taken back to 1999, war in Kosovo, many husbands and sons disappearing. We are taken back to the mid 2000s, the aftermath of war, the remnant of old men, the wives and widows, the younger generation, surviving.

At the centre of this story is a middle-aged woman, a widow, Fahrije (an intensely powerful performance and screen presence by Ylika Gashi). Those who have seen *Quote Vadis, Aida?* With its memories of Serb massacres in Srebrenica, July 11, 1995, will be making comparisons between Aida and Fahrije. Two very strong women, having to cope with war and aftermath. While Aida had a prominent position as teacher, as translator, Fahrije lives in a village which is, to say the least, highly patriarchal.

Which comes to a head when Fahrije makes a decision to become enterprising. She has been keeping the hives built by her husband to whom was she devoted. She collects the honey and tries to sell it at a local market. She also belongs to a women's group in the village, who are offered a car to

help them in their work. When the invitation is raised, the women are afraid to get their driving licenses, not for fear of driving, but for fear of the reactions of the men who highly disapprove of women driving or taking this kind of initiative and the consequent gossip around the village. Which is what happens when Fahrije decides to get her license. Her father-in-law, wheelchair bound, who helps sell the honey at the market, is highly disapproving. Fahrije is continually clashing with her young daughter who misses her father and resents her mother. She also has a young son.

While Hive might be the title of the film, it might have been called Ajvar. (Google to the rescue: avjar is Balkan roasted red pepper sauce.) Fahrije, with the help of the strong-minded older widow, Zana, tells the supermarket proprietor that they have a company, establish one, start to make avjar in a shed, other women of the town gradually joining to help. And the men do not approve, throwing stones to smash the car's window, overturning shelves and breaking bottles of avjar, looking down with disdain, and the women fearful of the men's reaction and gossip.

This is truly – and, literally – a women's liberation story. The village patriarchy and attitudes are extraordinarily oppressive (and for audience feelings as well). But, Fahrije is enterprising, a small town entrepreneur who creates a business, encourages the women to assert themselves, is able to make some peace with her family.

At the end of Quo Vadis, Aida? There is a scene where Aida goes to view remnants of clothes and remains of the deceased men. There is a similar scene in Hives, women surviving, the sadness of the truth about the fate of the men.

While the opening told us that this is based on a true story, there is final information about how successfully Fahrije developed her business, exports to Europe, anticipated exports to the United States – and some photos of the actual Fahrije. Hives was Kosovo's nomination for 2021 Best Foreign Language Oscar. The film has won many awards, including three at the 2022 Sundance Festival.

JE SUIS KARL

Germany, 2021, 126 minutes, Colour.

Luna Wedler, Jannis Niewohner, Milan Peschel, Edim Hasanovic, Anna Fialova, Fleyr Geffrier, Aziz Dyab.

Directed by Christian Schwochow.



This is a drama concerned with right-wing movements in continental Europe, especially among the younger generation. By the mid-2010s, there were vast numbers of refugees coming from Syria, Afghanistan as well as from Africa. Angela Merkel welcomed them to Germany but there was great opposition.

This film opens with an act of terrorism, a box with an explosive carried into an apartment block and exploding, killing members of the family, destroying the building. We have been introduced to the mother and father of the family, cheerful on holidays smuggling in a refugee to Berlin. Then there is the introduction to their daughter, Maxi (Luna Wedler) coming from a summer camp, meeting up with her younger twin brothers. The father survived because he had gone out to his car to get groceries. The daughter survives because she had gone to see a friend.

The film then focuses on the daughter, pursued by media, sheltered and taken in for a coffee by a young man on the street, Karl. He is charming, invites her to a Convention in Prague and, after clashing with her father, she decides to go.

Karl (Jannis Niewohner) is a leader of a revolutionary protest movement against governments in Germany and all over France, setting up meetings, rallies, aligning himself with a French candidate, reminiscent of Marie Le Pen. We see his other associates, from different countries in Europe, fanatical in their expressions. Whereas, Karl is rather quiet in his intensity. And, the audience realises that it is he who planted the bomb. That his group is unscrupulous in creating situations to rouse up prejudice against foreigners and refugees.

Maxi falls in love with Karl, agrees to speak at rallies, identifying with his cause. However, the refugee helped by her father turns up, phones Maxi and discovers where she is, he and her father driving to Strasbourg to the rally.

Karl is so intent on his cause, radicalised, that, like a suicide bomber, he is prepared to die for his beliefs – with one of his associates set to assassinate him, shoot him.

This does happen, has quite an effect on Maxi, and the finale is their travelling through tunnels to escape riots and random shootings in the street, to where...?

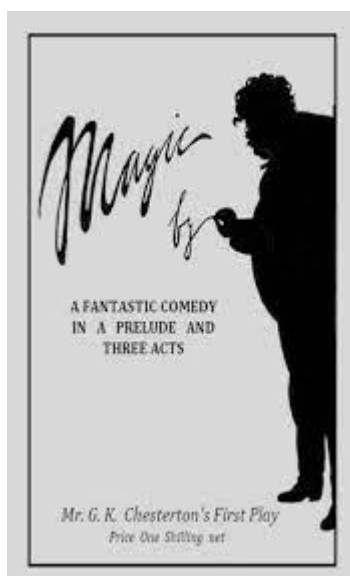
The next film by the director, Christian Schochow, was Munich – The Edge of War, a dramatisation of Hitler and his ambitions, Chamberlain going to Munich, but with a fictitious subplot including the young German, played by the star of Karl, and George MacKay with Jeremy Irons as Chamberlain.

MAGIC site

Australia, 2021, 70 minutes, Colour.

Vincent Parfitt, Barnaby Goodwin, David Lucas, Kirsty McKenzie, Aaron J. March, Nick Barker-Pendree, Joe Loria.

Directed by Elvis Joseph.



'magic' (lowercase) is not a word or idea that springs immediately to mind when thinking of GK Chesterton. 'Magic' (upper case), however, is the title of the play produced in 1913 (when he was 39). But Chesterton did like a mystery – witness Father Brown solving his cases but probing the clashes between good and evil.

Magic has now been turned into a 70 minute film by Elvis Joseph (assisted by Heather Joseph as producer and, judging from the credits, members of the Joseph family).

There is always a challenge of how to stage dramas set in the past: preserve their original atmosphere or modernise the situation while retaining the dialogue. The Magic-makers have opted for the former. We experience something of what Chesterton presented in his time (although there is a reference to 1913 as being modern times as well as a reminder that good manners are always in order).

Which means that like so many of the plays of the period (and the first three decades of the 20th century), the main setting is the drawing room of a country estate, complete with the Duke, his agent and glimpses of servants, his doctor and the local vicar (Chesterton was Anglican High Church before his conversion to Catholicism). There are two characters, brother and sister, lately coming from the US, representing the younger generation. And there is a visitor, invited by the Duke, a Country.

As anticipated by any Chesterton devotee, the emphasis will be on dialogue, the words, intonations, pauses... Which means that this Chesterton devotee needs to be a listener, an attentive listener. Chesterton was a philosopher and theologian so this is not going to be just smart and witty dialogue and, because the makers of opted to stay with so much indoor action, though sometimes out in the street obsessed with a lamp that changes colour, magically, the film does resemble a staged play, stage performances, but editing enabling the audience to shift focus of attention from one character to another, often quickly, compelling us to notice and to be watchers as well as listeners, attentive to body language and facial expressions.

But, of course, with Chesterton, he challenges not only by what the characters are saying but by what they mean.

QED is not what we expect at the end of a Chesterton article or book (except Father Brown's crime solutions). Chesterton does not solve. He probes.

The screenplay uses the device of a narrator – but here it is the writer of the story, busy at his typewriter (1913 look) but then out and about in the evening, walking, thinking, pondering.

And then we have the Conjuror, meeting Patricia in the garden, talking about fairies and magic but also introducing the theme of how much we should believe in ourselves. This makes us check where we stand. And this is immediately confirmed, schematically, by the appearance of the rationalist, the doctor, on the one hand and on the other the man of faith, Mr Smith the vicar (though Chesterton does not give him much faith-filled dialogue).

Since the Duke has invited the conjurer (and the Duke is self-satisfyingly comfortable on both sides of a cause and argument) to demonstrate magic, this leads to some emotional drama with the young man, Morris, modern and sceptical and a scorner, who becomes obsessed with one of the tricks, concerning the changing colours of the streetlamp. He rants, hyperventilates, and it drives him mad, literally. Conjuror give him a solution, the truth or a lie?

So, we are in the world of Chesterton Paradox. Is life reasonable? Is making sense of it reasonable? But is life able to be reasonable about? Probing life and its meaning without drawing up a set of rationalist principles? And the Conjuror reminds us that we have our demons. We have our spirits. Who are they? What are they? Do they control us?

Perhaps the best response to Magic (unless you watch it with the Pause button and take time off to think scenes through) is to let the dialogue wash over us, letting it seep into our consciousness, influencing our understanding – a 70 minute contribution by the Chesterton intelligence to what human existence is.

MARRY ME

US, 2022, 112 minutes, Colour.

Jennifer Lopez, Owen Wilson, Sarah Silverman, Maluma, John Bradley, Chloe Coleman.

Directed by Kat Coiro.



“A guilty pleasure!”. Not exactly the expected opening for a review of this romantic comedy. For fans of Jennifer Lopez, definitely a pleasure, not a scary guilt. For those who are not Jennifer Lopez fans, yes, probably a guilty pleasure.

“An insane response to a manic situation.” Well, that is what one of the characters states early on in the film – and, just saying it out loud, it does seem manic, preposterous. Here is a top American singer, on television, 20 million viewers, about to be married on screen, singing a duet with her partner, and suddenly discovering while on stage that he has been unfaithful to her.

Stop the marriage! And, the most manic moment is Kate Vogel, Jennifer Lopez’s character, surveying the audience, seeing an innocuous non-fan in the spotlight, holding a placard given to him by his daughter with big letters of the name of the song, Marry Me. She chooses him for an instant ceremony. And it happens!

At this stage, non-fans of Jennifer Lopez (and probably a big percentage of critics) are squirming in their seats. What could possibly happen?

In fact, what happens is a variation on the romantic comedy, although, to be fair, the audience knew the background of her choice when she didn’t, Owen Wilson playing Charlie Gilbert, divorced, having time with his 12-year-old daughter, Lou (Chloe Coleman), a very nice man who teaches maths in a creative way at school. And, he has a most boisterous friend, Parker, Sarah Silverman doing a lively Sarah Silverman! It is she who dragged Charlie to Kate Vogel’s concert/marriage.

Jennifer Lopez wrote nine new songs for this film and there are some lavish stagings as well as very quiet ones, (and that opening number is a highlight of showbiz kitsch).

We can’t help liking Charlie, who was quite bemused by the whole shenanigans, especially by his kindness in just helping out. And one of the main questions, of course, is how he is going to survive all the media hype. One of the interesting things about the screenplay is that there are quite a number of lines, situations, critically sending up the media, the stars entourage, the paparazzi and the everlasting cameras, (with Parker at one stage firing an extinguisher contents at the pursuing pack).

Yes, this is the story of the mellowing of the superstar, her having to face a few realities at school, for instance, rather than in her luxury jet. She has to become practical. And, she has to weigh up promoting her Grammy nomination with the reality of the relationship. And Charlie, charmed, fascinated, gradually falling in love, has to make decisions about Kate, Lou, and his students who are competing in the state Mathathon (with Lou as one of his stars but suffering from nervousness).

Realistic? Of course not, the film doesn't claim to be. But, a dose of realism in the lives of these characters? Certainly!

A guess would be that at the end, not on stage but at the Mathathon, there's probably a tear or two and sniffle around the cinema. Guilty!

MIRACLE MATT

US, 2017, 25 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Kevin Durham.



This is a short film, American, designed for screening for families, schools, clubs, churches. It is an *entertainment but it is also, rather low-key, moving towards the end to issues of God and faith and Providence.*

It is advertised like this: The first thing to know about Matt Manzari is that he should be dead. A self-described adrenaline junkie and world-class professional athlete, Matt would survive not one but two accidents, each of which left him at death's doorstep. But for Matt, miracles seem to be a way of life.

Matt Manzari appears in the film, with a great deal of footage about his sporting progress, his skill in being a water skier, a wake-skier. He had significant prospects in this field. However, in a competition, skiing in a series of lakes was a bottleneck stream, he had a severe accident and could have died. He spends long months in hospital, recuperates, goes back to his sport.

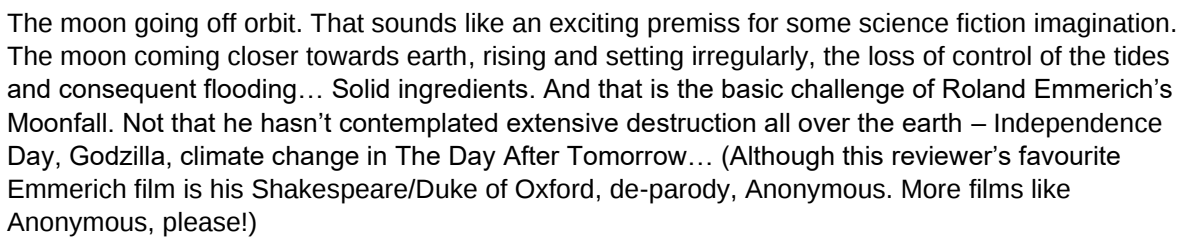
He is a genial interviewee, explaining his life, explaining the accident and recovery, then revealing that he should have died twice – doing some labouring work, electrocuted, the current, it is said, the equivalent of six electric chairs. And, once again he recovers.

There are interviews with his wife who was pregnant at the time of his accident. She thought he was to die.

So, this is a story of a man with strong will, trusting in God's Providence, twice almost dead and coming to life again twice.

MOONFALL

Halle Berry, Patrick Wilson, John Bradley, Charlie Plummer, Michael Peña, Carolina Bartczak, Zayn Maloney, Ava Weiss, Stephen Bogaert, Donald Sutherland.
Directed by Roland Emmerich.



So, this is one of those science-fiction disaster movies where one is invited to have more than willing suspension of disbelief. Could this possibly happen!

Which means, of course, that there has to be an expedition to steady the moon's orbit. And, of course, who has to go but Patrick Wilson, living alone, repairing cars, alienated from his wife who has remarried, from his teenage son who is arrested for reckless driving and drug possession? Reinstated, he has to team up again with Halle Berry who has become head of NASA. But, the interesting character is John Bradley's KC Houseman, a more-than-eccentric delete amateur mathematician and moon theorist, especially those ideas of Megastructures and the construction of

the moon. He is a welcome presence, one of those large-build actors (his choice of words in the screenplay is “chubby”), Jonah Hill and Josh Gad, who is something of a scientific genius, but ignored by all except his mother and some really eccentric friends.

So, no spoilers, simply to ask will the expedition rectify the orbit, save Earth, head off the chiefs of staff who want to nuke the rampaging AI? (And, for some more dramatic excitement, there is a lot of the action taking place on earth, the astronauts’ sons involved in adventures as they try to escape to safety in Colorado.)

Action adventure for science-fiction fans rather than for scientists.

PARALLEL MOTHERS

Spain, 2021, 123 minutes, Colour.

Penelope Cruz, Milena Smit, Aitana Sanchez- Gijon, Rossy de Palma, Israel Elejalde.

Directed by Pedro Almodovar.



It is now 40 years since Pedro Almodovar (recognisable always as simply Almodovar) has been making films commenting on Spanish society, harking back to the Franco decades, commenting on trends in Spain, some satire, some parody, some melodrama, and many very serious dramas.

He has been preparing this film for some time. While it is a film very much about the present, the story of the parallel mothers of the title, it also does some harking back, very seriously, to the Franco years and some atrocities.

In fact, that is how the film starts, a focus on Janis (named by her hippy mother after Janis Joplin), a commercial photographer, busy with covers for popular women’s magazines. She is played by Penelope Cruz, who has been working with Almodovar since the 1990s. She won the Best Actress award at Venice 2021 for this performance.

But she is also interested in making contact with an archaeologist that she is photographing, trying to persuade him to do excavation work on a mass grave in the village where she came from, many dead, including her grandfather. The people of the village are united in wanting to know more of the truth about the deaths, to recover the bodies, to mourn and to bury. The archaeologist becomes more involved, starting a relationship with Janis.

And, suddenly for the audience, Janis is nine months pregnant, hospital, sharing a room with a pregnant teenager, also about to give birth, Ana (well played by Milena Smit). There are two strenuous birth sequences, then delight in the babies, and their being taken away for observation. And there are visits from Ana's actress mother, an effective Aitana Sanchez-Gijon (who soon gives an opportunity to show her acting talent with moving auditions for a role in a play by Lorca).

Concern about the mass grave seems to go into abeyance.

The emphasis is on the two mothers, their exhilarating love for their daughter's, all kinds of domestic detail, for Janis with an unsatisfactory au pair, Ana in some depression, her mother going on theatrical tour, rejected by her father. So the parallel mothers have a lot in common, but are very different in age, temperament, situations. However, a surprise occasion brings them together again, closer than each of them might have imagined, highly dramatic and emotional issues about their babies, and an intensity of personal relationship.

The drama is intense for Janis, Penelope Cruz at her best. Huge emotional demands.

Ultimately, the film returns to the excavations, grim reminders, visually grim reminders of the antagonisms of the Spanish Civil War, the taking of sides, viciousness of reprisals and the consequences.

This is Almodovar serious, a Spanish director with his finger on the pulse of contemporary Spanish life but also conscience-raising about the Civil War enmities and past.

QUEEN BEES

US, 2021, 104 minutes, Colour.

Ellen Burstyn, Ann Margret, James Caan, Jane Curtin, Loretta Devine, Christopher Lloyd, Elizabeth Mitchell, Matthew Barnes, Alec Mavor, French Stewart, Rick Russert.

Directed by Michael Lembeck.



A film for octogenarians. It is definitely the target demographic. However, a number of the characters are in their 70s. Which means that septuagenarians might also enjoy the film with some kind of hope and anticipation. For audiences under 70, an opportunity to try to understand and appreciate grandparents and parents. So, possibly, something for everyone.

However, the film is not an analytic study of ageing. Rather, it is more of a romantic comedy (yes a romantic comedy of octogenarians). Which means then that the film is something of a fantasy/reality imagining of what life could be like after 80. And, it is based on the experience of the writer, Harrison Powell, with his grandmother.

The grandmother figure of this film is Ellen Burstyn (turning 90 in 2022). She is central to the film, dominating it, Helen, a strong-minded widow, tangling with her strong-minded daughter, but with a great fondness for her grandson. She locks herself out of her home many times, accidentally sets fire to the kitchen, the need for her to have somewhere to stay during repairs – so the residential village for the aged that her daughter has been promoting seems just the place. In theory, rather than in practice.

One hopes that residential villages for the aged are something like the one on the screen – it is a village rather than a place for aged care for those who are ill or debilitated. Which means then that it is pretty lively in an extroverted American kind of way. All kinds of things to do, bridge groups, massages, Helen indulging her passion for flowers in the flower shop.

There is also a cantankerous mean girls, or mean old ladies, led by an obnoxious Jane Curtin (but we hope that change is always possible), with Ann Margaret and Loretta Devine, nice and cheerful, as other members of the group. There is also Christopher Lloyd with a strange

wig (eventually removed) as an amorous widower who is living in the past. And then there is James Caan, the charming widower who befriends Helen and, of course...

Helen can stand her ground but she also learns that she needs to be with other people, relate to them, go out of herself, become her better self. And so do all the others.

So, some charm for the octogenarian audience – and some happy moments for those who are younger!

QUO VADIS, AIDA?

Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020, 101 minutes, Colour.

Jasna Djuricic, Boris Isakovic.
Directed by Jasmila Sbanic.



A return to the Balkans of 25 years ago, the vicious wars, Bosnians and Serbs, Muslims and Orthodox, and the tragedy and massacre of its men citizens in Srebrenica. This devastating story is worth telling, remembering, telling again.

The writer and director of this film is Jasmila Sbanic who in 2006 strongly impacted audiences by her re-creation of the siege of Sarajevo, Gbavica. Interestingly, she won the Ecumenical Award at Berlin in 2006 – and the present film won the SIGNIS Award (World Association of Catholic Communication) in Venice 2020.

The Aida of the title is a middle-aged woman, (a powerfully persuasive performance by Jasna Djuricic), a local schoolteacher, working as a translator for the United Nations, a squad from the Netherlands. Most of the action takes place on July 11, 1995, a frantic day – and the film movingly immerses the audience in the Srebrenica experience. The Serb forces have occupied the town, thousands fleeing to the United Nations centre, some able to get into the compound, thousands stranded outside. The Dutch UN officers are trying to deal with the situation but not getting cooperation from headquarters.

We view all these events through Aida's eyes, her concerns, compassion, translations, negotiating with the UN, concerned about her husband and two sons outside the compound. She will be desperate all day to get them on the buses which will transfer the townspeople to a safer destination.

There is a major episode when three of the locals are volunteered by the UN to go to negotiate with military leader, General Mladic (Boris Isakovic, interestingly the real-life husband of Jasna Djuricic). For audiences who are unaware of Mladic's role in the wars and in the atrocities and his later arrest and trial in Rotterdam, life sentence, there will be suspense in watching his dealings with his soldiers, always at the ready, the propaganda filming, his cajoling words and sending in some food and bringing in the transport buses. For audiences who know what Mladic did and the consequences, will watch, continually appalled.

The tension builds during the day, no help from UN headquarters, the Dutch leaders abiding by the rules, trying to prevent chaos, allowing the Serb military, armed, to enter the compound to check whether the men have weapons. And, in the meantime, Aida's trying to hide her family, and get them the on the official list for bus transportation out.

At times, the re-creation is so effective that it looks like actual newsreel footage. And it doesn't shy away from the difficulties for the crowded refugees, hunger, lack of water, although up seen of pathos with a woman washing clothes and a bucket, absence of toilets, the birth of a baby, continued uncertainty and fear.

And the film leads inexorably to the fate of the massacred men, the director able to generate the tension, the uncertainties facing of the men, separated from the women and children, intimating rather than graphically showing the cruelty of the massacre.

There is a postscript to the film. Year have passed. Aida returns to Srebrenica to teach, finds her house occupied by Serbs, joins the movement to find the bodies of the murdered men, finally the excavations and the laying out of the skeletal bones and clothes.

This is a harrowing film experience. However, despite the dire tragic experiences, the film ends with looking to the future, not without hope.

SANS REPIT/RESTLESS

France, 2021, 96 minutes, Colour.

Franck Gastambide, Simon Abkarian, Michael Abiteboul.

Directed by Regis Blondeau.



Here is an exciting and quickly paced French police drama. But, it is not just about investigations, the main interest is in police corruption, taking money from drug deals, and police finding that they are in further than they ever dreamt, more extensive police corruption.

The title of the film in English, *Restless*, seem something of an understatement with the French phrase being translated as “without let up”. That seems a far better description of what happens. The film itself is a French version of an original Korean film, *A Hard Day*, the same plot and characters (but the Korean film running 15 minutes longer than the French version).

While the film has fast paced action, taking place, more or less, over 36 hours, it is also a character study of the central character. He is Thomas, a reputable police officer in a provincial city, divorced, devoted to his young daughter. And his mother has just died and he is taking care of her funeral with his sister. He is played very effectively by Franck Gastambide (and, with his bald pate, and his facial features, he strongly resembles Vin Diesel who might be ideal if there were to be an American remake!).

At the opening, Thomas is driving his car, under strong pressure, being warned that internal affairs are coming to inspect his locker and question his associates about money on drugs. He is also driving to the hospital, the mortuary room where his mother is resting and the lid is about to be put on her casket. A dog on the road and he swerve. A further swerve and a dead body – and a life changing decision, self-protective, in retrospect, foolish. He puts the dead body in his car, and, rather ingeniously but testing credibility, in a sequence worth watching, he is able to infiltrate the corpse into the mortuary room and put it in his mother’s coffin.

There is a mystery of who is the dead man and its revelation, Thomas examining the building where he came from and finding information about a security locker.

But, then come mysterious phone calls and the mysterious identity of who is behind the crisis, the man who is wanting the body (and the key to the security box).

This is the moment where anything further might be construed as spoilers. There is quite some action, some surprising developments, and, of course, the dangers Thomas as he confronts the arch-villain (who has absolutely no redeeming features) and a moral decision at the end – the kind of moral decision at the end of the film which has the audience wondering what they would do in Thomas’s place.

A reminder that the French can do police action thrillers well.

A STITCH IN TIME

Australia, 2022, 98 minutes, Colour.
Maggie Blinco, Glenn Shorrock, Belinda Giblin, Hoa Xuande.
Directed by Sasha Hadden.



In fact, the title does not appear until the end credits – which means that we may be wondering, all the way through, what it actually means. The central character, Liebe, is a talented seamstress, making dresses in the past, deciding in her later age to branch out again, a stitch in time to give her new life. However, she has spent 50 years in partnership with a musician, Duncan (played by musician and singer, Glenn Shorrock of the Little River Band), ambitious for his music but disappointed in his partner pulling out decades earlier, leaving him floundering, and taking out his disappointments on Liebe.

Liebe is played by Maggie Blinco, a career highlight for her after 50 years in film and television. She explains her story, one of the Kindertransport, war children transported by train from Germany to Britain, Jewish but brought up as Christian. She has had to be a patient woman most of her life, supporting Duncan. But, he is angry, bitter, even vengeful on Liebe, fired from his job, making contact with the musician who walked out on him, Justin (John Greg), resentful of his wife, Christine (Belinda Giblin).

In the meantime, Liebe wanders the market stalls outside the church in Balmain, where much of the action was filmed. She encounters the stall of a fashion designer, young Chinese man, Hamish (!) And becomes friends with him, his supporting her work, her going to his stall to sell her dresses, initially slow, then some customer attention.

The screenplay has a women's liberation theme, Liebe's liberation from patriarchal presuppositions about her place, in the kitchen, at home, subservient to the husband. She gets a new lease of life, initially helped by Christine who is wealthy, but experiencing some of the same patriarchal dominance from her husband. There is a crisis, some unhappy memories of the past, Liebe walking out to find her own life, fortunately helped by Hamish and his Australian wife.

Which leads her to a new phase, renting garage space from a group of Chinese students, working continuously, making new clothes, becoming more successful – and this, especially, with advertising online and her getting many followers. Hamish helps but he also relies on Lieber for drawing up patterns (though she does not quite approve of his more modern styles of dress design).

Given her background from World War II, Liebe does believe in forgiveness but finds it very hard – but, that is the expected conclusion from a story like this, her finding possibilities for some kind of forgiveness, understanding and a surprising way of encouraging Duncan to record one of his songs (the wonders of social media!).

A film that will resonate with older audiences, especially women who will identify in many ways with Liebe.

STUDIO 666

US, 2022, 106 minutes, Colour.

Foo Fighters: Dave Grohl, Nate Mendel, Pat Smear, Chris Shiflett, Taylor Hawkins, Rami Jaffee, Whitney Cummings, Will Forte, Jeff Garlin, Jenna Ortega.

Directed by B.J.McDonnell.



This reviewer is indebted to a blogger for a succinct review: gory and goofy.

The main reason for seeing this film is to see Dave Grohl, larger-than-life, Kurt Cobain's former drummer and founder of the rock group, Foo Fighters. It is an opportunity to see him and the whole group with their musical talent, plenty of opportunity. And, each of them, is able to display their prowess and finesse.

But, Foo Fighters fans may not be definite A's of grisly horror films. But, that is what this one is, some gory touches at the opening to set a tone but after the music comes all kinds of gristle and Gore, demonic appearances, and the most graphic and macabre slayings. (For those not into this kind of horror they, maybe, will have to close their eyes and listen to the music!)

The screenplay is based on an idea by Dave Grohl which could be interpreted as self-promotion. However, he is a genial presence, larger-than-life, able to send himself up. And, at times, he plays the guitar as if possessed (and, according to the plot, he is!).

To brighten the proceedings there are some guest spots, Will Forte is an unfortunate would be musician who is a pizza deliverer. Then Dave Grohl has a dream singing Hello and who should enter into his dream but Lionel Richie himself! Jeff Garlin is the manager, money-preoccupied, but also in league with the devil.

In many ways, this is a typical B film which might hope one day to be a cult film (and probably will be given the reputation of the Foo Fighters). It is B budget – especially with some of the effects for the bizarre Demons. And, the individual Foo Fighters are given a lot to do and say in the drama of the narrative, about their work, their personalities, and becoming more and more involved in the bizarre goings on in the country estate where the audience knows there has been a massacre in the 1990s and that the Foo Fighters had walked into a trap.

It may have been a condition in the contracts for the Foo Fighters that they are not required to act. Acting is definitely not their forte.

For Dave Grohl fans and the music of the Foo Fighters if they can live with the gory horror (and the non-acting).

THE TINDER SWINDLER

UK, 2022, 114 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Felicity Morris.



This is a true story. And with so much evidence up there on the screen.

This Netflix documentary achieved enormous popularity worldwide, seen by millions, talked about, the subject of all kinds of probing through the various media.

This is the story of a professional fraud, a conman from Israel, calling himself Simon Leviev, blaming to be son of a diamond merchant, living the high, very high, and life. After fleeing Israel and changing his name, he lived abroad under his assumed identity, conning a great number of women, extorting large sums of money from them by personal appeal and persuasion.

(With the expose of the scams, and information on social media, the women themselves were subject to a great deal of aggressive messages and tweets – especially by males.)

This is also a story that develops within the world of social media and is exposed by social media and mainstream media. Very much a story of the first two decades of the 21st-century.

The centre, as the title indicates, is the app for dating, Tinder. The women rely on tinder, the film showing a lot of images from the app, especially when there is the success of a “match”.

There are some immediate indications of trouble with the introduction of some of the women. However, one of them, from Finland living in London, Cecilie, narrates her story for the first part of the film, fairly calmly, step-by-step, indicating her enthusiasm and infatuation, always saying that she favours a love, the high life, the appeals for money, her efforts to send money to Simon, her efforts to retrieve some money, the expose.

The second woman, from Sweden, and Villa, has a much more serious attitude towards Simon even though she is infatuated by him. Her role is more of a companion and friend with him having a Polish girlfriend at the time of their relationship and her visits and international trips. Again she is targeted for money and supplies Simon.

In the meantime, the audiences got to know Simon rather well, the result of the women keeping so much footage of him, photos of him on Tinder, on the Internet, seen by Googling. He seems to be about 30+ or minus, is accompanied by a large bodyguard (who also appears in some of the photos), and are sometimes seen business partner. He is always in a jet, sometimes private jets, going to all parts of Europe, allegedly on business, but always seen at parties. And he has an extensive and fashionable wardrobe.

When Cecilie discovers the truth about Simon, she approaches the police, and the media. The film shows the work of investigative journalists working for the mainstream media, efforts made, visits to Israel, to the Israeli police, finding Simon's mother and her disowning of him, international travel, information from Sicily and from Pamela, locating Simon in Munich and photographing him.

However, it is the third woman, Ayleen, from Holland, who was instrumental in bringing Simon down. She has the same experiences, contact, high life, requests for money. However, she pretends to be interested, Simon setting up a new bank account, her informing the police where he will be, the name that he has, and he is arrested – to her great satisfaction and the satisfaction of all.

There would be little satisfaction from the audience watching the film concerning Simon, arrested by Interpol, tried in Israel, a short prison term – and he is out and about, even advertising business advice on Google!

UNCHARTED

US, 2022, 116 minutes, Colour.

Tom Holland, Mark Wahlberg, Antonio Banderas, Sofia Ali, Tati, Gabrielle, Steven Waddington.

Directed by Ruben Fleischer.



More sober older audiences for whom this film is definitely not intended, may find the opening sequences far-fetched: Tom Hollander is Nate Drake (without the benefit of Spiderman suit and powers) sliding out of a plane's cargo hold, bounced along various dangling bales, losing his grip, a car speeding out of the hold towards him... But, wait till the narrative takes up this episode again and it seems even further-fetched.

But, uncharted is based on a PlayStation game, live-action characters in impossible situations, and the invitation to the players to identify with the hero. Lots to identify with here!

Nate and Sam are orphan brothers, living in an institute run by severe nuns, Sam running away but promising to keep in touch with Nate always. Move to the present. Nate works at a bar in New York City, encounters Victor Sullivan, "Sully" (Mark Wahlberg doing his usual action shtick deliberately meaning to be unsympathetic) who knows Nate's brother. Sully has a proposition – searching for Ferdinand Magellan's gold treasure.

The young lads had been expert on Magellan, on maps of his journeys, on his journal, concluding that the gold was shipped to Barcelona and is hidden there. There are two keys – one of which is on auction and which Sully intends to steal. Of course, he does, but not without a spectacular modernist chandelier clinging stunt by Nate. The rival bidder is a Spanish grandee, Antonio Banderas.

The first part of the film is action adventure – one of the characters even referencing Indiana Jones. However, this is one this one is more like Romancing the Stone or the National Treasure films. While while Mark Wahlberg is of the age of Harrison Ford, Michael Douglas, Nicolas Cage, Tom Holland is 20 years younger and it is his film. They do team up with a British treasure seeker, Chloe (Sofia Ali) and are pursued by a literally cutthroat seeker, Braddock (Tati Gabrielle). Lots of vistas of Barcelona's churches, Gaudi included, and mysterious basements, tunnels, – but no gold! But an authentic map!!

Then, off to the Philippines (using Thai locations) and that mid-air action again. But, then and from then on, more adrenaline pumping, even for the older non-targeted audience. And it is pirate adventure, gold bullion, stranded galleons, pursuits and double crosses, helicopter attacks, helicopters raising the galleons....!

In the past there was Saturday matinees. In the present there are computer games – and the chance to re-create the adventurous Saturday atmosphere with film versions like this.

HIGHLIGHTS: JIFF, JEWISH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

I AM HERE

South Africa, 2020, 73 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Jordy Sank.



The I of the title is a vivacious elderly lady, Ella Blumenthal. This is her story.

At the outset, this reviewer would state that this is a film that should be seen by everyone. For older audiences, it evokes memories of the 20th century past, especially World War II, the Jews in the Holocaust, the aftermath. For those of the next generations, it is acknowledgement of the past and learning from the past. And, it should be recommended for viewing for secondary school students, only 73 minutes of viewing, time for reflection and conversation, a valuable emotional and intellectual experience – that such experiences should not be lost, not forgotten.

Early in the film, Ella is celebrating her 98th birthday, surrounded by family. She takes the opportunity to open up about her past life, more than she had in the past. Ella knows how to tell a good story, to involve her audience, to lead them on, wanting to know more. So, at age 98, at the party and afterwards, her family records her memories, her reminiscences, her regrets, her joys.

But the filmmakers have added a wonderful extra dimension. So much of Ella's young life, separation from family, the years in the concentration camps, the aftermath, her engagement, wedding, family, all told via animation. So, the real Ella speaking while we are moved, excited, saddened, joyful with Ella and her niece, Rachel, through these animated characters.

And, as happened with the animation/documentary/portrait of the Afghan refugee, Amin, in *Flee*, footage is included, this time from World War II, from the camps, photos, are inserted within our looking and listening with Ella and within the animation. A very effective cumulative impact, especially in about 70 minutes.

Ella had a happy life after the liberation from the camps, finding her loving life, marriage, moving to Johannesburg – but finding that her husband's family did not want the war experiences to be talked about, Ella then becoming accustomed to keep these memories to herself, finally released at age 98.

There is no mention of apartheid or Ella's experiences living in South Africa for so long – but, she is a devout woman, continually referencing God, faith and prayer, and a firm belief in the equality of every human being no matter what race or colour.

Fine and moving documentary-making. And we are glad to have met Ella, not only to make her acquaintance, but to have the privilege of hearing her confidences.

NEIGHBOURS

Switzerland, 2021, 124 minutes, Colour.
Serhed Khalil.
Directed by Mano Khalil.



The northern part of Syria where Kurds live is not so often seen in cinema. Here the audience is invited to go back several decades, meet the Kurds, especially a Kurdish family, who, in fact, live next door to a Jewish family which had settled in the area. They are the neighbours.

The wonderful thing about the film is that the central character is a little boy, Sero, and we see the characters and the events through his eyes. He is first seen with his mischievous uncle secretly releasing balloons in the air, with the Kurdish colours, very quickly fired on by Turkish border guards. Sarah lives with his mother and father, with that same mischievous uncle, his father's parents and a little baby sister. The father of the Jewish family runs a store in the village, supported by his wife, but very concerned about their young daughter, Hannah, wanting to help her escape from the region.

The Kurds seem to have come to a state of living with tension, especially with the Turkish border and a huge notice in stones on the side of the adjacent Hill extolling Turkey. At one stage they try to visit Sero's mother's parents at the border, 15 minutes, continually harassed by the border guards.

The family seem to have settled into this way of life, staying in the village, sometimes a visit to the city for a visit to a gynaecologist or to visit officials issuing passports (with a succession of refusals and then acceptance of bribes).

But, a teacher from the city arrives, highly political, classes in Arabic (which Sero does not understand). The teacher is full of Syrian propaganda, seeing the president as the Fuhrer and everybody saluting the flag with a Sieg Heil gesture. And, into his propaganda come anti-Semitic myths, tales that Jews trap little children to kill them and to make cakes with them. Despite his

friendship with his neighbours, lighting candles for them on Sabbath, Sero absorbs this anti-Semitic propaganda. The teacher administers corporal punishment, is demanding of the children to speculate on how to eliminate the Jews, having a huge doll which they practice stabbing, organising a play where each of the children has a map of the Arab states, his advocating pan- Arabic union and the speaking solely of Arabic.

The drama has to come to a head. There is a tragic accidental shooting by a Turkish guard and the death of Sero's mother. The Jewish family then suggest to his father that they might be able to use the dead mother's identity to smuggle out their daughter. Sero's father is a good man, self-sacrificing, wanting to do the best.

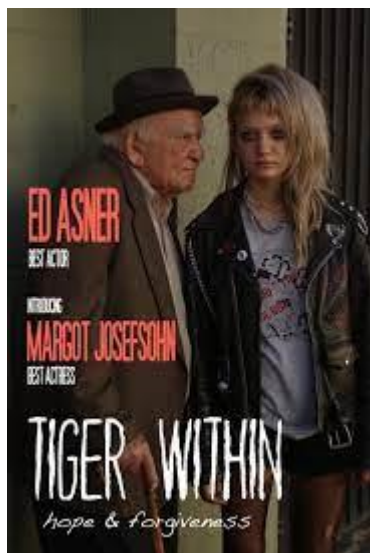
In fact, the story is Sero remembering his past, and a glimpse then of Sero at detention camps on the border, an older man, and a Swiss delegation with the woman asking him to identify the people in the photo that she has. Yes, it is a reunion.

THE TIGER WITHIN

US, 2020, 98 minutes, Colour.

Ed Asner, Margot Josephson, Diego Josef.

Directed by Rafael Zielinski.



From the outset, we know where this story is going. That is not the important thing – it is how the story gets there.

First, we are introduced to Casey, in her mid teens, touches of punk and Goth in her clothes and piercings, going to school, instantly taunted and her firing back, expelled. The seventh school she has been to. She is already angry and bitter. Angry with her rather slatternly mother, the current man who is living in the house, abusive and violent. She decides to leave home, to find the father who had abandoned her who has remarried and has three daughters.

Next, we are in Los Angeles, at the Jewish cemetery. Samuel is an elderly widower, originally from Germany, memories of the Holocaust. He lives a very simple life in his rented apartment.

When Casey overhears her father's family comments, she hides, wonders, her bag snatched in the street, sleeping in the cemetery, Samuel visiting his wife's grave, then having second thoughts and returning to watch Casey till she wakes, inviting her for a meal. A strange odd couple.

Samuel is a character all that we might have expected him to be, a dignified old gentleman, devoutly visiting temple, sad memories of his dead wife and twin children, putting up with Casey's

abrasiveness, language, but what touches him most is her ignorance. To that extent, the screenplay is directed towards an American audience which is ignorant of the Holocaust or is in denial (as has been Casey's mother who told her that the Holocaust was a lie and that all Jews are liars).

While there is a lot of sentiment in this film, it continually has a hard, very hard, edge in Casey's immature, unformed, angry personality. While Casey is appreciative of Samuel's kindness, she is innately suspicious of anybody doing anything good for another. And she goes off to work in a massage parlour – and, fortunately for Samuel, Casey and us, she witnesses some boys robbing Samuel and gives chase. They renew their friendship.

In the final credits there is a tribute to a great range of religious leaders of Los Angeles who have supplied wise sayings, aphorisms, words of advice that are incorporated into the screenplay. Samuel offers Casey the image of the Tiger, her inner Tiger as the title suggests, and her need to overcome her fears of her inner Tiger. She follows his advice, seeks out her family, once again overhears critical comment and angrily leaves.

We know there is going to be greater bonding but the screenplay keeps us waiting, anticipating but uncertain, listening again to Casey's hesitations and outbursts. And Samuel is patient. Eventually they do make a deal and Casey goes to school (angry at admissions requirements but Samuel, ever-patient, travelling with her to get her mother's permission). And it proves that Casey is intelligent, can be thoughtful, has an artistic temperament – and attracts one of the students at school.

This reveals her vulnerability, never having been on a date, never having been kissed, thinking she was ugly, not only in appearance but her inner ugliness, hesitations to open up – but Samuel going to buy her a dress for her first date with Tony.

And we guess that there will be sadness in the ending, but images of Casey going to the zoo, close-ups of tigers, and her making some kind of effort to control her Tiger within. And, so, an ending not without hope.

Admiration for Ed Asner in his late 80s for embodying Samuel so believably. And interest in the further career of Margot Josefsohn who really gets into the skin and soul of Casey.

TAHARA

US, 2020, 78 minutes, Colour.

Madeline Grey De Freece, Rachel Sennot, Daniel Taveras.

Directed by Olivia Peace.



The title refers to some of the rituals for burial in the Jewish tradition.

The burial at the centre of this film is that of a teenage student who has killed herself. The action takes place at the ceremony and at a class on rituals afterwards.

At the centre of this film, brief, to fellow students. There is a focus on Carrie, rather reserved, but best friends with Hannah. The two are played by – and a reminder that at the same time Rebecca played the precocious young woman, also at funeral ritual, Shiva Baby.

Most of the film is conversation. In fact, it is girl-chat, girl-gossip. Carrey is tentative in her relationships, discovering her sexuality and sexual orientation, attracted towards Hannah but also finding her very difficult. Hannah, on the other hand, is out there, chatting all during the ritual, looking about in making comment on those present, imagining that the young man is attracted to her when he isn't, she rather flaunting herself. She is self-centred, self-preoccupied, prone to literal pratfalls as well as conversation gaps.

Besides the girl chat, there is also some boy-chat between the young man and Hannah, Hannah making a fool of herself, the young man bewildered.

A lot of the chat is about identity, sexuality, relationships, self-discovery.

A film for its target audience, the age of its characters. Other audiences might lose interest.

EIN NASSER HUND/ A WET DOG

Germany, 2021, 13 minutes, Colour.
Doguhan Kabadayi, Mohammad Eliraqui.
Directed by Damir Lukacvevic.



An arresting title. What could it mean? There is a reference, a comment about Jews living in Iran: better to despise a Jew than a wet dog.

This is a German film, set in the Berlin area of Wedding, 'n neighbourhood where many of the refugees from Turkey and the Middle East have settled, some of the young teenage men forming into gangs and rivalries. They are Muslim, some devout, some not. And they have an innate antipathy towards Jews, some of whom run local stores and jewellery shops.

At the centre of the drama is Soheil, mid-teens, his family having fled Iran, settled in Gottingen but having moved to Wedding. His parents run a fabric shop, are proud of their Jewish heritage but have tended to underplay it, stating they were not religious, bringing their son up rather more secretly, no Bar Mitzvah. This makes it confusing for Soheil trying now to blend into the atmosphere of Wedding. He is seen wearing his star of David but will deny this. Craving some kind of company, he comes across a group playing soccer and eventually is welcomed, becoming the best friend of the leader of the Tigers, Husseyn. In an area covered with graffiti art, Soheil goes out at night, gaining a reputation for his skills.

Soheil feels at home with the local Tigers gang, runs with them, fights the rivals, even stabbing one of them. At school he is attracted to a local girl, Selma, even going out of his way to collect plastic bottle tops for her cause to finance a wheelchair for refugees. At home, he clashes with his father, especially when the group are apprehended fighting and the police bring him home – and later his father has to get him out of jail.

The gang decide to rob the Jewish jeweller's shop and Soheil volunteers to be part of the activity, even later getting them an opportunity to carry out their attack. Some of the group are suspicious.

Ultimately, and this is the core of the drama for this wet dog, Soheil has to make a decision as to his Jewish identity. And he does, prepared for the consequences – except for his love for Sela. But his admission, and his interactions with his parents, lead him to the Jewish library in Berlin. He starts reading, stirred by some of the film sequences he saw at school about the Holocaust but which he had tended to ignore at the time. He reads, studies, identifying more and more with an Israeli mentality, touches of patriotic fervour.

So, this is the journey of a Jewish boy, whose life underplayed the core of his identity, who is craving some kind of bonding, irrespective of religion, even prepared to investigate Islam and visit a mosque, but faced with a genuine identity crisis. Will he stay in Wedding, what about the pregnant Selma, what about his continued support from Husseyn, what about going to Israel, becoming an Israeli citizen? And final images of his choice – in the Israeli Army, his rifle pointed towards protesting Arabs.

REVIEWS APRIL 2022

AMERICAN TRAITOR: THE TRIAL OF AXIS SALLY

ASCENSION

BLIND AMBITION

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CODA

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IT SNOWS IN BENIDORM

KIMI

LOVELAND/ EXPIRED

MAN OF GOD

MORBIUS

NOWHERE SPECIAL

OFF THE RAILS

RIVER

RUBY'S CHOICE

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

SOUVENIR PART II

TURNING RED

X

AMERICAN TRAITOR: THE TRIAL OF AXIS SALLY

US, 2021, 106 minutes, Colour.

Meadows Williams, Al Pacino, Thomas Kretschmann, Carsten Norgaard, Swen Hemell, Mitch Pileggi

Directed by Michael Polish.



A drama for those interested in World War II stories, especially background stories from the Third Reich, propaganda stories and Goebbels' radio broadcasts. The story may not be so well-known even in the United States but even less so throughout the world.

Axis Sally was the radio name given to Mildred Gillars, an American who had gone to live in Germany during the 1930s, partnering with a German with whom she was in love, he a producer for the Nazi propaganda programs. She is sought out by Goebbels and promoted to do a program, first up urging Americans not to enter the war, then comments to the troops about their loved ones and being home, singing songs. The screenplay provides several locations for her to sing songs like Yes, we have no bananas or Lili Marleen. Goebbels has a lust for on her, she taking the opportunity of a revolver to shoot him but it has no bullets. Her passport and documents were taken and, like all the programs, she had a strict written text, supervised by Goebbels, to speak from.

These historical episodes are interspersed throughout the film which is about her trial in Washington DC in 1948.

There is a backlash against Mildred, her being taken to court on eight counts of treason. She always looks glamorous, a glamorous blonde, even in the prison cell, but especially her court presence. She is played by Meadow Williams who produced the film aided by personal finances.

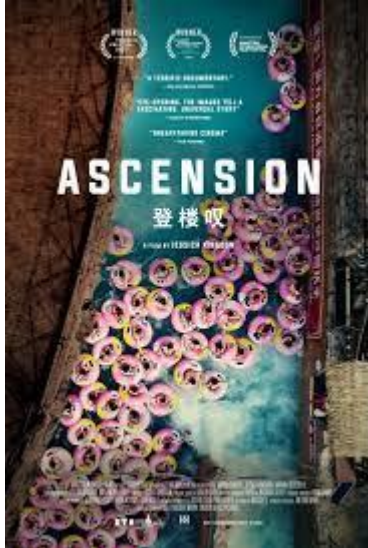
The other star of the film is Al Pacino, aged 80, one of those scenery-chilling performances that he did so well. This is one of the best. Sloppy and dowdy at first, seemingly not interested in the case, he comes into his own at the final defence speech, moving the jury to think about Mildred as a person rather than the Nazi propaganda persona, Axis Sally, reading from the text, pressured by Goebbels, passport gone, the always present possibility of death. He makes the distinction between the persona of Axis Sally and actual Mildred. It is quite a moving speech, especially coming after the rather virulent attack by the prosecutor, played by Mitch Pileggi.

Ultimately, Mildred was found not guilty on seven of the eight charges but found guilty of participating in a play about American soldiers, sentenced to 30 years, serving 12, getting out of jail and returning to Ohio as a teacher.

The film is based on a book by Bill Owen, a naive young lawyer in the film, assisting Al Pacino and taking a lot of flak from him. The book was written by Owen with his son, Vance Owen, who produced the film as well. There is an interview with Bill Owen during the final credits.

ASCENSION

US, 2021, 95 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Jennifer Kingdon.



An extraordinary array of visuals. However, no voice-over, no clear narration thrust.

For those who appreciate the visuals, they will be more than satisfied. For audiences who want some backgrounding, some information, some interpretation – it is over to the audience themselves.

The film opens with a quotation from the great-grandfather of the director (who was also responsible for screenplay, photography, editing). He speaks of people looking up to ascend a tower, out of reach, growing problems. (And it ends with the ascent of the tower and the climber looking around and seeing that everything has been razed.)

By the end of the film, audiences may well be amazed at how much footage the director has been able to photograph in China itself, a seeming freedom movement, freedom to encounter all kinds of people, in training, instructors, management. In fact, this is a very strong visual film about capitalism, all the more surprising since the setting is the People's Republic of China, ruled by a Communist government, with socialist aims. However, we are well aware that there are many millionaires in China, Chinese investment in property all over the world, Chinese involvement in casinos and Chinese highrollers.

There is a development in the presentation of the images, something like the cinema equivalent of a gallery installation, the audience moving from one image to the next. The development spends a considerable amount of time at the opening of the film showing the range of men and women trying to get jobs, the spruiking of jobs, the low payment, working conditions, and then a collage of detailed and repetitive work, literal hands-on, yet vast machinery, workers at a factory producing bottled water.

The development keeps going up the stages, to the training of men and women for more upmarket jobs – although, with mention of Downton Abbey, there seems to be some emulation of repeating that British lifestyle amongst the affluent families in China, training to be butlers, to lay tables with precision (perhaps they should check Remains of the Day). And it moves on to upper management,

well-dressed young men and women, being instructed by experts whom they applaud. And the levels of management go higher.

In the meantime, there is a more physical training of police men and women, much more regimented, with touches of violence by the instructors. Some martial arts.

Ultimately, there is social gatherings, parties, dinners, with speeches from the CEOs of vast businesses, urging improvement of production, rivalling the US, wanting to outdo it in particular markets.

Which means then that this vision of China is not exactly what the revolutionaries of 1949 may have had in mind, nor those during the Cultural Revolution, but a gradual change of perspective with greater wealth, international markets, greater communication – and, as everywhere else, the young people are seen bent over their mobile phones. And some playing computer games.

This is a very urban scene, not a farmer insight, not a country village, not a poor neighbourhood. We do see some domestics and cleaning, some grounds people (someone hunched in the heat while a petulant model being photographed complains about how hot it is).

Nominated for an Oscar for Best Documentary.

BLIND AMBITION

Australia, 2021, 96 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Warwick Moss and Rob Cohen.



There are two principal audiences for this quite engaging documentary. The first audience would be those who are wine-lovers. The film gives them the opportunity for some vicarious wine-tasting as they follow the careers of four sommeliers, information about the world competition in Burgundy for wine tasters, preparation and training for the competition, the coaches, a tour of vineyards in France and Germany, the competition itself.

The second audience, who might not be interested in wine at all, are those who are concerned about refugees around the world in the 21st-century, especially African refugees and, more particularly, refugees from Zimbabwe in the first decade of the 21st-century, refugees from the ever worsening Mugabe-Zimbabwe, stranded at the borders with South Africa, being smuggled into South Africa to make their lives there, sometimes with their wives, often having to leave their children behind in Zimbabwe till they made good.

And, there is the audience who is interested in both themes.

The focus of the film is on four Zimbabwean men who decided to leave their home country, taking their wives but leaving their children behind until better times, who experience the brutality of the border groups, smuggled by train and find their way to Cape Town. Each of them has made quite a success of his life – each of them learning wine tasting even though there is minimal wine in Zimbabwe. They become expert and are employed as sommeliers in top restaurants. We meet them as a group. We meet them each personally. And we see Joseph's mother back in Zimbabwe with a newspaper article acclaiming him on her wall.

The men become the team for Zimbabwe at the 2017 competition in Burgundy. Quite an amount of time is spent on their working together, pooling their gifts at tasting and understanding the wine. And they have a South African trainer who explains situations and his work to the audience. He is also the trainer of Team South Africa and wants the two teams to bond rather than be arch-competitive rivals. Money is raised around the world to get them to France, social media support and affirmation.

In France, they have a coach who previously was the winner of world competitions, Denis. There is quite some introduction to him, his speaking tongue-in-cheek to the camera, yet a pompous man, proud of his not being liked! He accompanies the men on their trip around France and Germany but clashes with the South African coach.

Then, the competition, 12 wines to be tasted and identified, the tension as the four sit around their table with Denis. At times they are quite a riled by his interventions! We see the discussions, the tasting, the tension, the time limits.

The team hope that they will not come last and, surprisingly, Italy comes last. They come 23rd. But, they return home to great acclaim, symbols for Zimbabwe. And, at the end, quite an affirmation of each of them as they produce their own wines, or go to Hong Kong to raise money for charity, and one migrating with his family to the Netherlands and becoming an importer of African wines.

More cheer. They go back in 2018 – and improved by nine places!

(Interestingly, this is a Screen Australia production.)

BOOK OF LOVE

UK/Mexico, 2022, 106 minutes, Colour.

Sam Claflin, Veronica Echequi, Fernando Berceñil, Ruy Gaytan, Horacio Villalobos, Horacio García Rojas, Lucy Punch.

Directed by Anileine y Mayor.



What would happen if a serious novel about love, rather abstract and philosophical, not selling at all in the UK, was translated into Spanish and reached the Mexican bestseller list? Its ominous title is *The Sensible Heart*. We would want to know why – and, the answer is that the translator spiced it up (understatement) and omitted the boring parts! And what would happen to the serious novelist on discovering what had happened – and being sent by the publishers on a Mexican tour?

And the answers to these questions are what we see and sharing.

The basic premise is rather obvious and predictable – and, rather one-note. However, the screenplay unfolds in a way that perhaps we might have written that had we been commissioned. Which means that we probably like it. It is lighthearted – lightheaded. It is an amusement not to be taken too seriously.

Sam Claflin plays the hapless novelist, Henry Copper (always confused with Cooper). He has taken some years to write his novel, rather introspective, the theories of love in his head rather than from experience. No wonder the few people at his novel reading walk out and the booksellers “get three when you buy one”!

Henry is rather overwhelmed by Jen, the ultra-exuberant opportunist publicist, played with verve by Lucy Punch.

So, off to Mexico and who knows what! He is whisked from the airport by the translator, Maria (Veronica Echequi), her grandfather and her little son, chaperones for her travel. (She actually has a husband who is hopeless, turns up now and again, jealous of her.) And, almost immediately, Henry is whisked again to press conference with absolutely adoring fans, men and women.

(This reviewer happened to see *Lady Boss*, the Jackie Collins Story at the same time as *Book of Love* – some remarkably similar sequences and experiences, fans, TV interviews, the high life, except that this is all that Jackie Collins wrote and hoped for!).

We know where this is all going, especially if we were to write it ourselves. Henry will mellow. Maria will be always in charge, dominating Henry. They will be urged to write another novel together which leads to clashes, interventions by Maria’s husband, Henry disappointed. But, a nice ending with her son. There will also be a sequence where they walk and talk together, being honest with each other, she challenging about his isolation and inexperience, he succumbing in love.

Of course there is a happy ending (absurd to think otherwise!), Maria's husband makes a fool of himself intervening at a press conference, Maria comes to the rescue with translating again as Henry returns to Mexico.

What happens, he explains the fans, is that Maria in re-writing novel "re-wrote his life).

CARBON, THE UNAUTHORISED BIOGRAPHY

Australia/Canada, 2021, 89 minutes, Colour.

Narrated by Sarah Snook.

Directed by Daniella Ortega, Niobe Thompson.



As indicated by the title, this is a documentary about Carbon. However, it is highly personalised, Carbon telling the personal story.

It is difficult to gauge exactly for whom this documentary has been made, an Australian-Canadian collaboration, locations in each country, scientific representatives as well as ordinary people giving their opinions. Not for scientists, it is aimed for an audience not so well informed about science, carbon, the evolution of carbon and its place in the universe and in our world. For the adult audience there is a huge demand/test in so far as the filmmakers decided to personify Carbon as feminine speaking her story through the voice of Australian actress, Sarah Snook. For some audiences, this is all rather twee and, for many, off-putting.

Which means that the film may have more of a chance with younger audiences who may accept the feminine Carbon and find a lot of information accessible through images and narration.

In fact, most of the content of the film is quite serious. There is detailed explanation of the origins of Carbon, images of the big bang and the millennia following, the development of the planets, Carbon and stars, the role of the evolutionary processes. All visually striking.

Then there are explanations of Carbon on Earth, Carbon mixing with other elements, leading to its place within human beings – we live in a Carbon world.

Throughout the film there are quite a number of talking heads, various science experts, some of them highly enthusiastic in their explanations. There are also rather more ordinary characters, reflecting on our situation, the place of Carbon, the place of coal, climate change...

And there is a very human framework with a family, Canadian, father and daughter and pregnant mother – leading to a birth sequence at the end, and the continued reminder of the presence of Carbon in ourselves.

Which means then that the screenplay is asking us to forgive Carbon. Screenplay asking us also to respect Carbon and its/her place but not to exploit it.

One irritated viewer commented that the final part of the film is “Greenwashing”, advocating renewables, focusing on sun and wind, images of solar panels, wind sources – but, the objector criticising the enthusiast for renewables (who runs a company in Australia) for not acknowledging the role of coal in the production of wind farms. An important point to consider – but not to undermine the development of renewables.

So, perhaps an audience one evening watching this documentary on television or, more probably, teachers using it as an education aid in schools.

CODA

US, 2021, 111 minutes, Colour.

Emilia Jones, Marlee Matlin, Troy Kotsur, Daniel Durant, Eugenio Derbez.

Directed by Sian Heder.



Oscar-winner for Best Picture, 2021. And, interestingly, a winner from a streaming service, Apple, rather than from cinema distribution.

CODA is an arresting title and needs explanation. It stands for children of deaf adults. Which means that the film takes us into the daily life and struggles of a deaf family, father, mother and son profoundly deaf, the daughter, by contrast, able to hear and speak. And, as the narrative progresses, more than able to sing.

The producer of this film also produced a French film, *The Belier Family* (2014), the story of a family on a farm, coping with farming life, but the daughter able to hear and speak, also able to sing. While the film is a remake, the main French storylines are incorporated into CODA, the location now the fishing town of Gloucester, Massachusetts. Sian Heder, director of the film, also adapted the screenplay which also won an Oscar.

The hearing audience is invited into the family, to experience the hard-working fishing and processing, the struggle to make ends meet, the building up of the family business, the son in his father's footsteps, the daughter having to go early, share the work and then go to school. There are subtitles – but, it is worth avoiding the subtitles at times just to appreciate the signed communication, the experience of the signing world.

British actress Emilia Jones is believable as Ruby (and, it seems, spent six months learning American sign language for the film). She has friends at school and suffers slights from those not sympathetic to her family. She joins the choir, initially timid, but encouraged by the exceedingly eccentric choirmaster, played by Eugenio Derbez. He sees and hears her talent and encourages her with private lessons, to build up her capacity for an audition and a singing scholarship.

Needless to say, there are many struggles within the family, regulations for the fishing industry, a supervisor arriving unaware, initially, that the men were deaf, not hearing the Coast Guard boat approaching to warn them off. There are court cases. However, there is also solidarity and the community gathering together to bypass the fishing agents and set up a co-op.

Ruby, of course, is torn between her love for her family and her sense of obligation to help them and the requirements of the demanding singing instructor. But, more and more, Ruby learns to stand her ground.

Every audience will be impressed by the deaf actors, Daniel Durant as the son, Oscar-winning Marlee Matlin for her 1986 performance in *Children of a Lesser God* here playing the wife. Most impressive perhaps is Troy Kotsur as the father, an interesting and challenging screen presence, and, deservedly, winning the Oscar for Best Actor in a Supporting Role. (And the response at the Oscars ceremony and his signed speech, his tribute to family, memories of his career, the first male deaf actor to win an Oscar, were well worth seeing.)

In many ways, the plot outline is quite familiar, not entirely unexpected. However, being invited into the world of the deaf, of communication by signing is an important experience for hearing audiences. And this is reinforced in the sequence where Ruby performs, her family going into the auditorium, seeing rather than hearing, a sense of rhythm and vibration, the film's soundtrack going silent.

CYRANO

UK/US, 2021, 124 minutes, Colour.

Peter Dinklage, Haley Bennett, Kelvin Harrison Jr, Ben Mendelsohn, Monica Dolan, Bashir Salahuddin, Ruth Sheen, Mark Benton, Richard McCabe.

Directed by Joe Wright.



Cyrano, Cyrano de Bergerac must be one of the most romantic characters in fiction. Created as a verse play by Edmond Rostand in 1897, his story has been told and retold, with Jose Ferrer winning an Oscar for the 1950 *Cyrano de Bergerac*, later Gerard Depardieu as Cyrano, and a contemporary version with Steve Martin in *Roxanne*.

Cyrano is a man of unrequited love – or his love being requited by Roxanne as simple friendship. But Cyrano is a man of unconditional love, devoted to Roxanne, and finding the outlet for his passion in writing letters for the handsome guard, Christian, even providing his voice in the famous balcony scene where Roxanne is in love with Christian's soul, his poetry. Which, of course, is the soul of Cyrano.

This present version, directed by Joe Wright (*Atonement*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Anna Karenina*, *Darkest Hour*) is a musical. The book was written and staged by Erica Schmidt and she has written the screenplay – this project also a work of love because Peter Dinklage and Erica Schmidt are married in real life.

One of the most famous characteristics of Cyrano de Bergerac was his long nose. However, no long nose in this version. Rather, the film uses Peter Dinklage's form of dwarfism, lack of development in his bones, to make him distinctive, and sometimes the butt of mocking humour. (Peter Dinklage's successful film and television career, especially with *Game of Thrones* making him known worldwide,

has become a significant icon for dwarfism, audiences accepting him for his characters rather than focus on his physical condition.)

So, while the film traces the basic tale of Cyrano and his devotion to Roxanne (Haley Bennett who worked with Peter Dinklage in the stage version), her infatuation with the handsome Christian (Kelvin Harrison Jr), the romanticism of the wooing by literate letters, it also shows Cyrano as a master swordsman and, at the end, in vivid war sequence in snowy mountainous terrain leading to deaths.

The musical aspects of the film, the songs, their dramatisation, the elaborate choreography surrounding many of them, the melodies, may not appeal to audiences whose sensibilities do not extend to musicals. However, with the power of the story and Peter Dinklage's performance, these audiences may be won over and, finally, be moved and identify with the characters.

Audiences who do enjoy musicals will be amazed at the quite lavish sets, from 17th century theatre performance (and mockery) to the military training grounds, to the battle in the snow, big cast, especially for the staging of some of the songs, and elaborate choreography.

Much of Cyrano was filmed in Sicily with the atmosphere of life in the 17th century.

And, there is an interesting supporting cast, led by Ben Mendelsohn as the Duke of Guise, Monica Dolan as Roxanne's maid, Marie, Richard McCabe as the officiating priest.

But, it is the focus on Cyrano himself and Peter Dinklage's presence and performance. He is not the greatest of singers (perhaps better if we think of him in the tradition of Lee Marvin in *Paint Your Wagon* or Rex Harrison's recitative style in *My Fair Lady*). He is adept with the sword, delivers his romantic lines and aspirations with aplomb, and, at times, especially in the final sequences, the longing in his eyes is extraordinarily moving.

Doubtless there will be other versions of *Cyrano de Bergerac* – but, in its imagination and in the casting of Peter Dinklage and the repercussions of his dwarfism, this is a very distinctive version.

DEEP WATER

US, 2022, 115 minutes, Colour.

Ben Affleck, Ana de Armas, Tracy Letts, Grace Jenkins, Dash Mihok, Rachel Blanchard, Kristin Connolly, Jacob Elordi, Lil Rel Howery, Brendan Miller, Finn Whitrock, Jeff Pope.
Directed by Adrian Lyne.



The first thing to notice is that this film comes from a novel by celebrated crime writer, Patricia Highsmith (Strangers on a Train, the Tom Ripley novels). In fact, Deep Water has been filmed a number of times, especially with a French version Eau Profonde with Isabelle Huppert.

Audiences with longer memories will be alerted when they see that the name of the Director is Adrian Lyne, originally a British Director who made films in the 1980s and 1990s, often with sexual content like Nine Weeks. He is better known for his classic, Fatal Attraction, as well as Indecent Proposal with Demi Moore and Robert Redford and the 90s version of Lolita with Jeremy Irons. It is then surprising to find that after his very well received Unfaithful, with Richard Gere and Diane Lane, in 2002, there was a 20 year gap before he made Deep Water.

This is a film about love fixation as well as violence.

We are introduced to a couple, Vic, a seemingly solid and stolid Ben Affleck (which does suit the character as the film develops) and his highly flirtatious wife, Melinda, Anna de Armas. They seem to have strong bonds, their language, sexual behaviour, and their dealing with their rather precocious young daughter, Trixie.

However, it soon emerges that not only is Melinda flirtatious, she is something of a nymphomaniac, openly attentive, as Vic watches, to the men at parties, going out with them, arriving home late. This is particularly the case, initially, with Joel whom Vic confronts, telling him that he once killed a man for attentions to his wife. He even invites Joel to a meal, continuing the threats but Melinda continuing to make advances on Joel.

Vic has quite a number of friends, older, their wives, who meet socially at his house, at a pool.

One of the newcomers to the town is a screenwriter, interested in murder mysteries, particularly interested in Vic and the story of the man who disappeared. He is played by actual playwright and screenwriter, Tracy Letts. Vic is polite to his wife who then sides with Vic against her husband.

We see Vic becoming more and more intense, quietly intense, a smiling face but interior anger, charming with his little daughter, more and more on edge with his wife, especially when she takes piano lessons from a professional pianist (Australian actor, Jacob Elordi). On a stormy night, after performing for visitors, guests go swimming in the pool but, when it starts to rain, the pianist is found floating in the pool. Vic becomes the rescuer along with his friends but the pianist is dead. A hysterical Melinda accuses him of murder.

The melodrama heightens when a friend from the past reappears and Melinda reopens a relationship with him, Vic, pretending to help him, takes him to a lonely forest place and...

The culmination, with the detective tracking Vic, becomes more melodramatic – and a Patricia Highsmith ending with a rather smug Vic, and Melinda realising that with his killing for her, he really loves her.

DOG

US, 2022, 101 minutes, Colour.
Channing Tatum, Ethan Suplee, Jane Adams, Kevin Nash.
Directed by Reid Carolin, Channing Tatum.



Nearly everybody says they love a dog film. But, the dogs can range from Lassie to Cujo! So it is probably best to say that this is not a cute doggie, nice film. Rather, it is an entertaining and interesting film about a dog who has experienced war action, been decorated, and is on her last journey. Her name is Lulu. She is a Belgian Malinois military working dog.

The opening credits are quite arresting, pages turning in a scrapbook about Lulu, photos, comments, her exploits in war, working with a Ranger. Now the Ranger is dead and the family would like Lulu to be present at the funeral in Nogales, Arizona. However, Lulu has given up on flying and it is necessary for her to travel overland. Which makes the film something of a road movie.

The other star of the film is Channing Tatum who over overcomes the warning that an actor should not work with animals or children. He works very well with Lulu. And his role here fits him perfectly.

He plays Jackson Briggs, also a former Ranger, serving up hotdogs in a diner, taking out the garbage, but continually phoning the authorities with the request to come back to work. They seem to be adamant that he cannot. And, it does emerge, that is suffering from some aspects of the PTSD. However, he is of a dislike chance for re-consideration if you will take Lulu from Oregon to Arizona.

No, there is not a cuddly relationship between the two at the outset. Lulu is large, has to wear a muscle, goes into a canine range of her ears are touched, strains on a leash. She is not going to be an easy passenger. In fact, at time she get loose, and enjoys savaging the upholstery on the front seats of the truck.

What follows is a range of generally offbeat situations along the way. At one stage Jackson would like some female company, chats up some women in a bar who do not respond well, becomes involved with a type of New Age Couple, who is strong on detecting energies and want to apply their methods to Jackson. Q upset by Lulu.

Interestingly, along the American highways, there are a number of New Age characters and psychics. Entertaining is the episode where Lulu breaks free, races into a marijuana hothouse, Jackson stunned by a dart, the owner suspecting that this is a police raid. Actually, it turns into a pleasant conversation, and the wife, psychic, detecting all kinds of futures for Jackson and Lulu.

There is a visit to San Francisco. And there is a visit to Los Angeles, a surprise when Jackson goes to visit his wife and daughter from whom he seems estranged. But, the main episode in Los Angeles is pretending to be blind, with Lulu as a guide dog, getting sympathetic treatment from the hotels staff for veterans, dog and companion getting a luxury apartment gratis. Just as it seems to be going well, Lulu races off, creates mayhem with Jackson finishing up in jail, tangling with an unsympathetic police officer who had previously been an MP.

Of course, by this time, what we were anticipating is beginning to happen, the bonding, truck breaking down, a lift from Hispanic farmers, ultimately Jackson carrying Lulu on his shoulders into the funeral.

By this stage, audiences may well feel very cheery at the funeral, especially with Lulu lying down near the shoes of the dead Ranger.

Much more likeable than we might have anticipated.

L'EVENEMENT/ HAPPENING

France, 2021, 98 minutes, Colour.

Anamaria Vartolomei, Casey Mottet Klein, Sandrine Bonnaire, Anna Mougallis, Pio Marmai.
Directed by Audrey Diwan.



Happening is one of the meanings of the French title, also meaning an event, or an occurrence.

The happening/event/occurrence in this film is pregnancy. And, then more specifically, abortion.

It is based on an autobiographical novel by Annie Ernaux and is set in the early 1960s, in France, in a very different period from later decades and the changes in abortion legislation.

A film on this topic would be approached in many different ways. Adamant pro-life advocates will oppose it. Those in favour of abortion rights will be in favour of it. There is also the position of being pro-life but being concerned about legislation and the abuses from what used to be referred to as “backyard abortions”. Whatever the stance, a story like this, a film like this, serves as conversation point, discussion material, dramatising the human and lived experiences of the pregnant woman and the experience of the abortion.

Which is what happens here. Anne (Anamaria Vartolomei) is in her early 20s, a top student, ambitious to go to university, living in a college dorm, visiting her parents, simple people, at home. Anne is not an entirely likeable character all, self-preoccupied, sometimes moody and petulant. She tends to dominate her friends. She tends to feel herself a bit superior. And, she enjoys the social life, out dancing, flirting.

She finds it difficult to admit to herself that she is pregnant, denying it to a friendly doctor, asking for help from a sympathetic-seeming doctor whose medication in fact strengthens the fetus. And this is where the film becomes a drama of desperation, remembering that it is the early 1960s, information not readily available, Anne searching for knowledge in books, experimenting with primitive ways to force a miscarriage.

Eventually, the film does give some background as to how Anne became pregnant, her relationship with the young man whom she visits but who abandons her. However, a close friend at college puts her on to another friend, and the address of an abortionist – which leads to a severe screen experience of sharing the abortion with Anne.

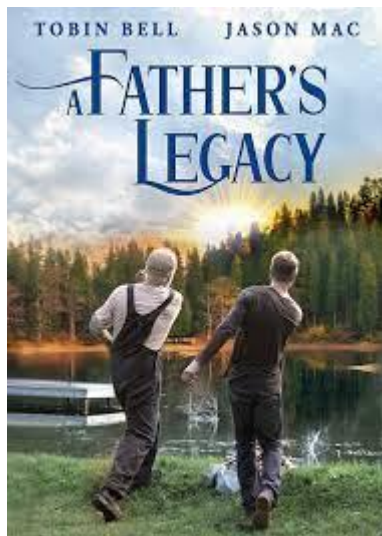
There are further complications, harrowing and painful for Anne.

And, at the time, there were severe legal penalties for the woman undergoing abortion, for any abortionist and for those who aided and abetted. In the succeeding decades, there has been legislation abortion in many countries – although, as in the United States, there are some moves to reverse the more liberal legislation.

A women’s audience will watch the film with some empathy – and it will be a challenge for a men’s audience to watch and reflect on.

A FATHER'S LEGACY

US, 2020, 90 minutes, Colour.
Tobin Bell, Jason Mac, Rebecca Robles.
Directed by Jason Mac.



To say that this is a home invasion and hostage drama, which is actually true, does not do justice to the film or its themes.

This is a film which is usually categorised as a “faith-film”, produced for an audience of believers and churchgoers, with some hope that it will touch the hearts of those who do not believe. (Which is a difficulty for many audiences who do not share the faith of so many American audiences, automatically put off by any suggestion of explicit religion, the Bible, prayer, and reacting with a kind of passive-aggressive irksome response – which can be gauged by Googling some of the reactions to this film.)

Which, being said, enables a reviewer to talk about the film in itself. While it presupposes a sympathy towards faith and prayer in its audience, it is comparatively reticent in comparison with other films of its kind. There is a Bible. There is a reference to some verses. And, at the end, wonderful use of that most excellent poem-Psalm, The Lord is my Shepherd.

But, the film is also robust, an atmosphere of violence in the opening home invasion sequences and later when some thugs threaten the central character.

The important thing, however, is to focus on the central character, Billy, played with some dignity by Tobin Bell (who is probably best-known to many audiences, and to horror fans, for his role as Jigsaw in the Saw series). Here he is a benign man, older, having served in Vietnam, Silver Star, living alone and isolated. But, as his opening prayer indicates, lifting his eyes to the sky, he is ready for God to take him at any time.

Suddenly, a man with a gun invades his home. The man has been shot, is erratic in his behaviour, abusive, waving his gun, dominating Billy. But Billy tends his wounds, gives him something to eat, does not reveal his presence to the police.

As might be anticipated, most of the film will be the interaction between the two men, the gradual calming of Nick (who eventually reveals his name to Billy), their fishing together, sharing meals, each gradually enabling the other to reveal something of his life, mistakes and failings. And, each of them

has a sad story to tell. While Billy tells his story verbally, the screenplay has some quick flashback indications to what has happened with Nick, the robbery, his wife and her pregnancy, faith and prayer, is discussing religion with a minister – negatively.

And, so, the week passes, and the discovery as thugs turn up to threaten Billy, that are property owner in the town wants Billy to sell him his land – with the threat of the thugs burning it down.

There is a dramatic confrontation and quite a dramatic trick in the screenplay which will disturb audiences as they watch it, are apprehensive, but then are calmed.

At times the screenplay is didactic, Billy instructing Nick, metaphors, stones rippling on the water and consequences. But the dialogue also shows the value of deeper conversation, empathetic listening, the encouragement to confession, self-revelation, the desire for forgiveness, some atonement and reconciliation. Which means that the film can be well used by churches, religious groups, discussions with families, younger audiences.

The film also shows that you can't judge a screenwriter and director by the character of the character they portray on screen. Jason Mac, longtime actor, has written the screenplay, has directed the film, and plays Nick.

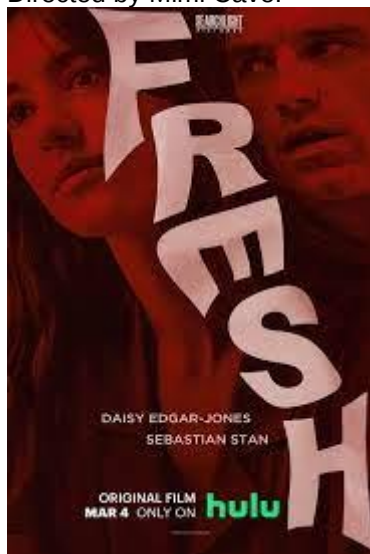
A good example of a Faith-film.

FRESH

US, 2022, 115 minutes, Colour.

Daisy Edgar-Jones, Sebastian Stan, JoJo T Gibbs, Andrea Bang, Charlotte Le Bon, Dayo Okeniyi.

Directed by Mimi Cave.



Fresh is, ultimately, a horror film about cannibalism. However, it is a mixture of subtle moments as well as as explicitly gory moments.

In fact, the first half hour is romantic comedy material, the central character, Noa (Daisy Edgar-Jones) is on the lookout for romance, relying on the support of her close friend, Molly (with whom she spars at a gym – rather handy later in the film). At a bar, she encounters a handsome man who chats with her, becomes friendly, then texts her and they go out together, coming home for a sexual encounter. He is charming and Noa is charmed. He is Steve (Sebastian Stan), inviting Noa to come away with him to his country house.

Perhaps some audiences who know that the film has been described as horror, may be inclined to give up at this stage, not a horror indication in sight. However, there are moments when there are indications, intimations of suspicions.

Once the couple go to the country house, the film turns into a version of abduction, like *The Collector*. Noa is in quite an elaborate cell, chained, becoming more aware that she is not the only prisoner in the house.

But, this is where a reviewer has to be cautious, warning about Spoilers. For readers who are interested to see *Fresh*, don't read any further but come back later to check the review.

For those who do not want to see a horror film, but are curious about the cannibalism – which is rather chic though somewhat Dark Web material – here are some comments.

Steve explains that he is a plastic surgeon. He does not explain that he is married with children – his wife looking as if she is the first who experienced his facial surgery and then reveals that she is probably his first cannibal victim. He starts with an amputation of a leg.

Steve has quite a business going, with quite some detail, close-up, of meat processing in his kitchen, then the packing, the labelling, the courier arriving to distribute the product, and a glimpse of a range of clients, male, who have a bizarre and warped gourmet taste.

With the abducted women, especially with Noa, despite her dislike and disgust for Steve seems to embody aspects of the Stockholm Syndrome, seeming to be charmed, to agree with her capture, even to sharing his modish table with him.

But, it will come to a head, Molly becoming concerned for her absent friend, trying to get her bar tender associate who had met Noa and Steve to help (but, interestingly, he runs away, drives away rather, and does not help in the rescue).

It does get gory at the end, Steve confronted, his wife turning up, Molly having been captured but freed, and another of the women, all combining to vindicate themselves.

And, with a grim play on words, one might say that for horror films, *Fresh* is an acquired taste.

IT SNOWS IN BENIDORM

Spain/UK, 2020, 117 minutes, Colour.

Timothy Spall, Sarita Choudhury,

Directed by Isabel Coixet.



This reviewer must have led a sheltered life. Prior to watching this film, Benidorm was not part of his consciousness. He had to look up where exactly it was in Spain (discovering it was on the Eastern Mediterranean coast). However, the central character of this film goes to Benidorm and the filmmakers take us with him, discovering the town, its size (dramatic high rise expansion along the beachfront's since the mid-1950s), the beaches, the nightlife and clubs, and the loud and somewhat boozy Brits on holidays there.

With references to poets Sylvia Plath, the screenplay reminds us that when she visited this town for honeymoon with her husband, Ted Hughes, in 1956, it was something of a quiet village.

But, the film actually opens in a somewhat gloomy Manchester, focusing on a veteran bank employee, clients even going down on the knees to beg him to grant a loan, but his boss treating them with casual unconcern. He is Peter Reardon, is played by Timothy Spall. Which is probably enough of a recommendation for many audiences to make the choice to watch *It Snows in Benidorm*. For many decades, Timothy Spall has been at the top of British acting.

The smug boss actually arranges for Peter to have forced early retirement. So Peter decides to contact his brother, out of touch with him for over a decade, who lives in Benidorm.

Once the audience realises (already knew) where Benidorm is, the title is more than tantalising. Snow on the Mediterranean coast? Actually, there is a tongue in cheek fulfilment-ending with snow.

Peter has led a rather sheltered life, living by himself, hasn't developed a great number of social graces. Which means that he is rather out of place in Benidorm. He is immediately fleeced by a taxi driver, rescued by a woman who turns out to be a police officer, tries to contact his brother who seems to have disappeared. What is he to do? And, it would seem that he is unaccustomed to holidaying.

This is a perfect role for Timothy Spall, now looking rather gaunt in his mid-60s, with something of a hangdog look, shoulders a bit stooped as if he was bearing the weight of the world – or, at least, weighed down by his own personal anxieties. But, as he wanders the city, the nightlife, encounters a woman who works in a bar, who substitutes for singing and dancing when the professionals don't turn up. She is Alex, played by Sarita Chaudhry (who has had a long career but made such a mark early with *Monsoon Wedding*). They form something of a bond.

But, there are mystery elements, Peter and his search for his brother, discovering his business interests, making contacts with butchers in the city who are up for financial deals. And he experiences some violent threats. There are some final answers to Peter's search but not some final answers to what Peter's future will be.

And the snow? Writer-director, Isabel Coixet, who has made a number of films both in Spanish and in English, uses a chapter heading device. But, it is not numbers. It is more of weather forecasts. And, the weather indications are anticipations of what the developments in Peter's drama will be like.

The film has a rather longer running time, is not in a particular hurry, but invites us to share in discovering Benidorm and share Peter's discoveries about himself, his brother, and about life.

KIMI

US, 2022, 89 minutes, Colour.

Zoe Kravitz, Byron Bowers, Devon Rattray, Rita Wilson, Erica Christensen.

Directed by Steven Soderberg.



This reviewer suddenly discovered Kimi on a streaming service and began to watch it without checking any of its background or any of its credits. It came as something of a shock, even more than a shock, to discover that the film had been directed by Steven Soderberg and that the screenplay had been written by veteran David Koepp (Jurassic Park, Mission Impossible amongst many others).

There are references to covid 19 in the screenplay. The central character often wears a mask as do other characters. This is a film made in pandemic times, small budget, generally small locations, a small cast – but amplified by some outdoor sequences.

The film opens with something of an air of mystery, an expert on IT and computer communication developments experiencing extortion. There are some moments throughout the film where there is further extortion – and, while the film ends with some explanation of this and how it affects the central character, it is treated very, very briefly.

The focus is on a young woman, Angela (played by Zoe Kravitz, Serena in The Batman). We see her interacting with the computer voice, Kimi, controlling all the operations and the apartment. Angela is gaunt, has blue hair, lives alone – although, echoes of Rear Window, she looks out of her apartment, especially to the businessman in the apartment across the street. We also notice a man in the upper window looking out at her – and he becomes integral in the final climax of the film.

Angela seems to be rather agoraphobic, even backing out of a rendezvous with the man across the street at the sandwich truck below. When he does visit, there is an aggressive sexual encounter.

The key to the film, some memories of Coppola's The Conversation, is that Angela in her work of finding solutions to errors in computer voice answers to questions, comes across an aggressive episode, sexual assault, which she wants to report to the authorities. Her bosses demand that she does not. However, even venturing out of the apartment, she goes to an appointment with one of the authorities (played by Rita Wilson). She discusses but is unsatisfied. She is detained. Then she is pursued, abducted into a van, but street protesters rescuing her. She escapes home.

In the meantime, we are shown supervisors at their screens, not exactly explained, one might say touches of the Kafkaesque (and Soderberg did direct the film, Kafka).

There is a final confrontation, Angela using her wits, an expose of the conspiracy behind the action. Kimi is a brief film, interesting because of its writer and Director, but at times seems too enigmatic.

LOVELAND/EXPIRED

Australia, 2021, 105 minutes, Colour.
Ryan Kwanten, Jillian Nguyen, Hugo Weaving.
Directed by Ivan Senn.



This is not an easy cinema experience. There are aspects of science-fiction in a pre-apocalyptic world. There is personal drama and a search for identity. There is a sex club, the Loveland of the title, and one of the performers a refugee from a village in Vietnam. There is also a theme of life, genetic engineering, immortality, death.

The film was released in Australia as Loveland. However, at the same time, the Internet Movie Database lists it as Expired with a poster with that name.

While this is a film financed by Screen Queensland, with some of the interiors shot in Queensland, the setting is Hong Kong, generally Hong Kong by night, the vistas, the skyscrapers, the neon lights, the streets, dingy apartments, the corridors and rooms of the club.

And, this is a film of dialogue, philosophical dialogue, self-ruminating dialogue, rhetorical dialogue, often a succession of monologues by the central characters.

The word that kept coming to mind during the screening was portentous, portentous dialogue, portentous themes and treatment. So, it seemed a good idea before writing the review to check on what was exactly the meaning of portentous. There were some definitions: 'of or like a portent; of momentous significance' and 'done in a pompously or overly solemn manner so as to impress'.

The first definition applies to John, the central character, a hitman for hire (and we see him doing an assassination, without any sense of conscience), unsure of his origins, a white man in the Chinese context, often ruminating about the absence of his mother and his wanting her, going to the sex club, waited on by the management, watching the women rather than any physical contact, their performing and singing behind a glass. All these events were portentous for John, momentous significance for his life and his possible death.

However, the second definition pervaded, especially the solemn manner, maybe overly solemn, poetic, rhetorical, scientific, pre-apocalyptic, issues of life and death, outed as voice-over, as monologues, designed to impress.

The setting is exotic, the issues of life and death and genetic engineering are raised, John discovering a doctor, played impressively, as always, by Hugo Weaving, who has experimented in the past, has his regrets, looks to possibilities for rectifying the situation.

The other exotic aspect is April, the Vietnamese woman who performs at the club, whom John follows, gets to know, forms a relationship – which is partly good for her but partly disturbing, jolting her in her life in Hong Kong and desire to return home to Vietnam and to her daughter.

There is some explicit explanation towards the end of the film as to why John is as he is, his quest to find the doctor, to get an explanation about his mother, and the realisation that powers that be after him to destroy him.

While the release title focuses on the sex club, the alternate, Expired, title focuses on John and his quest – and his destination? Expired seems a better choice for title.

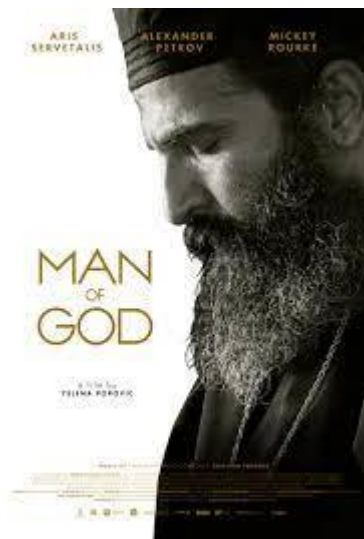
(Ivan Senn is, perhaps, best known for his films with aboriginal themes from Beyond Clouds to Mystery Road and Goldstone. Loveland is a far cry from these themes.)

MAN OF GOD

Greece, 2021, 109 minutes, Colour.

Aris Servetalis. Alexandre Petrov, Christos Loulis, Tonia Sotiropoulou, Mickey Rourke.

Directed by Yelena Popovic.



Here is a cinematic invitation to visit the world of the Orthodox Churches.

This has been a welcome film for members of the Greek Orthodox Church. It is a Greek production, a Greek cast plus some Russians, and a cameo at the end of the film by Mickey Rourke as a paralysed patient in the hospital. Those not familiar with Orthodox Christianity will be intrigued by differences from their own experiences.

The man of God of the title is a Bishop, Nektarios, who was declared a saint in 1961.

The film opens in Alexandria in 1890, plenty of atmosphere, an introduction to Nektarios as a good man, encountering the poor, talking with Muslims. But, then we enter the world of ecclesiastical politics and this is a pervading issue throughout the film, deep effect on the life of Nektarios himself.

Many want him to find a high place in the hierarchy, eventually to become the Patriarch. However, he has been denounced, out-of-favour with the authorities, accused of being a fraud. The scenes of the bishops arguing the case, their reasons for condemnation, are the familiar discussions in all aspects of politics, church and secular.

The action then moves to Athens, Nektarios, labouring under the reported suspicions, unable to be given an appointment for ministry. We see him working with the poor, living the life of the poor. In some ways, he is the image of the traditional saint, absolutely devoted entirely to God, stern, rarely smiling, self-sacrificing. Later, he will be engaged in a discussion about asceticism – and he is the model of the ascetic. He also finds that he was born in a part of Greece now seconded into the Turkish Empire, and his not being recognised as a Greek citizen.

However, we see that there is a providence in his life. He is asked to be the head of the seminary in Athens. Once again, complete dedication, certainly not always approved of by the Board of the seminary, especially one member, Christos, continually antagonistic towards Nektarios (the discussion about asceticism with him), apologising to seminarians involved in petty disputes because he has provoked anger, determined to do penance, and in another case, apologising again and offering to go on a hunger strike. When the janitor is ill and his job threatened, Nektarios cleans the toilets.

In the early 20th century, there is another election in Alexandria, with Nektarios travelling, some wanting him elected patriarch – but the malevolent authorities continually undermine him.

In the latter part of his life, he accedes to the wishes of a group of women in Athens, the leader an earnest blind woman, who wish to be nuns. They move to the island of Aegina, building it up, living a poor life, but fulfilling their ambitions to live a community life. Again, church authorities suspicious, civic authorities sending the police to interrogate him, the mother of one of the nuns having gone to accuse him of misbehaviour – but he and the women are vindicated.

All the time, Nektarios has had the support of Kostas, deciding not to go on for priesthood, but a firm supporter of Nektarios, faithful over the years, but pleading with him not to go to the island, ultimately visiting him and concerned about him in his old age. Nektarios' health declines, and he dies – leading to further veneration and the declaration of his sainthood.

In many ways, severe hagiography and the portrait of an ascetic, maligned, but caring for the poor and oppressed.

MORBIUS

US, 2022, 104 minutes, Colour.

Jared Leto, Matt Smith, Adria Arjona, Jared Harris, Tyrese Gibson, Al Madrigal, Michael Keaton.

Directed by Daniel Espinosa.



For this reviewer, quite a surprise. With the early part of the story and treatment, he found that he was enjoying the film, not what he was expecting. In fact, no reading of the Marvel Comics, no knowledge of who Morbius was – except seeing the trailer a number of times and then discovering that it was 100% misleading, especially about the character of Michael Morbius himself.

By way of extra review, this reviewer sat behind four 14-year-olds in the cinema. Those who scoff at Marvel Comics and their range of movies sometimes remark that they were written for 12-14-year-olds. And, judging by this group in the cinema, they were reaching their mark! And, momentarily embarrassingly, they were reaching the reviewer. Which led to the reflection that material for 12-14-year-olds is good for them but why can't we enjoy at least some of them as well! A further compliment to the boys was that one of them insisted they take all their litter out with them after the film – and an opportunity to ask him whether he enjoyed the film. Yes, he said, it was the second time he had seen it (and this was the morning of its third day of release!).

So, a sobering experience with a real audience. The running time is brief compared with other Marvel epics, delivering what it intends, even though critics might declare that is not what it ought not to be delivering!

The action opens in Costa Rica, Morbius, with walking sticks, confronting a huge cave of bats and seemingly overwhelmed by them. Then a return to Greece, 25 years earlier, Michael in a clinic cared for by a sympathetic medic, Dr Nicholas (Jared Harris). A young patient is brought in, Lucian, whom Michael name is Milo because of the succession of boys in the adjacent bed who have passed through while Michael has been there. They become friendly. And Michael is clever, fixing an elaborate machine with a ballpoint pen and Dr Nicholas recommending him for further studies and a scholarship. So, the human touch after the episode with the bats.

With the adult Michael, he is awarded the Nobel Prize and rejecting it, stating that his attempts so far to find a cure for his condition have been failures. He works in a laboratory, financed by the adult

Milo (Matt Smith), collaborating with a young doctor, Martin Bancroft (Adria Arjona). Contrary to the impressions created by the trailer, Dr Michael Morbius is actually a man of integrity, seriously involved in his work. However, during an experiment on a boat in international waters, he succeeds in his experiment but with dangerous consequences.

This is where the film turns into a variation on the Dr Frankenstein theme, wariness of undisciplined scientific and medical experimentation, and the Frankenstein monster this time the doctor himself – and, as the action progresses, the real villain is a transformed Milo.

And, of course, with the bats who survive on blood, Morbius is transformed by his cure to a vampiric condition, there are many Dracula moments.

With a death in a hospital, as well as the deaths of all the crew on the mysterious boat, there are police investigations, media reports and the audience seeing more and more of Milo and his ambitions.

Which means then that Dr Morbius is a kind of Bruce Wayne figure, wanting the good, but transforming into a character beyond, this time with superpowers of transformation in flight, fangs and gore.

Jared Leto is Morbius and, as mentioned, far more sympathetic and with integrity than initially thought. Despite his transformations, he wants what is best and is prepared to suffer consequences. And, during the final credits, there are two indications of what some of the consequences might be, the introduction of an oddball character seen in prison, Andrew Toomes (for those in the know, Vulture) then transforming himself and confronting Morbius, a character played by Michael Keaton. So, in the future ...

NOWHERE SPECIAL

UK, 2020, 96 minutes, Colour.
James Norton, Daniel Lamont, Eileen O'Higgins.
Directed by Uberto Pasolini.



Knowing practically nothing about this film going into the cinema, by the time the final credits came up I was sad that I was the only one there. This is the kind of film that many audiences would very much like to see, a small film – but that does not mean slight.

The particular Nowhere is Northern Ireland, Belfast, but a very important somewhere for John and his little boy, Michael. John is a working-class man, a window cleaner (and we do see quite a lot of suds, swipes, and sparkingly clean windows!), But the Russian wife of his three-year-old son has disappeared back to Russia. John is doing his best to care for Michael, bringing him up well.

There is a very impressive screen presence and performance by James Norton – quite a long way from his Anglican priest-sleuth in the 1950s village of Grantchester. And the little boy, Daniel Lamont, how could the director get such a realistic performance? The IMDb says that James Norton has no. He doesn't. But an article which described how the actor spent a lot of time before and during the making of the film with Daniel and his actual family (who are accredited as chaperones during the final credits). Which means that the two obviously got on very well, the little boy comfortable in James Norton's presence. Which also means, perhaps, that all the director had to do was just to ask the little boy to imagine the scene, give him some words, and simply train the camera on him. And that works wonders in terms of his performance. In fact, director, Uberto Pasolini, described Daniel as 'extraordinarily aware and sensitive'.

I want to say that I felt great empathy for John and the little boy – relating to my own experiences. For my brother and myself, our mother died when we were young, leaving our father, age 36, a widower. In this film John has a birthday cake with 34 candles – and the little boy holding up an ominous extra candle. The theme is how does a father take care of his motherless son. I felt an extraordinary empathy for John.

And then came the complication, that John has a brain tumour, a limited time to live. He has meetings with social services, that a trainee was accompanying him on various interview visits, that he was looking for a family to whom he could entrust Michael: meeting the different families,

listening to them, testing them, their points of view about family, upbringing, love and care, education. Which meant then that we were identifying with John, testing out our own reactions to the different parents, some wealthy, some with a number of children, some very lonely, some uppity, a single mother who had he given her child up for adoption.

John does his best but is highly emotional himself, looking at Michael and his responses to the various families, but how can we really read the reactions of a three-year-old?

By the end of the film, and the delight of a visit to the fair, we have become very familiar with this particular Nowhere Special, the way of life, the daily details, the range of families we have met. And, when John finally makes a decision, I realised I had gone with the flow and fully expected the choice that he actually made.

With no one in the cinema, handkerchief to teary eyes without any self-conscious embarrassment.

OFF THE RAILS

UK, 2021, 94 minutes, Colour.

Jenny Seagrove, Sally Phillips, Kelly Preston, Elizabeth Dormer-Phillips, Judi Dench, Peter Bowles, Ben Miller, Martin Shaw, Franco Nero.

Directed by Jules Williamson.



The title indicates where this film is going – off the rails! However, it could have just as well been called Girls Trip, Girls (Many) Nights Out. The target audience, very quickly established, is female, of an indeterminate age. There are various clues early in the piece: the

explanation for the soundtrack, more than a dozen songs by Blondie, their favourite when they were young – and they are now at grandmother age, menopause discussions.

It is fair to add a comment from an IMDb blogger that challenges male perspectives on the film: ‘I also secretly love that middle aged male critics don’t get it. This one is for us!’

This is one of those stories where women friends from the past who have grown rather apart, have some secrets, also some resentments, are brought together on the occasion of the death of one of their friends. The film has some sobriety at the beginning with Judi Dench offering a eulogy at the funeral of her daughter, some moments of Peter Bowles as the vicar. And, at the ceremony, the deceased woman’s daughter, Maddie, 18, plays the organ and a song which the three friends are able to sing.

There is a credit for the “original story” which seems rather a stretch. We have seen this kind of film before, the dead woman leaving tickets for her three friends to take her daughter to relive one of the trips of the past, the goal in Palma Cathedral.

It is a long time since the three were friends, back in the travelling days, back in the Blondie days, drinking, kicking over the traces. They are not quite like that now. Kate, Jenny Seagrove, is rather serious and solemn. Cassie, an American, is the longtime star of a television show, moody and peremptory when she wants to. She is played by Kelly Preston in her last role and the film is dedicated to her. There is some enjoyment with Sally Phillips who was settled down to marriage and ordinary life (but about to be shocked by her husband). Maddie is played by newcomer, Elizabeth Dormer-Phillips.

So, some random adventures with comic touches, especially when they miss quite a number of trains, when a train breaks down, when they miss the ferry to Palma... And sequences in Paris, especially a potential spree in a fashionable dress shop, nightclubs, the encounter with a British guitarist, and then a train into Italy, the one that breaks down. On board there is a young man who attracts Maddie’s attention, more than attention. And there is a pregnant woman, the passengers all trek along the train lines and out into the field, helping her give birth, Liz acting as midwife. Consequent rejoicing, a huge party, outdoors, in the town, where the mayor turns out to be Franco Nero.

More adventures, more missed trains, and the missing of the ferry, Franco Nero coming to the rescue with a World War II plane flying them to Spain, the guitarist turning up with his motorbike so that they get to the Cathedral.

And, the sun shining and reflecting through the rose window of the Cathedral is a beautiful site.

Seems a slight entertainment. However, it would also seem that for those who identify with the characters, a good show.

RIVER

Australia, 2021, 75 minutes, Colour.

Narrated by William Dafoe.

Directed by Jennifer Peedon, Joseph Nizeti.



Beauty. Pessimism. Exhortation.

For more than 10 years, Director Jennifer Peedon, has made significant and beautiful documentaries. She has worked most notably in the Himalayas with Sherpa as Well Is documentaries Mountain Quest, Mountain. (And the writer of this documentary, Robert McFarlane, was a writer of the Mountain documentaries.)

In many ways River is a masterclass in cinema photography. It is also a masterclass in editing such a range of beautiful material. The early part of the film, spoken in quiet tones by Willem Dafoe, indicates the evolution of rain, streams, rivers, and then the interaction between humans and rivers.

All this is captured beautifully in striking images, a delight to watch.

And, as we see in the opening, the Australian Chamber Orchestra is assembling, under the leadership of Richard Tognetti, preparing to play the score, original music, classical music, something of a concerto as we watch.

But, the narration moves us into the 20th century, the human controlling of so many rivers, rivers which are diverted, dammed. And alarming explanations given about dams, the trapping of silt, the release of water without the silt, the lack of nutrient benefit with the waters released, compensated in some way by hydroelectric energy.

And the images go further, close-ups and vast vistas, helicopter and drone material, satellite images, devastation in so many parts of the world, the erratic behaviour of droughts and floods, the commercialisation of the rivers, profitable consequences for the affluent, the poor being deprived of aspects of livelihood.

And the commentary asks towards the end: are we good ancestors? Human history flowing like rivers – and what will human history be in the future downstream? Not that the film is without hope. Some remedies have been put in place, recovery of silt as dam waters are released in full flow, some enriching consequences.

But, along with this, there are still the scenes of devastation, hundreds of stranded fishing dead along a defunct river. But, the rivers flow into the sea, there is evaporation, huge amounts of water in the streams of the clouds, and their returning to the earth.

There is so much to see in a documentary like this – and so much to challenge.

RUBY'S CHOICE

Australia, 2022, 117 minutes, Colour.

Jane Seymour, Jacqueline McKenzie, Coco Jack Gillies, Stephen Hunter, Michael Budd, Nicole Pastor, Brendan Donaghue, Rory Potter, Tim Omaji.

Directed by Michael Budd.



Over the years there have been quite a number of films about the elderly, about the development of senility, about the coming on of dementia and its consequences. This is one of those films.

Ruby is played by Jane Seymour, veteran British actress, so popular on American television. Ruby migrated to Australia in the 1960s with her parents, when she was a teenager. She eventually settled, married, had a daughter, Sharon (veteran Australian actor, Jacqueline McKenzie). However, living by herself, she becomes forgetful, a fire caused by leaving cooking on the stove, needing to move in with her daughter, her son-in-law and granddaughter. And, at the same time, cousins have a crisis and father and son also move into the house, causing crowding, and the granddaughter's resentment at having to share with her grandmother.

In many ways, the situations are familiar. There is also the awkward background of the husband in danger of losing his job – which eventually he does.

Audiences will have great sympathy with Ruby, driving her car to the library, forgetting it is there and getting the bus home. She goes to the cinema and the ticket seller knows her well and knows that she likes seeing Red Dog, every time she watches it like a first-time. It is clear to the audience that Ruby is in need of some kind of constant care.

Sharon, however, is devoted to her mother and resists the thought of her mother going into aged care, the cliché that these places are terrible.

So, a lot of the film focuses on day-by-day detail in the house, Ruby left at home first with some chores, conscious of having to feed the fish which she does, and does, the fish dying to her granddaughter's dismay. Then the granddaughter having to stay home to keep an eye on her

grandmother – although, they do go out and enjoy themselves. Then the husband stays home but goes to the unemployment centre, Ruby going to the toilet – and then disappearing, the whole family out to search for her and rescuing her from some bullies mocking her.

By this stage, audiences will be acutely conscious of Ruby's needs, of Sharon's reluctance for her going to care, but realising that the family is unable to keep a constant eye on Ruby and, checking with agencies, that they cannot afford this kind of care.

Because the thrust of the film is to highlight care for the aged, it has to have a happy ending, nicely done when the family all visit an aged care home and Ruby finds a friend from the past and is content to be with her.

Some background information from the website: Ruby's Choice was inspired by writer and producer Paul Mahoney's work as a disability case manager and was directed by Michael Budd, who was inspired to make the movie after losing his grandma to dementia.

A portion of the movie's profits will go to Dementia Care International and its charity arm Dementia Foundation for Spark of Life – from the Glen Family Foundation which contributed to the budget of the film -transforming the lives of people with dementia all across Australia. As the official charity partner for the film, they worked to ensure the story reflected real-life experiences of families dealing with dementia.

In 2022, there were an estimated 487,500 Australians living with dementia, according to researched undertaken by the National Centre For Social And Economic Modelling (NATSEM), University of Canberra.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

US, 2022, 116 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Ben Schwartz, Idris Elba, Colleen O'Shanussy. Jim Carrey, James Marsden, Tika Sumpter, Natasha Rothwell, Shemar Moore, Adam Pally, Lee Majdoub.

Directed by Jeff Fowler.



There's nothing like a video game popularity, especially amongst younger players (and their parents?) To help towards decisions to make feature films. The first Sonic the Hedgehog film was popular and a commercial success. And, it would seem, that this sequel will easily follow in its footsteps – and, at the end, all kinds of prospects for further Sonic adventures.

Sonic himself seems the least likely of world heroes, so it just goes to show! Small, blue, like a child, but with that capacity for absolute fast motion. And, there is a nice sheriff and his wife, James Marsden and Tika Sumpter, already having proved their niceness and care for Sonic, ready to join in these adventures as well.

Which means then that the screenplay offers all kinds of entertainment for the younger audiences Sonic himself, a friend, Tails, a little fox with two tails, and an echidna from outer space, Knuckles, with whom there will be an ultimate reconciliation and plans for further adventures.

But, in the meantime, the arch-villain from the first film, Dr Robotnik, has been stranded on a mushroom planet in outer space. He is the most dastardly of the dastardly, a huge moustache, severe eyes, dressed in pilot's uniform. And, we first met him in the first film, in the form of Jim Carrey. For older generations this is an opportunity to see the Jim Carrey of old, all eccentric mannerisms and grimaces, oddball dialogue which it would seem he wrote himself.

The whole point of the adventure this time is that there is an emerald that gives power over the world, Dr Robotnik searching for it, Knuckles wanting it for better purposes, and It entrusted by the wise owl to Sonic to find it and preserve it.

So, a lot of animated adventures to please the young audience, enough knockabout comedy and eccentric characters to entertain the youngest. And, to keep the adult audience attention, there is comedy with those characters, especially a wedding in Hawaii which goes disastrously awry.

The climax, Dr Robotnik with the emerald, able to build a gigantic monstrosity which he inhabits, ready to crush anyone in its path, animated characters or humans, but defeated by the team work of

the trio of Knuckles, Tails and Sonic. And there is time out for heartfelt talks and advice about responsibility, helping others, teamwork.

THE SOUVENIR: PART II

UK, 2021, 107 minutes, Colour.

Honor Swinton Byrne, Tilda Swinton, James Spencer Ashworth, Charlie Heaton, Richard Ayoade.
Directed by Joanna Hogg.



As indicated by the title, this is a continuation of the original *The Souvenir*, 2019, rather than a sequel. The original film divided opinions. It was praised by critics and the intended arthouse audience. It did not appeal to the general public. And the same could be said about *Part II*.

A yes to this comment by a blogger: You have to pay attention and work things out on your own for the most part. A tall order these days, I know.

The film is written and directed by Joanna Hogg and is based on her experiences of being in film school in the 1980s. Which means that it immerses its audience in this film-study-making world, an attention to detail, to production values and style, to the role of the director, camera crew, performers. And situations can become very tense – which might involve some audience tension and concern but leaves the other audiences detached, observing, looking on.

In fact, many of the sequences are the equivalent of fly on the wall observation, close, not necessarily interesting in themselves, revealing character and clashes, and something of a desire, perhaps, to fly and observe on another wall.

But, this is all offset by the sequences where the trainee director, Julie (Honor Swinton Byrne, Tilda Swinton's actual daughter) visits her parents. She is in mourning, grieving for the death of her lover, Anthony (Tom Burke), the subject of the first film, his alleged work in the foreign office, his drug addiction, his love for Julie, his treatment of her, his death. In fact, Julie's visits to her parents, the ever attentive mother, the rather laid-back father, something of a relief after the visits to the film sets.

Julie is present at some filming, taking photos, interested in the French director and inviting her to be the lead in her own graduation film. A great deal of attention and time is given to this film,

performance, discussions of motivations, and long clashes with the director of photography who declares that he does not comprehend what is going on and how it is going on.

There are also some eccentric personalities, especially the prima donna Patrick (directed by Richard Ayoade who appeared in the first film) and some sequences, black-and-white, from the film he was making and wanting to edit.

Ultimately, Julie and her crew and friends, her parents, all arrive at her graduation screening, and the audience is treated to her finished film – an extraordinary fantasy, Julie wandering from sequence to sequence, echoes her life, her search, and then sequences with her mother, and with Anthony himself, still quite ambiguous.

The film ends with the party sequence, the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the camera withdrawing and showing that this is also a film set and performance. And the final “Cut!”.

TURNING RED

US, 22, 100 minutes, Colour.
Voices of: Rosalie Jiang, Sandra Oh.
Directed by Domee Shi.



Unfortunately, this reviewer has very few qualifications for reviewing Turning Red. Yes, seen many films, but watched all the Pixar films. But he has never been a 13-year-old girl, a 13-year-old North American girl with Chinese background, never had a 13-year-old sister or niece, never been a mother trying to cope with a 13-year-old daughter, so has to accept at face value that Meilin, a perfectionist 13-year-old who normally gets 100% for every school project, who always measures up to her perfectionist demanding mother, is real. Of course, she is an animated character, short, bespectacled, smart-mouthed at times, but the film is inviting us to identify with her, the beginning of puberty, a motley trio of girlfriends at school, the burgeoning attraction to boys, the intense desire to go to a concert of boy-singers.

Where the identification is challenged is in our discovery that when Meilin gets really upset, something inside wanting to burst out of her – it does. And, it is a large red panda, big ears, fluffy tail. At first, Meilin is dismayed, and we can empathise with her alarm, trying to conceal it, looking in the mirror, trying to hide.

Actually, interest is a bit aroused as to how this could possibly be. The family owns a shrine in Toronto, a family shrine, respecting the elders, with mythological stories handed down, especially about a female warrior who in battle, transforms into a red panda. Ultimately, we discover that this is prevalent in all the female generations, Meilin's mother (a rather ferocious panda when it is released) and grandmother, along with quite a number of aunts. There is a ritual, when the moon is red, and a circle is drawn, and the panda is fixed in the circle, the women singing and chanting, an elder performing a ceremony for the exorcism of the panda.

But, should this be the case? Is there a value in having an inner panda? Of acknowledging the truth within oneself and setting it free? Not subservient to perfectionism and obedience which dominate at times, especially when mother and daughter sweep the shrine clean, almost obsessive-compulsive disorder.

There are some comedy episodes with the three friends. There are some comedy episodes with some of the boys, especially one who wants the panda to perform at his birthday party – and, ultimately, gets far more than he paid for.

Which means, probably, that this is a film for girls 13 plus or minus who can identify, presumably, with Meilin and her large red panda experiences. Not sure that 13 plus or minus boys will want to go along for the ride. There is a very nice father in the picture, rather quiet, but supportive, and, right at the end of the credits, revealing himself as a fan of the boy singers. The other principal demographic for *Turning Red* is probably mothers and grandmothers, hoping to understand their daughters and their respective pandas, remembering their past and however their panda, at age 13, troubled them – and made them assertive!

X

US, 2022, 106 minutes, Colour.

Mia Goth, Jenna Ortega, Brittany Snow, Scott Mescudi, Martin Henderson, Owen Campbell, Stephen Ure.

Directed by Ti West.



X the anonymous, X the unknown, X marks the spot... For this rather grisly thriller, all meanings are possible.

This is the work of cult director, Ti West, best known for horror films on the big screen and, more recently, on television, perhaps the best known, *The Innkeepers*. Critics admire his work.

As regards the public, his films have a particular demographic, fans of horror films, fans of films with a touch of the gory, but fans of horror films which give more thought to the plot and themes than the average thriller.

The film opens with a quiet focus on a house out in the country, then the camera draws back and shows two police cars as another drives into the property. The sheriff joins his investigators in the house, discover blood and mayhem. Then the film goes back 24 hours, which means that we watch most of the film with that gory end in mind. And, when we return back to the house and the sinister old owner, we are reminded of the ambience of Texas Chainsaw Massacre. But, no chainsaws here - but guns, knives, bolts...

The central characters are a group of six young men and women, all ambitious, planning to make a sex movie – this is the 1970s and they see they can make a fortune with the advent of video tapes. We are introduced to them, three men, three women, travelling along the road, held up by a grim accident, a bull crashed into by a large truck. However, they arrive, confront the old owner who lets them into rent a house on his property.

What Ti West does is to intercut the sequences of the making of the sex film, explicit in their way, and the mounting horror. He is inviting his audience to test their reactions to sex on screen and horror on screen, at ease with one of the other, or both, or neither.

The characters are given a bit more than usual background and character, the drugtaking heroine, Maxine (Mia Goth) girlfriend of the director, Wayne (New Zealander Martin Henderson) who will also act in the film. She dreams of being a star, often saying this out loud. The stars of the film are a southern blonde, Brittany Snow, and her African-American, somewhat exhibitionist boyfriend, Jackson, (Scott Mescudi). Along with them is the photographer, he wants to make the sex film but to make it cinematically, artistically, often intervening, R.J.(Owen Campbell) and his rather naive girlfriend who holds the microphones, Lorraine (Jenna Ortega) who is bemused by observing the sex activity with dire consequences for her.

And, when they arrive, Maxine sees an old woman looking out of the upper window.

The film spends some time establishing the interactions between the characters, Maxine visiting the house and having a cool drink with the old woman, the husband upset. The old woman wanders around. The old man has a rifle. And sexual tension arises between the old couple.

Gradually the tension builds much further, the characters are killed off, gruesomely, with a final confrontation – and one survivor!

There is a fundamentalist Christian theme throughout, a tele-evangelist preaching and condemning contemporary morals, playing when the police arrive, the old couple watching it. And the audience watching it at the end – and an interesting twist with the preacher talking about his daughter who had walked out on him...

When looking at the credits list to find out who plays the old woman, we are partly surprised to find that she is played by Mia Goth.

REVIEWS MAY 2022

AFTER YANG

AMBULANCE

DOWNTON ABBEY

DROVER'S WIFE THE LEGEND OF MOLLY JOHNSON, The

EVERYTHING, EVERYWHERE, ALL AT ONCE

FANTASTIC BEASTS: THE SECRETS OF DUMBLEDORE

FAREWELL MONSIEUR HAFFMANN

FATHER STU

GOOD BOSS, The

HERE TODAY

HERO, A

ITHAKA

LOST CITY, The

MEMORIA

NOBODY HAS TO KNOW

NORTHMAN, The

OPERATION MINCEMEAT

PETIT MAMAN

UNBEARABLE WEIGHT OF MASSIVE TALENT, The

WHEEL OF FORTUNE AND FANTASY

AFTER YANG

US, 2021, 96 minutes, Colour.

Colin Farrell, Jodi Turner-Smith, Malia Emma Tjandrawidjajaj, Sarita Choudhury, Clifton Collins Jr, Haley Lu Richardson.

Directed by Kogonada.



A quiet, very quiet, science-fiction or futuristic fantasy. An invitation to enter and explore a new era of Artificial Intelligence.

Who or what is Yang? We first meet Yang with his family, father and mother, mixed race, and the little daughter with visible Chinese ancestry. And Yang seems also Chinese. He is a young man, seems part of the family, pleasant and genial, at meals, happily conversing – with the quiet touch of inherited Chinese wisdom – a wonderful companion for the daughter, something of a tutor, something of a friend, to encourage her with her Oriental heritage.

While this future seems to be a future we recognise, we soon see many technological differences. And this is especially the case when we realise that Yang is a very sophisticated example of robotics, development of androids, the creation of a well-balanced person who resembles a human almost perfectly. But, the title indicates that there might be a crisis, Yang no longer there, and what happens after Yang.

For the little daughter, she is almost inconsolable, despite the efforts of her parents to reassure her.

The mother, a successful businesswoman, seems loving but somewhat detached, occupied with her work, having to go away from home.

The father, is devoted, actually purchased Yang not from the accepted company which produces such androids but, one might say, secondhand (later learning a rather longer history of Yang's presence). The main part of the action is the father trying to get Yang repaired, going to the company which will not help, trying some means prohibited by legislation, visiting the museum where a curator with specialist interests does her best to restore Yang – although, what is most valuable is the disc with his memories, visible when someone looks at them wearing specialist spectacles, something the father does often, with wistfulness.

And, all the while, there are pleasing flashbacks to Yang, to his friendship with the young woman and the father tracking her down, getting explanations.

Not exactly the material of fast-paced or action-packed pre-apocalyptic sagas. Rather, a gentle, if urgent, story, a family story, of loyalties and hopes.

The father is played by Colin Farrell, his Irish accent and all. His wife is played by Jodi Turner-Smith, the daughter by Malia Emma Tjandrawidjaja and the young girl is played by Hayley Lu Richardson.

AMBULANCE

US, 2022, 137 minutes, Colour.

Jake Gyllenhaal, Yaya Abdul-Marteen II, Eliza Gonzalez, Garrett Dillahunt, Keir O'Donnell, Jackson White, Olivia Stambouliah, Moses Ingram, Colin Wardell, A Martinez.

Directed by Michael Bay.



For almost 30 years, the name of director, Michael Bay, has been associated with big films, loud films, brash films, hyper-action films. This goes back to the 1990s with films like Bad Boys and The Rock (joking references to both in the screenplay), then the to thousands and Pearl Harbour, the Transformers series. Critics are not prone to praise the films of Michael Bay – far from it. On the other hand, he has many fans, audiences who like adrenaline-pumping action. And there is plenty of this in Ambulance. 2 ¼ hours of it.

With such a brief, direct title, there is no guessing as to what the main plot line will be. In fact, the action will give new and different meaning to “ambulance chasers”.

But, first the central characters have to be introduced. First is Will (Yaya Abdul-Marteen II), an Afghan veteran, finding life at home difficult, finding jobs, wife and child, illness and insurance. Second is his brother, adopted, Will African-American, Danny (Jack Gyllenhall) white. Will hoped for a job from Danny – and he gets one, far more than he bargained for. It emerges that Danny has a reputation as a bank robber for years, on the FBI list. And a big one is about to go down, a big crew, daring because it is in the centre of LA, allegedly foolproof, \$16 million or more.

Bay immerses us in the world of LA, an ever-moving camera, swirling camera up the sides of skyscrapers, hovering and then descending down into the city (quite a number of times). The robbery goes to plan at first, but an on guard policeman wants to flirt with the teller and gets himself trapped. But his partner is ultimately suspicious of his absence. Then the truck breaks down outside the bank and the policeman gets it started again!

And then the mayhem begins. (Jake Gyllenhaal had referred to it as Bayhem)

However, our initial attention has been drawn to a paramedic team, attending a car accident, rescuing a young girl, helping her survive, getting her to hospital. The leader of the team, Camille (Eliza Gonzalez), adopts a detached stance, and is irritated by the incessant talking of her new partner. They have the ambulance.

The policeman is shot, there is a call for the ambulance, Camille arrives, her partner knocked out, the ambulance commandeered. And so begins the long chase, the multiple crashes, some explosions, shootouts, deceptions, involvement of local drug criminals... And, all the while, we are more in sympathy with Will, even though he has fired at the policeman, concerned for Camille trying to do her paramedic work while being a hostage. And we like Danny and his bravado less and less.

The chief of police, with his large pet dog, is confident but outwitted. There is also an FBI agent who went to university with Danny and knows him well, trying to do some bargaining. The screenplay is very strong on communications, not only by radio, but phones and images, especially when Camille tries to do some surgery with the advice of experts speaking through their phones.

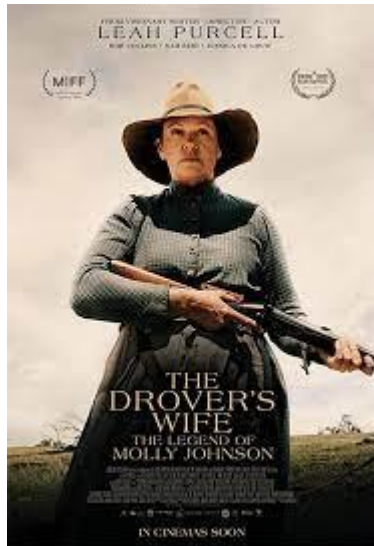
How can this end with hope? You will just have to see.

THE DROVER'S WIFE OF THE LEGEND MOLLY JOHNSON

Australia, 2021, 109 minutes, Colour.

Leah Purcell, Rob Collins, Sam Reid, Jessica De Gouw, Anthony Cugini, Harry Greenwood, Benedict Hardie, Nicholas Hope, Bruce Spence, Maggie Dence.

Directed by Leah Purcell.



Henry Lawson's 1892 short story is an Australian classic. Writer/director/actor Leah Purcell has spoken of her love for the story from her childhood, opening up her imagination. In later years, she has certainly opened up her imagination in exploring the characters of Lawson's story, shaping the story into a theatre drama, award-winning, then a novel, award-winning. Now she has made the film version, an obvious nominee for film awards.

Leah Purcell has made this a darker and bleaker story than Henry Lawson's. She gives a name to the drover's wife, Molly Johnson, her husband droving sheep in the mountains, frequently absent, her living with her children, pregnant at the opening of the film. She lives a hard life, surviving, the harsh birth sequence, grief.

The audience is taken into Molly Johnson's life, the basic of her hut, and her often busily sweeping neatness on the dirt entry, austere but surrounded by extraordinary photography of the Snowy Mountains, the landscapes around Adaminaby – although this is the opposite mood from *The Man from Snowy River*.

Meanwhile a local town is growing, a young British policeman and his wife pass by the hut (Sam Reid, Jessica De Gouw), a sympathy for Molly, the wife, eager to write articles on the situation of women in the bush, also eager to help. But, her husband, is very strictly law and order. And there is a lot to be concerned about, the rough life in the town, the visiting drovers and Wanderers, the women and the brothels, the difficulties of imposing order. And, there are strict people in the town, Bruce Spence as the local priest, Maggie Dence his austere sister.

However, at the centre of this tale is an aboriginal man, Yadaka, played by the versatile Rob Collins. He is wanted for murder, turns up at the drover's hut, threatened by Molly, eventually some understanding, his helping Molly's oldest son, moments of initiation rituals. He is able to tell his story, a strange story of his being taken from his family, working in a circus, searching for a peaceful place in the bush. He also has stories about Molly's mother and father.

And then the tale becomes grimmer. The drover's friends turning up, threatening Yadaka, Molly fearing danger for her children, but her then becoming target of the law abiding policeman.

Lawson highlighted the loneliness of the drover's wife, the isolation. This is certainly to the fore in Leah Purcell's interpretation, strengthened by Leah Purcell's powerful screen presence. But she is a force to be reckoned with even as she is victimised – and this interpretation is a fierce indictment of macho arrogance of the 19th century male (and all who are descended from these 19th-century migrants will be alarmed at these aspects of their heritage).

Which means that many audiences will see this as a late 19th century, early 20th century Me#Too stand for women and their rights, condemnation of male violence and brutality. This is made especially strong in the final sequences, perhaps dramatically unnecessary – or too explicit, but nevertheless, thematically relevant, then and now.

Leah Purcell has made a drama, bringing her first nation experiences and sensibilities to her writing and to her performance, one of those Australian films that, however tough it might be, should be seen.

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE, ALL AT ONCE

US, 2021, 137 minutes, Colour.

Michelle Yeoh, Stephanie Hsu, Ke Huy Quan, James Hong, Jamie Lee Curtis, Tallie Medel, Jenny Slate, Harry Shum Jr.

Directed by Daniels (Dan Kwan, Daniel Scheinert). All



Judging by reviews, bloggers, box office, everyone, everywhere, is wanting to watch this film all at once. And, if you decide to see it, you are in for what they usually call a wild ride. Perhaps it might be better to say wild, weird ride.

Before we get to everywhere, there has to be a where. Actually, it is as prosaic as a coin laundry, managed by Evelyn (the ever-versatile Michelle Yeoh) and Waymond (former child star Ke Huy Quan). Evelyn is busy, busy, busy, Waymond worried, thinking of a divorce. They have a visit from their daughter, Joy (Stephanie Hsu), bringing her girlfriend, Becky, exasperated by the hold her mother has over her. And, upstairs, there is Gong Gong, Evelyn's father (James Hong filming at age 80). So, prospects of a lively domestic drama – compounded when they go off to the IRS building with their tax documentation, encountering a very severe auditor, Jamie Lee Curtis.

But, then the first part of the title comes up on screen, Everything. And, off we go, barely stopping for another two hours of screen time. The two writers and directors, using the common name Daniels, (Dan Kwan, Daniel Scheinert) came into some prominence with their *The Swiss Army Man*, but they have made a number of short films and videos. They bring all their talents from these backgrounds, a kaleidoscope of ideas and images and music, non-stop. (So far the film has received one award – for Best Editing, Paul Rogers, heartily endorsed by this reviewer, wondering how it worked in the editing room with hundreds of short pieces to be edited coherently. Coherently might be an overstatement but, as we watch the film, it is pacey, exciting, sometimes breathtaking, and unexpectedly working well.

So, off into the multiverse, relying on our familiarity with strange powers in the universe, gizmos for mind control, exciting special effects, and always the unexpected. At one stage one of the characters remarks in an understatement, not typical of the whole dynamic of the film, "I'm a little lost". And, this is an *Odyssey* in the multiverse for Evelyn, showing Michelle's Yeoh's multi-versatility, serious, dramatic, some martial arts, music, a bewildered mother facing so many of the possible lives she might have led, trying to work out which life she is in, especially with her husband turning up in all kinds of guises, the quiet man at the laundry, a dapper suit and tie gentleman, touches of the android.

And, who is cast as the villain, but Joy. And, as the film progresses, this is a film about family reconciliation, regrets about the past, Evelyn confronting Gong Gong as an evil power and memories of a harsh father, Joy and emotional rivalry.

After about an hour of this, the second part of the title comes up on screen, Everywhere. That is rather misleading because, in fact, we have already been Everywhere. And, it is more of the same, in the different universes, Evelyn's sudden changing lives, encountering her family in different guises, conflict, resolution, possibilities.

And, by the way, the tax auditor turns up quite a deal, initially fighting with Evelyn, finally becoming reconciled and friends – and a pleasure to see Jamie Lee Curtis again.

When the third part of the title appears on screen, All at Once, it is almost the end of the film, quietening down a bit, reminding us that whatever our existential imaginations might conjure, whatever our cosmology of the universes, we live here, and have to live our lives in our here and now limitations.

Safe to say you won't find many more films (any films?) Like this!

FANTASTIC BEASTS: THE SECRETS OF DUMBLEDORE

UK, 2022, 137 minutes, Colour.

Eddie Redmayne, Jude Law, Mads Mikkelsen, Ezra Miller, Callum Turner, Richard Coyle, Dan Fogler, Katherine Waterston, Poppy Corby-Tuech, Alison Sudol, Jessica Williams.

Directed by David Yates.



This is the third film in the Fantastic Beasts series. The stories are the works of J.K.Rowling and the director is David Yates who made four of the Harry Potter films. The first film made an impression but the fans were very disappointed with the second film. With the third, there are some changes. First of all, American writer Steve Kloves, who wrote all but one of the Harry Potter films, has joined J.K.Rowling for the screenplay. Fans and critics have already noted that the plot is clearer, better dramatic development.

Of course, the focus of the Fantastic Beasts tales is Professor Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts (and there is a visit to Hogwarts in this film, the students, the staff, and echoes of the musical theme). But, as in the earlier films, Dumbledore, played again by Jude Law, is in conflict with his former friend, Grindlewald. In fact, this film opens with a confrontation between the two, Grindlewald asserting an enmity and his overpowering desire to control the world of the wizards and even to conquer the world of Muggles.

A big difference for this film is that in the previous films Grindlewald was played by Johnny Depp. This time he is replaced by the Danish actor, Mads Mikkelsen, and always worth seeing, and has played many an effective villain over the decades. Here he is more subdued, always menacing.

And the other central character, Newt Scamander, once again played by Eddie Redman, gets caught up in the conflict. He is joined in the struggle to defeat Grindlewald by his brother, Theseus (Callum Turner).

The occasion for the struggle and a climax is an election for the best candidate to be the Chief Wizard. Grindlewald is relying on an acknowledgement by a small magical Dragon whose talent it is to recognise interior goodness and bow before that person. But, there are twin dragons and while one is magically controlled by Grindelwald, the other is eventually free to bow before the accepted leader.

Quite a lot of adventures, the finding of the dragons in Chinese forests, a hostile expedition led by Credence (Ezra Miller looking for all the world like a young version of Septimus Snape) to steal the little dragon, the involvement of the Muggle baker, Kowalski (Dan Fogler), and assorted allies, female and male, including Dumbledore's brother, (Richard Coyle).

The climax takes place at quite an exotic setting, the last Castle, staircase and halls in Bhutan.

This film is often dark, even visually dark, and a film for adults rather than younger audiences (although those younger audiences for the Harry Potter films are now older, ready for Fantastic Beasts).

J.K.Rowling and the producers have promised two further episodes.

ADIEU MONSIEUR HAFFMAN/FAREWELL MR HAFFMAN

France, 2021, 115 minutes, Colour.

Daniel Auteuil, Gilles Lellouche, Sarah Girardeau, Nicholas Kinski.

Directed by Fred Cavaye.



For audiences looking for a strong and substantial French drama, impressive performances, interesting and challenging plot, Farewell Mr Haffman would be a recommended choice.

There have been a number of films about the Jews in Paris in 1941, especially The Round-up, the decree for all the Jews to be assembled in the stadium, then transported to the concentration camps. However, that is not the subject of this film. Rather, this is a background story. We see the Jews being rounded up in a particular neighbourhood in Paris but we stay in the neighbourhood, focusing on the local jeweller, Joseph Haffman, his work and reputation, the threat of the roundup,

his being able to have his wife and three children smuggled out of Paris to the Free Zone, his intending to follow.

In fact, the film, based on a theatre piece, remains mainly in the shop, the customer area as well as the basement. There are some scenes in the street, visits to a pawnbroker, an outing to a restaurant. But, the audience stays with the shop over the period of 14 months, 1941-1942.

While the film recreates the atmosphere of fear for the Jews in Paris, audience attention is focused on Joseph Haffman's assistant, François Mercier. An arrangement is made that Mercier will buy the shop with money supplied by Joseph and that at the end of the war, everything will be restored. In the meantime, Mercier will have a living and the possibility of developing his ambitions concerning his jewellery skills. Mercier has a young wife, rather morose and diffident, the couple wanting to have a child. They move in and the plan seems to begin well.

However, the drama is in Joseph Haffman not being able to escape, returning to the shop, eventually having to stay in the basement for the duration. There is the continued drama of the German presence, especially when a young officer comes to the store and is impressed by the jewellery (that made by Joseph) and becomes a constant customer, bringing his young French companions. The complication is that the officer wants better jewellery and so Joseph has to work on the pieces down in the basement. Of course, we anticipate that there will be difficulties and, probably, an unmasking.

And, within this basic plotline, there is an unexpected development, François unable to impregnate his wife, and a proposal that Joseph do that for him, his wife initially very reluctant, and François trying to persuade Joseph by promising to post letters from him, something which is very dangerous.

As the young wife, Blanche, tries to come to terms with this proposal, and as Joseph is faced with it, the audience is left to ponder the personal issues, the moral issues, the war conditions.

The screenplay is persuasively written. The central performances are excellent, the always reliable veteran Danielle Auteuil as Joseph, an interesting performance from Gilles Lellouche, usually far more boisterous in his roles but here having to be subdued as François. Audiences may not respond well initially to Blanche, Sarah Girardeau, somewhat nondescript as a character but, in fact, the screenplay shows quite a strong development in her in the war crises.

A very satisfying, intelligent and interesting French drama.

FATHER STU

US, 2022, 124 minutes, Colour.

Mark Wahlberg, Mel Gibson, Teresa Ruiz, Malcolm McDowell, Jacki Weaver, Cody Fern, Aaron Moten, Carlos Leal.
Directed by Rosalind Ross.



To get the best value out of watching this film, this reviewer suggests that, if you do not know anything about Father Stu, don't look up anything, go to see the film and share the complexities of Stuart Long's life and life choices. You will have mixed emotions along the way. But the ending will be credible. For many audiences, quite moving.

The film is based on a true story and, as with many of these films, there are photos and video clips of the central character during the final credits. And, given the story, it is helpful to see these clips and listen to Father Stu's comments. The project has been a labour of love for Mark Wahlberg who invested his money in the production. He has also invested a great deal of personal energy in his performance, probably the most demanding so far in his career. And he is persuasive in the very different stages of Father Stu's life. And, in support, he has Mel Gibson (always a strong screen presence) playing Bill Long, a negligent father, a drinker, labourer, putting down his son. And there is Jacki Weaver, full of emotions, as Stu's mother. Both parents are grieving the death of their other son, aged six.

And here is another caution, especially those who have high sensitivities concerning what classification authorities name "coarse language". There is a lot. However, it reflects so much of everyday language these days, and is typical of the characters and their emotions (a priest in confession actually giving the advice to Stu to clean up his language). But, sharing Stu's journey means accepting that this is his life, that this has been his language.

The early part of the film, as expected, especially for audiences who know that he began life as a boxer, focuses on his career, its coming to an end, his not having any particular post-boxing aims in his life, deciding to go from his home in Montana to Los Angeles for an acting career. It doesn't work out that way at all. Although he does get to appear in a commercial for a mop, to his mother's dismay. He works in a shop selling meat, tries to charm customers, clashes with people, gets into fights... Not much prospect here.

Stu comes from a family with no religious background, something of an antipathy towards a cruel God with the death of their son. And Stu doesn't seem to have many clues about religion but is attracted

by Carmen (Teresa Ruiz) who teaches children in the local parish. Stu sets his eye on her – and who would believe the road that this attraction would open up?

And, for a religious audience, this is where the film comes into its own. And, it is interesting that a non-religious audience, who can readily identify with Stu and his life and stances, will be challenged about the mystery of God, the mystery of suffering, especially in the Catholic context.

There is an interesting characters, Monsignor Kelly, played by Malcolm McDowell (50 years after A Clockwork Orange!) And Aaron Moten as Ham, a sympathetic friend and seminarian, and Cody Fern as a rather prim and pious seminarian (but the screenplay does not neglect some resolution for his character). Audiences will find the seminary sequences more than interesting.

So, Mark Wahlberg, has to play boxer, cheeky young roustabout, attempted charmer, aggressive fighter, experiencing a deadly motorbike accident, having to discover more meanings in his life than he would ever have dreamed.

This is a film that many audiences will have to be patient with, maybe not the kind of film they are expecting, but sharing the life of this “ordinary” man and his struggle to find fulfilment in his life.

HERE TODAY

US, 2021, 117 minutes, Colour.

Billy Crystal, Tiffany Haddish, Penn Badgley, Matthew Broussard, Andrew Duran. Laura Benanti, Audrey Hsieh.

Directed by Billy Crystal.



As soon as we register the title, we realise its implications: gone tomorrow.

In recent times there have been quite a number of films about dementia, from the US, *Queen Bees*, from Australia, *Ruby's Choice*, both focusing on older women, mothers, the issue of going into care.

Audiences have always liked Billy Crystal, welcoming him on the big screen, on the television screen. He has a great sense of humour, comic timing, and communicates a genial affability (and six Emmys amongst many other awards). This is very much his film, adapting a short story, *The Prize*, by Alan Zweibel. Billy Crystal was 72 while he made this film, playing older, playing a man who is realising oncoming dementia.

He is Charlie Burnz, prolific comedy writer (and an entertaining cameo sequence acclaiming him with guest stars, Director Barry Levinson, Sharon Stone and Kevin Kline). He keeps going to work, is admired by his colleagues, has an eye and ear for successful jokes and their staging for television. He plays tennis with his architect son. Has fallen out with his daughter but her daughter is devoted to him, wanting him to come to her Bat Mitzvah.

From the outset, as Charlie walks to work, checking stop signs and lights and knowing that he has to turn left to get to the office, we realise that he is having memory lapses. Sometimes he can't remember people's names. And at home, he has the names of his family under their photos. He goes to a strong and sympathetic doctor played by Anna Devereaux Smith.

But, the unexpected aspect of the story is that he goes to a lunch with someone who has made a bid for this lunch at a celebrity auction. But, it is not the winner of the ticket but his former girlfriend, Emma played by Tiffany Haddish.

And, so, we have a meeting of the older generation of comics and the new generation, a meeting between Jewish and African-American humour (and music and culture). As might be expected from those who have seen Tiffany Haddish's films and television, she comes on heavily (perhaps an understatement). But, at the lunch she suffers from an allergy, Charlie having to take her to hospital, pay her bills which she insists she repay. Which means then that she turns up sometimes unexpectedly to pay her debts! She sings with a band, especially in the subway stations but is offered a bus tour around America.

What follows is a wonderful friendship, step-by-step, understandings and misunderstandings, Charlie appreciating Emma – and the important dramatic aspect that Tiffany Haddish gradually tones down her performance, her dominating presence, becoming a strong friend, a supporting friend, an understanding friend. Although, she does take over the Bat Mitzvah, singing exuberantly but able then to gather all the guests around her, joyfully singing and dancing.

We learn about Charlie's background, a great number of pleasing flashbacks, emotional, to his meeting his wife Carrie, there really courtship, her giving birth at a Museum near the dinosaurs (and their calling their son Rex!), the bonding over the years, her sad death.

We see Charley mentoring an ambitious young writer who is hesitant. We see Charley bonding with his granddaughter. We see him having a very personal conversations with Emma, her encouraging him to write about his life and his family. And she goes with him to visit the doctor and understand his prospects.

There is some drama, especially the fears of his children – but, a fine scene where Emma is able to communicate to them what is happening.

Some bloggers have complained that this is too sentimental! One wonders whether they want Charlie to die alone and abandoned for their dramatic satisfaction. But, no, the screenplay offers a possibility of understanding reconciliation, forgiveness, bonding and love, and the support of true friendship. Who can complain about this! And thanks to Billy Crystal for bringing this to the screen.

A HERO

Iran, 2021, 126 minutes, Colour.

Amir Jadidi, Mohsen Talabandeh, Sahar Goldust.

Directed by Asghar Farhadi.



With Oscar-winning writer-director, Asghar Farhadi's previous films, A Separation is not quite a separation, The Past is not exactly the past, and The Salesman has echoes of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. So, what are we to expect from this very plain title, A Hero or a hero?

The ordinary audience is invited into the atmosphere of an Iranian city, not exactly the atmosphere that media headline suggests, not the world of nuclear developments and sanctions. Rather, this is a small story, a local story of a man on leave from prison, sentenced because of his not paying back a debt to his partner.

The director is very shrewd in his casting. Rahim, played by Amir Jadidi, has a genial smile almost all the time, quiet, seemingly sensible, hard done by in his setting up his company and its failing, enduring prison. Whether he is a hero or not, everyone, the audience included, is charmed by his smile.

Well, not quite everyone. His partner is a bitter man, hostile to Rahim, trying to put him down at every turn, especially to the police and investigators. His antagonism also antagonises the audience.

However, Rahim is estranged from his wife, his sister and her sympathetic builder husband, are looking after his little son who has a speech impediment. Rahim has met a woman in prison and hopes to marry her – though her family are quite hostile to him.

The heroism concerns a purse with gold coins in it, Rahim reporting this to the bank, a distraught woman coming to claim the coins, the prison authorities proud of him and his generous gesture, and the media having more than a field day. He has become not a hero, but the hero, everybody recognising him.

But, as has been said with Fahradi and his films, A Hero is straightforward title is far more ambiguous, and this is the case here, following up the investigation of the finding of the coins, his collaboration with the woman from prison, the effect on his antagonist, the effect on his family, especially his son. The hero becomes more desperate.

While this is an Iranian story, it is also universal story – and has universal interest and appeal. Co-winner of the Cannes Jury Prize, 2021. And a strong reminder of how good Iranian films have been for many decades.

Ithaka



Peter Malone MSC 30 April 2022

A documentary about the campaign to free Julian Assange by his father, as well as his lawyer, now wife, Stella Moris. Assange remains a remand prisoner at the UK's maximum security Belmarsh Prison as he appeals an extradition order to the US.



ITHAKA. Australia, 2022. Featuring John Shipton, Stella Moris, Julian Sands. Directed by Ben Lawrence. 111 minutes. Rated M (coarse language)

The focus of this documentary is Julian Assange. At the time of the release of the film, WikiLeaks is 16 years old, and is still responsible for the release of numerous documents unmasking abuses in all areas, including political and financial.

While Assange does appear in this film, it is mainly through photographs or by his voice on the phone (and the audience realising that the phone provides an outlet for communication and some sanity during harsh imprisonment, including 23 hours a day lockdown in cells).

However, the focus of attention in the film is also on Assange's father, John Shipton, who separated from his wife before Julian was born. After 20 years, he came back into Julian's life and in more recent years has been a constant champion, crusader for his son's release. He is at the centre of this film which was produced by his son, Gabriel, who also appears. At the time of the film-making, Shipton was 76. So, in this sense, the film is a portrait of Shipton.

Also prominent in the film is Stella Moris, part of Assange's legal team, then his fiancée and lover, mother of two children, and wife from March 2022. She is a strong personality, committed to Julian Assange, his cause and liberty. (Jennifer Robinson, who has been spokesperson for Assange over many years, is glimpsed only once, going into the court.)

The action of the film takes place after Assange's years in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. He has been confined to Belmarsh prison, infamous for its harsh treatment. Visits were limited. However, over the decade there have been constant world-wide protests in his favour. The case in point for his internment, and refusal of bail, is the American government's demand that he be extradited to the US on charges of treason because of the release of so much documentation through WikiLeaks (and the famous sequence of the attack on civilians in Iraq is included at the beginning of this film).

Many people around the world have had difficulty in responding to Julian Assange and his personality, perhaps applauding his revelation of the secrets, but finding his personality difficult – and the information here that he is on the spectrum, Asperges, and long prone to depression and suicidal drives. In fact, his mental condition is a central part of the defence against his being extradited to the United States where the harsh imprisonment in Colorado would aggravate his depression and drive him towards suicide. This prevailed at the London hearing in 2021 after 19 days of hearings, but the American government appealed.

The point is made that the investigator into the leaks came to the conclusion in 2013 that no lives were lost because of the leaks.

In the background is Chelsea Manning, the information given to WikiLeaks by her and revealed. There is also an interview with Edward Snowden.

Throughout the film, there is a great deal of emphasis on the freedom of the press, whether Assange should be considered a journalist, and the consequences of his conviction on freedom to report by other journalists.

This is a film supports Assange, and, at the end, the listing of some governments, some officials, organisations around the world who are asking for his release.

But, in the meantime, this is an interesting and often engaging portrait of John Shipton, calm, edgy, giving myriad interviews, devoting his life to his son's cause. The film is also a sympathetic and understanding portrait of S Morris and her personal and legal commitment.

There have been many documentaries and news coverage of Assange –Robert Connolly directed *The Underground*, a 2012 television feature about Assange and his upbringing. And in 2013 there was *The Fifth Estate*, with Benedict Cumberbatch as Assange.

THE LOST CITY

US, 2022, 112 minutes, Colour.

Sandra Bullock, Channing Tatum, Daniel Radcliffe, Brad Pitt, Da'Vine Joy Randolph, Oscar Nunez.

Directed by Aaron Nee, Andrew Nee.



Lost cities in jungle settings. We have been there before! But, we generally enjoy going there again!!

Once upon a time, in fact 1981, there was an academic adventurer searching out relics of antiquity. Everyone knows Indiana Jones. Then, second upon a time, in fact 1984 and 1986, a couple set out on similar kinds of adventures, *Romancing the Stone* (and *Jewel of the Nile*). These 1980s adventure fantasies reinforced this genre.

And so, in 2022, former antiquity academic, with a talent for understanding hieroglyphics, who worked with her now deceased husband and still grieving him, who was persuaded to write a series of pot-boiling action adventures, Loretta Sage (Sandra Bullock) is about to set out on a promotions tour of her latest book. The audience is teased by a visualisation of the climax of the book, hero and heroine in a snakepit and then that particular ending deleted!

Loretta is reclusive, has no wish to go on tour but is sometimes literally pushed into action by her agent, Beth, a cheery performance from Da' Vine Joy Randolph. And the model, who had appeared on the cover of every book, also turns up for the audience, female, there only interest in the launch is seeing Dash, the dashing hero, blonde wig, shirt off... Actually, his real name is Alan, played by Channing Tatum. effectively sending up his screen image with more than a touch of dumb, dumber, dumbest.

A lot could go wrong – and does. First of all, Loretta, dressed in a scarlet/crimson jumpsuit is abducted by a ruthless billionaire, played by Daniel Radcliffe, the script taking advantage of his short stature and making him something of a pipsqueak villain. He has bought an island where he thinks there is hidden treasure and has some hieroglyphics which he wants Loretta to translate. Then, suddenly they are on the island, Loretta bound to a chair, translating, protesting.

Dash, Alan, wants to rescue Loretta and teams with Beth, contacting an expert, Jack Trainer who instantly locates Loretta flying to the rescue, and one of the most action packed attacks on the billionaire and his thugs. It is all enhanced by the fact that Jack Trainer is played by Brad Pitt – looking as if he is auditioning for a new phase of Indiana Jones films. (And he is not in the film as much as we would like – but, a warning that audiences should not rush out at the first glimmer of final credits because he does reappear!).

From then on, there is rescue, pursuit, dangers, cars over cliffs, shootings, escape by river, climbing mountains... And all the time, some banter between Loretta who is certainly not a cheerful self and poor old Alan whom the screenplay seems to be typecasting as the dumb assistant and then, as he complains, the damsel in distress. Oh, and Beth is on her way for the rescue, encountering a cargo pilot who really fancies her and he does turn up to help in the climax.

Daniel Radcliffe becomes more and more dastardly, recapturing Loretta, Alan in pursuit on a motorbike, by boat to some vast caves, exploration of the caves, a volcano threatening to explode...

A reviewer mentioned the word “cartoonish”. And that seems to be fairly accurate, it is very much a kind of live-action cartoon, action stretching the imagination, some silly situations, some dramatic situations, some comic bantering dialogue.

Which is probably what the audience for The Lost City were buying their tickets for.

MEMORIA

Colombia/Thailand, 2021, 136 minutes, Colour.

Tilda Swinton, Elkin Diaz, Jeanne Balibar, Juan Pablo Urrego, Agnes Brekke, Constanza Gutierrez.
Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul.



This is a film with a strong reputation, the work of celebrated Thai director, Apichatpong Weerasethakul. In the leading actor is one popular with a wide range of popular and specialist directors, Tilda Swinton. Both are out of home territory, the action taking place in Colombia, in the city of Medellin and this surrounding mountainous countryside.

Part of the reputation is the film winning the jury prize in Cannes 2021, but having a very limited release, in the US, travelling across the country, cinema by cinema.

The director, who writes his own screenplays, has an imaginative approach to his work, not so much interested in narrative, but rather introducing characters, staying with them, images. There is limited dialogue in this film and no musical score background, though some music introduced as part of the events. The director also uses the techniques of fixed camera, some sequences here lasting many minutes. There are two or three sequences where the camera moves, one a tracking shot of Tilda Swinton walking along a path in city footpath past shops. The camera work demands attention, concentration, contemplation.

We are introduced to Jessica Holland, Tilda Swinton, woken by a loud bang. We see her going to a musicologist (and something of a 10 minute tutorial on sound engineering) to recreate the sound. But, then she cannot find him. We do see her with her sister in hospital, a meal with her and her family, various visits to lecture rooms, libraries, research... And, going out into the countryside, visiting a huge tunnel excavation, and time spent with an older fish-scaler. That is some narrative for a 136 minute film, but narrative is not important. What is important is Jessica, her experiences, in reality, in her mind, her encounters, questions about life, communication. And this is key for the last half-hour of the film – which does not prepare us for a shock moment and the emergence of a green monster-like alien spaceship.

This reviewer relies on a marvellous lecture by Australia's eminent poet, A.D.Hope, at the Australian National University English course in 1960. The lecture was on the poet, T.S.Elliott, and his understanding of what he called the "object of correlative". The poem, according to Elliott, was not to be analysed in terms of narrative or cause and effect consequences. Rather, images were evocative, eliciting emotions and understanding, for the reader to respond, relish, retain this new awareness. And this seems to be an effective way of responding to Memory, each image, each experience, the occasion for this poetic, object of correlative response.

To clarify: [T.S. Eliot](#) used this phrase to describe "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion" that the poet feels and hopes to evoke in the reader. There must be a positive connection between the emotion the poet is trying to express and the object, image, or situation in the poem that helps to convey that emotion to the reader. (Change poet to director, poem to film sequence.)

So, not a review, but a response.

NOBODY HAS TO KNOW

Belgium/UK, 2021, 99 minutes, Colour.

Michelle Fairley, Bouli Lanners, Andrew Still, Julian Glover, Cal McAninch, Clovis Cornillac, Paul Amed.

Directed by Bouli Lanners,



Here is a film about middle age characters, a film for a middle-aged audience, for an older audience. It is something of a quiet human drama.

And, it has an unusual production background, a coproduction between Belgium and Scotland. The central character, Phil, is Belgian but has left his homeland and migrated to the island of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. He is employed by a local farmer, hard manual work out in the fields, mending fences, digging trenches. And then he suffers a stroke.

The film was written and directed by its star, the Belgian veteran actor, Bouli Lanners. He has written a sensitive screenplay and portrays Phil as quiet and introverted, running away from his former life, having to deal with the strokes and, particularly, for the most part of the film, amnesia.

The island setting is rather bleak, generally overcast – though some sunshine towards the end of the film. The locations are ordinary homes, the fields, church – the churchgoing scenes are made with the collaboration of the Free Church of Scotland, quite explicit in the sermons about the role of Jesus and his suffering. Interesting to see churchgoing accepted by the community and the community participating, listening attentively to the preacher, vigorously singing the hymns.

When Phil has his stroke (not his first), Millie, daughter of the local landowner, Angus (played by veteran Julian Glover in his mid 80s), offers to look after Phil. He doesn't remember her from the

past. And, she begins to devote herself to him, continuing, she says, her love for him before the stroke.

While this is the emotional centre of this story, the effect on Millie, and the transforming effect on Phil, there are family complications, and is rather disapproving of Phil, but especially Milly's young nephew, Brian, a decent enough young man, churchgoing like his family, out in the fields with Phil, his biggest tangle being his love for a dog and caring for it while its owners are away, and his becoming too attached to it.

There are many happy moments, many sad moments, especially with Millie having to come to terms with Phil and his recovery of his memory, a beautiful scene when they are at a funeral, as a distance, coming to sit together, Frank talk and declarations.

This is certainly not an adrenaline-pumping drama. Rather, it is something of a quiet slice of life, anchored in the Scottish island atmosphere, relationships, emotional and tangled.

OPERATION MINCEMEAT

UK, 2021, 126 minutes, Colour.

Colin Firth, Matthew McFadyen, Kelly MacDonald, Penelope Wilton, Jason Isaacs, Johnny Flynn, Simon Russell Beale, Alex Jennings, Mark Gattis, Hattie Morahan.

Directed by John Madden.



The title sounds like one of those comedy satires from the 1950s or 1960s starring Peter Sellers and Terry Thomas. In fact, it was the code name for one of the most significant deception operations perpetrated by the British on the Nazis during World War II. It was a plan to deceive Germany into thinking that the Allied invasion would be through Greece rather than Sicily. 1943. If you remember

the story or if this intrigues you, then you will want to see this 21st-century interpretation, Operation Mincemeat. (The original title of the operation was Operation Trojan Horse, quickly dismissed as too obvious, a dead giveaway, so to speak.)

Back in the day (more precisely, 1956), there was a film version of this story with the intriguing title, The Man Who Never Was. This reviewer still remembers it with great warmth, an exciting story, well told, stirring, and of all people, Clifton Webb as Ewen Montague, the organiser of the operation and the author of a book on which this film was based. It was filled with a whole range of British character supporting actors, an intriguing entertainment.

65 years later, based on a book by Ben McIntyre, with a lot more information available about the operation and the identity of “the man who never was”, this is a tribute to the ingenuity of the team and the details of the operation.

This time it is Colin Firth who is Ewen Montague. It is a typical Britishly Firth-ish performance. Legal counsel, seconded to the war effort, working undercover, his Jewish wife and children sent for safety to the US. His brother, Ivor, was under official suspicion for Soviet contacts – but who later was an eminent filmmaker and film critic (played here by Mark Gattis). Also in the team is Charles Cholmondeley (Matthew McFadyen), the epitome of stitched up British emotions, stiff upper lip, devoted to his task, awkward in relationships. Also in the team is Penelope Wilton as a veteran secretary and assistant and Kelly MacDonald, who works in the office but becomes integral in creating the story of the man who never was.

The plan was to create a fictional narrative, find a body of a man who had drowned, do detailed research which would enable him to be placed in a container, eventually on a submarine, put into the sea off the coast of Spain, and carrying all kinds of documents which would mislead Nazi readers. The plan does not always go according to plan after the body is washed up in Spain, involving the local police commander, the British ambassador, a Spanish associate, hopes that a prominent but easily-taken-in German spy or get the material to Berlin. And, even then, there is a twist as the deceit is finally successful.

There are some subplots involving relationships in the team, some jealousies, spying and reporting to the wary and sceptical Admiral Godfrey (Jason Isaacs). And Simon Russell Beale does a cameo as Winston Churchill.

This is one of those World War II occasions when, secretly, Britannia did rule the waves.

PETITE MAMAN

France, 2021, 73 minutes, Colour.
Josephine Sanz, Gabrielle Sanz, Nina Meurisse, Stephane Vaurupenne.

Directed by Celine Sciamma.



go

French writer-director, Celine Sciamma, as often focused on children in her films, *Tomboy*, *Girlhood*. She is also noted for dramas developing relationships between women, *Portrait of a Woman on Fire*.

This drama, something of a miniature running at 72 minutes, is about relationships and about childhood. It is a blend of realism and imagination and fantasy.

We are introduced to the little girl, Nelly, doing crosswords with residents of an aged care home where her grandmother has just died. She and her parents go to the grandmother's home to pack things have everything in order. Her mother is quite distraught, loving nearly but, as her father informs her in the morning, her upset mother has gone. She has talked to her mother about her mother's childhood days, in the same place, and building a hut in the woods. She is rather upset that her father does not remember any of these stories.

When Nelly goes out into the woods, she sees a young girl about her age, gathering branches to build a treehouse. Nelly helps, visits the young girl, Marion (her mother's name) at her house and meets her mother. The two become friends, visits, meals, helping with the hut, bringing flowers and branches. Nelly tells her father about her friend.

But, with the names, with the hut, with the exchanges in the conversations, we realise that Marion is Nelly's mother, back in that time, and nearly as communicating with her, understanding her, loving her.

So, while the film is something of an intimate look at a little girl and her relationship with her parents, takes on something of a childish mystical touch, the audience watching the two children (played by twins, Josephine and Gabriel Sanz, senses the effect on each character, the daughter understanding her mother, the mother and her love for her daughter.

Hence the title, the little mother, Marion and her mothering Nelly.

THE UNBEARABLE WEIGHT OF MASSIVE TALENT

US, 2022, 107 minutes, Colour.

Nicolas Cage, Pedro Pascal, Tiffany Haddish, Sharon Horgan, Paco Leon, Neil Patrick Harris, Lily Mo Sheen, Alessandra Mastronardi, Demi Moore, David Gordon Green, Ike Baronholtz.

Directed by Thomas Gormican.



The immediate thought while watching this tantalisingly titled film is what a good sport Nicolas Cage must be. To have agreed to the enterprise in the first place. To have participated so enthusiastically in the second place. And to display his life and career on screen with such acting and dramatic zest.

Obviously, this is a bit of cinema fun for everyone concerned and for the audience, especially those who have had an admiration for Nicolas Cage despite the multitude (to say the least) of action quickies that he has been making in recent years. This one, of course, sends those up. (And, to respect Cage, he did win the Best Actor Oscar in 1995 for his alcoholic in Leaving Las Vegas.)

In a sense, this is a film that has its cake and eats it! The cake is presenting a Nicolas Cage action show. Eating it is in the fact that it is all tongue in cheek, a sendup, we can have all the action while mocking it.

Then, there is Cage's alter ego, a digitised version of his younger self who, in the final credits, is named as Nicolas Kim Coppola (which is Cage's actual name). The alter ego is the younger swaggering self, making demands, taunting, but needing to be KO'd.

The cowriter-director, Tom Gormican, was daring to ask Cage to participate in this self-mocking enterprise. The popularity of Being John Malkovich meant that Being Nicolas Cage was taken for a title. And, there was a precedent, Adaptation, starring Cage and written and directed by Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufmann, who made Being John Malkovich!

As the film opens, Cage is pleading for a role that will get him a comeback, arguing with his agent, Neil Patrick Harris. Meanwhile, he struggles with his ex-wife (British comedian, Sharon Horgan), tries to relate to his 16-year-old daughter, making her watch the 1919 German expressionist film, Cabinet of Dr Caligari. She is rebellious.

But, he accepts an invitation to go to Mallorca, hosted by Javi (Pedro Pascal) in a lavish coastal villa. Javi has written a screenplay he wants Cage to star in. However, in the background, then in the foreground, drug dealing criminals, surveillance by the CIA in the form of Tiffany Haddish and Ike Barinholtz. Cage is seconded by them to spy on Javi, to find the location of a politician's kidnapped daughter, and deal with his ex-wife and daughter being abducted to the Villa.

So, the rest of the film is action adventure, espionage, surveillance, assassins, dealers, fights, shootouts, car chases, the lot.

Which means then that we have a typical Nicolas Cage movie underlying and overlaying an entertaining movie spoof – with all kinds of enjoyable references to many of Cage's other films.

As this film is being released, Cage already has for action shows in post-production, including playing Dracula in Renfield.

WHEEL OF FORTUNE AND FANTASY

Japan, 2021, 121 minutes, Colour.

Directed by [Ryûsuke Hamaguchi](#).



[Ryûsuke Hamaguchi](#), the Japanese writer-director, may not be a name on every filmgoer's lips. However, his Oscar-winning *Drive My Car* has been seen and acclaimed all around the world. *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy* is the film he made before *Drive My Car*. And it won the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2021. Many audiences will be eager to see this film.

And it runs for 121 minutes, an hour shorter than *Drive My Car*! And, it contains three episodes, three short stories, not linked by characters but rather by themes of relationships.

In many ways, the director's style of filmmaking is straightforward, unfussy, direct, a great deal of dialogue, talking heads, the drama communicated by the performances, the strength and content of the dialogue, judicious editing so that audience interest is maintained in each of the characters.

But, audiences may be wondering during the first story, *Magic* (or *Something Less Assuring*), as it opens with a young model and a photo shoot but then spends 10 minutes with the model and her friend sitting in a taxi talking, close-up. They are discussing relationships, attraction, sharing and communication. The next part of the film is also conversation, this time the young woman going to visit her ex-boyfriend who is the man who has charmed her friend from the taxi. The model is wilful, petulant, not afraid to hurt people. He, on the other hand, is enigmatic, hostile, yet still in love. And then the woman turns up at the apartment, having left her laptop behind! Discussions and explanations.

There is an unexpected twist at the end of this story as the two women sit in a restaurant talking about the experience – and the man walks past and sees them. The director uses the device to test just where our sympathies lie and what might happen.

The second story is called *The Open Door*, the University Professor very cautious about propriety in his office, first encountering a young man who is literally on his knees begging for some help for his career and being refused. Later, the young married woman who is in relationship with the young man, but admires the professor and his new novel, arrives to get his autograph, read some of his text, rather laboriously explicit at times, and to trap him. Once again, there is quite a dismaying twist and the characters seen five years later. Deviousness in relationships.

The third story is somewhat plainer, *Once Again*, two women passing on escalators, realising that they recognise each other, then catching up, one accompanying the other to her home, talking. We learn something of the life of each of them, the occasion of a 20 year high school reunion. But, complications and the conversation arise – leading to some role-plays, highlighting how illuminating a role-play can be for both participants. The experience has been significant for the two women and the final scene makes us wonder where it will go.

Audiences will respond differently to each of the stories but each has its own merit, the quality of the dialogue, the interest in relationships, twists of fate.

Three short stories written by the director– who then went on to enlarge several short stories into a three hour-long story in Drive My Car.

FILM REVIEWS JUNE 2022

A CHIARA

ADAM PROJECT, The

ALL THE OLD KNIVES

BENEDICTION

BOB'S BURGERS MOVIE, The

DOWNTON ABBEY: A NEW ERA

DR STRANGE IN THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS

FATHER STU

FIREBIRD

HATCHING

HOW TO PLEASE A WOMAN

INTERCEPTOR

JULIA

LAST SEEN ALIVE

LITTLE TORNADOES

LUNANA, A YAK IN THE CLASSROOM

MAIGRET

MOTHER MOUNTAIN

TO OLIVIA

TOP GUN MAVERICK

TOUS S'EST BIEN PASSE/ EVERYTHING WENT FINE

2022 GERMAN FILM FESTIVAL

FORGER, The

CAGED BIRDS

GERMAN LESSON, The

HOUSE, The

LAST EXECUTION, The

MONTE VERITA

PATH, The

A CHIARA/ TO CHIARA

Italy, 2021, 121 minutes, Colour.

Swamy Rotolo and members of the Rotolo family, Fumo family.

Directed by Jonas Carpignano



This is a rather different Mafia story, a focus on a family in southern Italy, and especially on Chiara, 15 years of age. The setting is very local, a small town away from Reggio Calabria, the ordinariness of life in the town, family and friends, connections, school, and birthday celebrations.

There are some family resemblances in the cast – and we discover that most of the performers are amateurs but the central characters all belong to the same family.

A word of warning for prospective audiences: just as when there are flashing lights, strobe lights, a warning is often given that this may have an effect on the audience watching. For almost 20 years, especially with some small-budget local horror films, the use of the handheld camera has become very popular. Here it is used throughout the film, the audience very conscious of the handheld effect of the camera, the continued movement, jerky and unpredictable, from one character to another, a great number of close-ups, extreme close-ups. It may mean that an audience can be more focused on the technique of the handheld camera,, physically and psychologically, than becoming involved in the narrative and the characters.

One blogger noted, aptly: *I didn't like the handheld shaky cam cinematography. I thought it was inappropriate for the story and made it difficult to get perspective on the settings.*

The audience is immersed, involved because of the handheld camera, in the life of the family in a small town, quiet father, household-busy mother, sister turning 18, and a little girl, boisterous and irritating, but a strongly bonded family. Then about 20 minutes is given over to the sister, Giulia, and her 18th birthday party. We live the life of the family – a little puzzled because the father, reticent, draws back from toasting his daughter.

Then a huge transition. The father's car is blown up in the street. He disappears. And the drama for Chiara is that she learns about what has happened, his Mafia background, from social media. Her mother is not forthcoming. Giulia does not wish to explain.

There are further repercussions for Chiara, social services coming to visit the school and her family, the proposal that she be fostered out because of the trouble – and, it emerges, that many of the relatives and connections in the town are also involved.

There is a sequence which brings home to the audience some of the detail, small details, of Mafia activity. Chiara seeks out her father, finds him hiding in an underground bunker, equipped with considerable surveillance techniques. But, he invites her to accompany him on the process of making the contacts, collecting the drugs, the payments for the drugs, the processing of the drugs, the new packaging, the distribution and repackaging, the profits.

One thought is that after this explanation to Chiara and her experience, and her previous devotion to her father, it might mean that Chiara herself will take on the family tradition of Mafia and drug dealing.

The ending is upbeat, more positive, a different celebration as Chiara turns 18.

THE ADAM PROJECT



US, 2022, 104 minutes, Colour.

Ryan Reynolds, Walker Scobell, Mark Ruffalo, Jennifer Garner, Zoe Saldana, Catherine Keener.
Directed by Shawn Levy.

Here is science-fiction, science-fantasy for a younger audience. In fact, it is also an entertainment for adults. And this is the intention of the filmmakers, having two characters, two Addams – or, rather, the younger Adam and older Adam. The older Adam is played genially by Ryan Reynolds in his familiar affable style. The younger Adam is played by Walker Scobell.

The film is set in 2050 as well as in 2022. The screenplay depends on the effect of time travel, taking it for granted, but making some audiences wonder whether it is at all possible (and, if it is, what are the possibilities!). However, all is not happy in 2050.

With the young Adam the focus of the story, we see him at school, asthmatic, bullied, in a difficult relationship with his mother (Jennifer Garner) because of the recent death of his scientist father (Mark Ruffalo). In the meantime, we see the older Adam stealing and playing in order to find his wife who has been lost in time travel, Laura (Zoe Saldana). However, he crash lands in 2022 instead of his intended target of 2018.

Audiences with a technological bent will enjoy the picture of laboratories, technology, scientific advances, algorithms and speculation as well as vehicles from the future.

And, for the action, there is an arch-villain, Maya Sorian, played by Catherine Keener who has an arch-villain enforcer, Christophe's. The audience sees her place in the developments in 2018, the death of the scientist, her taking over control of algorithms in time travel, becoming a dictator in the future.

There are complicated enjoyable twists, Laura appearing, her relationship with her husband, the issue of meeting him again in 2018, her helping him in his quest. There is also the introduction of Louis and seeing his work and his wanting to destroy the time travel algorithm. And, in the future, there are some spectacular chases and fights in the laboratories.

Direction is by Shaun Leavy, best known for many comedies including the remakes of Cheaper by the Dozen, at the Pink Panther, the Night at the Museum series.

ALL THE OLD KNIVES

US, 2022, 101 minutes, Colour.

Chris Pine, Tandiwe Newton, Laurence Fishburne, Jonathan Pryce, Ahd, David Dawson.

Directed by Janus Metz.



The title has the echoes of the murder mystery title, Knives Out. However, while there is mystery, this is a 21st-century espionage story on, written by American thriller writer, Olen Steinhauer (who has also written television spy series, including Berlin Station). Practically every commentator notes the connection with John le Carre (as has been done here!).

To say that the plot is complicated is something of an understatement. Much of the action takes place in Vienna, 2012, the hijacking of a plane and the demands of the hijackers, the members of the unit in Vienna and the discussions about how to handle the situation. The officer in charge is played, with some solemn dignity, by Laurence Fishburne. Also on the staff is the researcher, Celia (Tandiwe Newton) who is having an affair with the seemingly happy-go-lucky staffer, freelancing type, Henry (Chris Pine) who had previously been stationed in Moscow, connected with negotiations about terrorists and Chechnya. Also present is the older agent, William, played by Jonathan Pryce.

There is urgency with the discussions, orders coming from DC, an undercover agent on the plane who is discovered – leading to suspicions that one of the staff has been in contact. Each of the members at the Vienna station is suspect.

Moving to 2020, the identity of the mole has never been revealed. However, one of the terrorists has given information and the head of the Vienna station, still Laurence Fishburne, commissioning Henry for a particular mission, to track down Celia in California, to confront her, and the challenge about naming the mole. He also pays a visit to William in London who telephoned Celia with a warning.

The plot becomes more complicated as Henry meets with Celia, remembers the past, Celia now happily married with children, but seeming to lead Henry on.

Which is where any review of All the Old Knives must stop, because the plot becomes more convoluted, twists, and not quite the ending we might have been led to believe!

BENEDICTION

UK, 2021, 137 minutes, Colour.

Jack Lowdon, Peter Capaldi, Simon Russell Beale, Jeremy Irvine, Ben Daniels, Kate Phillips, Julian Sands, Geraldine James, Gemma Jones, Anton Lesser, Calam Lynch, Lia Williams, Kellie Shirley, Suzanne Bertish, Joanna Bacon, Richard Goulding, Matthew Tennyson.

Directed by Terence Davies.



This review begins with a suggestion, not ordinarily made – that audiences intending to watch Benediction do some research, reading about the poet, Siegfried Sassoon, to fill in a lot of the background of the film. Ordinary advice would be the opposite but this film is a kind of impressionistic portrait of the poet, visual, verbal with his poetry, pieces of narrative, but with flashbacks and flashforwards. The narrative is not the most important part, rather the portrait, the war experience and memories, the poetry are key.

Older audiences would be more at home in the early part of the 20th century, the experience of World War I, emergence from war, the roaring 20s, especially in London society. There are references that audiences, 100 years later, may not be familiar with: Stravinsky and the Rite of Spring, sequences with the poet Edith Sitwell, references to the music of George Gershwin, the composer and performer, Ivor Novello (and a performance of his amusing ditty, “and her mother came to...”, dancing to Tea for Two, the Charleston, Oscar Wilde and his friend Robbie Ross...

This is very much a Terence Davies film, written and directed by him. He has been making some excellent films for almost 40 years but they are not to everyone’s taste. Too quiet for some, too precise for others, particularly delicate sensibility in presenting characters, their complexities, their struggles.

And, yet, there is quite some ferocity in this film. Siegfried Sassoon served for over two years in World War II, in the trenches, eventually taking a stance against what he thought was the mismanagement of the war, sent to an institution (fictionalised interestingly in Pat Barker’s novel and the film version, *Regeneration*). What the director does is to insert a considerable amount of war footage, soldiers, assemblies, parades, the fierce fighting, wounds and the mass dead lying in the mud. These are the images that haunt Sassoon throughout his life and permeate his poetry.

Jack Lowden gives a very strong performance, nuanced, as the young Sassoon. And Peter Capaldi appears as the older Sassoon (flashbacks/flashforwards). There is a strong array of British character actors in support, some of them more visibly older after decades in films, Geraldine James, Ben Daniels, Gemma Jones...

And, pervading the film, is Terence Davies’ gay sensibility, prominent in a number of his films, especially the autobiographical *The Long Day Closes*. The era in *Benediction* is immediate post-Oscar Wilde, Sassoon quoting ‘the love that does not speak its name’ to his doctor (Ben Daniels). And Sassoon’s prominent friend is Robbie Ross (Simon Russell Beale), Oscar Wilde’s friend and Catholic confidant. Sassoon came out, in the secretive way of the period, a number of affairs, including with Novello, Jeremy Irvine (and Terence Davies obviously dislikes, almost creating a caricature and accusing him of arrogance and pettiness).

Eventually, Siegfried Sassoon married and had a son. There is a wedding sequence and the support of his gay friends. But, into the future, there is tension with his wife, separation, the devotion of his son, even to his increasingly cranky and crabby father. This is illustrated by a visit from his former lover, Stephen, who 30 years later wants to apologise but is ousted from the house.

In a final sequence, in the 60s, Sassoon nearing 80, his son takes him to the West End to a performance of Leslie Bricusse-Anthony Newley’s *Stop the World, I Want to Get Off* (featuring the amusing ‘typically English’ song. We see Sassoon walk home, sitting on a park bench, remembering, transforming into his younger self, in uniform, sitting, sad, eventually weeping. (And one wonders

whether Davies himself regrets that he did not live in the England of a century ago where he seems more at home.)

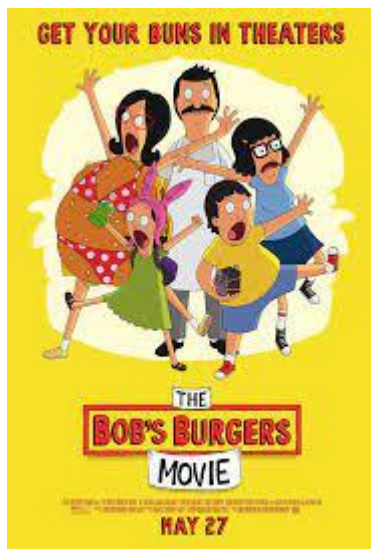
At the end of this experience, we might be wondering why the film could be called Benediction – ultimately, Sassoon did not seem to be blessed (although, for Catholic interest, he became a Catholic in his older age, instructed by the translator of the Bible into English, Msgr Ronald Knox). Perhaps it is a benediction to have lived, to have survived, and to be able to remember as well as regret.

THE BOB'S BURGERS MOVIE

US, 2022, 104 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: H.Jon Benjamin, John Roberts, Dan Mintz, Eugene Mirman, Kristen Schaal, David Wain, Zach Galifianakis, Kevin Kline, Larry Murphy, Gary Cole.

Directed by Loren Bouchard, Bernard Derriman.



Bob's Burgers has been a very popular television show, 11 seasons to date beginning in 2011 and with the feature film in 2022. However, there are vast audiences who know nothing of the television series. This film is for the fans but with the hope that others might be attracted to follow Bob and his family.

Any animated television show with families will obviously be associated with The Simpsons, although this series comes 20 years after The Simpsons. There are also other television series like Family Guy, King of the Hill, Beavis and Butthead... The fans consider Bob and his family superior.

The film takes up Bob, rather laconic in his way, making the burgers and their shop, working with his wife Linda. They have three children, Tina the oldest, pondering questions of attractions two boys. There is also the son, and the little daughter, Louise, who covers her head with a wig. The characters remain much the same age throughout the series – and the voice of the wife and of Tina are by male actors.

There are some well-known actors in some of the roles, Zach Galifianakis, Kevin Kline, Jenny Slate.

After meeting the members of the family, we find a crisis where they owe money to the bank which is unwilling to extend the repayment of the loan. Suddenly, there is a huge sinkhole outside the front of their store. Discussions involve their landlord, his shady brother who has been in jail, and their lawyer. In the meantime, a character is murdered – with a little memorial set up on the pier. Bob and family then decide to go to the pier to sell burgers to try to repay the debt.

There are all kinds of zany happenings, imaginative use of all the attractions on the pier as well as going into basements, the old entertainments at the pier which had been built over.

There are suspicions as to who the murderers are especially with the two older brothers planning to escape to Cuba. However, the true murder is revealed. But, it is the three children who spend their time following the clues, getting into all kinds of scrapes and adventures, building up to a confrontation.

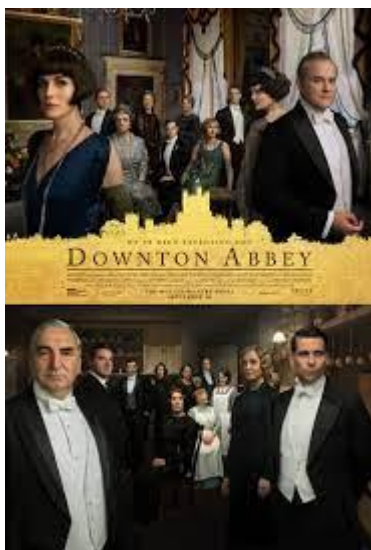
So, the material is familiar enough, an opportunity to see the family in action (and, surprisingly, their bursting into song now and again), a murder mystery and its solution, some action and comedy (and some more adult comedy lines).

DOWNTON ABBEY, A NEW ERA

UK, 2022, 127 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Bonneville, Elizabeth McGovern, Maggie Smith, Michelle Dockery, Tuppence Middleton, Hugh Dancy, Dominic West, Laura Haddock, Alan Leech, Imelda Staunton, Jim Carter, Joanne Froggatt, Phyllis Logan, Penelope Wilton, Robert James-Collier, Brendan Coyle,

Directed by Simon Curtis.



Whether you were a constant visitor to Downton Abbey during its television years, or whether you discovered the Crawleys in the first cinema adaptation in 2019, or whether you come across this film

unaware of its history (no, that's impossible), this visit to Downton Abbey, with an extended trip to the south of France, will be satisfying easy entertainment.

It is 1928. The talkies are taking over from silent films. And, believe it or not, this is very important for all those at Downton Abbey, upstairs and downstairs, because, for financial reasons, despite ideological fastidiousness, Robert Crawley has agreed that a film can be shot in his venerable home (to help pay for repairs on leaking attic roofs).

But, there is another story running alongside the moviemaking, Violet inheriting a château in the south of France, a dispute about ownership and a will, an excursion by the British to the Riviera. The two stories are intercut.

For those who have been following the history of the family for so long, everybody is present, has a significant role in the drama, with Maggie Smith once again doing her famous putdowns, though shocking everyone by actually saying she is sorry about an issue, something, she acknowledges, that nobody would have been expecting from her. And the key characters of the family, played by Hugh Bonneville, Elizabeth McGovern, Michelle Dockery, all have their moments of drama.

Life downstairs is much the same, friendly, gossipy, loyal service, Mr Carson presiding (Jim Carter) and the moderating influence of his wife (Phyllis Logan). But they are very much caught up in the moviemaking.

Actually, the moviemaking sequences are quite interesting, a silent film just as talkies were coming in and the company having to adjust their film to talking. Dominic West is suave as the leading man, Hugh Dancy as the film's director. Laura Haddock has an interesting role as a blonde bombshell whose diction and delivery will eliminate her from the talkies. (Bring Julian Fellowes must have been watching *Singin' in the Rain*.) And, while she is a figure of fun, snobbery and disdain, she does get the opportunity to come much more human.

Lady Mary becomes unexpectedly involved in the filmmaking, lending her voice for dubbing, giving advice for production – and introducing Mr Mosley, the local schoolteacher, who discovers his talent for writing plays for the cinema. And the scenes for the dubbing and how the sound engineering worked in those early years is interesting and entertaining.

So, the expected material, the expected cast, costumes and decor, and a lovely reversal of roles when the extras for the film go on strike and the downstairs staff have to take their place, all dressed up and exceedingly stylish.

Unless you are a fixated ideological socialist who cannot bear the British traditions of upstairs-downstairs, here are two hours of escapism, easy enjoyment, light entertainment.

DR STRANGE IN THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS

US, 2022, 126 minutes, Colour.

Benedict Cumberbatch, Elizabeth Olsen, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Benedict Wong, Xosha Roquemore, Rachel McAdams, Michael Stuhlbarg, Sheila Atim, Patrick Stewart, John Krasinski, Hayley Atwell, Bruce Campbell, Charlize Theron, Anson Mount.

Directed by Sam Raimi.



Box-office -wise, we seem to find ourselves in a world of contemporary multiverses - especially if we are devotees of Spiderman (with Dr Strange himself turning up there, wherever there is). But, more recently, the Daniels were able to sum it up: Everything Everywhere All at Once. Which is, more or less, what is happening in this on-screen multi-verse of madness (with many versions of Dr Strange!).

There is so much whirl of colour, sound, special effects in the opening credit – but that is a foretaste of things to come, only more so!

Which led to the continual question: what is the collective noun for a multi-verse of universes? The mood of the film initially suggested,

a Pot – Puri of universes?

So, here is Benedict Cumberbatch back again after some Spiderman and Avengers adventures, mindful of his initial role as a surgeon, now conscious of his status as magician, his super powers. Benedict Wong is back. Chiwetel Ejiofor is back – and the touch of the villain. And, maybe not quite as romantically as we had hoped, Rachel McAdams is back as Christine. But Tilda Swinton is not back.

The other looming presence here is Elizabeth Olsen, having had great television success as Wanda Maximoff. She mentions that in moving from universe to universe (and there is one spectacular sequence where we are whisked through a multitude of universes, including an animated one), that the characters are Dream walking.

A Dreamwalking of universes?

Central to this adventure is the young woman, America Chavez, wandering the universes, encountering Dr Strange, needing to be rescued, but also needing to affirm her own superpowers, especially in confrontations with Wanda (who in one universe/or more is a power hungry witch but who in another is a devoted mother).

A kaleidoscope of universes?

This is reinforced by Dr Strange confronted by a panel of powers that be, presided over by, of all characters, Patrick Stewart's Dr Xavier, with other superheroes led by John Krasinski signalling The Fantastic Four and Hayley Atwell coming from Captain America.

There is no point in asking the reader if they are still with me! Cause and effect have no place much in this scenario, little place for logic – one thing happens, then another, then another, and even more...

So, what are we watching, why are we watching it, fascinated by Benedict Cumberbatch? Intrigued as to what might happen next because it is so unpredictable?

An unpredictability of universes?

FIREBIRD

Estonia/UK, 2021, 107 minutes, Colour.

Tom Prior, Oleg Zagorodnii, Diana Pozharskaya, Jake Henderson, Nicholas Woodeson, Margus Prangel.

Directed by Peeter Rebane.



We do not see many films from Estonia. And we do not see many stories from Estonia during the Soviet occupation, especially at an Army base in 1977. But, this is the initial setting. And it is the story of a young soldier, Sir gay (British actor, Tom Prior, who co-wrote the film and acted as a producer) is nearing the end of his service, hounded by an exaggerated shouting Sergeant Major in the barracks, doing driving jobs, bonding with his friends, a keen photographer, especially as Luisa who works in the Major's office.

But, of set purpose, this is a film about homosexual relationships. At the end of the film, there is information about legislation in Soviet times, about positive changes in 1993 but, a warning, that more restrictive legislation and suspicions were introduced in Putin's Russia in 2013. There is a website information for audience response to the issues.

In many ways, audiences nowadays are familiar with this story and so have to travel back to try to appreciate what relationships and secrecy were like in those times.

Tom Prior is convincing as Sergey, developing his character over the six years of the film's narrative, naive soldier, acknowledging his sexual orientation, the relationship with the pilot, Roman, his move to Moscow to audition to be an actor, his success, the impact of Roman's marriage to Luisa – and then four years passing, Roman and Luisa with their young son, Sergey successful in Moscow – and the build up then to an emotional climax.

In the synopsis, Roman is described as "charismatic". That seems to be something of an overstatement. In fact, the actor, Ukrainian Oleg Zagorodnii. With the touch of the iconically handsome, is, nevertheless, somewhat stolid in his screen presence and performance. On the other hand, Luisa is a much more open personality.

There are three significant military characters in the background, Sergey has a young friend at the base who is hostile to the relationship, a Major, sinister in that Soviet official way, suspicious of Roman, confronting him, asking Sergey to spy on him. He also appears at the wedding, confronting the couple. And, at the very end of the credits when most of the audience have acted on their compulsion to exit instantly, there is a momentary glimpse of the Major, a reminder of continuing sinister surveillance. But, there is also a sympathetic official, played by Nicholas Woodeson, familiar

from many British films, who reveals that he has always known what was happening but did not let that influence his decision-making.

There are two sequences from Stravinsky's, *Firebird*, symbolic – but, perhaps, not for those unfamiliar with the ballet.

A contribution to dramatising the realities and emotions of same-sex relationships and a reminder of past (and present) repressions.

THE GOOD BOSS

Spain, 2021, 120 minutes, Colour.

Javier Bardem, Manolo Solo, Almudena Amor, Oscar de la Fuente, Sonia Almarcha, Tarik Rmili Celso Bugallo.

Directed by Fernando Leon de Aranoa.



Of course, and by the end of this drama, with its touches of ironic humour, we are in a better position to comment on what a good boss can be like.

The setting for this Spanish story is a factory which produces all kinds of scales, the CEO, Blanco, inheriting the company from his father. The factory is expecting a visit from a local committee because it is a strong candidate for an industry award. Another for a large wall already studied with plaques.

The success of the film and its enticing its audience is the presence and performance of Javier bardem. He has an inherent charm. But, even with the charm, we see that he is a strong and determined character, and touches of ruthlessness which will emerge. We see him speaking to his employees, genial, urging them on. But, there are many many problems.

The film uses the structure of highlighting life in the factory over eight days, signalling each day of the week. The factory seems to be running well, production, contracts, international deals, trucking

equipment... However, the smooth running is marred by the response of an accountant who has been fired. He brings his young children to the factory to protest his firing, denouncing Blanco. And, then, he sets up a protest camp on public ground opposite the entry to the factory, placards, bullhorn, denunciations every time Blanco arrives or leaves. The protester is not entirely a sympathetic character, even when he brings his children to demonstrate with him, but his situation does raise issues of justice, hiring and firing and social consequences.

As the week progresses, more problems to be solved. A long-time associate is becoming paranoid about his wife's behaviour, even getting Blanco to sit vigil in the car outside the house where his wife has been tracked. And the repercussions on the mental health of the employee, the consequences for bad decisions and disruptions are also highlighted. But, Blanco seems to take these episodes in his stride, listening, talking, attempting to smooth things over.

In fact, there are quite a few episodes like this throughout the film, an old employee has a son who mixes with a group of anti-Arab youths, bashing the locals, Blanco getting amount of police custody. And there is a new young intern who reminds us that Blanco also has a roving eye, despite his home life and happy marriage, a flirtation, and more, that eventually will blow up in his face.

By the end of the week, the seemingly good boss with his charm is revealed as more determined and ruthless than we might initially have thought, but always able to maintain the charm.

So, a drama about the workplace, social justice, capitalism, consequences, along with the personal dramas that haunt the good boss.

HATCHING

Finland, the 2022, 86 minutes, Colour.

Siiri Solalinna, Sophia Heikkilä, Jani Volanen, Reino Nordin, Oica Olila, Ida Maattenen.

Directed by Hanna Bergholm.



A domestic horror film from Finland. However, in the opening moments, the director is trying to lure us into believing that the family - ultra-glamorous mother, bespectacled and silent father, bespectacled and silent little son, charming gymnast daughter, is the most wonderful and ideal family. Mother has a

blog, continually filming, getting everyone to smile beyond belief, posting her film clips, talking to her seemingly adoring followers...

Then a little blackbird gets into the house, disrupting the photo-shoot, and smashing around, vases and glasses, even the chandelier. Everybody tries to catch the bird, the gymnast, Tinje, eventually throwing a blanket over the bird to save it. But, her mother wants it – and breaks its neck. Tranquility shattered!

However, this is Tinje's story, Siiri Silalinna in her only films so far. We see her at gymnastic training, urged on by her photographing mother (and when we see her leg scar we realise that she is compensating). Tinje is good but certainly needs more work. However, more complications arise, guiding us into this story, wondering about the hatching.

That is soon explained because Tinje discovers the bird is not dead, and she puts it out of its misery – but then finds its egg which she secretly takes into the house, warming it in her bedroom, watching it grow, gigantic until a monstrous caricature of a bird emerges. Tinje is somewhat bewildered, fosters the bird until it kills the neighbour's dog. Tinje is even more bewildered by her mother, carrying on an affair with the workman who comes to fix the chandelier, the mother with sweet words, gifts, favouritism, grooming her daughter to accept the relationship, even taking her to the house, where Tinje discovers that the workman, a widower, has a little baby which her mother absolutely dotes on.

Meanwhile, the mysterious bird whom Tinje names after a song she and her mother sing, Alii, begins to transform into the alter ego of Tinje. There are all kinds of drastic repercussions as we might expect.

This is a successful horror film for those who prefer their horror more moderate, more suggested than gory and graphic (although, of course, there are some moments).

Running under an hour and a half, much of the action in sunlight, a fine performance from the young girl who may have career ahead of her in films, an increasingly loathsome glamorous mother, and, of course, an ambiguous ending which leads us to make of it what we will.

HOW TO PLEASE A WOMAN

Australia, 2022, 107 minutes, Colour.

Sally Phillips, Alexander England, Erik Thomson, Ryan Johnson, Tasman Walton, Myles Pollard, Cameron Daddo, Josh Thomson.

Directed by Renée Webster.



An Australian social comedy about sex (for the male characters) and about sex and sexuality (for the female characters). It has appealed to a female audience, not so much to male audiences (as the main male characters are presented more or less as gigolo dills).

Obviously, all human behaviour can be the subject of comedy, and has been, often very effectively. However, the test is always in the “how” the material is presented.

On the one hand, the serious side, this is a film about women feeling repressed, discarded in middle age, wanting to assert themselves, discover or rediscover their sexuality. On the other hand, the less serious side, this is a film about sex seen as casual, recreational, with the hope that this kind of sexuality will be fulfilling for the women.

Which means then that this is a mixture of the serious and the crass. And, female reviewers and bloggers have been very much in favour.

The plot concerns an English migrant to Australia, Sally Phillips, living in Fremantle, whose busy lawyer husband, Cameron Daddo, has lost interest in sex. And she loses her job, trying to help out a company of removalists which her company has decided to close down. In the meantime, her girlfriends have sent a stripper for her birthday who offers to do everything, anything she wants. She wants him to clean the house. So, this is the comic idea of the men in the removalist company becoming escorts, initially quite inept, needing instruction from the women, but their becoming a professional company – soon overloaded with bookings. The boss of the company, played by Erik Thomson, is a sympathetic older character who raises some questions about the whole enterprise and its repercussions on the personal and sexual level.

So, plenty of scenes with the middle-aged women, enjoying swimming, locker room chatter, experiences with the men, the lawyer husband discovering the truth, the police coming to investigate...

The full meaning of the title is limited to its word “please” for the woman sexually and the men just to move on to the next customer.

THE INNOCENTS

Norway, 2021, 117 minutes, Colour.

Rakel Lenora Flottum, Alva Brynsmo Ramstad, Sam Ashraf, Mina Yasmin Bremseth Asheim, Ellen Dorrit Peterson, Kudrow Yusuf.

Directed by Eskil Vogt.



The Innocents was also the title of the 1961 film version of Henry James novel, The Turn of the Screw. This was a story about children, initial innocence, a growing sense of malice and malevolence. The various film versions of The Turn of the Screw set something of a precedent for this unexpected story from Norway.

The film was directed and written by Eskil Vogt, who has made an impact over the years, with his drama film are, and his writing the screenplay for the Oscar-nominated The Worst Person in the World. He has written the screenplay from the point of view of children, but also from the point of view of adults/parents, observing behaviour, puzzled by behaviour, and sometimes victim of such behaviour.

The film opens with the family moving to a country town, a modern apartment complex with woods surrounding as well as a lake in the centre of the community. It is summer, definitely not Norwegian early darkness of autumn and winter. Interesting that a story about malevolence should take place mainly in bright sunlight.

There are two daughters in the family, Ida (Rakel Lenora Flottum) aged nine, the centre of the story. But she has an older sister, Anna (Alva Brynsmo Ramstad) who is explained as autistic, an extreme autism, her inability to focus on the reality around her, attracted and bemused erratically, uttering sounds, irritating Ida who almost immediately is seeg pinching her sister hard. So, intimations of hostility, violence and we are wondering where it will lead.

Where it leads, in fact, is Ida going out to play, encountering a young boy, Ben (Sam Ashraf). They click immediately, Ben showing Ida his capacity for a power to move objects by mind control. But, the seeming innocence is soon changed and the tone of the film sent on a particular direction when the two children high in the apartment block and drop a cat down a stairwell. The audience is somewhat relieved when the cat does not die – but, within moments, Ben in a moment of harshness stomps on the cat's head. In fact, Ida is repulsed.

There is a further complication when Ida puts glass in her sister's shoe but the audience sees another young girl, Aisha, putting on shoes with glass, her feet cut but her not feeling it. What the film then develops is a relationship between Aisha and the autistic sister, a kind of telepathy, Ben and Ida testing it out with games, and her becoming more communicative, the four children finding some peace in play.

However, it is not to last. This is a film about power, loss of innocence, darkness in children, malice in behaviour, malevolence in attitude. And, Ben embodies it to the full, exercising dark powers which lead to malicious deaths.

Which places a challenge to Ida, to save Anna, to ward off Ben, even to eliminate him, destroy him.

As expected, in the sunlight, the film comes to a conclusion, Ida making decisions, consequences for Anna, and a fate for Ben on a playground swing in that bright sunlight.

And great deal to reflect on in terms of good and evil, intentions of good, intentions of evil, malice, and all in the context of young children.

INTERCEPTOR

Australia/US, 2022, 99 minutes, Colour.

Elsa Pataky, Luke Bracey, Aaron Glenane, Mayen Mehta, Paul Caesar, Marcus Johnson, Zoe Carides, Chris Hemsworth.

Directed by Matthew Reilly.



In the old days, single hero exploits could be referred to as a “one-man band”. Interceptor is definitely the era of the “one-woman band”. This show is definitely for the action fans, the kinds of exploits we have seen in the past (as with Jean Claude van Damme, Steven Seagal as one-man bands), lots of action, lots of threats, lots of suspense, lots of last-minute – or, rather here, last-second – saving of the planet.

The film was written and directed by Matthew Reilly, a novelist for many years, this his first feature film, collaborating with popular writer Stuart Beattie. It is an Australian-US production, filmed in Sydney.

And the one-woman band, JJ, without any benefit of super-powers, is played by Elsa Pataky, who has appeared in the number of films but has tended to stay home bringing up her children with her husband, the executive producer of this film – and, comically playing a kind of Los Angeles “dude” selling televisions, Chris Hemsworth.

Matthew Reilly has created a dire world situation, and disillusioned with the US gangs stealing 16 nuclear weapons in Russia. They are mainly disaffected Americans, led by a seemingly charming psychopath played by Luke Bracey. His team have infiltrated one of the two interceptor-of-nuclear-missiles centres in Alaska. The other is a floating centre in the Pacific. JJ has experienced some sexual harassment by a top general in the past and he has been believed rather than she. Topical material and she has suffered for it. And she has been appointed to this floating centre. Almost immediately, it is attacked by the subversive team. So, suspense level raised early, how will she manage, presumption being that she will manage, with so much stacked against her.

Elsa Pataky as warrior is not strong on charm and personality. She is military, businesslike, loyal. And she has the backing of her father seen in a number of flashbacks (Colin Friel looking the worse for age and wear). She does have a loyal corporal technician, a married man with children, rather timid, but he does prove himself in courage. Otherwise, she has to rely on the moral support of the television link to the White House, to the President (Zoe Carides) and to the generals and their encouragement.

And, that is what happens. But, there is the psychological confrontation between the leader and JJ, each trying to use their wits but having to fall back on physical conflict. And there are quite a number of fights!

The tension is very strong because one of the missiles, aimed at an American city, with the rebels taking charge of television channels and threatening the US public, needs to be stopped by JJ who has been captured, hands bound behind her back. She has about six minutes of leeway. But, with that crisis out of the way, the other 15 nuclear missiles have been launched. How can JJ possibly press the interceptor button when she has been in the ocean, climbing steep rungs, having to leap from supporting bars to another, the clock ticking down?

It is no spoiler to say that she succeeds. That's what we expect. The action adventure is in the audience identifying with JJ and the challenges and suspense in her trying to save the world.

JULIA

US, 2021, 8X 45, Colour.

Sarah Lancashire, David Hyde Pierce, Bebe Neuwirth, Fran Kranz, Fiona Glasscott, Brittany Bradford, Robert Joy, Michael Malvesti, Adriane Lennox, Judith Light, Jefferson Mays, Lindsay Broad, Isabella Rossellini, Tosin Morohunfola.

Directed by Jenne LaMarque, Melanie Mayron, Charles McDougall, Erica Dunton, Scott Ellis, Charles McDougall.



Julia Child is immortal in the history of American cooking. She was the subject of an interesting documentary, *Julia*, 2021, going back over her history, but with a lot of talking heads and interviews, the retrospect about her life and career and influence. There was a 2009 Nora Ephron film, *Julie and Julia*, with Meryl Streep as Julia Child and Amy Adams as Julie Powell, an admirer of Julia Child who set out to reproduce all of Julia Child's recipes. So, she is part of cinema consciousness as well.

This miniseries presupposes audience knowledge of Julia Child, her background (and her crusty father, played by James Cromwell, appearing in a visit to his daughter, antipathetic to her husband and his painting career). It also presupposes some knowledge of Paul Child and his diplomatic work,

his postings, World War II, he and his wife's presence in France. And it presupposes audience awareness that this is where Julia developed her knowledge and practice of French cooking.

The focus of this miniseries is one year, the early 1960s, echoes of the Kennedy era, quotes from Kennedy, early years of television, the development of Public Television, especially in Boston. While Julia and Paul Child had settled in Boston, Julia was somewhat restless, having published a book on Mastering French Cooking, cowritten by her French friend, Siska (played by Isabella Rossellini), she found herself being interviewed by a supercilious professor on a book program, she deciding to cook an omelette on set. She was intrigued by this, letters coming into the station in favour of her, her deciding then to propose a program to the station, not explaining this to her husband, relying on her close friend, Avis (Bebe Newirth), financing the pilot herself.

There is a lot of time spent on the set, establishing it, building it, Paul interfering with the design, Julia and her demands, the reaction of the producers, especially Russ (Fran Kranz) hostile, thinking cooking below the dignity of public television. However, there is a support from African-American producer, Alice (Brittany Bradford). Each episode of the television series has a title from a particular menu to be cooked.

Audiences who enjoy cooking programs will be delighted by the procedures, learning how a half hour program is planned, rehearsed, performed. There is quite some human drama, supercilious attitudes on the male producers, the support of the station head, played by Robert Joy, Julia's connection with Judith, her editor with Alfred Knopf publishing, the background story of Judith Jones, her skills in editing, especially with John Updike (and a sequence where he is persuaded to be interviewed on public television), and a portrait of the very demanding Blanche Knopf played effectively by Judith Light. With Paul Child and Blanche Knopf, and Siska in France, there is a lot of spurning of television and reliance on books.

There are some plot stories with Alice, her critical mother, her meeting a young man. Stories of Russ, his wife's pregnancy, their both learning to cook. And the role of Judith and her work as her book editor.

Sarah Lancashire is excellent as Judith Child, voice, presence, intonations, the final bon appetit. David Hyde Pierce has an excellent role as her husband. There are many episodes in Boston, a visit to San Francisco an indication, as in real life, that Julia Child supported more liberal stances, her visit to a gay club and singing with the Drag Queen. But there is also a visit to a celebration in New York, a gala in her honour, but the chance meeting with feminist Betty Friedan who criticises her program as being anti-feminist. Which puts a doubt into Julia's mind as to whether she should continue with her program, eventually being persuaded, after confessing her deceptions to Paul about getting the program going, to sign a contract for a new season.

LAST SEEN ALIVE

US, 2022, 95 minutes, Colour.

Gerard Butler, Jaimie Alexander, Russell Hornsby.

Directed by Brian Goodman.



Few doubts about the title! Direct and straightforward. And, this action show, is very direct but has had few twists in the solution to the plot, an abduction plot, reminiscent of the Dutch film and its American remake of the past, *The Vanishing*.

And it is a film for Gerard Butler fans. Scots actor Gerard Butler (who should have been Jack Reacher in the films of Lee Child's novels!) Has made a name for himself in the US with a series of action films for almost 20 years. This is one of the lesser ones, a kind of interlude before he takes on the next... *Has Fallen*.

There is a tantalising opening, a police officer threatening a rather scraggy redneck who tells the police that someone might be dead. And then the screenplay goes into flashback's, highlighting the time and the passing hours.

We find an ordinary enough situation, a husband and wife with difficulties (Will and Lisa, played by Gerard Butler and Jaimie Alexander), some prickling is, she having had an affair, he devoted to her, she wanting some time and space for herself and he to drop her off at her parents home.

They stop at a service station to fill up. She goes into the store to buy something, is glimpsed and then disappears. The server behind the counter (and should keep the change is a tip) denies any knowledge of her. Will searches, it more more frantic, drives around looking for her, calls the police who eventually come, though, in the meantime, he has gone to her parents home upsetting them.

When the officer comes (Russell Hornsby), he takes notes, and, although we know different, is at first suspicious of Will himself, learning of the wife's affair and its effect on will, learning that Will is wealthy and is a real estate developer.

Then comes some leads and suspicions, the man at the counter in store, the handyman who works for the parents. Which leads to quite a twist, especially as Will becomes more and more frustrated and anxious, not following police recommendations, looking as if he had been watching Gerard Butler action films too much... And then we find ourselves in the woods, a method for laboratory, all kinds of odd boards working there.

Some shooting, some bare knuckle fighting, some police intervention, some reconciliation.

Perhaps a bit of the abduction formula – but that is what many audiences enjoy.

LITTLE TORNADOES

Australia, 2021, 90 minutes, Colour.

Mark Leonard Winters, Sylvia Colloca, Robert Menzies, Fabio Motta, Minnie Lischkiwicz, Freddy Lischkiwicz, Julie McGregor.

Directed by Aaron Wilson.



This is a surprising, quiet, almost intimate, visit to a small town in 1971, Tocumwal on the River Murray.

We are invited to identify with the central character, Leo (played by the very versatile Mark Leonard Winters). This is not easy. He seems very introverted, laconic. His wife has suddenly left him to go to family in Melbourne. He is left with his young daughter, Maudie, and son, Jack. He works in a local machinery factory, seems efficient at his job. He has one friend, an Italian, Tony, but Leo keeps to himself, taking the children to school, reading to them, not very friendly with the workers, going to the pub only once later in the film to play pool with Tony.

The radio plays often during the film and so we pick up on the time, Billy McMahon as Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, Leader of the Opposition, the Vietnam war.

For those who remember the time, this is a welcome return, small but a reminder of how people were, the politics of the time, the war – but not expecting the changes that would come at the end of 1972. For those audiences for whom this period is before their time, an opportunity to look at quiet Australians.

The film has a voice-over narrative, in Italian and English, from Maria, explaining how she came from Italy to Australia, memories of her dead husband, Lorenzo, migrant hopes but finding herself in the country town. Tony suggests to Leo, who is not a good cook at all, that Maria might be able to look after the children in the afternoons and prepare the evening meal. Since the children are waiting for a phone call from their mother, they are initially hostile to Maria. But, in no time, she overcomes the barriers, has some cooking and enjoying her meals (Maria played by Silvia Colloca, who has her own television cooking program on SBS, so not too much of a stretch!), Leo very grateful. But reticent.

The other strand is Leo's memories of his mother's collapsing and dying, the visits to her grave – and Maria thinking was neglected and tidying and cleaning the headstone. And there is his father, Robert Menzies, a brief flashback to a Japanese attack in World War II, some moments with his driving the tractor and a paddock, plane flying over and his memories again of the war. Leo visits, takes the children, but if Leo is reticent, his father is taciturn and uncommunicative. There is a telling moment indicating changes in Australia when Leo leaves a container with one of Maria's meals, his father refusing to eat it – but, hungry, eventually doing so, turning up to turn take the children to school.

There are some momentary groups glimpses of little tornadoes, but they are symbolic of the little tornadoes the blow up in our lives. (Interestingly, novelist and commentator Christos Tsiolkos collaborated with the writer-director, Aaron Wilson, for the screenplay).

LUNANA: A YAK IN THE CLASSROOM

Bhutan, 2019, 110 minutes, Colour.

Sherab Dorji, Ugyen Norbu Lhendup, Kelden Lhamo Gurung, Pem Sam.

Directed by Pawo Choyning Dorji.



Have we seen any films from Bhutan? In the late 90s, there was the popular film, *The Cup* (with Australian connections). In fact, *Lunana* has some Australian connections and some scenes in Sydney. (A recommendation for those interested, Wikipedia has an entry with a list of all films from Bhutan in alphabetical order with the year of release.)

Yes, at about the 60th minute of the running time, a big black yak, Norbu by name, does take his place in the classroom and settles there, out of the cold, supply of grass to eat, supplying dung for necessary fires, serving as a reality check as well as a symbol. But, more of that later.

Very few of us are likely to visit Bhutan, high mountains, surrounded by China and India. So, apart from National Geographic documentaries, here is a wonderful opportunity – to see something of life in the capital city, Thimpu, a lot of the modern 21st-century there, social media, music and clubs, the influence of the West, Hollywood references... But, some traditional elderly people. The film also offers the opportunity to visit the countryside, the majestic mountain scenery, forests and rivers, and one of the most remote villages and schools in the world, up in the mountains, Lunana.

The way we visit is by accompanying, but being invited to identify with, the central character, a young man, a government teacher on a five-year contract, Ugyen, whose dream is to migrate to Australia, already setting in process his Visa application. He does not want to be a teacher. He wants to be a singer.

Ugyen is played by Sherab Dorji, his only films so far (as is the case with the rest of the cast, many of whom come from the high mountains). Ugyen is, reluctantly, appointed to Lunana, an eight day journey from the capital. We share his reluctant journey, at first by bus, but then on foot, camping out, the touch of the primitive, but his listening to his music app. He is met by two yak-herders, courteous as are all the members of the village, respecting the ancient religious traditions, Ugyen bypassing them, a secular 21st-century type.

Everything in the village is primitive, outside toilet (though the yak-herders have brought him toilet paper rather than local leaves), a difficult fire, needing yak dung cakes to get it started, and practically nothing in the rather open classroom. He is instantly ready to go back!

But, we have already realised that this is one of those films that reminds us that 21st-century Western-style, self-preoccupied hedonism, lack of awareness of those less privileged, needs to be challenged. There is more to life, we need to respond to those who are needy. The children are nice, attentive – and Ugyen postpones his departure. The locals make a blackboard and chalk for him, lessons improve, there is singing, his friend from the capital sends a box full of resources and a new ball to play with, time passes, the children respond, the local chief is supportive, there is a charming young woman, a singer, who suggests that Ugyen may have been a yak in a previous life, a creature who is very dependent – and it is she who urges the yak in the classroom.

Winter comes. Will he leave? Will he stay? What about Australia? All these questions are answered – but, a touch of the harmless spoiler, he finds himself in Sydney singing at a club, the self-preoccupied somewhat hedonistic young people do not listen to him. He sings instead one of his own songs... And that is where the screenplay leaves us, to make up our own minds about what we Think Is decisions about his future will be.

A humanistic film with social conscience, with charm, and with challenge to altruism.

MAIGRET

France, 2022, 90 minutes, Colour.

Gerard Depardieu, Jade Lebeste, Melanie Bernier, Aurore Clement, Herve Pierre, Clara Antoons, Pierre Moure, Anne Loiret, Andre Wilms.

Directed by Patrice Leconte.



All crime fiction fans know who Maigret is. He is up there with Poirot and Miss Marple. But, especially beloved in France, the creation of author Georges Simenon.

Over the decades, there have been film versions of the Maigret crime dramas as well as television series. (The most recent Maigret was, surprisingly, a very subdued and serious Rowan Atkinson.) This time it is another French icon, Gerard Depardieu, even larger than he used to be, an imposing screen presence, in his early 70s. His Maigret seems to be rather world-weary, life-weary, having experienced many disappointments, but committed to his work as police and as a detective.

In many ways, this is a straightforward mystery, investigation, running for just 90 minutes. But, it is well written, opening with the victim, her unexplained behaviour, conflict, her mysterious death, murder. And the screenplay invites us to enter by identifying with Maigret, looking at evidence, noting clues, following them through, step-by-step, nothing spectacular here. Rather, the painstaking and patient detailed work.

The design and colour palette of the film indicate the setting, the drab immediate post-war Paris.

We are introduced to a number of characters, a young woman who resembles the murdered woman, Maigret eventually discovering where she lived, her roommate, leading to a visit to a film set, to a social engagement party, to the young businessman and his protective mother.

It is not that Maigret does it all on his own. He does have two very loyal assistants who do a lot of the footwork and interrogations. There are also discussions with the coroner, with judges.

But, Maigret does live in a rather dark world, at times literally dark or at least shadows. He has a supportive wife who understands him and is patient. He has had to give up his smoking and pipe for health's sake. And, we realise that his preoccupation with solving the death of the young girl brings him back to the death of his own daughter, aged 20, and visits to her grave.

There is some excitement at the end when Maigret creates a set-up which is meant to startle the killers and get a confession – which it does.

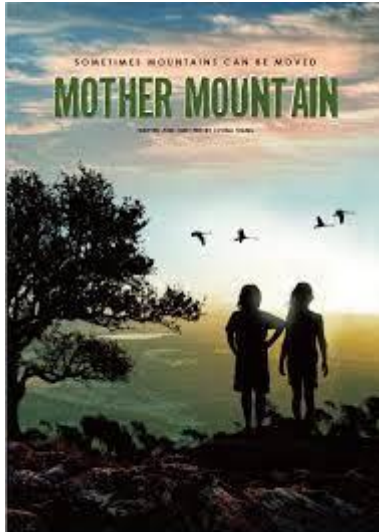
So, if you are a fan of Maigret, Gerard Depardieu offers an interesting interpretation. If you like detective work, then this is quietly thorough. And if you like French cinema, the director, Patrice Leconte, is a long time veteran director (The Hairdresser's Husband, Moensieur Hire, Ridicule).

MOTHER MOUNTAIN

Australia, 2021, 105 minutes, Colour.

Emilie Cocquerel, Fayssal Bazzi, Anne-Louisa Lambert, Willow Spears, Jarrah Finnerman, Pip Miller, Damion Hunter, Angeline Penrith.

Directed by Celina Stang.



The mountain of the title is found on the South coast of New South Wales, the Tilba area and there is photography at various times on the coast including Bermagui. The mountain is a sacred site for the First Nations people who live in the area, a sense of affinity with the land and a boating presence.

This film is the first feature film by writer-director, Celina Stang, based on her own experiences and her relationship with her family. Her intensity is felt throughout the film through her central character, Selene, played by Emilie Cocquerel.

At the opening of the film, Selene and her husband, Dean (Fayssal Bazzi), who has a diplomatic career, are moving from the city with their daughter, Shani (Willow Spears), a youngster who is resentful of having to move from the city and her friends, loving her mother yet clashing with her. There are ordinary scenes at home, meals, taking Shani to school – though Selene frequently forgets to collect her daughter from school. In fact, the character of Selene is a challenge to the audience, sometimes sympathetic, oftentimes moody, wandering, brooding, intending to write but not doing so, wandering along the shore and encountering a fishing trawler, Jonah the captain (Damion Hunter). She reminisces about trawling on a kibbutz in her young days in Israel. She joins Jonah and finds the experience of fishing and sorting exhilarating. Her husband doesn't find it exhilarating – nor does her mother. And we are made aware of the tension between mother and daughter with the mother ringing, not leaving a message, Selene angry and hanging up.

While Shani experiences some bullying at school, she makes a friend, Ren (Jarrah Finnerman) and they bond, sharing their experiences, Selene meeting Ren's mother (Angeline Penrith), an aboriginal family – and happy discovery that Jonah is Ren's father.

One day, early in the morning, her mother and father turn up, wanting to celebrate Shani's birthday. There are some explicit angrily confronting sequences between mother and daughter, and whatever difficulties the audience has with Selene, they will have far more difficulties with her mother, a self-righteous dominating woman, tentatively sure that she is right. Her husband takes something of a back seat in the disputes. The mother is played by Anne Louise Lambert (audiences, perhaps, remembering that it is almost 50 years since she was Miranda in Picnic at Hanging Rock).

How can a family come to some kind of resolution and peace? Concessions on both sides, or is that impossible? The experience of a death and its consequences? Better understanding of husband and daughter? Or, something of all the above.

It is interesting to note that explicitly Jewish themes have not been very strong in Australian films despite the significance Jewish presence in Australia. This film is quite explicit, religious language, memories of kibbutz in Israel, and prayers and the Jewish meal.

Striking to look at, emotionally involving, and challenging.

TO OLIVIA

UK, 2021, 94 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Bonneville, Keeley Hawes, Darcy Ewart, Isabella Jonsson, Conleth Hill, Geoffrey Palmer, Sam Heughan.

Directed by John Hay.



While the real-life Roland Dahl and Patricia Neal were world-famous, he with his writing reputation, she with her acting career, this film offers a rather small focus on their lives and relationship, limiting itself to 1961 to 1964, with minimal information about the two prior to these years and no information as to the subsequent years and the struggles, stroke, rehabilitation, campaigning for vaccination against measles, she is one affair, the divorce, his second marriage, death, Patricia Neal living to 2010.

Hugh Bonneville, whom practically everybody knows from his central role in *Downton Abbey*, offers an interesting, complex interpretation of Dahl. (Although one commentator said he does an excellent Jim Broadbent who, when younger, would have fitted this role perfectly.) Keeley Hawes, best known for television series, physically resembles Patricia Neal. There is an episode where the couple go for help to Dahl's school mentor, Geoffrey Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury who crowned Queen Elizabeth in 1952. Veteran Geoffrey Palmer, in his final film, gives a vigorous performance as a very narrow-minded Anglican cleric.

In 1961, the couple had been married for several years, he establishing himself as a writer of children's stories, concerned about the lack of success of *James and the Giant Peach*, experimenting with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Patricia Neal had been in films and on stage since the late 1940s. They had met in Hollywood, married, she moving to England, their eventually having five children.

However, there is tragedy. Their eldest daughter, Olivia, still very young, contracted measles and died. There were no vaccinations. The bulk of the film focuses on Roald Dahl and his grief, obsessive grief, extreme grief and its consequences on his behaviour, his treatment of his children, his treatment of his wife, not mentioning his daughter's name, forbidding others to talk about her, refer to her.

In that context, Hollywood director Martin Ritt arrives offering Patricia Neal the script for what was to become *Hud*. She is attracted by the script, Dahl thinking it beneath her. Some conflict but she goes to Hollywood taking the children. He eventually follows. For film buffs, there are some interesting sequences where Patricia Neal goes for an audition with the star of *Hud*, Paul Newman (and actor Sam Heughan doing quite a good impersonation of the young Paul Newman, and suggestions of lookalike).

The time in Hollywood is successful. Dahl is able to write *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and, ultimately, great success and reputation. Patricia Neal won the 1963 Oscar for Best Actress.

Which means that the film ends happily, information about the couple being campaigners for vaccinations for children. (It does not indicate the struggles and the unhappiness of the coming years.)

TOP GUN MAVERICK

US, 2022, 130 minutes, Colour.

Tom Cruise, Miles Teller, Jennifer Connolly, Bashir Salahuddin, Jon Hamm, Charles Parnell, Monica Barbaro, Lewis Pullman, Jay Ellis, Danny Ramirez, Glenn Powell.

Directed by Joseph Kosinski.



It seems that everybody thinks that this is a top sequel – and it is breaking box office records. Which is a phenomenon in itself, insofar as the original *Top Gun* came out in 1986, 36 years earlier! While there is always younger audience for an action film, with this sequel, it means that those who were, say 20, in 1986 and now moving toward 60! But they are moving towards the cinemas to enjoy this sequel.

Of course, there are some naysayers, especially those who would like to put Tom Cruise in his place. However, this sequel establishes what Tom 23's place in cinema history is, a career which began in 1981, established himself as a popular star, (at times) that he could act, Born on 4 July, Magnolia, but that he could be an action hero, everybody knowing that he does his own stunts, with his *Mission Impossible* series. So, a very high place in popular cinema. And, here he is, almost 60 at the time of *Top Gun Maverick's* release.

So, what has been Mitchell, Maverick, been doing over 36 years! He has not risen in the ranks, seemingly content with his work, seeing him initially trying to break Mach 10 as the film opens, defying a cranky commander (Ed Harris). But, he has his supporters. And he is surprised to be asked to come back to instruct the popular, ultra self-confident young *Top Guns*, for a particular mission, destroying a nuclear reactor in the desert situation rather like the unnamed Iran.

Maverick does get a chance to go to the local bar and to meet a past girlfriend, Penny (Jennifer Connolly) which does give the occasion for some dialogue to fill in a bit of detail of what Maverick has been doing, as well as some flashbacks to the original film (and a reminder that Meg Ryan was in Top Gun).

There are also plenty of photos to remind us of the first film, Val Kilmer, Iceman, now in command, but unwell, a cameo from Val Kilmer himself, unable to speak but with a special effects contrived voice. There are photos of Goose (Anthony Edwards), and some drama with his son, alienated from Maverick because of his father's death. This will be the central conflict but, of course, ultimately resolved. Miles Teller plays the son and he is up against the ultra-vain Hangman (Glenn Powell) in rivalry for positions in the raid.

So, plenty of drama and interactions, a severe commander (Jon Hamm), training, rehearsals, dogfights to prepare for the raid. And, whether you are a fan or not, you have to admit that the raid itself, the effects, the planes and flight, the exciting editing, mean that we are engrossed. And, when we seem to have got our money's worth, there is another 15 minutes of exciting action as a bonus.

Popular consensus would indicate that it was worth the 36 years wait!

TOUS S'EST BIEN PASSE/ EVERYTHING WENT FINE

Friend, 2021, 113 minutes, Colour.

Sophie Marceau, Andre Dussolier, Geraldine Pailhas, Charlotte Rampling, Eric Caravaca, Hanna Schygulla, Gregory Gadebois.

Directed by François Ozon.



A film which explores themes of ageing, illness, issues of assisted suicide. Well worth seeing and reflecting on. It has been written and directed by François Ozon, who has been making significant films for a quarter of a century.

(But, a criticism, not of the film itself, but on the Americanised translation of its title. The French says that everything went well. Now the adjective fine is used, American-wise, as an adverb, a rather off-putting colloquialising of language.)

Towards the end of the film, the old man, Andre Bernheim (with actor, Andre Dussolier, perfectly embodying an 85-year-old, the effect of strokes, hospitalisation, cantankerous disposition, demanding on his daughters) remarks that his story could be the subject of one of his daughter's novels. In fact, this is the case. The film is based on a novel by Emmanuele Bernheim, played by Sophie Marceau with a blend of compassion and exasperation. And, the names of the central characters, of the whole family, are their real names.

Emmanuele is a novelist, middle-aged, living with cinema entrepreneur, Serge, close to her sister, Pascal (Geraldine Pailhas) and her children. Their mother, Claude, Charlotte Rampling, is a sculptress, ageing, years suffering from depression. Their parents have long separated – this theme revealed rather later in the film and highlighting quite some complexities.

Ordinary life is suddenly interrupted when Andre has a series of strokes, hospitalised, under care. He is not an exemplary patient, not even a good patient. While the illness takes its toll, he begins to recover, even able to participate in some past activities, a meal out, his grandson's recital. But, the effect on his mind is a realisation that he does not want to live. He demands assisted dying.

This means that the audience has to check its own attitude towards assisted dying, assisted suicide, legislation in particular countries, here France, where hospital authorities have to take care, where police can intervene. Switzerland offers opportunities for assisted dying. There is something of a jolting sequence where Emmanuele asks the cost and is told that it is \$10,000, plus ambulance transport – and wonders how people can afford this, her father nonchalantly noting that they have to wait till death comes.

While the family has a Jewish background, religious ethics are not part of the consideration. Rather, the focus is on a general outlook on living rather than dying, on some kind of palliative consideration, of encouraging life-giving activities. This does provide some moral dilemmas for the two daughters.

The screenplay goes into some detail about associations for assisted dying, a character, a lady from Switzerland (German veteran Hanna Schygulla) visits Paris, visits Andre, discusses with Emmanuelle, Andre having to talk onto phone camera declaring his wish to die, arranges for Andre to come to Bern.

There are some moments of humour in the story. There are many moments of pathos. There are complications with the attitude of Claude and the memories of her marriage. There are complications with an intrusive friend from the past and the audience discovering the sexual orientation of Andre.

So, this is a presentation of an actual case, raising the issue of assisted dying in the context of a secular perspective on life and death, in the context of restrictive legislation and practice, in the context of availability for assisted dying in Switzerland, offering the audience an opportunity to empathise, understand, agree or disagree.

GERMAN FILM FESTIVAL 2022

CAGED BIRDS

Switzerland, 2020, 118 minutes, Colour.

Marie Leuenberger, Joel Basman, Jella Haas, Pascal Ulli, Bibiana Beglau.

Directed by Oliver Rihs.



This title is evocative but the original German-language title is more striking, Until I Die or am Free.

A rather sombre story focusing on two quite disparate characters whose lives intertwine. The setting is German-speaking Switzerland at the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s (and, ultimately into the 1990s). There is quite some protest against brutality in prisons.

The film is based on actual characters and events.

The first character is Barbara Hug, a lawyer who takes on cases defending prisoners, stating that Switzerland itself is a prison. She has her own personal difficulties, especially a case of a male-functioning kidney which requires medication and treatment, her walking with a stick. However, she can be a fiery person, defending her clients even as she collapses to the floor.

The other character is Walter Sturm, son of a wealthy industrialist but alienate it from him and protesting against him (and disowned by his father). He has become a thief, wily, shrewd, but frequently arrested and incarcerated. However, he also has a talent for escape, and a national

reputation for his many escapes. The audience sees him initially getting out of jail, disguised as a policeman, moving through a strong protest, commandeering vehicles, stealing briefcases of documents – which, he offers to Barbara.

They travel to Germany to meet with some of the leading protesters, who have been violent in protest during the 1970s but who are trying to find alternative methods. There are quite some emotional complications with the group. The German-language title of the film is that of a biography that Water writes while in prison.

Matters do not quite work out as they, or we, might have anticipated, a number of disappointments, moments of disillusionment, touches of tragedy.

THE FORGER

Germany, 2022, 116 minutes, Colour.

Louis Hofman, Jonathan Berlin, Luna Wedler, Nina Gummich, Marc Limpach, Andre Jung.
Directed by Maggie Peren.



Berlin, 1942. This is the story of a young Jewish man, Ciomo (and based on his memoir written in later years). His family have been transported to the camps in the east.

The Berlin of 1942 is not so much a target of Allied attack but rather a town with deprivations and rations. As the film progresses, there will be the experience of bombings. So, this film provides something of a glimpse of what life was like for ordinary citizens in Berlin at the time.

Ciomo works in a munitions factory but has a background in art education and these are his ambitions. A fellow-worker suggests that he contact a Christian minister who is involved in preparing documents, passports, forgeries, permits, to help people escape. Ciomo is not an idealist and goes along with the plan, sharing his apartment with another Jewish young man, their pretending to be part of the German Navy, going to clubs, the high life, Ciomo meeting a young woman who survives by contact with men and falls in love with her.

In the meantime, his landlady, loyal but against the greed of authorities, arranges for Ciomo's family possessions to be sold in secret to local women. The pastor then finds accommodation for Ciomo who contrives to be fired from his job and spends full-time on the forging.

There are always dangers and he wants to forge a document for himself, especially when the pastor is arrested as is his friend whom he cannot save. He enlists the unwilling help of the landlady and eventually is successful in escaping.

It is interesting that the forger himself is not presented as heroic, rather an ordinary person who responds to a situation, some self-centred motivations, but who eventually can be seen as contributing to the safety of thousands of people.

THE GERMAN LESSON

Germany, 2019, 125 minutes, Colour.

Ulrich Noethen, Tobias Moretti, Levi Eisenblatter, Tom Gronau, Johnna Wokalek, Sonja Richter, Maria Dragus, Louis Hofman.

Directed by Christian Schwochow.



The initial setting is 1943, World War II in Germany. However, the place is a north-west island of Germany, the North Sea, isolated, no visible Nazi insignia, the small community dominated by the local policeman, a rigid man in his interpretation of orders coming from Berlin.

The film is based on a well-known German novel by Siegfried Lenz. the film is to been directed by Christian Schwochow who, in recent years, has directed episodes of The Crown, adapted a Robert Harris novel, Munich, with Jeremy Irons as Neville Chamberlain, and explored fanatical political stances amongst the young, Je Suis Karl. He has a very strong cast, led by Ulrich Noethen as the policeman, Tobias Moretti as a local artist who comes under government suspicion when art is deemed subversive, and a strong performance by a young actor, Levi Eisenblatter, as the policeman's son, harshly dealt with by his father, and who has a fascination with the artist and art.

The film works very well as a portrait of a closed community, past bonds and friendships, past rivalries, but the constrictions of government edicts and the intrusion of the state on the artist as well as the consequences for the young boy and divided loyalties.

The story does move forward to the postwar period, the young boy has now grown up and is in juvenile detention, the consequences of some of his activities on behalf of the artist. He is humiliated, interned, confined to a cell. He is also been commanded to write his memoirs, especially focusing on the theme of Duty, something his father tried to instil in his son.

World War II stories continue to be of interest to a 21st-century public – and this is a different perspective on the war.

DAS HAUS/ THE HOUSE

Germany, 2021, 90 minutes, Colour.

Tobias Moretti, Valery Tscheplanosa, Hans-Jochen Wagner.

Directed by Rick Ostermann.



The house is a different kind of science-fiction/science fantasy. It has a brief running time.

The setting is 2029, the near future. A more right-wing, fascist-style government is coming into power. Johan (Bertrand German actor Tobias Moretti, The German Lesson) is a journalist who has published against the authorities and is taking refuge, with his wife, an activist, on an island where he has built a very modern house, comfortable, on the sea, but with a swimming pool, and all kinds of technological development.

The wife is in contact with some rebels who eventually turn up at the house but the house turns on them and they are killed. The technology seems to be taking control – but, as the narrative develops, Johan identifies with the house and the house identifies with him, he having control of the house in the house having control of him.

Ultimately, there is conflict with his wife concerning the rebels as well as a visit from his journalist partner who wants to get a story for him for his own advancement, fight, shots.

Finally, there is an image of the wife outside the glass door of the house with Johan inside. She escapes. Johan is identified with and within the house.

THE LAST EXECUTION

Germany, 2021, 116 minutes, Colour.
Lars Eidinger, Devid Striesow, Louise Heyer.
Directed by Franziska Stunkel.



East Germany, the early 1980s. The film is based on a true story but with names changed. The director sought the advice of the widow of the central character and showed the film to her for a private screening with the widow not wanting to make any public comment.

Franz Walter is an academic, in a happy relationship, about to travel to Africa for fieldwork before an academic promotion. There are some momentary alarm as he goes on to the plane, authorities arrive, taking him off without any explanation. But, he is recruited to work for the Stasi.

Franz sees this as a great opportunity, he and his partner receive a fine apartment, he goes to the various meetings, is mentored by another Stasi operative, Dirk. The main operation shown in the film is the targeting of an East German footballer who has moved to West Berlin and the authorities want him back, his wife still in the east, their letting the footballer know that she has terminal illness. Walter and Dirk also travel to the west, eye-opening for Walter, revealing the more hedonistic side of Dirk and visits to clubs and meeting women. They contact football professionals to blackmail them to spy. But, Walter sees a beggar in the streets and wonders.

Ultimately, Walter is disillusioned with the methods and the targets, decides on an expose, supported by his partner. However, situations change and he is arrested, charged, brought to the courts for treason. While his defence lawyer puts up some kind of argument for him, he is sentenced to death – not executed in a formal way but shot in the head as he moves through a corridor.

The film then indicates the number of executions that took place in the decades of the East German Republic. The film can be linked with other exposes of life in those decades, especially the award-winning *The Lives of Others*. Top German actor, Lars Eidinger, is convincing in the central role.

MONTE VERITA

Switzerland, 2021, 115 minutes, Colour.

Marie Riegner, Max Hubacher, Julia Jentsch, Joel Basman, Phillip Hauss.

Directed by Stefan Jaeger.



The story of the resort/spa, Monte Vertia, Switzerland at the end of the 19th century into the 20th century is probably better known in Europe than outside. This film is based on facts although it creates a fiction in its central character who symbolises women of the period, social and personal restrictions, possibilities for liberation.

In fact, Monte Vertia, a mountain resort, beautifully picturesque, was in anticipation of the freedom movements such as the hippies in the 1960s. The goal was freedom.

The factual characters in the film include Dr Otto Gross, the founder of what was called Psychosexology. He is presented sympathetically but with a questioning of the consequences of his therapy for freedom. The manager of the centre, Ida Hoffman, whose husband spent a lot of time travelling to raise funds, is also an actual character and later moved to set up a centre in Brazil. Two of the guests who are presented as coming for therapy are the German novelist, Hermann Hesse, who discusses the theme of the Buddha and his novel, *Siddhartha*. There is also the dancer, Isadora Duncan, and a scene of her dancing with freedom of movement and rhythm.

However, the central character is fictitious, a young wife, married early, now 29, with two girls, subservient to her dominating husband who is a professional photographer. She has asthma, feels constricted, submits to the sexual pressures of her husband. She assists him with his photography. However, she has come across Otto Gross previously, receives a letter mentioning the resort and suddenly she leaves home, catches a train, arrives at the resort. She is Hannah, played by Marie Riegner.

Hanna is not used to the style of Monte Verita, finds it difficult to adapt, the behaviour of the other guests, freedom, the shedding of clothes, the meetings, open speech... However, she is challenged by Otto and Ida, shows her skill in photography, especially for an exhibition of photos of the guests and their activities. Eventually, Hannah is able to break free, breathe more freely, shed the restricting costumes, go about her work.

There is a challenge when her husband and daughters visit and she has to confront him, herself and the truth, making an option for freedom.

THE PATH/ DER PFAD

Germany, 2022, 95 minutes, Colour.

Julius Weckauf, Nonna Cardoner, Volker Bruch, David Bredin.

Directed by Tobias Widemann.



Quite different is The Path, opening in Marseilles 1940, a journalist fleeing Germany with his young son, trying to escape with false papers to join his wife in New York. The focus is on the young boy, possessive of his dog and smuggling it through the Pyrenees, dangers for his father and himself and the young girl who is their guide. For most of the film, the boy has to learn his responsibilities, accept blame for the situation he finds himself in, but also some moments of goodness and happiness.

REVIEWS JULY 2022

ALI & AVA

BOMBARDMENT, The

COMPARTMENT NO. 6

ELVIS

FALLING FOR FIGARO

HALFTIME

HUSTLE

INTERCEPTOR

JURASSIC WORLD: DOMINION

KITCHEN BRIGADE, The/ LA BRIGADE

LIGHTYEAR

MAN FROM TORONTO, The

MEN

MINIONS. THE RISE OF GRU

MOTHERING SUNDAY

MY SWEET MONSTER

SPIDERHEAD

WOODCUTTER STORY, The

ALI & AVA

UK, 2021, 95 minutes, Colour.

Adeel Akhtar, Claire Rushbrook, Ellora Torchia, Shaun Thomas, Mona Goodwin.

Directed by Clio Barnard.



Yorkshire Screen welcomes its audience to come and spend some time in the city of Bradford, to meet ordinary citizens, their lives, struggles, happiness. The credits indicate that the film is not based on actual characters but, rather, a group of writers and the cast workshopped themes of life in Bradford and came up with the story of Ali and Ava. Both of them can be described as “nice” people.

Ali represents the migrant population of the UK, Pakistani background, a landlord, but genial, driving children to school, married to a younger woman who has ambitions to go off on her own, to study, make a new life. However, they live next door to Ali’s family and they have to keep up the pretence that all is well. On the other hand, Ava comes from Irish Catholic migrants, is now widowed from a brutal husband, loving her children, and devoted grandmother who survived domestic brutality, done a course and is now a primary school class assistant. He is played by character actor in British films and television, Adeel Akhtar, she is played by Claire Rushbrook (who, 25 years earlier, played Brenda Blethyn’s daughter in *Secrets and Lies*, now resembling Brenda Blethyn as she has grown older). She is several years older than Ali.

They meet by chance at school, Ali giving her a lift home from the pouring rain. One thing they have in common is a love for music, he more for rhythms and beat, she for country and folk. In fact, there is a strong musical score playing through most of the film.

They meet, have conversations, gradual revelations about their situations, with time given to Ali and his relationship with his wife and keeping up the appearances for the whole family. Ava, on the other hand, finds that her young son takes a suspicious dislike to Ali, personal as well as racist. Those are the kinds of issues that citizens in Bradford take for granted every day. Ali has a kind of charm which can even cajole a group of nasty kids chucking stones at him by playing music, some dancing, a kind of Pied Piper.

Ava is very tentative in the relationship, remembering her past. Ali is more venturesome – but, gradually, the relationship develops, despite the hostile son, but encouraged by Ava’s daughter.

Yes, there are some moments of tension, but the niceness of the characters keeps us on side – and living in hope that each will find a future. With each other.

A pleasing slice of Yorkshire city realism.

THE BOMBARDMENT

Denmark, 2021, 107 minutes, Colour.

Alex Hogan Andersen, Fanny Bornedal, Bertram Bisgaard Enevoldsen, Susse Wold, James Tarpey, Ella Josephine Lund Nilsson, Ester Birch.

Directed by Ole Bornedal.



A very moving World War II film.

Each year, surprisingly in many ways since it is 80 years plus and minus since the harrowing events of World War II, that there are so many films dramatising aspects of that war. Lest we forget.

The bombardment is based on a true story, set in Denmark, the city of Copenhagen, March 1945, almost at the end of the war. We are introduced to 5 strands in the story which eventually come together. The tone is vividly set in the opening, three young women happily getting dressed, off to a marriage ceremony, a benign old taxi driver, jollity – and then a plane swooping out of the sky and strafing the car killing them all. And the witness is a young boy, Henry, riding his bike, delivering cartons of eggs. He is overwhelmed by what he sees, traumatised, from then on unable to speak.

The strafing is by the RAF, revealed to be mistaken identity, the consequences weighing heavily on the pilots

We are also introduced to a young man, condemned by his father, discovering that he is working for the occupying Germans. Then one of his friends is confronted in the street, is a resistance member, he is shot, and witnessed by mothers and little girls. It emerges that little girls go to a French school in Copenhagen, that Henry is a cousin of one of them and he goes to the school, managed by a community of sisters. The focus is on one of the sisters, Teresa, penitential, flogging herself, questioning God's presence and absence, criticised by the superior community, yet devoted to the

girls. She has also encountered the German collaborator and told him that he is the devil. But, there is a strange attraction between them.

The plot is ready for the central action. The Germans are occupying a large building in central Copenhagen, the Shell House, and the resistance are requesting the RAF to bomb it, even if some of their members are in cells immediately under the roof. We see the preparations, the planning by the RAF, three squads, setting out for the bombing, the first reaching its target.

However, the drama of the bombardment is the mistaking by two of the squads for the French school as Shell House. From then on, the drama is vivid, highly dramatic, tragic, the bombs and fires, the nuns and children killed and injured, hurrying to the basement, trapped, the attempted rescue... With such suffering of the innocent children, the film is very hard to watch. As is the aftermath, the anxious parents, the nun and one of the little girls beneath the building, water rising, and Henry, dismayed, but finding a task of identifying girls being taken to hospital, writing notes, taking them to the theatre for an actress to read out the details to anguishing parents.

This is not a spoiler, but the ending, narrowly focused, is not what we were quite expecting at all, but gives us a moment of relief before the final credits come up and there is a listing of all those who are killed, especially the names of the children.

Yes, it is difficult to watch, but The Bombardment is recommended.

COMPARTMENT NO. 6

England, Russia, 2021, 107 minutes, Colour.
Seide Haarla, Yuriy Borisov, Dinara Drukarova, Tomi Alatalo.

Directed by [Juho Kuosmanen](#).



Winner of the Grand Prix in Cannes 2021, a Finnish and drama. And the title, of course, does suggest a train journey.

In fact, the journey is from Moscow to the Arctic Russian city of Murmansk, quite a long journey, through St Petersburg, then veering north, with stopovers, including one night in a remote town. Not sure whether this will serve as a tourist incentive for other travellers to take this journey. It is not always comfortable in the amenities let alone in the risk of finding those sharing the compartment uncongenial, often obnoxious.

The title does have an aura which might lead to expect something like murder on the Murmansk Express. But, no, it is not that kind of film. Rather, it is a very personal journey by a young woman, student in Moscow, Laura, from Finland. And she has become involved with Irina, a university lecturer, who persuades her to travel north to see the 10,000-year-old petroglyphs. At the last moment, Irina herself does not go on the journey, leaving Laura somewhat bewildered, venturing out on her own.

The first thing that happens in compartment number 6 is Laura's discovery of her fellow passenger, Ljoha, a bald young man, drunk and drinking, verbally abusive. The stern matronly-like figure of the train conductor cannot be bribed to change Laura's compartment. There is refuge in the corridor. There is refuge in the dining car but it has to close. Where can this be going?

In the morning, the young man is awake, engaging in conversation which is rather blunt, no idea about the petroglyphs and dismissing them. Can the whole journey go on like this?

It doesn't. Laura begins to come out of herself, disappointing phone calls to Irina, more conversation with the young man, even being persuaded during the night stopover to visit an old lady, his friend, a wise old woman who gives her good advice. A family sits in the compartment at one stage but then get off the train. Then a musician comes in, friendly, but leading to something which causes Laura complete dismay.

The mystery is whether they will ever get to see the petroglyphs because it is winter, the roads impassable, no one willing to serve as a guide.

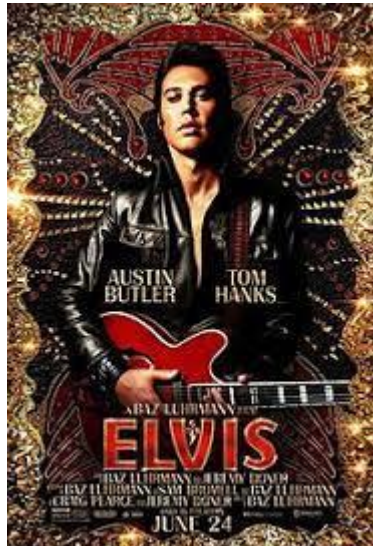
Perhaps the best thing is to say that we realise that Laura is in search of herself – and in his own way, in fact, is the young man – and whether she will find herself in the quest.

ELVIS

Australia, 2022, 163 minutes, Colour.

Austin Butler, Tom Hanks, Olivia de Jong, David Wenham, Richard Roxburgh, Helen Thomson, Kate Mulvaney, Kodi Smit-McPhee, Luke Bracey, Dacre Montgomery, Xavier Samuel, Leon Ford, Anthony Phelan, Nicholas Bell.

Directed by Baz Luhrmann.



Audiences who delight in Baz Luhrmann extravaganzas will delight in *Elvis*. Luhrmann immerses us in the complex life of Elvis, his music and the influences, success and final decline and death. But the film could be sub-titled, *Against Colonel Tom Parker*, a probing of his advising and exploiting Elvis, a malevolent performance by Tom Hanks.

The reviews of *Elvis* have been, to say the least, mixed. It would seem that a number of critics have decided to look down on Baz Luhrmann, to condemn his extravagance, to say that his talent is in glitter rather than substance, that in his filmmaking, all surface and shiny, he is self-indulgent. On the other hand, there have been a number of critics who have been very enthusiastic – and, it would seem, that the public would agree with them rather than the nay-sayers.

Which means that we have to make up our own minds! This review is on the side of those in favour!

The first 10 minutes of the film is somewhat overwhelming, a visual collage which takes us into glimpses to Elvis's young days, to his career, to his final concert, to his death, to the presence of Tom Parker (not necessarily in that order). For audiences with a willing suspension of disbelief, this intriguingly introduces us to what is a portrait rather than a biography of Elvis.

Austin Butler gives a strong in performance as Elvis, a filmic interpretation rather than the kind of show by the myriad Elvis impersonators. He is the naive youngster of 20, from the staff singing with entertainer Hank Snow (David Wenham), friend of his son (Kodi Smit McPhee), a touch nervous, having made a record, but letting loose with his voice, his gyrations, his magnetic charm. And the girls are screaming and swooning!

And there is Tom Parker, the mysterious Dutchman with no real identity, strange accent, entrepreneur in carnivals with sideshows, mesmerised by Elvis and his presence and performance, coming up to him something like Mephistopheles, offering to control Elvis, and Elvis accepting. While we watch Elvis and his drama, there is always the Faustian voice of the Colonel, commenting, justifying himself.

Helen Thomson and Richard Roxburgh portray Elvis's parents, strong influences on his life, but also manipulated by Tom Parker.

Older audiences will know Elvis's story well, the initial impact (and a pity that filmmaker Luhrmann gives no indication of the impressive range of films that Elvis made before his military service, showing only those cheery musicals that he made during the 1960s). We know that he went to Germany, met the young Priscilla, married her, Lisa Marie as their child.

Younger audiences will find this an introduction to Elvis, hopefully rousing their curiosity leading to some admiration.

And, all the way through, there are his songs, pre-1960 sung by Austin Butler, post-1960 his lip-syncing to Elvis singing. And, all the way through, thanks for these memories.

The Colonel was responsible for getting Elvis to do military service, get him out of the country as moral authorities were denouncing Elvis and his leading young people astray. It was the Colonel who controlled him in Hollywood. And, it was the Colonel who controlled him in his Las Vegas career, trapping him in contracts, year by year, when Elvis really wanted to travel the world (and the Colonel citing security difficulties in his refusal, a reality that the Colonel actually had no passport and citizenship).

The initial taking of substances to pep up, the increased drugtaking, Elvis going to fat... Difficulties with Priscilla... And then his death.

Elvis was definitely an icon of the 20th century. He was a top-selling recording artist. He was an extraordinary influence. In Baz Luhrmann wants us to experience something of the razzle dazzle as well as the manipulation by the sinister Colonel Tom Parker.

FALLING FOR FIGARO

UK, 2020, 104 minutes, Colour.

Daniel Macdonald, Joanna Lumley, Hugh Skinner, Shazad Latif, Gary Lewis.

Directed by Ben Lewin.



Figaro? It must be a film about opera. And it is. But, it is a pleasant, Saturday matinee for older audiences, lovers of opera but also appealing to those who would say they are not opera lovers. Something for everyone.

This is a story of Millie who has become disillusioned with her job as an adviser in a large company, attending board meetings, financial advice, and living in a flat with her boyfriend. But, she has always wanted to sing – and is prepared to give up the year of her life to train and to see where this would lead. She does have an adviser who suggests she contact a Scottish former Opera singer, Meghan Geoffrey-Bishop, who, apparently, does not suffer fools gladly! With that hyphenated name and discussions about her peremptory and often dismissive manner, it is not surprising to find that she is being played by Joanna Lumley. One might say it is a typical Joanna Lumley performance, haughty for most of the time, glimpses of some humanity, and, eventually, some niceness.

Millie is played by Australian actress Danielle Macdonald who had success in the United States with Patti Cake\$ and quite a number of other films and television appearances. Millie is a solidly built young woman, more than capable of an opera stage presence, like so many of the other traditional divas.

So, here she is in Scotland, not the most comfy place to spend a year, boarding in an old pub, getting used to the locals, encountering Meghan Geoffrey-Bishop, seemingly dismissed, but allowed to try out. Of course, there is a great deal of entertainment in the interactions between the aspiring singer and the haughty former star, remembering her glory days.

And there is the complication of her other aspiring singer, who has actually won some local competitions, Max (Hugh Skinner). He has more than a touch of the surly Scott, not really responding to Millie, although he is forever turning up, doing all the jobs at the pub including cooking and serving the meals.

The film was directed by Australian, Ben Lewin (who has a solid 40 years career in writing and direction, the Dunera Boys, The Watch, The Favour and the Very Big Fish, Paperback Hero, The Sessions).

We know that Max eventually has to mellow, let go of this antagonism, but it does take quite a while.

Will Millie succeed? Will she go into the competition? What happens when she runs away, frightened? Will Max win the competition? And what about Millie's boyfriend, will he understand? And, most importantly, will this year lead to a career?

Well, the only way to find out is to go to enjoy Falling for Figaro!

HALFTIME

US, 2022, 96 minutes, Colour.



This is definitely a documentary for fans of Jennifer Lopez, who have been following her for decades, as a dancer, singer, actor, celebrity.

However, the title indicates that in 2019, Jennifer Lopez turned 50. And the literal halftime is that of the performance at the Super Bowl in Miami, 2020, and Jennifer Lopez performing as well as making political statement.

There are quite a number of interviews with Jennifer Lopez talking to camera, reminiscing about her past, clash with her mother and walking out, the dancing jobs, her eventually being cast as Selena and making an impression with that film, Golden Globe. There are visual suggestions of some of our other films and actor she worked with including George Clooney, Ralph Fiennes, Owen Wilson...

The film also focuses on her singing career, the many awards, her albums. And there is her dancing and the particular style. Fashion is important and for those who enjoy the visuals of a range of costumes for celebrities, there is an abundance!

The chronology moves about, focusing on 2019 and the months of development of the Halftime performance in Miami, as well is going back to various episodes of the past. There is also an emphasis on the release of the film Hustlers, if the claim, praise for her performance and some Festival awards, the preparation for going to the Golden Globes, expectations of an Oscar nomination – and her disappointment with not winning or being nominated and the reaction of her fans and co-workers many of whom had been with her for 20 years.

There are several scenes with her daughter, rather than with her son, her daughter taking a mother to a dance school and the children being incorporated into Halftime, and her daughter with a central performance.

The film does not spend any time much on Jennifer Lopez and relationships except for some comments from Ben Affleck.

One of the main features that emerges from this documentary is that Jennifer Lopez has felt very hurt over the decades, especially about comments on her figure, the literal butt of jokes and satire, her being cheery but nevertheless hurt. She lets this vulnerability be seen.

On the other hand, as might be expected, she has strong ego and drive, especially in the discussions with the authorities for the Super Bowl, the discussions with costumes, choreographers, dancing cast.

This reviewer had a difficulty with her constant chewing gum throughout the film, very American, but too much!

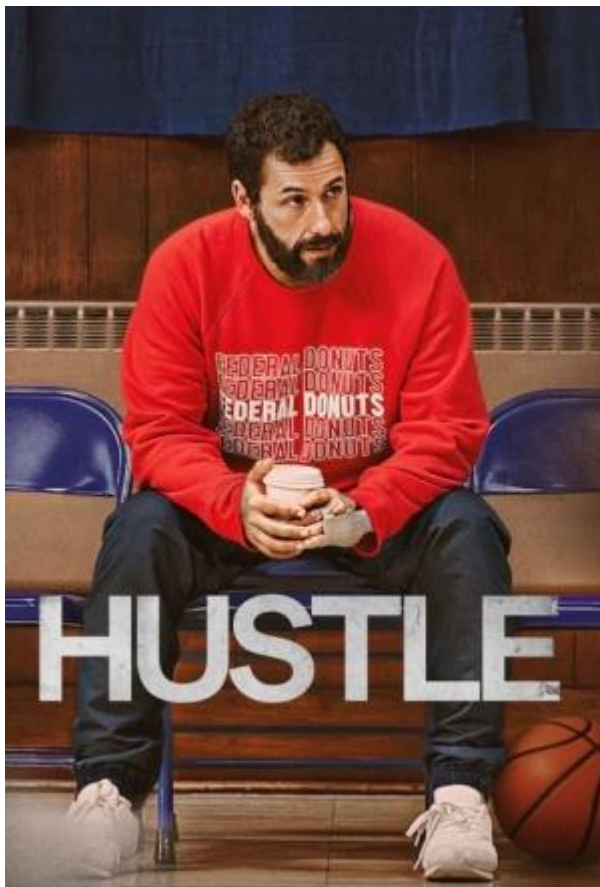
The film is released on Netflix on June 14, 2022. Comments on the IMDb on that day illustrate the different attitudes towards Jennifer Lopez, mainly praise for this documentary but several, rather like patrol comments, not only putting her down but reprimanding her, exhorting her to learn humility... However, Jennifer Lopez in scenes after the Halftime performance, illustrate her patronage of social courses and her financial support.

HUSTLE

US, 2022, 117 minutes, Colour.

Adam Sandler, Queen Latifah, Juancho Hernangomez, Ben Foster, Kenny Smith, Robert Duvall, Jordan Hull, Maria Botto, Heidi Gardner.

Directed by Jeremiah Zagar.



With Adam Sandler's name topping the cast, there will be fans very keen to see his latest film, especially with the emphasis on sport and basketball. But, there will also be a number of non-fans who will reject the opportunity to watch Hustle because of the presence of Adam Sandler. As it turns out, that would be a mistake on their part.

While Sandler has built up a strong reputation over many decades for broad comedy, and a great deal of clowning, he has also had some more serious roles, roles which drew admiration from critics and audiences, films like Punch Drunk Love, The Meyerowitz Stories, Uncut Gems. (And then he makes Who be Halloween just before hustle!)

Sandler subjugate himself to the role and the character of the sports coach for the Philadelphia 76ers this means much of his time travelling internationally as a scout, will it all kinds of matches, characters, generally in Europe, by and large rejecting them as candidates. His preference would be to stay at home with his family (where we surprisingly find Queen Latifah as his wife, quiet and engaging). He does have the backing of the owner of the 76ers, played by 91-year-old Robert Duvall (60 years after he was be Radley in To Kill a Mockingbird). However, his ambitious son, played by Ben foster, is not so sympathetic, sending Sandler out for further Scouting expeditions.

On one of the expeditions, Toma Lorca, the candidate not being suitable, Sandler wanders around and finds a local match in a neighbourhood, a tall player been most impressive. Sandler follows him, in the bus, rejected, to his home, meeting his mother and daughter, learning more about him, eventually offering him the possibility for being part of the 76ers. His played, with a blend of arrogance and the genial, I basketball player, the very tall Juancho Hernangomez.

For basketball fans, this will be a must, full of interestingly photographed and edited games, training, ploys.

In a way, the rest of the plot is predictable, but enjoyably so, the testing of the new recruit and his almost sabotaging possibilities for a career by his inability to keep calm during taunts in play, the coach offering his resignation, going it alone, lots of scenes of coaching (and, because this is Philadelphia, a lot of running up hills and steps à la Rocky, and eventually an actual reference to Rocky), new opportunities for all.

While it certainly is Adam Sandler there in the central role, it is not the full-on Adam Sandler of the comedy is, which means that he plays an engaging character, interesting developments, and reminds us of what he can do seriously as well is comically.

INTERCEPTOR

Australia/US, 2022, 99 minutes, Colour.

Elsa Pataky, Luke Bracey, Aaron Glenane, Mayen Mehta, Paul Caesar, Marcus Johnson, Zoe Carides, Chris Hemsworth.

Directed by Matthew Reilly.



In the old days, single hero exploits could be referred to as a “one-man band”. Interceptor is definitely the era of the “one-woman band”. This show is definitely for the action fans, the kinds of exploits we have seen in the past (as with Jean Claude van Damme, Steven Seagal as one-man bands), lots of action, lots of threats, lots of suspense, lots of last-minute – or, rather here, last-second – saving of the planet.

The film was written and directed by Matthew Reilly, a novelist for many years, this his first feature film, collaborating with popular writer Stuart Beattie. It is an Australian-US production, filmed in Sydney.

And the one-woman band, JJ, without any benefit of super-powers, is played by Elsa Pataky, who has appeared in the number of films but has tended to stay home bringing up her children with her husband, the executive producer of this film – and, comically playing a kind of Los Angeles “dude” selling televisions, Chris Hemsworth.

Matthew Reilly has created a dire world situation, and disillusioned with the US gangs stealing 16 nuclear weapons in Russia. They are mainly disaffected Americans, led by a seemingly charming psychopath played by Luke Bracey. His team have infiltrated one of the two interceptor-of-nuclear-missiles centres in Alaska. The other is a floating centre in the Pacific. JJ has experienced some sexual harassment by a top general in the past and he has been believed rather than she. Topical material and she has suffered for it. And she has been appointed to this floating centre. Almost immediately, it is attacked by the subversive team. So, suspense level raised early, how will she manage, presumption being that she will manage, with so much stacked against her.

Elsa Pataky as warrior is not strong on charm and personality. She is military, businesslike, loyal. And she has the backing of her father seen in a number of flashbacks (Colin Friel looking the worse for age and wear). She does have a loyal corporal technician, a married man with children, rather timid, but he does prove himself in courage. Otherwise, she has to rely on the moral support of the television link to the White House, to the President (Zoe Carides) and to the generals and their encouragement.

And, that is what happens. But, there is the psychological confrontation between the leader and JJ, each trying to use their wits but having to fall back on physical conflict. And there are quite a number of fights!

The tension is very strong because one of the missiles, aimed at an American city, with the rebels taking charge of television channels and threatening the US public, needs to be stopped by JJ who has been captured, hands bound behind her back. She has about six minutes of leeway. But, with that crisis out of the way, the other 15 nuclear missiles have been launched. How can JJ possibly press the interceptor button when she has been in the ocean, climbing steep rungs, having to leap from supporting bars to another, the clock ticking down?

It is no spoiler to say that she succeeds. That's what we expect. The action adventure is in the audience identifying with JJ and the challenges and suspense in her trying to save the world.

JURASSIC WORLD: DOMINION

US, 2022, 146 minutes, Colour.

Chris Pratt, Bryce Dallas Howard, Laura Dern, Sam Neill, Jeff Goldblum, DeWanda Wise, Mamoudou Athie, Isabella Sermon, Campbell Scott, BD Wong, Omar Sy, Justice Smith, Daniela Pineda, Scott Haze, Dichen Lachman.

Directed by Colin Trevorrow.



It's almost 30 years since Steven Spielberg amazed the cinema world in his adaptation of Michael Crichton's story of dinosaurs and the dinosaur park, Jurassic. There have been a number of sequels, including the more recent stories of Claire, Owen and Maisie and the attempt to tame and foster dinosaurs – despite some spectacular destructive consequences.

This film is the conclusion of that trilogy – but it is also the conclusion of the original stories, bringing all the characters together. So, while there is an appeal to the new audiences as well as to the older audiences, there is a new focus in the Jurassic story, the development of experiments in a huge institution, Biosyn, managed by a seemingly quiet scientist but who has enormous world power ambitions, experimenting with creatures, a different version of Dr Frankenstein, wanting to create new animal lives. Despite his quiet appearance, as played by Campbell Scott, he is still enormously arrogant and his pride will come before an enormous fall.

This film introduces Claire and Owen and Maisie again, Claire (Bryce Dallas Howard) doing a raid to capture a dinosaur from captivity. Owen (Chris Pratt) is living a more retired life. And there is their adopted daughter, Maisie (Isabella Sermon) who is abducted. Scene set for all kinds of adventures!

First port of call, so to speak, is Malta, with lots of location photography in the old cities. Enter a sympathetic but tough military type pilot, Kayla (DeWanda Wise) who has a touch of compassion and helps the anxious parents who are trying to find Maisie. In Malta, there is a huge underground market in illegal creatures, a dinosaur chase and motorbike through the narrow streets, and a plane taking off to go to Biosyn (and all kinds of aviation difficulties and landings!). So, plenty of action so far.

But then the oldies appear, Jeff Goldblum giving a lecture to eager students but offering a pessimistic view of human endeavour, humans overreaching themselves. And, visiting, Alan and Ellie (Sam Neill and Laura Dern), being welcomed to Biosyn but being alerted to Biosyn arrogance and immediately becoming involved in some biological espionage. And Maisie discovers the truth about her mother and her involvement at Jurassic Park.

And, at Biosyn, there are dinosaurs galore for those who feel the need to see them, huge, dangerous, in action.

It then becomes a huge action adventure, with a dangerous “cliffhanger” every couple of minutes, everybody having to use their wits, escape the dinosaurs and menace, get the plane going, aided by a sympathetic assistant to Biosyn (Mamoudou Athie), plenty of adrenaline pumping.

Perhaps this is enough Jurassic adventure for the time being. But, sequels being what they are, who knows?

THE KITCHEN BRIGADE/ LA BRIGADE

France, 2021, 97 minutes, Colour.

Audrey Lamy, François Cluzet, Chantal Neuwirth, Yannick Kalombo, Amadou Bah, Mamadou Koita, Alpha Barry, Stéphane Brell, Chloe Astor.

Directed by Louis-Julien Petit.



it's just as well the English title for this French comedy drama includes the word "Kitchen". The French have simply called it La Brigade - which means that some audiences might have thought it was a military film rather than a focus on chefs and their creative skills.

Which also means that this is a film which will attract the audience which enjoys television cooking programs. In fact, that's the way this film starts, lavish setups for filming a program but with one of the chefs, Cathy Marie (Audrey Lamy) clashing with the star, insisting on using her recipes rather than what the script demands. And, so, out. And, standing on the highway, making phone calls, looking for a new job.

When she does go for her new job, she finds that the organisation has over-hyped their advertisement and requirements. This is an organisation, a hostel for young male migrants who, as yet, have no ID for France. The young men, from a variety of countries, from Africa and from the Middle East, are to be enrolled in schools to get some qualification and their papers. Some are learning French.

Of course, this is not Cathy Marie was expecting, especially when she sees the actual kitchen and the range of tins in the cupboards. But, Sabine, the matron of the house is a large very friendly type, always encouraging. We all know where this is going in the sense that Cathy Marie is going to mellow but the interesting focus is how and why.

We meet quite a number of the young men, especially one called Gusgus, short, keen, exuberant, supportive of Cathy Marie. As might be guessed, there is a range in the young men, some with their headphones perpetually on and incommunicative, another, with great soccer potential, refusing to take orders from a woman, but others who are genial. Which means then that a number of them will find their place in the kitchen, initially being tested about how to peel and slice a shallot, then cooking techniques, learning to wait tables, everybody delighted with these skills – and the appetising results.

This film is very sympathetic to migrants, not treating them as statistics (although there is a harrowing scene where the boys' bones are x-rayed for DNA to check whether they are telling the truth about their age and are not over 18, which some are). Rather, this is a humanitarian approach, respecting people, young and old, looking for opportunities to help rather than deportation.

This is the kind of film that those involved in migration departments might look at and reflect.

The finale is somewhat eye-opening, a cooking competition, television audience – and vindication of Cathy Marie and her students.

Not a film great, but enjoyable one with message and a heart.

LIGHTYEAR

US, 2022, 106 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Chris Evans, Keke Palmer, Peter Sohn, Takia Waitit, James Brolin, Uzo Aduba, Mary McDonald-Lewis, Isiah Whitlock, Bill Hader, Angus McClain.
Directed by Angus MacClane.



Toy Story fans have a soft spot for astronaut, Buzz Lightyear (who was voiced by Tim Allen but now by Chris Evans, Captain America). The film opens with the information that back in 1995, young Andy chose to have Buzz as one of his toys because he watched a film about Buzz. And, we are told, this is the film. Perhaps the point is whether we would have chosen a Buzz Lightyear toy after seeing this film. Perhaps...

Really, this is a film about outer space with all kinds of spacecraft, techniques, special effects, and ease in moving about that might make the crew of the Enterprise quite envious. And, instead of Klingons, there are all kinds of robotic creatures, menacing and destructive, out there in space.

So, this starts, along with Andy's sensibilities, as a kind of Space Boys Own Adventure with Buzz at the helm, encountering another space champion who challenges him – but he is responsible for her disappearance. Later, Buzz encounters a really oddball group, Izzy, who has great memories of her grandmother who had written a lot of books, including admiration for Buzz. Izzy has read all the books and knows who Buzz is. With enterprise, Izzy makes the film is something of a Space Girls Own Adventure.

But, it turns out, they are volunteers, with minimal training, although their first vigorous enterprise in rescuing Buzz serves them well for future action. Along with Izzy, is Derby Steel, an old tough

veteran who is on parole for stealing a spacecraft, wary about picking up guns because of breaking parole! But, the oddest of all is Mo Morrison. Audiences may be wondering where Mo got his unusual accent, British? From where? But those who enjoyed the Thor movies may realise quickly, others eventually, that it is actually Taika Waititi, the prominent New Zealand comedian and director (Jo Jo Rabbit). He gets all the best funny dialogue and makes the most of it. Actually, the rival for the comedy action and lines is the robot cat, Socks, entertaining but essential for resolving the action sequences.

There are villains, there are military commanders, there is all kinds of adventures in space, Buzz a kind of by the book hero as he was in the Toy Story films, but having a soft spot and basically kind under all the earnest heroics.

Not sure that it will appeal to all the Toy Story fans or that all the action show will entertain the toddlers. But, meeting Buzz again and sharing his adventures offer animated adventure, to infinity – and beyond..

THE MAN FROM TORONTO

US, 2022, 112 minutes, Colour.

Kevin Hart, Woody Harrelson, Ellen Barkin, Jasmine Matthews, Kaley Cuoco, Pierson Fode.
Directed by Patrick Hughes.



Not sure why Toronto! As it turns out, the handler of a range of hitmen, American and International, controls a Man from Miami, Man from Tokyo... Anyway, it turns out that Woody Harrelson is the Man from Toronto.

And, while it is Woody Harrelson's film, is very much a film for Kevin Hart. He does the same comic role over and over again but audiences enjoy it. He has the skill of being both irritating and ingratiating at the same time. Needless to say, they make quite the Odd Couple!

We see Kevin Hart as Teddy, a would-be gymnast, with all kinds of creative ideas (including boxing without hitting an opponent), advertising on social media but everything collapsing every time. He is married to Lori (Jasmine Matthews) and is planning on treating her to something special for her birthday. Instead, he gets the sack. We see Woody Harrelson, all in black, black hat, bald head, driving a sleek car, arriving for an interrogation, thugs eager to see his performance because they have heard so much about him, the victim terrified, the Man from Toronto able to extract information just by menacing threats.

How could these two possibly come together! By mistake, course. The Man from Toronto gets an urgent call to come to Virginia. In the meantime, Teddy drives to the house which he has rented for the birthday celebration. Wrong house. Another victim, admiring thugs, a checking photo taken of Teddy arriving with his box of goods and picking up a knife. He must be the Man from Toronto. But then the FBI raided the house.

Since Teddy is known to some criminals as the Man, the FBI filling him in on the background of the real Man and deciding that he has to impersonate the Man in order to draw the criminals, especially with the threat of a bomb exploding in the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington DC. Enter the real Man, who decides that using Teddy as an alternate is a good idea, especially when they suddenly fly to Puerto Rico, have a new job, Teddy with an earpiece getting advice from the Man, with Teddy-Kevin Hart obviously enjoying the impersonation and, despite mishaps, relishing the situation – and succeeding.

Enter the Man from Miami, threats, the cutting off of a thumb necessary for the bombing! And some acrobatic hijinks in a vast building in Puerto Rico.

We know that it will all turn out well, Teddy turning up for the birthday dinner, accompanied by the Man, who is infatuated by Lori's friend (Kaley Cuoco) who urges him to dance – but, then they have to escape, face the Handler (her face previously not seen but the voice that of Ellen Barkin!), face the Latin American powers who are wanting to explode the bomb...

Some postscripts, the Man and the truth about him (more about Mr Nice Guy), but Teddy still in trouble because he was the cause the destruction of the Man's special car – friendship but expectations of repayment.

Directed by Australian Patrick Hughes, Red Hill, Expendables, Hitman's Wife Bodyguard.

MEN

UK, 2022, 100 minutes, Colour.

Jessie Buckley, Rafe Kinneer, Paapa Essiedu, Gayle Rankin.

Directed by Alex Garland.



Writer-director Alex Garland (Ex Machina, Annihilation) would probably not be surprised or upset to read such words as “enigmatic” or “weird” in connection with this film. It would seem that he has intended it to be enigmatic and weird.

The enigmatic is in the theme. The weird is in the treatment. And there is always the question as to why he entitled the film “Men”, making us look closely at the men male characters and their attitudes and behaviour, although the central character is Harper, woman.

Nor would the writer-director be surprised when reviewers express cautions as to how audiences might respond, how audiences might be too puzzled, confused, and not want to continue. Or, walk out. It is that kind of film.

It begins conventionally enough, focusing on Harper, played by Jessie Buckley was made such an impression in recent years (Wild Rose, Judy, The Lost Daughter, the American television series, Fargo). At her window, she sees a man falling to his death. We then learn that it is her husband from whom she is being divorced. This episode pervades the film and her memories and conscience.

Wanting to break free, Harper rents a 500-year-old house in the Gloucestershire countryside, delighted with the house, the countryside, and phoning her friend, Riley, constantly. What could go wrong?

Well, almost everything! And the narrative moves into some of the conventions of terror and horror.

And the men? Except for the husband, James (Paapa Essideu) and a strange young man in the village, all the male characters are played by Rafe Kinnear. This is certainly a virtuoso screen presence. He plays the landlord of the mansion, the touch of the dithery. He is also the local

policeman as well as the man behind the bar at the local pub and several of those sitting drinking. When Harper goes into the church, her flashbacks tormenting her and she screams, Kinnear appears as the local vicar, offering some sympathy but turning the situation back on herself, making her blame herself. He also appears as a naked man who seems to be stalking Harper, who appears frequently, but increasingly tormented, metal spikes emerging from his skin, and then a visual horror climax which has to be seen to be believed. Perhaps it does not have to be seen, and might be too much for some audiences. Weird is the appropriate word.

So, a review which indicates the enigmatic and weird of the film, the core of the plot and issues, and, hopefully, a sensible caution about the style of the horror touches.

MINIONS, THE RISE OF GRU

US, 2022, 89 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Steve Carell, Pierre Coffin, Taraji P.Hanson, Jean-Claude van Damme, Michelle Yeoh, Dolph Lundgren, Lucy Lawless, Danny Trejo, Alan Arkin, Julie Andrews, Russell Brand, RZA.

Directed by Kyle Balda.



Everybody seems to love the minions! And for young audiences, the Minions seem to have been around always. In fact, this is the fifth screen appearance. Audiences have warmed over the years to these yellow creatures, one eyed, two eyed, and their muffled words and sounds in communication (Pierre Coffin has been voicing them right from the start.) Even though they get entangled with that arch would-be criminal, Gru, they still seem to be likeable, even lovable.

But, at times, they are overwhelmed by the presence of Gru. And while they appear first in the title, this really is a film about Gru himself. We already know a lot about him, even about his interactions with his mother (voiced over the years by, of all people, Julie Andrews). He has wanted to be an arch-criminal and has been involved in many a crime, earning his nickname (introducing this word to many younger audiences who would not normally be using it), Despicable.

If the characters of the Marvel Universe can have origin stories, then why not an origin story for Gru? He is at school, some moments of deceptive charm, but that is all a cover, and he has no hesitation in declaring that when he grows up he wants to be a great criminal. And opportunities come his way, even at this young age.

It would seem that the master criminals in the world of the Minions and Gru, are The Vicious 6. Younger audiences like extraordinary and colourful villains – and the adult audience might enjoy these: all with funny names, like Belle Bottom (Taraji P. Hanson), with action stars Dolph Lundgren (Svengeance) and Jean-Claude van Damme (nicely called Jean-Clawed), always rough movie villain, Danny Trejo (stronghold) and, of all characters, a vicious nun, appropriately named Nun-chuk (television warrior, Lucy Lawless). And they are led by the elderly Wild Knuckles, a welcome voice with Alan Arkin.

Steve Carell has been voicing Gru for 10 years – master of the funny voices, and extending his range to the for the schoolboy-aged Gru.

The young audience will enjoy the visuals of these characters, their criminal behaviour, Belle Bottom masterminding a revolution against Wild Knuckles. The adult audiences will enjoy the zany goings-on. Gru idolises Wild Knuckles and joins with him after he has been ousted from the Vicious 6, so plenty of activities and action. While Knuckles might be getting old and being one-upped by the other Vicious 5, but he is always shrewd, setting himself up as an icon for Gru.

And, always there, the Minions, even going for martial arts lessons from Master Charle, voiced by veteran Michelle Yeoh).

So, it looks as though there is something for everyone. But, it is also pretty hectic, lots of colour, lots of noise, lots of action, non-stop really. Hectic.

Certainly no nodding off by any of the youngsters, no time for being bored!

MOTHERING SUNDAY site

UK, 2021, 105 minutes, Colour.

Odessa Young, Josh Lawson, Colin Firth, Olivia Coleman, Glenda Jackson, Sope Dirisu, Patsy Ferrin, Emma D'Arcy.

Directed by Eva Husson.



Back in 1924, servants were given a Sunday off to go to visit their families or for some free time. The first part of this film takes place on such a Sunday – however, there are many flashbacks, and a number of flash-forwards, making the narrative quite complex. And, within small scenes, the flashbacks occur, a kind of meandering of memories, not quick dramatic cuts, but rather the central character, Jane Fairchild, experiencing, remembering, cherishing... She is a servant in the house of the Niven family, with strong performances by the always reliable Colin Firth, a kind and rather mournful man, giving the story some gravity. And there is Olivia Coleman as his wife, more than a touch of the neurotic.

This is a British story, based on a novel by Graham Swift (*Last Orders*) and adapted for the screen by Alice Birch, responsible for quite a number of television series including *Succession*. Strong credentials. However, in its storytelling, in its style, in its photography, in its pacing, it is not particularly what we are used to as British filmmaking. And, the director, Eva Husson, is, in fact, French. *Mothering Sunday* does seem a very French kind of film, Impressionist storytelling and character drawing, and a straightforwardness with the presentation of the central characters in what the French, not the British, would describe as 'deshabille'.

On the Mothering Sunday, Jane goes on her day off to visit the son of a neighbouring wealthy family, Paul, played by Josh O'Connor (*God's Own Country*, *Prince Charles in The Crown* where Olivia Coleman plays his mother, Queen Elizabeth). A great deal of time is spent with Jane and Paul, the families meantime waiting for him at a picnic at Henley. The relationship between the two is played quite languidly, with those memory flashbacks from Jane, and her wandering the house after Paul has left for the picnic.

We have not been prepared for the surprise in the second part of the film. And, while there are scenes from the 1924 *Mothering Sunday*, we move into the 1930s, Jane working in a bookshop, encouraged to write, encountering a sympathetic philosopher, Donald (Sophie Disu who has a considerable career in British television). There is joy and sadness in this part of Jane's life. Because she is an orphan, she has been told by Mrs Niven that she has had all her bereavement, comprehensive bereavement, at birth, all her losses – and should only look forward to happiness. Not true.

Audiences will be pleased to see Glenda Jackson's name amongst the cast. She is glimpsed early but her main scene, a cameo, is at the end of the film, a pleasing and welcome scene, a tribute to Glenda Jackson in her mid-80s, memories of her powerful stage and screen career, two Oscars, an MP for many years. But, the film belongs to Sydney-born Odessa Young (*The Daughter*, *Looking for Grace* and an American career since 2016). In fact, she is 62 years younger than Glenda Jackson – who knows what her CV might be like and 60 years time!

MY SWEET MONSTER

Russia, 2021, 97 minutes, Colour.

Directed by [Viktor Glukhushin](#), [Maksim Volkov](#)



This is a 21st century Russian animation film which casts more than a glance at popular Disney films. This is especially true of the old classics with princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, as well as that most popular of 21st-century Disney princesses, Anna, from Frozen.

By and large this is an old-fashioned fairytale, the young Princess, Barbara, strong-minded as these princesses are. She loves reading about a fairytale Prince, Edward, the Prince of her dreams. Her father, the king, worries about her as do the three rather baboushak-like elderly minders.

Enter a cocky young man, delivering the post, who is able to manipulate the situation, a hold over the King, the demand to marry Barbara, is decking himself out in military gear, even with the Napoleonic hat. What is a princess to do!

This is to go into the forest. Here Barbara meets a genial “monster”, Boogie, looking somewhat human, looking like a giant toy, with flappy ears, with his friend Rabbit, a kind of comic-cousin to Bugs Bunny but more of an outlaw! Actually, Barbara is very irritating and dominating, wanting to invoke Mother Nature. Her friends are in two minds about her, even wanting to send her back to her father. However, the villain pursues her and the rest of the film is a chase and adventures.

The era tends to be coach and horses but there is an excursion into the city, cars, shops, drones, a scheming woman and her fawning assistant who, surprisingly, let Barbara go.

Which all builds up, of course, to a confrontation between Boogie and the Napoleonic would-be – but he has quite a number of powers, the touch of the magic, even commanding Mother Nature to do his bidding.

Boogie, of course, is a hero, defends Barbara, but is transformed into an ice figure. Barbara returns with her father, sad. But, what do princesses do, but offer a kiss. And, of course, a Prince Charming emerges from the trapped Boogie (with a surprising number of tattoos on his arm).

Because it is a princess film, there is an appeal to an audience of girls. The boys in the audience may put up with this for a while but identify with both villain and hero.

Hard to gauge what the target audience age is, perhaps a bit frightening at times for some of the littlies, but probably for the under 12s.

SPIDERHEAD

US, 2022, 106 minutes, Colour.

Chris Hemsworth, Miles Teller, Jurnee Smollett, Mark Paguio, Tess Haubrich.

Directed by Joseph Kosinski.



Spiderhead is an island with a facility for mental and physical patients. Audiences may be reminded of Martin Scorsese's Shutter Island, again with its mysterious facility, the doctors, the staff, the patients and their mental conditions.

It would be good to be able to say that Spiderhead matches Shutter Island – but, no, it is slighter.

Stories which show a medical authority in control of patients and staff, experiments which may or may not be legitimate, suspicious methods, are reminders of the classic Doctor Frankenstein story. Doctor Frankenstein was trying to create life, to “play God”, a divine arrogance which created a monster.

To that extent, Spiderhead is a Frankenstein story. At the centre is a rather dashing young expert (Doctor or not?), played with easy charm by Chris Hemsworth. He is in control of the island – although he keeps referring to outside authorities. He is responsible. He has an assistant, Mark (Mark Paguio) diminutive, something of a yes-man, but a suspicious collaborator. And, on Spiderhead there are quite a number of patients.

The difference is that these patients have all been found guilty in a court but have opted to go to Spiderhead rather than serve in an ordinary jail. They seem to have something of a comfortable life despite the restrictions, can relate well to one another, be a chef in the kitchen, be a deputy for the Director.

The Director is interested in drugs, drugs creating particular mental states, controlling the subjects, manipulating them. Which means that there are quite a number of scenes where he is in control, one woman out of control, another being manipulated to erotic behaviour, a violent African who participated in genocide, a tattooed brute of a man...

However, his main interest is in a prisoner who had been responsible for the car crash death of friends and who is haunted by guilt, excepting the blame. He is Jeff, played by Miles Teller. Jeff is also under the control of drugs but has close-up focus, sitting in the control room with the Director and Mark, observing, going into the main room to be observed, to be manipulated, but, as we might guess, being morally challenged by what he sees.

And, the Director we suddenly find has the drug pack implanted in his back, so that he too has the hallucinatory experiences.

What follows is more or less what we might have developed in the plotline, Jeff and a relationship with the chef, and his stands, Mark overcoming fear and taking a stance, some mayhem with the patients, and expose of the Director.

The film was directed by Joseph Kosinski (Tron: Legacy, Only the Brave) who made it in Australia during the two-year delayed release of his Top Gun: Maverick, Spiderhead being released on Netflix three weeks after Top Gun (whose box office exceeded all expectations!).

THE WOODCUTTER STORY

Finland, 2022, 99 minutes, Colour.

Jarkko Lahti, Iivo Tuuri, Hannu-Pekka Björman



Is there a place for existentialist absurdism in cinema? In watching this film from Finland, set in a remote sawmill town, amidst the forest snowclad trees, a range of ordinary characters who live rather mundane lives but are prone to utter deeper questions about the meaning of life and existence, there are reminders of the Coen brothers, especially *Fargo*. But, the director who comes to mind as we watch, if we have seen the films of the Swedish director, Roy Andersson, we realise that he was quite a pioneer in Existentialist Absurdism. And, with the Finland connection, there are memories of Ari Kaurismäki (and one commentator threw in Bunuel as well as *Twin Peaks*!).

Which means that an audience for *The Woodcutter Story* has either to be prepared for the absurdism or accept it as it unfolds before our eyes and ears.

There is an enigma right from the start, a businessman, suit and tie, climbing the snow to a high hut and forcing a woman to sign a contract of sale, presumably the sawmill. There is even more enigma at the end as the hero of the film, the rather uncomplicated Everyman, Pepe, also climbs to the hut and finds, symbolically, at home and life is where the heart is.

In the meantime, we get to know Pepe, simple, kind, a glass-half-full type, dressed in a red ski suit with muffler, surprisingly skimpy hair when he takes it off! He has a big burly friend at the mine, Tuomas, is devoted to his young son, is upset when his mother, disturbed by a wild beast, dies in hospital, and discovers when Tuomas is upset when he learns that his wife is carrying on with the barber, Pepe discovers that the barber is carrying on with all the women in the town!

So far, so deadpan in laconic dialogue, in posed pictures of the townsmen, and the camera focusing so often on facial reactions to characters and events. But, an axe murder, and the shift from deadpan to dead.

So, what follows is a great number of absurdist episodes – strikingly, for example, father and son wandering the snowclad Street outside closed shops but finding a barber's shop, going in and finding

the most up-to-date salon you could imagine, empty, but managed by a young girl who slips the little boy's hair and, with a knife, approaches the lathered in the, and lose it at that! Except that the little boy becomes infatuated with the girl which leads him into all kinds of trouble.

It is not only Pepe who asks questions about the meaning of life, but a tall bearded man who seems to be obsessed with it, wanting to have a meeting to discuss life only to be told that it is a card night! And then there is a psychic singer who comes to the town, forces Pepe to surface his memories, which the psychic mimics. When crowds gather and the psychic sings, the most benevolent song, we imagine that perhaps there is a religious solution for the meaning of life. But, no – he is exposed as self-absorbed, a discredit to evangelists.

It means that if an audience cannot accept this kind of realism/deadpan surrealism narrative (and most won't?), then they will be bewildered/annoyed. But, for those who can accept and be drawn into this often bizarre world, absurdism raises the questions and makes us wonder whether there are answers.

REVIEWS AUGUST 2022

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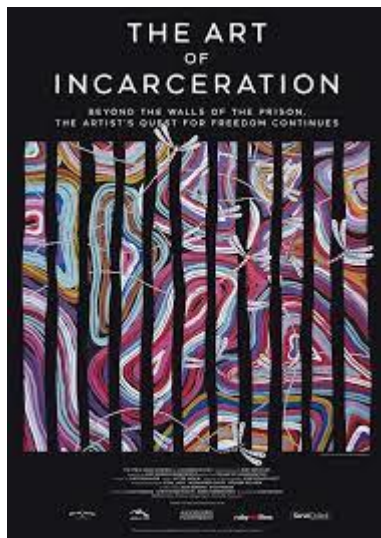
THOR: LOVE AND THUNDER

VILLA, The

WHERE THE CROWDADS SING

THE ART OF INCARCERATION

Australia, 2021, 77 minutes, Colour.
Jack Charles, Robby Wirramanda, Christopher Austin.
Directed by Alex Siddons.



Some years ago there was a very significant documentary on the imprisonment of First Nations men and women, *Incarceration Nation*. It highlighted the overwhelming statistics, prison treatment.

Interestingly, this brief documentary, which also highlights the statistics, uses the word 'Incarceration' over imprisonment. The Oxford Dictionary indicates a nuance: the state of being confined in prison; imprisonment. And, 'confined' is also a significant word, used in the title for an annual art exhibition at the Fulham Centre in Victoria, the *Confined* art exhibition.

The focus of this film is on male prisoners, especially middle-aged men. They tell their stories. The film itself is introduced by Uncle Jack Charles, by now a well-known First Nations icon, actor, television presenter, social commentator, drawing on his own experiences of crime when young, prison, out, back again... He knows from experience what he is talking about.

The men interviewed for the film have similar experiences, crime when young, growing up in this kind of atmosphere, introduced to drugs, addictions, robberies, imprisonment, getting out, continuing addictions, back to jail...

One of the key characters throughout the film is Robby Wirramanda, big, burly, jovial talker, singer... The film also focuses on two of the prisoners and their life story. But the important thing is art. The men express the continued desire to get back to their First Nation's roots, knowledge and awareness, a sense of belonging. And, they are finding this through art, through painting – and the camera does highlight quite a number of the paintings, and the attention to detail, colour, design, myth-making.

There is also a sadness underlying the interviews, memories of the past, regrets, opportunities after leaving prison, the experience of parole, the continued effects of drugtaking – the men quite

articulate in their self-expression and vocabulary, and a sudden jolt when it is revealed, just after we have looked at him and listened to him, that he had overdosed and is dead.

There are the members from The Torch organisation, non-profit, which sponsors the Confined exhibition, the men coming in, sharing experiences, tutoring, encouraging.

Which means then that this documentary takes its place alongside so many which look at the prison system, at the experience of confinement, incarceration, but also of a imaginative possibilities for the men and their self-respect, and for creative rehabilitation.

THE BLACK PHONE

US, 2022, 103 minutes, Colour.

Mason Thames, Madaleine McGraw, Ethan Hawke, Jeremy Davies, E.Roger Mitchell, James Ransone, Miguel Cazarez Mora.

Directed by Scott Derrickson.



There is an ugly masked face in the promotion for The Black Phone. It looks like a horror film. But, it is more of a terror film than a horror film. Horror as we understand it today suggests blood and gore, impossible, beyond this world situations. Terror, on the other hand, has situations that we can identify with, not such an emphasis on physical violence (though there can be some of that as here) but, rather, on the psychological.

Director, Scott Derrickson has made a number of interesting films over the decades, sometimes with religious implications (he studied theology at University): Exorcism of Emily Rose, the remake of The Day the Earth Stood Still, Sinister and the exorcism film, Deliver us from Evil. The setting for this film is Denver, 1978, focusing on a 12-year-old boy (which was where Derrickson himself was at that time). So, this is principally a story about children, seeing them play baseball, game rivalries, school

classes, bullying, harsh lives at home. And, several of the children have been abducted and have disappeared, the villain nicknamed by the media The Grabber.

The focus here is on a young boy, Finney (Mason Thames), not yet able to stand up for himself against the bullies or the brutal treatment at home by his father (Jeremy Davies). However, he is strongly supported by his younger sister, Gwen (strong screen presence by Madaleine McGraw). But here is where something mysterious happens. While Gwen prays to Jesus for the children to be found (and when she is upset with Jesus she gives him quite a crass tongue lashing), she also has dreams about the children, about the abduction, visionary and fearful dreams. The police interrogate Gwen to her father's anger.

And then Finney is abducted and, at last we see The Grabber, mainly with his monstrous mask, an ogre, and confining Finney to a harsh basement, a mattress, a toilet, little food... So, the audience has to share in his terror, a 12-year-old trying to deal with The Grabber (played by Ethan Hawke, a character with no redeemable qualities, completed evil).

And the black phone? It is in the basement, disconnected, but rings, some crackling, some silence, some voices – the voices of the children previously abducted, communicating with Finney, making suggestions to help him escape, and the film using the device of them appearing visually on screen though unseen by Finney. Which adds, of course, to the eerie atmosphere.

Gwen continues to dream, alerts the police, and the possibilities for saving Finney. But Finney has learnt from his ghostly visitors, especially a boy who had saved him from the bullies in the past, who urges Finney to stand up for himself against The Grabber.

The eerie thing about terror of films is that we can identify more readily with the victims than we do in horror films.

DASHCAM

UK/US, 2021, 77 minutes, Colour.
Annie Hardy, Amar Chadha-Patel, Angela Enahoro.
Directed by Rob Savage.



All the ingredients of a horror film. There is a great deal of blood and gore for audiences for whom this is an appeal. There are all kinds of weird supernatural elements. And, it is in the vein of the Blair Witch films with handheld camera and found footage.

This is a small-budget film, rather unpolished, which will appeal only to those who will identify with the qualities indicated. But, it may be too much for many an audience (most audiences), its appeal limited to diehard fans.

One of the difficulties/attractions is the central character, an extraordinarily unattractive character, singer, rapper, driving her car, moving to London, finding an old friend, and becoming involved in all the bizarre violent situations. And he is continually commenting, focusing her face, for her many social media followers. She encounters an old woman, ill, who introduces the theme of the demonic with a great number of apparitions, attacks, unexplained characters, absolute mayhem from which she generally emerges.

One of the distinguishing features of the film is that the footage is part of her online program, the film indicating most of the time the attitude of her followers, too quick for the audience to be able to read all of them as they scroll through, but enough to raise questions about why so many people are watching, what their attitudes are towards the woman, towards the demonic, towards credibility – and a whole lot of misogynist comments, crass comments, brawling focus references...

Which means that the film would be useful in media and psychological testing, getting a wide range of audiences, especially younger audiences, to discover what appeals to them and what doesn't, to test social media sensibilities and sensitivities (and some moral implications).

This would indicate response to visualising blood and gore and excesses of blood and gore, to course and gross and crass language, especially groin fixations, anatomy and sexual functions.

For a cross-section of opinions, as always, these are presented in the IMDb, some fans of this film but others highly critical.

THE FORGIVEN

UK, 2021, 117 minutes, Colour.

Ralph Fiennes, Jessica Chastain, Matt Smith, Caleb Landry Jones, Abby Lee, Christopher Abbott, Mari-Josée Croze, Alex Jennings, Said Taghmaoui, Ismael Kanater.

Directed by John Michael McDonagh.



John Michael McDonagh wrote and directed the very affecting Irish drama about sexual abuse, Calvary. He also made the drama, The Guard. So, expectations from him him? Not quite fulfilled?

It is difficult to engage with the range of Western characters who are introduced at the opening of the film. They are from Britain, America, France. They see themselves as culturally superior to the local Moroccan Arabs. And, they drive through the Moroccan desert to the home of a wealthy gay couple who are throwing a party, extravagant, swimming pools, lavish food, servants (whom they look down and take for granted), an extraordinary cultural contrast between the Westerners and the locals.

In wondering how to describe these characters, this description from an IMDb blogger, Xstal, hit the mark: 'An out of touch and dislikeable group of misfits, also rans and holier-than-thous, gather in a remote part of Morocco to celebrate and carouse'.

But, the central characters, David and Jo, he a doctor from England, she his American wife, drove through the desert and night to the party, crashing into a young man who wanted to sell them a souvenir, killing him, then burying his identity card, but taking his body on to the resort. The police arrive. Interrogations. Declaration of an accident. David is played by Ralph Fiennes, surly, commenting that his father said that we live in a difficult world and the only way to deal with it is to mock it. He is also alcoholic. His wife, on the other hand, is a hard to fathom character, not helped by Jessica Chastain's odd, ambivalent performance.

However, there is the possibility for involvement with the film after the uninvolved distance it initially sets up with its characters and their behaviour. The father of the dead boy comes to retrieve his son's body, encounters David who agrees to accompany him back to his home, helped by his sympathetic friend, Anouar (Said Taghmaoui). It is a significant journey for David, uncertain, conscious of his responsibility with the boy's death, the father acting mysteriously, a long journey through desert detours, no alcohol. As the audience thinks about the title of the film, we wonder about David and his repentance, whether he is being forgiven.

Important themes are articulated when David compliments Anouar as being a 'decent' and he returns the compliment by calling David an 'honourable' man. And, facing the aftermath of the party as most of the characters drive off to the next one, leaving the hosts rather empty, David is challenged even more to take the responsibility for what he did, drunk, arguing with his wife, speeding, responsible for a death – and whether he is forgiven or not.

FULL TIME/ A PLEIN TEMPS

France, 2021, 88 minutes, Colour.
Laure Calamy, Anne Suarez, Genevieve Mnich, .
Directed by. Eric Gravel.



Thank goodness that Full Time ran for only 88 minutes. This is meant as a compliment, not as a put down. For the first 60 minutes and more, the pace is frantic. And, not only are some of the characters exhausted, but so many of us, sitting comfortably in our cinema seats as well.

This is a story of a week in Julie's life (Laura Calamy). She is a working mother, two small children, up early in the morning, breakfast, taking them to the elderly lady who will care for them during the day, getting the train into Paris, getting to work, head of the staff at a three-star hotel, non-stop work in cleaning the rooms, assessing the work of the others, clocking out and then getting the train home.

As if this is not hard in itself, the situation in Paris is a strike. So, clogged freeways with cars, trains running spasmodically, not going to their destinations, the need to change to buses, passengers deposited and having to run to work. And, as the week goes by, the strike situation gets worse. And so does the anxiety of the old lady looking after the children, a daughter urging her not to do this work, putting more pressure on Julie as to who should look after the children.

The way that the film works, and which makes it so exhausting (technically very effective), is that for the main part, each shot is very brief, the editing fast-paced, a lot of tracking camera work, especially as passengers look at the passing suburbs, buildings, life in Paris, and there is an insistent relentless score beat which emphasises how frantic Julie can become – and how frantic we are as we identify with her.

And, there are complications at work, especially as Julie has the opportunity to go for an interview for a new job – and the lack of taxis to get to the interview, her persuading the concierge to get her a ride, difficulties with getting time off, no permissions, getting the work done during lunch break, persuading the newcomer to clock out for her, with disastrous results.

And that is the first hour!

With relief, there is a bit of restraint over the weekend, although it is the little boy's birthday, Julie has hired a van to bring home a trampoline as a gift, setting it up, the party, her being exhausted. And the issue of the nanny and whether she can continue.

Laura Calamy is very effective and believable as Julie. So is her boss, the other maids.

Just when all seems doomed...

GOOD LUCK TO YOU, LEO GRANDE

UK, 2022, 97 minutes, Colour.
Emma Thompson, Daryl McCormack, Isabella Laughland.
Directed by Sophie Hyde.



A sex worker is hired by a widowed religious education teacher for an evening at a hotel.

That answers the question: *what* is the film about? It does not indicate *how* the subject is treated, though there is a genial message in the title for Leo Grande, the sex worker.

The film is a two-hander which could be performed on stage. It consists mainly of dialogue and is expertly performed by Emma Thompson as Nancy and Daryl McCormack as Leo, Irish and with his accent.

Watching Leo and Nancy at the press preview made me realise that there were two basic responses. For “secular” Western audiences, the film was an interesting, often humorous, easy watch, comfortable in talking about bodies, male and female, about sexual experience and pleasure, about looking at past attitudes and restraints, restrictions, about new calmer freedoms. This is a particularly Western society a perspective.

But there is another approach, to a film dealing with sexuality, apps a subject that is too private and delicate for a film dramatisation. And the question arises as to what we mean by prudish and how much of this is sensitivity, how much fear of the subject. Many cultures and many religions and church traditions approach from a more prescriptive perspective: Thou shalt, Thou shalt not... (With an engineer and intolerance).

In the film, Leo Grande represents the former view. He is more than comfortable in his chosen role as a sex worker, providing a service, perhaps able to provide some healing for a client's bad past experiences or attitudes (except that he has not told his mother). That is his philosophy of life and he is at ease with it.

Nancy, on the other hand, is very straight-up-and-down in all aspects of her life, with her husband of 30 decades, her children (though she was finds her son boring, her daughter reckless). And she has been strict with the girls in school, especially in essays on sexual morality. She likes plans, order, lists...

But, in her late 50s, she realises she feels deprived, her sexual life having been one of very matter-of-fact, brief and rapid “conjugal duties”. No corresponding awareness, of course, of sexual pleasure. (Memories of Robert Mitchum and Sarah Miles, 50 years ago, dramatising the matter-of-fact proper conjugal duties and Ryan’s Daughter dissatisfied, yearnings, set in an Irish Catholic moral framework of commandments and expectations.)

Now, two years a widow, Nancy has hired Leo, a list of suggestions of what is to be done.

Yes, there is sexual activity. However, it is in the context of four meetings between Nancy and Leo, their discussions, telling their stories (and sometimes not), analysing past codes and their inadequacies, speculating on changing attitudes and behaviour, Nancy and a sexual curiosity, a desire for awakening late in life.

Leo faces some of his own realities, challenged by Nancy. Nancy is very much challenged, has a revealing confession conversation with a past pupil and, eventually, stands at the mirror, naked, acknowledging the reality and limits of her body.

Which means that the audience realises, at the end, they have been looking at the film as in a mirror, looking at bodies, sexual activity, pleasure, testing their own values and stances.

In the past 60 years, Catholic theological reflection on sexuality has moved from Moral Theology Manuals and their declarations of principles to a deeper Dir understanding of marriage, psychological awareness and even, as with Pope John Paul II and his writings, a theology of the body.

And we remember that this is just a film, just over 90 minutes, two characters, conversations, personal and moral questions, particular perspectives – and remembering that it does not cover every aspect of sexuality and relationships, that they can be helpful conversations (as Leo and Nancy find out). For instance, the renewed Catholic moral awareness of deeper aspects of sexuality and marriage could provide further questions in challenges.

And there is always the answer to the Gospel question: how did Jesus relate to sex workers?

THE GRAY MAN

US, 2022, 126 minute, Colour.

Ryan Gosling, Chris Evans, Ana de Armas, Billy Bob Thornton, Jessica Henwood, Dhanush, Alfre Woodard, Rege-Jean Page, Wagner Moura, Julia Butters, Shea Whigham.

Directed by Anthony Russo, Joe Russo.



Yes, we have probably seen all this before. But, does this matter? If it is done well and entertainingly, why not see it all again. Which, for most audiences, will be the case with The Gray Man.

We are in the world of espionage, encounter-espionage. We are in the world of the CIA – not always a comfortable world, not always a moral world, a world of political and moral grey. Which, for dramatic purposes, as we have known for decades with James Bond and other spies, can be exciting for us as we sit comfortably in our cinema seats or home lounges.

What makes this story little different is that the central character went to prison as a teenager (and, as we meet him when young, we suspect that he does not really deserve to be there) accused of killing his father. The explanation of why and how comes only at the end of the film. And he is played by Ryan Gosling, a versatile actor but not one whom we might immediately think of as an American equivalent of a less flamboyant James Bond (but, Gosling might have made an interesting James Bond). In prison, he is recruited by the CIA chief, Roy, played by the always-effective Billy Bob Thornton. His codename is Six. Because he has been sentenced to life imprisonment, then the offer to be an agent, a hitman, does, at least, offer him more freedom of movement.

The opening is in Bangkok, 2021, elaborate sets (as is the case throughout the whole film, with settings ranging from Hong Kong, Croatia, Berlin, Vienna...). Six fulfils his mission but discovers that he is being betrayed, that he is being targeted by the ruthless CIA chief, Carmichael (a coldly ruthless performance by Bridgerton's Rege-Jean Page).

What follows, sometimes at fairly breathless pace, abductions, hostage taking, shootouts, car chases (the usual ingredients that we might expect, hopeful) is Six using all his wits to escape but also to pursue his nemesis. He has an advantage that his Bangkok connection, Dani Miranda (Ana de Armas in yet another substantial leading role, Knives Out, Blonde, No Time to Die) believes him and not

only comes to the rescue at times, is able to join in the final confrontation, Six showing some vulnerabilities and she using her strength and wits.

There is also the human element, Six having babysat Fitzroy's niece, heart condition, pacemaker, and who is now hostage with her uncle to lure Six back. The surprise element at this stage of the proceedings is to discover the sadistically smiling psychopath torturer, Lloyd Hansen, cruel, sardonic, narcissistic, arrogantly self-confident, the villain of the film. And, surprisingly, he is played by Chris Evans, Captain America himself. Chris Evans played this role for four films by this film's directors, Anthony Russo, Joe Russo, two Captain America films and two Avengers films.

So, you will know whether you want to see The Gray Man and enjoy this kind of spectacular, expensively-made, international, espionage action and adventure. (This reviewer saw The Gray Man in cinema release, big screen, darkened space, atmosphere (the best way!) before it moved to Netflix streaming.

HAUTE COUTURE

France, 2021, 100 minutes, Colour.

Nathalie Baye, Lyna Khoudri, Pascale Arbillot, Soumaye Bocoum, Adam Bessa.

Directed by Sylvie Ohayon.



The title indicates exclusivity in the fashion world, it is used by the house of Dior.

Which means that this is going to be a fashion film. However, it is much more. On the fashion level, the audience is invited into the workroom of the company, the range of staff, their work, their desks, designs, skills, materials and fabrics. There are the talents of the various workers as well as the finished products and the role of the models, poses, wearing the dresses, the audience seeing the alterations as the model stands, everybody busy around her. The audience is certainly immersed in this world.

However, the film begins rather dramatically, Esther (Nathalie Baye) standing on a Metro station and two young women setting her up, stealing her bag and running away. It has quite an effect on Esther, upset, physically disturbed.

And the film shows the two young women, living in a quite a contrasting area of Paris, away from the fashion houses, neighbourhoods with racial issues, especially between Arabs and non-Arabs. We see the friendship of the two girls, especially Jade who is the centre of the action, caring for her, hypochondriac mother at home, dealing with her moods.

Jade seems to be intrigued by the woman from whom she stole, tracks her down, encounters her, gives back the bag. Instead of calling the police, Esther, noticing Jade's fine hands, offers her an introduction to the world of fashion, inviting her in, explanations, making the work attractive, praising Jade's possibilities.

Which means that this is a story of mentorship, a relationship between an older and a younger woman, the willingness of the older woman, the moodiness and suspicions of the younger woman, especially the criticisms of her friend at home.

And, there are the small politics within the craft room, the loyal subordinate, the haughty critical woman, the model and the hard work of just being there and wearing dresses, the young man with Arab background who changes his name to Abel and Jade's encounter with the Arab security guard.

So, are very French human drama, characters, interactions, and for fashionistas, the satisfying scenes of design and making of high-fashion gowns.

THE JANES

US, 2022, 101 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Tis Lessin, Emma Pildes.



A documentary about the status of abortion, moral and legal, in the United States from the late 1960s to the early 1970s and the Supreme Court decision, Roe vs Wade.

Over the almost 50 years since that Supreme Court decision, there has been a change of attitude towards abortion in the United States. While there are still many earnest men and women who are Pro-Life, anti-abortion, there is still more who are pro-abortion and have taken a stance Pro-Choice.

This is a film that needs to be seen by those who take both stances. It will reinforce the Pro-abortion stances, taken on moral grounds, especially Christian and biblical grounds. But, the film shows a group of American women in Chicago who were moved by the number of young women especially who were pregnant and did not want to go through with the pregnancy. A group gathered, took the anonymous name, Jane, when they answered the phone, had meetings with the women, took them to the place of abortion, ensured that the situation was physically safe and hygienic. The film also highlights the nature of the “backyard abortions” of the time, the callous attitudes of some abortionists, some who are of sexual predators, and a kind of abortion industry set up by Mafia types.

The film contains a significant number of talking heads, of so many of the women remembering almost 50 years on. And, there are a lot of photos of the women when they were young, footage when they were active, protesting. In their senior years, they are a group of very serious, quite dignified, earnest women who believed firmly in what they were doing at the time.

Because abortion was illegal, they were always in danger of being followed and, at the end of the film, there is a powerful sequence when, in fact, police did follow them and found the women, both abortionists and pregnant women, arrested them and put them in jail, along with the local prisoners for the night, especially the Street walkers of Chicago. Eventually they got legal help from a powerful lawyer who had worked for the Black Panthers. It is still a sobering experience as the women look back. (There is also an interview with a police officer at the time who reflects on his own attitudes and behaviour.)

Which means then that this is a scene in epic and historical document which ever stand one takes – and a reminder that when the stands becomes an ideology there is a danger that there is no possibility for dialogue or mutual understanding.

The film took on more significance because of the time that it was released on American television, the Supreme Court overturned the Roe vs Wade past decision leading to a great deal of legal chaos, antagonism, protests (even around the world), meaning that any abortion became illegal in a significant number of states, remained illegal in other states where women could travel.

While the intentions of the filmmakers might have been to go back into the past, they were clearly not anticipating the 2022 Supreme Court overturning of the legislation.

OFFICIAL COMPETITION

Spain, 2021, 114 minutes, Colour.

Penelope Cruz, Antonio Banderas, Oscar Martinez.

Directed by Gaston Duprat, Mariano Cohn.



'Cynical' is the word that keeps coming to mind while watching Official Competition. In fact, in retrospect, it is very cynical. But, of course, with satire, cynical can be entertaining.

The film opens interestingly with an entrepreneur turning 80, wondering whether he should invest his money in some kind of legacy in his own honour, for instance, the building of a bridge in his name and his dedicating it. But, he also has the idea of investing in a prestige film.

This is very much an interior piece, mainly three characters, at meetings with readings of the screenplay, rehearsals, performance.

And, what sustains it is the presence and performance of three top Spanish stars. And the big surprise is not that Penelope Cruz is in the film. Of course she would be, but in the role that she plays. She is a prestigious film director, Lola, winner of awards. And she is invited to be the director of the hoped for successful film, the entrepreneur having paid a small fortune to negotiate the rights for a novel, Rivalries, to be produced.

The director has the inspired idea to cast a very popular International Spanish star, Felix, as one of two brothers. And, of course, Antonio Banderas exemplifies that in his own life. His character in the film is something of a parody of his own career. The other actor to be cast comes from the stage, highbrow, prestigious, Ivan (played by Oscar Martinez).

Back to the cynicism! The screenplay presents us with three quite obnoxious characters, not at all likeable and, when the screenplay tends to think favourably of each of them, we realise that we have been tricked and are disillusioned.

Already at the first reading, Lola is finicky, making demands of each of the actors to repeat even the most basic lines until she is satisfied – already a challenge to their egos and pride. She is really a character you would not want to meet in real life. And things can get worse at times of rehearsal, her criticisms, testing them. The big ordeal for them, and for audiences who might imagine themselves in a similar situation and how they would react, Kerns when she binds them together in plastic, so that they become one character, and, with the range of awards and statuettes they have brought in, she puts them into a grinder. Frustration – and more.

Which leads them to quite some mean-mindedness on the part of each of the actors, performance (which, at least, this reviewer saw as performance rather than a genuine story) which is meant to touch the others' emotions. Then a different kind of performance to touch emotions. Each a hoax, of course, and the repercussions on each of the three.

There is a final rehearsal performance of the climax of the film, a reminder of the title, Rivalries, the story of two very different brothers, and the relishing of a shock ending.

And the title of this film – the finished work is accepted for a film festival, but there has been quite a sinister interlude, among the glitterati, which means that the film, as finally made, is not what anybody actually expected.

And just while Lola makes a speech, while the entrepreneur is very happy, there is a plot development as the film ends – which makes us very curious as to what might actually have happened if the film had gone on...

PERSUASION

UK/US, 2022, 107 minutes, Colour.

Dakota Johnson, Cosmo Jarvis, Richard E. Grant, Yolanda Kettle, Simon Paisley Day, Nikki Amuka-Bird, Stuart Scudamore, Henry Golding, Mia McKenna-Bruce, Nia Towlel.
Directed by Carrie Cracknell.



Persuasion was last published novel by Jane Austen before her death. It has not received the cinema and television treatment as the more popular and well-known novels. However, there have been television versions.

The central character of the stories, Anne Elliot, a self-assured young woman, especially after the disappointment of the breaking of her relationship with Wentworth, a naval man who has gone to sea. Anne lives in one of those contradictory families, like the Bennetts of *Pride and Prejudice*... Anne's extravagant father, played by Richard E. Grant, the haughty sister, a married sister who is a hypochondriac thinking only of herself and rationalising everything she does as if she were altruistic! Anne is unexpectedly played by American, Dakota Johnson – and with Anne's assurance.

The action takes place some years after the break between Anne and Wentworth, difficult financial times for the family, visits to her hypochondriac sister, a welcome into another family, the Musgraves. There is also a visit to the seaside town of Lyme Regis, and some wonderful beach sequences as well as cliff sequences and walking parties climbing cliffs.

And, Wentworth returns from the sea, awkward in the presence of Anne and she with him, feigning a distance in their awareness of each other. This is awkward for Wentworth, Cosmo Jarvis, who has achieved a solid reputation in the Navy, but is looking for some kind of future. One of the Musgrave sisters, after an accident, becomes infatuated with him, an engagement.

In the novel, Jane Austen tells the story from Anne's narrative of events and characters but also insinuates Anne's subjective point of view. The screenplay uses the device of Anne breaking the fourth wall, talking to camera, talking to the audience, ironic remarks, raised eyebrows, some asides, so that the audience becomes complicit with Anne's perspective. This seems to be a good 21st-century device for communicating Jane Austen's characterisation of Anne. However, there have been some objections that along with the main 19th century dialogue, there is the introduction of many 21st-century words which will seem very much out of place to those who have read the novels but will be easily accepted by those who have not.

Direction is by Carrie Cracknell, a well-acclaimed theatre director.

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPEN

UK, 2021, 16 minutes, Colour.

Michael Rylance, Sally Hawkins, Jake Davies, Christian Lees, Jonah Lees, Mark Lewis Jones, Rhys Ifans.

Directed by Craig Roberts.



No, not a misprint! The venue for this film is not a theatre – but there is a theatrical venue, and quite some performances, a golf course.

The screenplay is based on actual characters and events – although they seem to be in the category of ‘Believe it or not!’. However, as with so many contemporary films based on real characters, the final credits have quite an amount of footage and photos to verify the characters and events as real.

On the whole, this is a very lighthearted film. However, audience moods will change throughout the film, happy, hopeful, amazed, regretful, hesitant, happy again, more than happy.

This is the story of a crane operator at a shipyard in the 1970s, Maurice Flitcroft. And he is embodied on screen by one of Britain’s most versatile actors, Mark Rylance (artistic director at London’s Globe Theatre for a decade, television’s Thomas Cromwell, Oscar winner for Stephen Spielberg’s *Bridge of Spies*). Rylance plays Maurice Flitcroft as a complex-simple character. We meet him in middle age, threatened with Thatcher’s nationalisation of the shipyard and loss of job. He is both simple and naive. But he also has an innate intelligence, cultured in many ways. He has married the young woman of his dreams, Jean (Sally Hawkins, so versatile, so dependable). He has become a father to her son and they have twins together. They live a happy simple life.

Audiences will be wondering how on earth he became what the journalists headlined as “Phantom of the Open”. In a way, it was a simple and naive in the way that Maurice was simple and naive. Wondering about a new job, happy to dream of possibilities, is attracted by a TV program on golf.

Why not? But, and here is the stretch, he decides to enter the British Open! Audiences will enjoy the jigs and the reels of the procedures, rejections, aristocratic presumptions, and Maurice's practice which he says is the road to perfection.

The day at the British Open where he is an official entrant entertains us in our cinema seats. But, it also entertains the crowds. It attracts the attention of the media. How could he be so bad! And, he has his twin sons interchanging as caddies, they themselves with huge ambitions to be disco-dance stars, making the moves, touches of performance on the course. However, it is quite a different matter for his older son, Michael, who works at the shipyard, has moved into management and is placed in very embarrassing situations as his bosses watch his father's performance, or lack of performance.

Audiences who don't know the story may think that this is far-fetched but, it becomes even further-fetched as Maurice does not give up his ambitions for playing in the British open, despite the hostility and machinations of the boss of the competition, played by Rhys Ifans.

Maurice is a mixture of charm, dreams, deceptions – and loyally supported by Jean.

Actually, Maurice's rehabilitation in the public eye is also hard to believe – but, the Americans always come up with an unexpected solution and happy ending!

So, wonderful to have dreams, wonderful to have opportunities to live the dream – but, always the question, when does a dream become a delusion and when does delusion have sad consequences?

This film reminds us of similar unbelievable British characters and situations in the recent *The Duke*. And, unlikely sports competitors, Eddie the Eagle.

PRESS PLAY

US, 2022, 85 minutes, Colour.

Clara Rugaard, Lewis Pullman, Lyrica Okano, Christina Chang, Danny Glover, Matt Walsh.

Directed by Greg Bjorkman.



Definitely one for the romantically-inclined. With a major appeal to audiences in their 20s. There are some parents and a mysteriously wise advisor played by Danny Glover, but the focus is very much on the young. And, probably safe to say, not for the non-romantically-inclined!

The central character is Laura, played by Clara Rugaard, an artist, with up-and-coming hopes. She hangs out with her friend Chloe (America Curnot) whose interest is definitely not art. Beach boys cross the street and she is immediately after them. However, she does fall in love with one of them and marries. But, she is very keen on setting up Laura with her brother, Harrison, Lewis Pullman.

Audiences who are waiting for some conflict may be set back a little when the two actually fall in love – rather quickly. And the bond between them is music, a play-list, on small cassettes from the past. Harrison works in a record store which buys back tapes for cash from people had created them in the past and no longer need them. They are displayed on a special shelf. In the meantime, Lewis has ambitions to study medicine.

Then, we are rather taken aback, as is Laura, when Harrison is killed in an accident. This is not a spoiler because the rest of the film depends on this episode.

Laura is sad, time passes by, she mourns Harrison, is not in touch with Chloe and her family as she should. But there was also the wise advisor, the old man, friend of Harrison, who talks with her, helps with the music – but also has a mysterious aura.

There have been a lot of popular movies playing with romance and time, going back into the past, parallel universes, think About time, think In Time, remember aspects of Ghost, and aspects of Groundhog Day.

Which means then that we live Laura's strange experiences, the playlist, playing the music, going back into the past, and her encounters with Harrison, trying to save him, always in love – but, then her appearing and disappearing in the past and in the present, depending on the music.

So, it will depend on how happy you want your ending to be, love and romance all over again, or Laura to accept reality and to face her future. What would we choose!

SUNDOWN

Mexico, 2021, 82 minutes, Colour.

Tim Roth, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Albertine Kotting McMillan, Samuel Bottomley, Iazua Larios, Jesus Godinez.

Directed by Michel Franco.



A brief film, popular with arthouse audiences and film festival screenings. It was originally called Driftwood, indicating the lifestyle of the central character. However, Sundown with its application sunset both physical and of life, seems a more apt title. It was written and directed by Mexican director, Michel Franco.

Despite its brief running time, this is a comparatively slow-moving film, moving with its central character, Neil, British, on holiday with his sister and her children in Acapulco. His played by Tim Roth and the impact of the film depends on audience response to Roth and his interpretation of this character.

At first, the audience is invited to luxuriate at an Acapulco resort with Neil, with his sister, Alice (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and her adult children. It is clear that they are affluent and that this is quite an upper-class resort. Then comes some interrupting drama, with news that Neil's and Alice's mother is dying in England, then that she has died.

However, Neil pretends that he has left his passport behind does not go with the family to England, going back to the resort, checking out, finding a sympathetic taxi driver (who later becomes the villain of the drama), checking into a small hotel and spending all his time, wandering, lounging in the sun, on the beach, continually drinking beer. He seems absolutely idle and we as an audience might wonder why.

But there is more drama to come, Alice returning, confronting Neil about his abandoning her and the family at a crucial and emotional time, her children also returning violently attacking Neil.

Gradually, some of the family details, the family business, are revealed, Neil and his preference for drifting in Acapulco, not wanting to return to the business. There is a shock when a crime is committed and Neil arrested and held in prison under suspicion.

However, there is a resolution – of sorts. Neil opts for Acapulco, the pleasant company of a young woman, Berenice, encountered at her shop and had spent a lot of time with her.

Then a final revelation, why the film is called Sundown. And, without an ending as such, the film stops, leaving us to reflect on what we have seen, on Neil and his character, on the issues.

THOR: LOVE AND THUNDER site

Australia/US, 2022, 119 minutes, Colour.

Chris Hemsworth, Natalie Portman, Christian Bale, Tessa Thompson, Taika Waititi, Russell Crowe, Jaimie Alexandre, Chris Pratt, Dave Bautista, Karen Gillan, Pom Klementief, Sean Gunn, Vin Diesel, Bradley Cooper, Ben Falcone, Melissa McCarthy, Matt Damon, Luke Hemsworth, Sam Neill, Simon Russell Beale, Stephen Curry, Idris Elba, Kate Denning.
Directed by Taika Waititi.



For 10 years and more Chris Hemsworth has been the Marvel Universe embodiment of Thor (for his own films, appearing in four Avengers movies, and guesting in a number of video games and shorts). More recently it looks as if Thor has been taking it far too easily, lazy, putting on weight. Now he has to go through a health and fitness regime again so that he can combat the archvillain, Gorr, whose mission is to destroy all the gods. Gorr kidnaps the children from the city of Asgard (now a tourist

attraction even with a sideshow play about Odin, Thor and Loki – managed by Ben Falcone, his wife, Melissa McCarthy, playing the Mother, Hela, Sam Neill as Oden, Luke Hemsworth (fair enough) as Thor and, of all people, with two comparatively brief scenes, Matt Damon as Loki! And the town, peaceable, is ruled over by Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson).

The opening is particularly serious, eliciting some compassion for Gorr, wandering the desert with his young daughter who dies, confronting selfish gods in an oasis and going on a mission of destruction. He is a villain, but we sympathise with what he has gone through – and he is played, very seriously by Christian Bale.

Seriously is not exactly the word comes to mind with Chris Hemsworth enjoying himself as Thor – somebody remarked about his goofiness and that seems a good word to describe his tongue-in-cheek humorous approach to his character. He teams up again with his first love, scientist Jane Foster (Natalie Portman) who wants to join with him in his exploits, hoping that this will control her terminal cancer. And, director, Taika Waititi, is back again as the stone creature, along with his New Zealand iccent (this reviewer having a New Zealand grandfather feels free to make accent jokes and references).

In fact, as the narrative goes along, there is a lot of farce introduced. This is especially the case with the surprise appearance of Russell Crowe as Zeus, the king of the gods, with his special effects lightning rod (and, a strange Greek-Australian accent which might remind older audiences of television's, Con the fruiterer!).

So, there is quite a deal of comedy, quite a number of battles, but in the accent of Taika Waititi, it is often quite 'a but sully'.

It has drawn audiences in all around the world – but its main appeal will be to the Marvel Universe fans and those whose funnybone is quickly and easily tickled. For those whose funnybone is rather resistant to tickling, somebody said it was Thorful!

THE VILLA/ MAISON DE RETRAITE

France, 2022, 97 minutes, Colour.

Kev Adams, Gerard Depardieu, Daniel Prevost, Mylene Demongeot, Jean-Luc Bideau, Liliane Rovere, Firmiine Richard, Marthe Villalonga, Marianne Garcia, Antoine Dulery, Jarry.

Directed by Thomas Gilou.



In a sense, *The Villa* is a formulaic film – but nonetheless enjoyable. This is the story of a character who is out of place, is sent to work in an institution, reacts badly, then encounters the people, mellows, and they all bond together. Happy ending. And why not!

The screenplay was written by the main actor, Kev Adams. He is obviously enjoying his role as Malinn, seen originally as a put-upon orphan, relying on his good friend, Moncef, growing up with an extreme dislike of older people, especially of elderly people. He is boarding with Moncef who is still looking after him – but he has been caught up with loan sharks, considerably in debt, but caught up in these activities by the police and sentenced to some community work. With elderly people!

So, off he goes to the Villa, not very happy, wary of the elderly – and, initially not without reason! He is befriended by one of the nurses who guides him. There is also an eccentric aide who is happy to help.

While Malinn is not enthusiastic at all about the elderly people and his initial dealings with them, the audience is very happy to meet them, especially since several are played by veteran French actors, familiar faces if not names for those who have been watching French films over the decades (but, especially, a star of the 50s and 60s who appeared in a number of British films to advantage, Mylene Demongeot). But, most of all, there is Gerard Depardieu (who also made at the same time the Balzac adaptation, *Lost Illusions* and starred as Inspector Maigret). He plays a former boxer, exuberant in his way, but having to face ageing, getting more and more cantankerous. This is one of Depardieu's most engaging performances, critical of Malinn, playing jokes on him, but gradually mellowing, especially as they begin to play computer games together.

The film is not just an entertaining collection of seeing the elderly, their foibles, interactions, giving their memories, but there is a kind of subtext about what can go wrong in care for the aged. In fact, the management of this Villa is quite corrupt, taking in only residents who have no heirs, writing restrictive clauses, not letting them go out, hiring a security guard to keep an eye on them, eventually inheriting their wealth.

Which sets up a conflict, aggravated by the fact that Malinn is pursued by the violent loan sharks (though he does get boxing lessons and puts them into practice eventually), how to save the residents from the corrupt management. What happens is, for the residents, a great escape, getting out of the building, packing into buses – and driving off to freedom.

Definitely a feel-good entertainment, familiar enough material but always pleasant to see again.

WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING

US, 2022, 125 minutes, Colour.

Daisy Edgar-Jones, Taylor John Smith, Harris Dickenson, David Strathairn, Michael Hyatt, Sterling Macy Jr, Logan Macrae, Bill Kelly, Garret Dillahunt, Jojo Regina.

Directed by Olivia Newman.



Huge expectations of this film in the United States where the novel, by Delia Owens, has sold over 12 million copies. Beyond the United States, audiences will not be familiar with crawdads. But, these birds contribute to an arresting title.

Commentators on the film, its style and impact, sometimes quite contrary. One way of appreciating the filming is to note that the main contributors are all women, the writer of the novel, the writer of the screenplay, the film's director, the producers, and the performance by Daisy Edgar-Jones in the central role of Kya. Their collaboration leads to quite a feminine sensibility. And this communicates to an audience, both women and men. However, it would seem that some reviewers and audiences, with a strong male sensibility have not been particularly moved. And some dismissed the film as emotional, mentioning the popular television Hallmark films, noted for their emotional storytelling.

And, there is a difficulty with the screenplay in terms of where the audience attention and interest is focused.

At the opening, there is a death, a possible murder. The young woman who lives in Marsh (the setting is North Carolina during the 1950s and 1960s), shunned by the townspeople as "The Marsh Girl", is

arrested, locked in a cell, interviewed by the retired lawyer from the town, Tom Milton (and veteran David Strathairn is always welcome on screen). But, very quickly, the screenplay goes to flashbacks, to the history of the Marsh Girl. And quite a lot of time is spent on this portrait of her. In fact, this seems to be the main dramatic thrust of the film – more than interesting for those who are wanting to get to know Kya, perhaps somewhat distracting (or more) for those who are expecting a murder mystery, a trial, and the solving of the mystery.

The young child actor, Jojo Regina, is persuasive as the young Kya, experiencing brutality from her soldier father, traumatised by the war, a violent man. He drives away his wife, then the other children, leaving Kya to manage until he too disappears. She lives alone, manages her life, but has a great attraction to the birdlife and insect life of the marshes. (And they are beautifully photographed.)

While the screenplay does return, at times, the comparatively brief sequences in the courtroom, there is much more about Kya's growing up, her encounter with the childhood friend, Tate (John Taylor Smith) with whom she bonds. But, for her, life is disappointing. He disappears. Then a brash young man appears in the town, Chase (Harris Dickenson) – and we are alert because we know right from the beginning that he is the dead man.

We are certainly on Kya's side, appreciating how she survived as a young girl, finding muscles and exchanging them for goods with a very sympathetic black storeowners. We see her bonding with Tate, sharing the love for nature, dismayed at his departure, wondering about the advances by Chase, a personality we don't like.

It is not necessarily a spoiler to note that the jury's verdict goes in favour of Kya and that there is a brief summary at the end, of Kya and Tate over the years, their life together, their work together – and Tate's discovery, and ours, of what actually happened to Chase all those decades ago.

(September to follow)