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ASSASSINS CREED

UK, 2016, 115 minutes, Colour.

Michael Fassbender, Marion Cotillard, Jeremy Irons, Brendan Gleeson, Charlotte Rampling, Michael Kenneth Williams, Essie Davis.

Directed by Justin Kurzel.

Assassins Creed is based on a computer game and is intended for the players, especially those who are fans of the game and assure us that the details of the games have been incorporated into the screenplay. But what about those of us who are not game players are not familiar with Assassins Creed? It means that this has to be something of a spectacle action show with plenty of special effects and computer graphics, especially for sequences which are set in Spain in the 15th century.

There is some information on screen as the film begins, a reminder of the role (not necessarily historical but in the mythologies of novels and the movies) of the Knights Templar, their position in the church, their influence on monarchies. There is also information about the lineage of secret Assassins. But, to the surprise of those who know a bit about the Bible and the Genesis stories, there is information about the Eden Apple, not only the cause of the fall of Adam and Eve but, somehow or other, the reality of human free will is contained in this Apple. Not a surprise that everybody is after it, wanting its power – and this continues into the 21st century.

And that is where the film opens in the 15th century, the Court of Ferdinand and Isabella, clashes between Muslims and Christians, the role of the Prince of Granada, and a tradition of secret and well-trained assassins. During the film there are several flashbacks to action in Spain, protection of the Prince, challenges from royalty, the flashy action of the assassins, arrests, almost-executions, escapes... And even Christopher Columbus.

There is a sudden leap to 1986, a little boy in Mexico riding his bike, trying some dangerous

feats, arriving home to find his mother dying, and his father dressed as an assassin with a knife, the authorities coming to get him and his advising his son to flee. In this way we are introduced to the character of the young Callum Lynch.

And then we are in the 21st century, 30 years later, with Callum actually about to be executed by lethal injection for murdering a pimp, so we are told. However, he is extricated from the jaws of death and set up in the experimental rooms of a huge company, investigating technology, medication, the role of memories. The person in charge is Jeremy Irons (who, as one reviewer wisely put, is very Jeremy Irons-ish). On hand is his daughter, Sifue (Marion Cotillard) who has dedicated herself to science, working with memories.

So, this is where Callum Lynch, played very seriously by Michael Fassbender, begins to get used to his post-almost-execution life, meeting various other subjects of experiments, meeting the rejects who now have very little life of their own. He agrees to go into the experimental program, the Animus, a virtual reality experience, where he goes back into the past, identifying with his assassin ancestor and his exploits, reawaken his own assassin genes, and discovering the Apple, involved in its rescue.

The Templars of the 21st century, meeting at their Temple in London, are very happy to have the Apple, and Jeremy Irons about to make a speech, but... Callum Lynch raises the question with his daughter whether her father really wanted the Apple or he just wanted to get rid of the assassins. We realise he wasn't 100% supported by the Templars in this quest for the Apple, especially when we meet the woman in charge played by a haughty Charlotte Rampling.

And so, that is Assassins Creed unless you are a game player – and unless they decide on Assassins Creed 2.

COLLATERAL BEAUTY

US, 2016, 97 minutes, Colour.

Will Smith, Edward Norton, Kate Winslet, Michael Peña, Keira Knightly, Helen Mirren, Jacob Lattimore, Noemie Harris, Ann Dowd.

Directed by David Frankel.

This is a drama of worthy themes, even high-minded themes. This is manifest in the title, particularly high-minded, the focus on beauty. Several times throughout the film there is an explanation of the title: that with suffering and tragedy, something good can emerge, a collateral to the suffering in the experience of a new beauty.

In many ways this is a small drama, a focus on a man who runs an agency, full of enthusiasm, giving pep talks, explaining the significance in marketing and in life with the focus on Love, Time, Death. He is played by Will Smith, initially enthusiastic and inspiring, then, after three years, suffering a deep personal tragedy, the death of his six-year-old daughter from a rare disease, his inability to cope, the repercussions for his wife, divorce.

For the rest of the film, we have a rather morose Howard, sitting alone at home, setting up most elaborate domino patterns in the office and then collapsing them, not communicating

with his friends, with the staff, the business going downhill with the need for a sale, he sitting at home, writing letters to Time, to Love, to Death, going out to post them.

His three enthusiastic partners at the agency, Edward Norton as Whit, Kate Winslet as Claire, Michael Peña as Simon, are becoming more and more desperate.

When Amy, Keira Knightly, comes for an audition to the agency and startles Whit with her rearranging of a slogan, he follows her to a theatre where she is in rehearsal, directed by Brigitte, Helen Mirren.

The drama that follows is a challenge to plausibility and the film moves into the realm of special messages, possibly angels, the tradition of *It's a Wonderful Life*. In this way, *Collateral Beauty* is reminiscent of a 2014 New York drama, which includes time travel, also plausibility-challenging, *A Winter's Tail* (with Russell Crowe and Colin Farrell). While both films are worthy in theme, other words that will come to mind are fey and twee.

Howard is challenged in a particular way, involving a video and a private detective, Ann Dowd, and Howard encountering representatives of Love, Time, Death in the form of knightly, Mirren and the young Jacob Lattimore.

Also in the picture is Madeline, who oversees a group for parents bereft because of the death of a child. Howard attends, begins to relate very well to Madeline – and you might guess the ending in this regard.

For a small film, the car seems to be over-qualified. The themes are attractive but the whole experience is rather ephemeral – and there is a need for a warning for audiences who automatically baulk at sentiment.

THE EDGE OF SEVENTEEN

US, 2016, 104 minutes, Colour.

Hailee Steinfeld, Haley Lu Richardson, Blake Jenner, Kyra Sedgwick, Woody Harrelson, Hayden Szeto, Alexander Calvert, Eric Keenleyside.

Directed by Kelly Fremon Craig.

There is an edge in using the word “edge” in the title of this film. Nadine, the central character, is approaching 17 with all the problems of adolescence, self-image, self-deprecation, touches of narcissism, experiences of depression, sexual talk and inexperience and the potential for shock. But this also indicates the meaning of “edge” in Nadine’s character and how she lives her life – she says she looks out from above on herself and does not like what she sees and realises that she will have to spend the rest of her life with herself. And, she over-dramatises with suicide notes.

One of the difficulties in responding to the film is that it has quite a lot of comic touches, even satiric touches in its portrayal of Nadine’s character. On the other hand, the film really serves as a case study, and that makes it very serious in its implications.

Hailee Steinfeld is Nadine. She bursts into her teacher’s office threatening suicide and then starts to tell the story, in flashbacks, of how she arrived at this desperate stage. As a seven-

year-old little girl she is bullied at school and continues to compare herself with her always-confident and successful older brother, Darian (Blake Jenner). Fortunately, another little girl befriends her through a caterpillar and they become strong friends for the next 10 years. There are glimpses of the girls at 13 – everything much the same.

While Darian continues to be a success in life, their mother, Kyra Sedgwick, spends a lot of her energy in being frantic, finding it very difficult to cope with the problematic Nadine. On the other hand, Nadine relates very well with her kindly father but he suffers a turn and dies.

By 17, Nadine is able to confide only in Christa (Haley Lu Richardson) who finds herself attracted to Darian – extreme crisis, Nadine thinking only of herself, demanding an either/or decision from Christa and then indulging in sulking and surliness. There are more scenes with her mother who still finds it difficult to manage her daughter, comparisons with her brother and the disdain for Christa.

The main port of call is the teacher who is given the best lines in the film, sardonically funny yet sardonically wise in his ability to deal with this problematic girl. He is played by Woody Harrelson at his best.

Nadine certainly makes some stupid decisions, underestimating the nice student who sits next to her in class but he proves to be something of her salvation. She feels attracted to a hunky student, almost propositions him at his workplace and then sends him an outlandish text. Following it up almost proves her undoing though, rather ignorant, she gets out of the situation, finding herself desperate.

It is a surprise to find some bloggers referring to Nadine as “endearing”. Nadine is hardly endearing and one is tempted to give up on her so self-preoccupied is she, but there is always the sympathy for mental health and depression.

Thank goodness, the ending is not without hope!

LA LA LAND

US, 2016, 124 minutes, Colour.

Ryan Gosling, Emma Stone, J. K. Simmons, John Legend, Rosemarie de Witt.

Directed by Damien Chazelle.

LA LA is Los Angeles twice! There is the city itself of which we see a great deal, as well as Hollywood, a real place as well as a Lala fantasy place.

This film has found itself on many a top 10 list for 2016, American seeming to fall in love with it. And it invites its audience to fall in love – although, perhaps a sensible warning would be to alert those who are not enthralled by musicals that they might not fall in love. It is definitely a musical, a memory of those Hollywood musicals of the past and, indeed, something of a homage to them.

You know where you sit in the cinema when the film opens with an old Cinemascope sign, freeways clogged with cars, and then one of the passengers getting out, starting to sing, followed by drivers and occupants (all young and engaging) joining in the song, joining in the

dance, expertly choreographed all over the cars!

Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) becomes impatient when the driver of the car in front, Mia (Emma Stone) is too busy checking lines for her audition to move – he overtakes her and there is a mutual disregard. And this is compounded when they encounter each other in the Hollywood lot, bump into each other and Mia is covered in coffee. By chance, Mia goes to a club where Sebastian, Seb, is playing (he is a jazz lover but the manager of the restaurant wants only Christmas songs and when said improvises, he is fired), bumping roughly into Mia who wants to congratulate him.

Not the most propitious encounters for a film where you know they are going to fall in love, where they have song and dance routines in the Los Angeles streets at night, where they go to Griffith Observatory and more singing and dancing – even to special effects so that they can dance in the stars. The main song, City of Stars, has rather a lilting melody which recurs throughout the film.

The film is divided into five sections, starting in winter and going through the seasons until it is winter again.

And so, we follow Seb, his love for jazz, his composing and playing, his memories of having been betrayed by a friend, wanting to open his own club, getting the opportunity to join a band and go on tour, meanwhile getting to know Mia a better and falling in love. And we follow Mia, lots of auditions which are brief and she is dismissed, her dream that she would write a play, her writing it, rehearsing, performing, and falling in love.

It would be nice to say that everything goes smoothly – there are upsets, personal, career clashes...

What makes it a bit different from the old musical is that it gives the opportunity for audiences to look at the different events from different points of view, from tough developments and from the “typical” Hollywood ending.

The film was written and directed by Damien Chazelle who made such an impact with his music film, Whiplash (for which J. K. Simmons won his Oscar and who has been invited back by show cell to play the manager of the restaurant). So, the musical is not dead.

LION

Australia, 2015, 120 minutes, Colour.

Dev Patel, Rooney Mara, David Wenham, Nicole Kidman, Sunny Pawar.

Directed by Garth Davies.

The title causes a question mark right throughout the film. The title of the book on which the film is based is called A Long Journey Home. And we see no lions either in India or in Tasmania! It is only in the last minute that the meaning of the title is revealed – and is symbolically satisfying.

The author of the book is Saroo Brierley, who remembers something of his childhood in India, especially his love for his older brother, the love for his mother, out in the fields (and a

myriad butterflies), on top of a coal train filling bags with coal to exchange for milk at the market, life at home, and his persuading his brother (after showing him all the things, heavy things, that he could lift) to taking with him to his night work. He is told to wait at the station, dozes off, wakes in fear, goes on to a train and is carried over 1600 km from his home to the busyness of Calcutta.

The film is very moving as we share the plight of a little boy lost, not really comprehending what has happened or what is happening, wandering through crowds, offered a piece of cardboard to sleep on in a subway, going to a shrine, praying but eating the food left in offering. When he is found by a sympathetic woman and taken home and cared for, there is the dreaded realisation that the man she calls in for help is a pimp for paedophiles. Saroo runs away, is collected and put into a boys' home, interrogated by the police – but, finally interviewed by a sympathetic official, he has been chosen for adoption in Australia, joining other little adoptees to learn a little English as well as table manners.

This first almost half of the film is well worth seeing. The performance by the little boy, Sunny Pawar, is just right.

As is the rest of the film, the little boy flying to Hobart, meeting his adoptive parents John and Sue Brierley, played sympathetically by David Wenham and Nicole Kidman. Saroo adapts to Australian life, though an adoptee brother finds it very difficult. And then 20 years have passed, Saroo (Dev Patel) truly Australian, going to study in Melbourne, encountering a young American student (Rooney Mara), and finding in discussions with their friends, especially Indian friends, a re-awakening of the story of his past, his longing for his mother and his brother.

As this becomes a preoccupation, then an obsession, he does not cope well – one of the most moving sequences in the film is, courtesy of a fine Nicole Kidman performance, where his mother is in something of an emotional collapse and she explains her life, her experience when young and her longing to help a child less fortunate than an Australian child and that her longing has been fulfilled in him.

Google Earth will be very pleased with the film because it provides an opportunity for him to further explore, to go back to India and, as Saroo says, and so the questions he has always had answered and the holes in his heart are filled.

The central characters all appear as themselves for the final credits – including a very moving sequence in India.

The film has been very well received – and pleasing that this is an Australian film.

OFFICE CHRISTMAS PARTY

US, 2016, 105 minutes, Colour.

Jason Bateman, Olivia Munn, T.J. Miller, Jennifer Aniston, Kate Mc Kinnon, Courtney B. Vance, Jillian Bell, Rob Corddry, Vanessa Bayer, Karan Soni, Abbey Lee.

Directed by Josh Gordon, Will Speck.

Just before the release of this film, Radio National's Law Report featured a discussion about office Christmas parties, the behaviour at the parties, the drinking, possible drugtaking, the ever present possibilities for sexual harassment – and various participants ending up in the courts.

While there is this kind of behaviour apparent in the film, it is not quite the crass and raucous comedy that the trailer would lead audiences to believe. Yes, it is raucous and crass at times and no credit to a lot of the participants in this kind of let-things-go party. However, for those who want something a little more serious with the raucous, there is actually something of a plot and characters responding to the plot. Bloggers who just wanted the raucous and crass objected to the plot, finding it unfunny. For those who have been overwhelmed and, at the same time, underwhelmed, by films like *Dirty Grandpa*, *Bad Neighbours* and silly and sorted hijinks, the plot is needed.

The film is set just before Christmas, of course, and introduces us to a range of people who work in an IT company, the very serious Josh (Jason Bateman), just getting a divorce, trying to be supportive of the CEO, Clay, (T. J. Miller), with plenty of money, and a mixture of good sense and bad sense, attracted to Tracy (Olivia Munn) who is working on a breakthrough project.

Then Carol turns up, Clay's martinet sister (Jennifer Aniston doing a severer audition piece for a new *Horrible Bosses*), no humour, more than a little jealous of her brother, wanting to be CEO of the whole company, threatening closure, cutbacks... She is momentarily tempted by the fact that they want to do a deal with an executive played by Courtney B. Vance. The solution: a Christmas party to end all parties, expensive, alcohol, and DJ...

Also in the picture is Mary, Kate McKinnon, the Human Resources officer, more than a little prim (on the surface) and Rob Corddry, doing his familiar style, in no way prim.

What happens is a mixture of the earnest, trying to do a deal with the executive and a lot of things getting out of hand, getting more out of hand, getting most out of hand. and, of course, Carol's flight is delayed by a snowstorm and she turns up disapprovingly.

One of the complications is that a nice young department chief boasts of having a girlfriend but actually phones for an escort, Savannah (Abbey Lee) who comes along with her pimp, Jillian Bell, who gives quite funny variation on this kind of character. By accident, the executive gets a face full of cocaine rather than snow from the snow machine and lets loose.

With the climax, Savannah taking Clay to her pimp's club, the rest of the main cast in pursuit through the snowy streets of Chicago, building up to a confrontation with Jennifer Aniston showing some martial arts moves, and Clay attempting to drive over one of those Chicago bridges as it opens.

Since this is a Christmas story, there are moments of disaster when the lights of Chicago and all Internet connection go out, and then the fairy tale with Tracy's invention getting everybody back online, the future of the company saved, no jobs lost – but, on their return to the office, wastefully trashed, there is a big cleanup job in store...

What might have been just another of those *Bad...* Comedies, is somewhat better because of some plot and themes and professional performances.

PASSENGERS

US, 2016, 116 minutes, Colour.

Chris Pratt, Jennifer Lawrence, Michael Sheen, Laurence Fishburne, Andy Garcia.

Directed by Morten Tyldum.

In recent years there have been quite a number of big-budget popular films about space. They include Oscar-nominated serious films like *Gravity* or *The Martian*, or the 2016 story of aliens and humans, *Arrival*.

In fact, a lot of this film will remind audiences of *Gravity*. However, it has many more ingredients besides the technology and the management of spacecraft. At heart, it is a romance. But it also has melodramatic aspects, dramatic aspects, and as with the other films poses a number of questions about how we would experience and react to crises in space.

There used to be cryogenics but now passengers to a distant planet can be put into hibernation for 120 years. And that is where this particular spacecraft is headed, into a future of 120 years in time on a planet which gives humans the possible ability for new starts and for creativity. As the film proceeds, we see that the vast spacecraft is state-of-the-art and, to say the least, huge and lavish, with 5000 hibernated passengers and over 200 crew.

As the film opens, there is a collision in space which will have all kinds of consequences. However, the immediate consequence is awakening one of the passengers, Jim Preston (and engaging Chris Pratt) an engineer from Colorado, your ordinary citizen but with intelligence and theoretical and practical know-how. For the first 30 minutes, Jim is by himself, managing, not managing, bemoaning his fate, letting beard and hair grow, and not even allowed the luxury of Gold Class passengers for breakfast or for coffee.

He is not quite alone, there is Arthur, your perfect British barman – but, of course, he is an android, but nicely so in the form of Michael Sheen.

Then, for reasons that viewers will have to see rather than being revealed here, Jennifer Lawrence is awake. She is from New York City and a writer, realising that she has a unique story in terms of the two of them being on a spacecraft wakened after only 30 years of the 120 year trip.

This is where the romance goes into high gear, happy sharing of life, love, and, of course, falling out.

So, where can it all go from here, just continuing on for the next almost 90 years?

There is another awakening, one of the crew, played by the venerable Laurence Fishburne, who helps the couple to explore what might have gone wrong and why so many other facets of the spacecraft are not operating properly.

This leads to the melodramatics and the dramatics with the valiant attempts to deal with the spacecraft and to get it back on track and repair the damage – and a bit of outside walking in space, reminders of *2001: A Space Odyssey* as well as *Gravity*.

In this sense, *Passengers* is not exactly an original story but rather derives quite a number of elements from previous stories which are incorporated to make it not so much science-fiction as an occasion for audiences to enjoy a variation on the human condition – as well as asking some disturbing questions as to how we would react in similar circumstances, especially with living out one's life on this comfortable but isolated spacecraft.

RED DOG, TRUE BLUE

Australia, 2016, 92 minutes, Colour.

Levi Miller, Bryan Brown, Jason Isaacs, Hanna Mangan Lawrence, Thomas Cocquerel, Justine Clarke, Steve Le Marquand.

Directed by Kriv Stenders.

After the immediate success and popularity of the initial *Red Dog*, it was, perhaps, inevitable that that would be a sequel. In fact, story-wise, it is a prequel.

Somebody asked whether this film was as cute as the original, cute in a good sense, pleasing, attractive, engaging. Well, it is.

The director is again Kriv Stenders who was able to bring the first dog story to life, a story of Western Australia and the Pilbara, a mixture of fact, reminiscence and legend.

So, how to create a credible prequel? One of the bright ideas is to show a busy father in Perth expected to take his son out to a movie – and they go to see *Red Dog*. The son would love to have a dog but his father is adamant – although, his son sees his father's eyes moistening as he watches the film. When they go home, the father reveals that red dog was actually his. And so, the bulk of the film is a flashback to his childhood, returning to the father and his storytelling every so often, and audiences then understanding why it was at the beginning of the original film that *Red Dog* was wandering North.

The story of the young lad, Mick, has everything going for it. Young boys (and girls) can identify with him and his experience of finding the dog, covered in dirt and so called Blue but, when washed, he is red. The boy has to move up to a farm in the Pilbara because of his mother being hospitalised. He goes to live with his mother's father, a fairly straight up and down man, especially so as he is played by Bryan Brown, an actor who can deliver any line in a very Australian way without it sounding like script. He is one of the most natural of our Australian actors and has some good opportunities here, sometimes being crusty and authoritative, sometimes being softer-hearted.

And, with the film set around 1970, who is one of Grandpa's great friends who visits the house, shares a meal, and plays banjo with Grandpa – a friend who predicts that the future of the Pilbara will be in iron, none other than Laing Hancock (played by John Jarratt).

Mick and Blue range around the property, even discovering a cave with aboriginal paintings and a special stone which one of the hands on the property explains should not be taken because it is sacred. Later, Mick, jealous of one of the workers because of his attraction to his tutor, the young woman, Betty (Hanna Mangan Lawrence), takes the stone and interprets all the havoc that ensues, storms, bushfires threatening the property, as a consequence of his

actions.

As well as the reminder of the mining of iron in the Pilbara, there are references to Saigon and the Vietnam war, the singing of songs of the period, a Chinese cook with an umbrella, quite a number of aboriginal characters (and the final credits pay tribute to aboriginal collaboration with the film), and two of the hands, Big John and Little John thought of as close brothers when they are not. These are points for the adult audience.

In the meantime, the younger audiences will be identifying with Mick and all his adventures, happy to be in the company of Blue, and, at the end, coming to realise how it was that Mick had to go back to his father and Blue went on the road to become Red Dog.

And, there is a new very younger generation who will want to see this film since the original was released. Good Australian storytelling.

STAR WARS: ROGUE ONE

US, 2016, 133 minutes, Colour.

Felicity Jones, Diego Luna, Alan Tudyk, Donnie Yen, Wen Jiang, Ben Mendelsohn, Guy Henry, Forest Whitaker, Riz Ahmed, Mads Mickelson, Jimmy Smits, Genevieve O' Reilly, Ben Daniels. Voices of James Earl Jones, Anthony Daniels. Computer mastered: Peter Cushing, Carrie Fisher.
Directed by Gareth Edwards.

Star Wars has been powerful in the consciousness of audiences all around the world for almost 40 years – and, for those who have not seen it or the succeeding films, there is a general awareness of the mythology, the heroes and heroics, and, of course, The Force.

Rogue One is billed as a stand alone story – but not quite. Throughout the film there are quite a number of connections, especially with the first film, which is now the fourth chapter, A New Hope. Darth Vader appears in two scenes (and still with the voice of James Earl Jones). At the end, he appears with a laser sword. There is a glimpse of R2-D2 and 3CPIO. One of the extraordinary features of the film (though, perhaps, not necessary) is that an actor portrays Lord Tarkin from the earlier films, played by Peter Cushing, but has digitally imposed Peter Cushing and Peter Cushing's voice on his performance. At the end, there is also a moment of a digitally-produced Princess Leia.

While there is a new score for the film, it does incorporate at different times, some of the original John Williams themes.

There are still battles in the galaxy, the film showing quite a number of planets with different terrains, planets and moons, deserts, dark forbidding battlement planets, strange moons, and a climax on the moon which has a very tropical, even Florida-look, palm trees and all – and the credits inform us that locations used were in Iceland, Jordan and, for the tropics, the Maldives.

The Empire is still dominating and there are rebels. With glimpses of the Emperor, the role of Lord Tarkin, the main representative of the Empire is Orson Krennick (Ben Mendelsohn).

The Empire plans to build a Death Star for its continuing conquering ventures, engineered by Galen (Mads Mickelson) whose wife has been killed and his daughter disappeared.

It is now 15 years later, the daughter, Jyn (Felicity Jones) who has been cared for by a most strange extreme rebel (Forest Whitaker), is now sprung from prison and has her opportunity to join the rebels, her contact being a very serious hero, Cassian (Diego Luna).

Once again, as in *The Force Awakens*, the action is led by a woman, this time Felicity Jones. and the president of the rebel Council is also a woman.

While Cassian and Jyn at the centre of adventures, especially to try to get the plans of the Death Star and transmit them to the rebels, there are also a number of spectacular battle in space scenes, the gung ho enthusiasm of the rebels attacking the Empire.

The film has been directed by Englishman Gareth Edwards who made an impact with his small-budget monster-thriller, *Monsters*, and was then invited to direct the re-boot of *Godzilla*.

And *The Force*? Seen in the action is a blind Jedi, Chirrut Imwe, played by Donnie Yen, who is committed to the cause and is also heroic, along with his associate, Baze Malbus (Wen Jiang),

The film has proven very popular – and is a satisfying *Star Wars* experience until the release of Chapter 8.

SING

US, 2016, 108 minutes, Colour.

Matthew McConaughey², Reese Witherspoon, Seth Mc Farlane, Scarlett Johansson, John C.Reilly, Taron Egerton, Tori Kelly, Jennifer Saunders, Jennifer Hudson, Garth Jennings, Nick Offerman, Rhea Perlman, Laraine Newman, Peter Serafinowicz, Leslie Jones..
Directed by Garth Edwards.

Here is a cheerful show, something for the children with all the animals, something for the adults with the memories of “the show must go on” movies of the past.

The film was written and directed by Garth Jennings (*Son of Rambow*), who also voices the intriguing character of the secretary, Miss Crawley, very effectively and supplying other voices.

The setting is an American city, familiar to Americans and to moviegoers, a touch of San Francisco. However, it is populated by animals, no humans in sight, the animals going about their daily business, an enormous range of animals: baboons as criminals, rhinoceroses as police... This, in itself, is entertaining, a bright city, brightly coloured characters, everything sunny.

But not quite for the central character, Buster Moon, voiced with extreme energy by Matthew McConaughey², and, of all things, a koala with no Australian explanation, obviously an expatriate who has absorbed American culture! He plays a failed entrepreneur, is trying to

live up to his father's reputation, the banks ready to take over his theatre, getting the brainwave to put on a singing competition – but Miss Crawley puts extra zeros inadvertently on the publicity, a prize of \$100,000 – and crowds wanting to audition.

The selection that Moon makes is rather puzzling, their talent not immediately perceived by the audience. What is important is their performances, their self-confidence or lack of it, rehearsals, Moon encouraging them, their eventually succeeding – and, of course, despite the young elephant stomping around the stage and bringing the house down (literally), the final rock concert draws the crowds and is a huge success!

A great deal of the enjoyment is looking at the particular animals and listening to the star voices: Rosita, a pig with an extra large family, a talent for dancing, Reese Witherspoon; a mouse who is exceedingly vain, a gambler, but singing very well, Seth McFarlane²; a British baboon whose father is a robber forcing his son to be a getaway driver, with a talent for piano and singing, Taron Egerton; Gunter, a self-confident dancing pig, Nick Kroll; a hedgehog, teenage, who composes her own songs, Scarlett Johansson; Meena, an extraordinarily shy young elephant, Tori Kelly.

John C Reilly is a sheep, Moon's best friend, and Jennifer Saunders is the former diva grandmother, a performance which, of course, is absolutely fabulous.

So, what's not to enjoy!

UP FOR LOVE/ HOMME A LA HAUTEUR

France, 2016, 98 minutes, Colour.

Jean Dujardin, Virginie Efira, Cedric Kahn, Stephanie Papanian, Cesar Domboy, Emonde Franchi, Bruno Gomila
Directed by Laurent Tirard.

This English title is playful in regard to the central theme of the film and the French title, *Homme a la Hauteur* (A Man up to, equal to...). While it is a romantic comedy, it is comedy with a difference, often of lightness of touch but, more often, with serious undertones.

The central character is a dwarf.

He is Alexandre, played with a genial smile and charm, reminding audiences of his Oscar-winning performance in *The Artist*, by Jean Dujardin. The object of his romance is a rather tall woman, Diane, played by Virginie Efira. (She could pass as something of a double for American actress, Katherine Heigl, who could take on the role were there to be an American remake.)

On the romance side the film has a charm because of Alexandre's personality, his acceptance of his height, a genial and friendly man who has learned to put up with jibes about his height or with being ignored (a scene where a man on his mobile phone walks into Alexandre and knocks him down without even noticing). Alexandre has been married but is in a good relationship with his ex-wife, has a son (very tall) whom he willingly and lovingly supports, and is an expert architect involved in a project extending the opera house in Liege.

Diane, on the other hand, is divorced from her philandering husband, Bruno (played by

writer-director Cedric Kahn) but he is still her partner in a law office, assisted by their somewhat ditzy but ultimately wise secretary, Coralie. When she loses her mobile phone and is contacted by Alexandre who reveals that he has witnessed a restaurant clash between her and Bruno, Diane meets Alexandre to retrieve the phone and finds him instantly congenial – and then he dares her to do something different, in fact skydiving from a plane.

The film shows the growing friendship, then love between the two. While the height issue provides the basis for jokes, it also provides a basis for Diane to understand Alexandre better. But, he makes her realise that she has been ‘hiding’ him from her friends – which leads to his meeting her mother at an art gallery exhibition, having a meal with her mother and stepfather, and Coralie then finding out and telling Bruno. The screenplay makes a point about disabilities by having Diane’s stepfather deaf, finding it difficult during a meal to hear exactly what is being said and misinterpreting words – and later telling his rather intolerant wife that she lives with someone who is disabled but she is the one who is truly disabled.

There has to come a time when Diane has to acknowledge whether she is able to live with the reality of Alexandre’s height and its consequences, some very rueful moments in the film for her and for Alexandre himself.

And the screenplay poses the question, how will Diane actually persuade Alexandre that she truly loves him and means it – why not another skydive!

Alexandre and Diane are quite attractive characters and so are able to carry the initially seemingly unlikely romance, the comic episodes as well as the serious implications of the situation – which means that this romantic comedy becomes something of an engaging moral fable and lesson.

WHY HIM?

US, 2016, 111 minutes, Colour.

James Franco, Bryan Cranston, Zoe Deutch, Megan Mullaly, Griffin Gluck, Zach Pearlman, Cedric the Entertainer, Keegan-Michael Key, Gene Simmons, Paul Stanley.

Directed by John Hamburg.

Many audiences have seen *Meet the Fockers* and its sequels, so are familiar with that question from an ultra-serious father about the young man his beloved daughter has chosen to marry: *Why Him?* This film is very much in the same vein, although Brian Cranston, moving away from his successful television career in *Breaking Bad*, has chosen a variety of film roles including LBJ in *All The Way*, an undercover DEA Agent in *The Infiltrator* and now a touch of comedy in *Why Him?*

Yes, this is one of those raucous American comedies with touches of the crass and the crude. However, unlike so many of the others, this one has its heart in the right place so that underneath the crudity, or despite it, there is a lot that audiences can identify with.

It doesn’t exactly open that way with dad celebrating his 55th birthday and a Skype connection to his daughter, Stephanie (Zoe Deutch), away at college, wishing him well – only that her fiancé arrives, oblivious of what is happening, slips off his trousers, leading to a very much in your face bottom sequence, to the shock of all. When the daughter invites her family

out from Michigan to California to meet her fiancé, dad is shocked - but is persuaded to go.

The prospective son-in-law is played in very good spirits by James Franco, rather ubiquitous on the screen in so many films in recent years. There is a very good line in the film which explains him – Stephanie says to her family that he, Laird, has no filter. Whatever he thinks and feels, he says, taking the extrovert philosophy: how do I know what I think until I've said it? And he has absorbed a four letter vocabulary and beyond which he blurts out, despite advice to the contrary, because in terms of his language, his feelings, his thoughts, he has no filter.

In fact, although he is in his 30s, he is really still a child. He was something of a child genius, especially in terms of technology, a whiz at maths, creative with computers, an expert in computer games. So, he is really a man-child. But, he is absolutely honest and direct, and is generous to a fault (and there are many of those because not only does he not have a filter, he has no sense of appropriate timing). He means absolutely well but does not achieve absolutely well.

So, it is a shock when dad and mum (Megan Mullally perhaps not immediately recognisable outside the context of *Will and Grace*) and their 15-year-old son have quite an experience in California, the son immediately identifying with Laird (in too many ways).

Laird is absolutely determined to marry but wants his prospective father-in-law's blessing. No matter how unlikely that seems at the beginning, we are sure that it will be granted at the end.

Another complication which gives the film a bit more substance is that like the other Christmas raucous comedy, *Office Christmas Party*, the background is decline in business in companies, possibilities for retrenching, even more possibilities for takeover – especially since the business in this case is the manufacture of paper in a growing paperless age period

Yes, there is some raucous comedy, especially a very long toilet sequence, a paperless toilet where the technology is not functioning and Laird's surprising majordomo (Keegan Michael Key) has to try to fix it to dad's embarrassment. What might seem a long interlude actually becomes a significant plot point by the end of the film!

So, a lot of comedy – even with the majordomo setting on Laird in all kinds of circumstances, very much like Cato and Inspector Clouseau which dad points out, though the two have never heard of the Pink Panther!

And, for a climax, Laird helicopters Stephanie back to Michigan to propose and to celebrate Christmas and, because the parents have had a great devotion to Kiss, what about Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley, with all their Kiss make up, garish and threatening as it is, emerging from a helicopter and singing *We Three Kings*!

And, all goes well for the future, relationships, peace, and manufacturing prosperity.

REVIEWS FEBRUARY 2017

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FAMILY, The
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LIVE BY NIGHT
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MOANA
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OPERATION AVALANCHE
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PERFECT STRANGERS/ PERFETTI SCONOSCIUTI
RESIDENT EVIL
SPLIT
STREET CAT NAMED BOB, A
xXx, THE RETURN OF XANDER CAGE
TONI ERDMANN

BALLERINA

France/Canada, 2016, 89 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Elle Fanning, Dane De Haan, Maddy Ziegler, Carly Rae Jepsen, Kaycie Chase.

Directed by Eric Sommer, Eric Warin.

Ballerina is a French- Canadian coproduction, with attractive animation, France in the 19th century, Paris and its streets in the river, the Eiffel Tower in construction, the Statue of Liberty in construction, and the Paris Opera house. There are also scenes in the countryside, especially a stately building serving as an orphanage on the coast.

The film is clearly aimed towards a children's audience, especially young girls who have aspirations to be dancers or ballerinas – and their devoted mothers. There is a rather lively young boy who might make the film enjoyable for a boys' audience (or not).

Felicie is a feisty young girl at the orphanage, dreaming to be a dancer, with a music box that was left with her by her mother at the orphanage door. She is friends with Victor who wants to be an inventor. There is a ferocious superintendent, and a nun looking like a Daughter of Charity who tut-tuts and has a very bleak outlook on the realities of life.

In some slapstick comic scenes, with Victor disguised as a nun and a chicken under his habit for a bosom, with wings he invented, on an off wagons, careering and crashing, the couple eventually arrive in Paris but are separated.

This is mainly Felicie's story, and she finds the building, is ousted by a toothy guard, encounters the cleaner who helps her but wants to get rid of her. Nevertheless, Felicie perseveres, helps with the cleaning, experience the haughty Madame and her snobbish daughter who also wants to be a ballerina. Felicie is given a letter by the postman with the

invitation for the daughter to go to the dance school but Felicie goes instead, knows nothing of the movements or what is required of her but, with the cleaner's help, is able to make an impression, even reaching the final for the audition to take a starring role in The Nutcracker, the snobbish girl being her rival.

Actually, not all plain sailing. Felicie does not win the audition and is bundled back by the haughty Madame (the equivalent of the witch in so many animation stories) and has to escape from the orphanage again, this time on the back of the motorbike by the once aggressive supervisor.

In the meantime, Victor has a job on the Eiffel Tower and is busy trying to develop wings for flight.

This all comes to a head, Madame threatening Felicie on the Statue of Liberty, Victor flying to rescue Felicie and confronting Madame.

Fortunately, there are some changes of heart at the end, and Felicie is able to demonstrate her dancing agility and her passion which leads to a satisfactory happy ending.

A bit of a difficulty for the historically-minded is that the setting is 1887, the beginning of the building of the Eiffel Tower, and The Nutcracker was not performed until 1892. The Statue of Liberty was dedicated in the US in October 1886. And the orphanage superintendant rides a motor bike!

Much more enjoyable than anticipated.

DANCER

UK, 2016, 85 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Steven Cantor.

The title reveals all – except for the name of the dancer who is the subject of the film, Ukrainian-born Sergei Polunin.

This is a film which will definitely appeal to audiences who delight in dance and in ballet. In fact, it will be of quite some interest to audiences who are not so interested in ballet or do not know much about its style or its history. The film does not depend on strong audience knowledge of the subject.

The film opens with a close-up of the dancer himself, waiting to go on stage, reflecting on his life, revealing himself something of a larrikin, myriad tattoos, taking pep-up drugs, which may make audiences wonder about him.

The film is interesting as a biography, going back to a poor town in southern Ukraine in 1989, on the verge of the collapse of the Soviet Empire. The young Sir Gay is seen going to school, skilled in gymnastics, open to the possibility of studying ballet which he embraces. He speaks with admiration of the teacher who influenced him and she is seen later in the film. Sergei is very much influenced by his mother and her desire for him to study ballet.

Fortunately for posterity, she had a video camera and she was to film many of his classes, many of his dances, showing his agility, ability and skill at an early age. His mother makes a remark that when he was born and the nurse moved his limbs, there was great mobility and stretch in his legs.

The boy was supported by his two grandmothers, who are also seen in conversation, with his father going to work in Portugal for financial support and his mother taking the boy to Kiev and his auditioning for the ballet school there, which he entered and again excelled.

The plan was for him to go with his mother to England and audition for the Royal Ballet school in London. It is a new world for them and they have to wait some weeks before the acceptance letter arrives. Given the financial circumstances, his mother returns home creating a distance between mother and son, news of the divorce between his parents which affect him greatly, on which he ruminates for years.

There are interviews with some of his close friends and fellow-students at the school, commenting on his initial impact, the recognition of his skills, the progress over the years until, finally, he is accepted as a principal dancer in the Royal Ballet before the age of 20. Reviews were most favourable.

In many ways we do not really learn all that much about Sergei Polunin as a person, more about his relationship with his family, the testimony of his friends, but no indication of any relationships. We see him in the snow, stripping to roll in the snow. We hear about his breaking loose as a teenager, drinking, an introduction to drugs and a looser way of living. Tattoos which had to be covered for performance, especially as seen in his dancing Spartacus in Siberia – with the physical toll for him.

While he was successful at the Royal Ballet, with a touch of kicking over the traces, he decides to walk out, giving the media a lot to write about and considering him the bad boy of ballet. His next step was to go to Moscow, almost beginning again, enjoying the dancing and rehearsals, and finding a patron and mentor in an entrepreneur. And, yet, this was not enough for a young man moving towards his mid 20s.

Going to America and relaxing there, he decided to make a video of a dance, partly choreographed by his close friend, and photographed and directed by Dave Chappelle, Hozier's Take Me to the Church. When released on YouTube?, the dance went viral to Sergei's surprise. However, it meant that he did not give up dancing but has continued, giving concert performances – and the film ends with his mother and father and his grandmothers coming to a performance for the first time to see him, something he had forbidden in the past.

To that extent, while the film is very interesting about childhood, adolescence and early adulthood of the talented dancer, it is only an interim story.

THE FAMILY

Australia, 2016, 108 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Rosie Jones.

This is an Australian story, especially from the 1970s and the 1980s, the story of a cult, The

Family.

Older audiences may remember the headlines of the 1980s when a number of children from The Family were taken in a raid by the police and the head of the cult, Anne Hamilton-Byrne² and her husband, Bill, fled the country. But, the older audiences may not remember the details at all, except in recent years with the stories about one of the best known of The Family children, Julian Assange. However, this documentary with some re-enactments, stays with family and does not mention Assange – the Australian film, Underground from 2012 does provide this background.

Anne Hamilton Byrne, a yoga teacher and her husband gathered followers around them both in England and in the Dandenong ranges, at Ferny Creek, Melbourne as well as out of Melbourne at Eildon (lots of images of Eildon and the dam). Quite a lot of adults became members of the cult, co-founded by an academic from the University, Raynor Johnson.

Anne Hamilton-Byrne² declared that she loved children and gathered a number of orphans as well as the children of some of the cult members, keeping them in the house at Ferny Creek or Eildon, an extraordinarily strict regime, harsh disciplines and punishment, brainwashing the children, instilling deep loyalties as well as fear of the outside (that if the policeman saw them they would be killed), and the motto: unseen, unheard, unknown.

The film has a great deal of testimony from the adults who remember their time in the family, the loyalties, the fact that most of them had to have bleached hair, look similar, wear uniforms – one headline of the time referred to the John Wyndham story and referred to them as Children of the Damned, the story of hostile alien children in an ordinary village. The audience gets to know these talking heads very well as they recur with substantial interventions throughout the film, some obviously badly damaged by their experiences, some having overcome the difficulties and taking strong and critical stances. There are also some older members, amongst them women who were referred to as “aunts”.

The story is also told from the point of view of the police inspector, Lex de Man, who joined the special task force to investigate The Family during the latter part of the 1980s. An actor is seen for situations of the 1980s but the actual officer, de Man, gives a rather impassioned account of his involvement, the effect of talking with the children, discovering the harsh regime they lived by, beatings, food deprivation, use of drugs like LSD as well as something of the madness of Anne Hamilton Byrne, her glamour, her snobbery, her extraordinary capacity for manipulation, and belief that she was Jesus Christ.

There was encouragement in the 1970s and 80s to take home movies of the children so there is plenty of material incorporated into this documentary showing the children, pictures of the adult talking heads of what they were like when they were little. Plenty of material of Anne and her husband.

The latter part of the film is interesting in terms of the pursuit of the husband and wife, the taking refuge in England, Hawaii, going under the radar in a house in the United States, which was also investigated by the FBI. After extradition, there were hearings, a court case and a sentence, in 1993 which barely touched Anne Hamilton Byrne and her husband, suspended sentence, a small fine.

Throughout the film, we might well be wondering who this woman really is, where she came

from – and the film gives a thorough explanation of her background, her family, her mental state and ambitions and their fulfilment. While her husband had died in 2001, the film informs us that as of its making in 2016, Anne Hamilton Byrne (actually not her real name) is still alive at 95 in a dementia section of an institution.

This is the kind of story we expect out of the United States – but here is a homegrown story, from Melbourne and Victoria, with real children and real adults, and the more shocking in recent times with the revelations about the sexual and physical abuse of children.

GOLD

US, 2016, 121 minutes, Colour.

Matthew Mc Conaughey, Edgar Ramirez, Bryce Dallas Howard, Corey Stoll, Toby Kebbell, Bill Camp, Craig T. Nelson, Macon Blair, Rachel Taylor.

Directed by Stephen Gaghan.

A very straightforward title. It means what it says – or perhaps not! Probably best not to know anything much about the plot to be ready for the ups and downs of the exploration for gold in Indonesia and the business consequences.

The film stars Matthew Mc Conaughey who has been called to lose weight for some roles and for others, putting on weight and keeping it. But that is character he plays, Kenny Wells, son of a wealthy businessman in Reno, Nevada, 1981, and determined to prove himself to his father.

His father's company was for prospecting and that is what enthuses Kenny Wells and drives him to go into action. The screenplay also makes use of the, literal, American dream. Kenny wakes one morning, convinced that he has seen where he will discover gold. He also hears about a prospector-geologist, Michael Acosta, played by Edgar Ramirez, who has a theory about minerals in Southeast Asia. Kenny tracks him down in Jakarta, praises him for his theories, tempts him to start prospecting for gold in the interiors.

It should be said immediately that this is not Indonesia where the film was made – Thailand is standing in.

In their explorations, they find definite traces of gold – but Kenny succumbs to malaria, looked after by Michael who assures him, when he recovers, that they have probably hit the mother lode. While there are a number of sequences in Indonesia, moving backwards and forwards to the US, most of the action takes place in the American business world.

Kenny Wells is also one of those unstoppable enthusiasts, a salesman par excellence and he gets investment for his company. He is a smiler, a talker and an inveterate smoker and, eventually, an inveterate drinker. He has a very loyal working team around, supported by his girlfriend, Kay (Bryce Dallas Howard) who doesn't quite understand his dreams, doesn't quite believe in them but is willing to support them as long as she can.

As successful reports come in, Wall Street becomes interested, Kenny is enthusiastic, does drive a hard bargain but moves on to further success. But he is a stubborn man and is very

wary of big business interests who seem to be willing to squeeze him out.

Just as you think the film is about to end, it doesn't. And that is why it is better to know nothing before going in to see it.

The film announces that it is based on a true story – which sometimes means 'loosely based on' and that is certainly the case here, worth Googling afterwards to find out what actually happened to Kenny Wells and to see what actual events have been incorporated and how the events and characters have been shaped for dramatic purposes, even the final minute!

JACKIE

Chile/ France/ US, 2016, 100 minutes, Colour.

Natalie Portman, Peter Sarsgaard, Greta Gerwig, Billy Crudup, John Hurt, Richard E. Grant, Casper Phillipson, Beth Grant, John Carroll Lynch, Max Casella.

Directed by Pablo Larrain.

Jackie has received quite some critical acclaim.

Older audiences will bring their memories of November 22, 1963 to mind as they watch the film. So powerful was the news of John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas that many people in succeeding years declared that they could remember where they were when they heard the news. The memory of the assassination was initially perpetuated with the killing of assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, by Jack Ruby, the day after the killing – and the consequent decades of conspiracy theories.

Which may mean that younger audiences, for whom this story is history from half a century ago, may not be caught up in the spirit of this portrait of Jacqueline Kennedy in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of her husband, the swearing-in of Lyndon B. Johnson as president, the fears throughout the United States, the uncertainties, and the preparations for the funeral and the actual march from the Capitol to the cathedral.

So, this is a portrait of Jacqueline Kennedy, the rather aristocratically-styled wife of the president (with her strange uppercrust accent), her presence in the car when her husband was shot, cradling him, wearing the pink suit and hat for which she was remembered, smeared in blood. It is a portrait of a woman who bore herself with great dignity, made decisions, along with Robert F Kennedy, about the funeral with great desires about how her husband would be remembered.

The narrative is not straightforward, rather the to-ing and fro-ing, especially in the week of the assassination and its aftermath. There is a principal flashback interspersed throughout the story, the 1961 television program where Jacqueline Kennedy hosted the television audience in a tour of the White House to make it more accessible, "the people's house", with an appearance of her husband at the end of the program. She is rather nervous, being urged to smile by her assistant, Nancy, rather relieved when her husband arrives.

Natalie Portman gives a striking performance as Jackie Kennedy, often very self-contained, introspective, alone with her grief, wandering the White House in a collage of guns and jewellery, to the accompaniment of Richard Burton singing the title song from the musical,

Camelot. She is tender with the children, finding a way to tell Caroline and John that their father has gone to heaven and is with their brother, Patrick. She can also be determined, some emotional clashes with Robert Kennedy about the Kennedys keeping secrets, standing her ground in determining the funeral march against the advice of Johnson's assistant.

The screenplay, by Noah Oppenheimer, writer of popular entertainments like, captures the spirit of the times, the spirit of the Kennedys, some of the social and political issues as well as the personal and spiritual issues. The framework of the film is an interview with a journalist (based on Theodore White who did write a similar article later). He is played by Billy Crudup, attentive, but with many abrasive moments and Jackie trying to determine the way that the article should read.

The screenplay also includes the introduction of a priest confidante, played with robust sympathy by John Hurt, with several intimate conversations between Jackie and the priest, based on the actual Father Richard Mc Sorley, Jackie is able to express her fears, her night thoughts, her wondering about her status, the fact that she had become a Kennedy, wanting to be with her husband – and some practical advice from the priest, about the search for meaning, comforting her that she had received people's compassion, using the Gospel story from John of the man born blind to remind her that God's work is to be revealed in mysterious ways, and finally reassuring her that he had his dark nights, but, like everyone, got up the next morning, had a cup of coffee, continued with life, just enough for us to keep going. There is a very moving sequence towards the end where the priest officiates at the reburial of the two deceased Kennedy children at Arlington.

One of the moving scenes is Jackie leaving the White House in the company of her two children. The film uses some actual television footage of the funeral cortege, Jackie walking behind the horse drawn carriage with the coffin, over a hundred international dignitaries marching behind her.

One of the interesting things about the film is that it was directed by the Chilean director, Pablo Larraín (No, about the Pinochet elections of 1988, the biography of Neruda, the film about erring priests, The Club). As an outsider, as a non-American, he has the advantage of not having a more sentimental feel that an American director might bring.

There is a very good supporting cast led by Peter Skarsgård as Robert Kennedy, Greta Gerwig as Nancy, John Carol Lynch as Lyndon Johnson.

In the film Jackie Kennedy is very conscious of the heritage of Abraham Lincoln, the role of his wife, Mary Todd, wondering what the future will remember about her husband, while Robert Kennedy ponders on all that they might have done had they had the time power in the cut-short Kennedy Camelot.

LIVE BY NIGHT

US, 2016, 129 minutes, Colour.

Ben Affleck, Elle Fanning, Remo Girone, Brendan Gleeson, Robert Glenister, Matthew Maher, Chris Messina, Sienna Miller, Zoe Saldana, Chris Cooper, Titus Welliver, Max Casella.

Directed by Ben Affleck.

There has been a long tradition of gangster films, beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s when the action of this film takes place. Most of these films were set in cities like Chicago and in the midwest, the Al Capone tradition, Texas outlaws and the robbing of banks in the West like Bonnie and Clyde. This film is of particular interest because it is about gangsters in Boston, Florida and the East Coast.

Something to commend it at once is that it is based on a novel by Dennis Lehane. There have been film versions of his novels, *Mystic River*, *Gone Baby Gone*, *Shutter Island*. This one has been adapted by Ben Affleck who serves as writer, director, producer and the main star. Affleck has proven his directing skills with *Gone Baby Gone*, *The Town* and *Argo*.

This is a more thoughtful gangster film, giving the audience time to experience the situations and background, get to know the characters and try to understand them, time for a bit of reflection – which might mean that those who prefer chases and shootouts (and, in fact, there are some) feeling a bit impatient.

Ben Affleck plays Joe, the narrator, who in the prologue, explains that he went to fight in France in World War I and came back determined not to take orders in life any more. When we see his father, a police Commissioner played strongly by Brendan Gleeson, we understand that family and the war experience have had a strong influence on Joe. Small robberies are the order of the day. It comes to the attention of the Boston Irish Mafia as well as the Boston Italian Mafia, complicating things by an affair with the girlfriend of the Irish boss, Sienna Miller.

In one of the robberies and chases, policemen are killed so Joe goes to jail, responding to an offer he finds he cannot refuse from the Italians – which leads him to Tampa, Florida, quite a contrast in sunlight and heat from the chill of Boston. He goes with his friend and ally, Dion (Chris Messina) and, they make more of a go of it given the clients, the bootlegging, the money coming in and sent to Massachusetts, and the prospect of building a casino. Tampa is something of a backwater compared with Miami but it is Joe's kingdom. He falls in love with a local Hispanic girl, Graciela, Zoe Saldana.

One of the consequences of Joe's success has a touch of revenge in damaging the interests of the Irish Mafia in Miami.

One of the interesting sub-plots concerns the police chief of Tampa, Chris Cooper, his young daughter being invited to Hollywood for a screen test, Elle Fanning, and her disastrous experience there, coming back and becoming an evangelist against corruption, always dressed in white, a tent preacher with big congregations, and her denunciation of gambling and casinos.

Which, of course, leads to difficulties for Joe, the building of the local casino and investment from local bankers, the powers that be in Boston not taking at all lightly. And there are further complications with the local Ku Klux Klan, with crosses of fire planted outside the bars, negotiations and betrayals with the Klan leaders, and a build up to violence all round – and Joe using his wits but having to make decisions for his future.

The film is quite long but always interesting, though not the kind of Scorsese gangster portrait that tends to set the screen alight. But, this dramatising of US East Coast gangsters makes its mark.

MANCHESTER BY THE SEA

US, 2016, 137 minutes, Colour.

Casey Affleck, Lucas Hedges, Michelle Williams, Kyle Chandler, Tate Donovan, Josh Hamilton, Gretchen Moll, Matthew Broderick.

Directed by Kenneth Lonergan.

Writer-director Kenneth Lonergan must have a great love for Manchester -by -the- Sea, a fishing town on the Massachusetts coast – even during the credits he has many loving shots of the water, the islands, the coast as well as the town itself. He is able to communicate the atmosphere of the small town and its life – and its place by the sea.

This is a very moving film, a very humane film which ordinary audiences can readily identify with.

This is the story of Lee Chandler, one of his very best performances from Casey Affleck who anchors what is quite a long film. We find him as a handyman working in Boston, able in his maintenance jobs but subject to criticism and clash with clients, sometimes more than a touch abrasive. He lives alone. He drinks alone in bars. He sometimes breaks out in anger and brawling. As yet, we don't really know how he ticks, what motivates him.

The next step in the narrative is his getting the news that his older brother, Joe (Kyle Chandler) has died from heart disease. Lee has to go to the hospital in neighbouring Beverly to see his brother and then arrange funeral matters, and then to Manchester to see Joe's son, Patrick (Lucas Hedges), a great favourite with his Uncle Lee.

As Lee drives we begin a series of flashbacks which gradually reveal the family story, Lee's marriage to Randi and their three children, Lee and his fondness for Patrick and their expeditions on the fishing boat at sea with Joe and his partner, George. We find that the family had known that Joe had a heart condition but that his wife (Gretchen Moll) could not deal with this, was alcoholic and walked out.

Gradually the film builds up the portrait of Lee, giving the audience a sudden shock when it is revealed what has damaged Lee and his wife and caused their separation.

The film is also a portrait of Patrick, a 16-year-old, sometimes on the aggressive side at hockey practice, fancying himself with the girls, in fact having two in tow and wanting his uncle to keep his secrets safe. Patrick finds it difficult to express his grief – and is particularly upset because it is winter, the ground too hard to dig a grave and so his father will have to be kept in a freezer in the morgue.

But it is the issue of what is to happen to Patrick with his father's death, contact with his mother or not, Lee becoming his guardian as his brother wanted him to, even providing the finance for support, the house, the boat, but Lee very hesitant and wanting to go back to Boston, not wanting to stay in Manchester, and Patrick wanting to stay in the town which he knows well and with all his friends.

The acting is very strong with the two central leads but also with Michelle Williams having

some very telling scenes as Lee's wife, Randi.

The screenplay is down-to-earth (with quite a lot of contemporary swearing) but also has insight into human nature, feelings and emotions, conflicts and the need for decision-making.

Considered one of the best films from the US in 2016 – much to commend it.

MIDDLE SCHOOL, THE WORSE YEARS OF MY LIFE

US, 2016, 92 minutes, Colour.

Griffin Gluck, Lauren Graham, Alexa Nisenson, Andy Daly, Rob Riggle, Thomas Barbusca, Retta, Adam Pally, Jacob Hopkins.

Directed by Steve Carr.

It might be more than a bit of a shock for those who read James Patterson's popular thrillers to find his name associated with this film, on which he serves as one of the executive producers. But, it is a screen version of one of his many collaborations, written for younger audiences.

With this said, older audiences may find it something of a trying experience to sit through. On the other hand, quite number of bloggers have use the unexpected word "endearing" to describe it.

Our hero, Rafe (Griffin Gluck) is a 12-year-old who has been in all kinds of trouble at different schools and is now being sent to the last one possible by his loving but exasperated mother, Lauren Graham. They and the little sister, Georgia, are still grieving the death of Eric, younger than Rafe, who has had a terminal illness and has died (not stopping him reappearing in his brother's fantasies, collaborating with him and egging him on).

There is an impossible headmaster, full of himself (even full if that were possible), played to the hilt by Andy Daly, who is a prissy enforcer of the rules, enshrined in a book which he liberally hands out. His vice principal shares his rule-bound perspective and is a formidable-looking lady.

Things go badly for Rafe, especially when his book of drawings (of the graphic novel type) is handed around at the assembly to everybody's laughter. The principal burdens his book. What else is a spirited young lad to do in such a situation – write down a list of the rules, determined to break every one of them before the external exam sitting, an enormous project of elaborate pranks, which take up the most part of the film.

Other characters include the mother's potential boyfriend, Rob Riggle, an absolutely full of himself twit – who also, of course, gets the prank treatment. There is a sympathetic teacher who encourages his students to think – but who gets fired by the school principal. There is also an enterprising little girl who campaigns to be on a committee (with Rafe defying conventions and standing up and applauding her campaign speech), who comes to the rescue at the end, along with a put upon janitor, to expose the headmaster and get prank issue revenge.

So, if you like this kind of thing... A young audience might enjoy 90 minutes of vicarious rebellion (which one reviewer referred to as learning to be creative!) But, probably, whoa be tied any of them should they try to put any of these pranks into practice!

MOANA

US, 2016, 107 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Auli'i Cravalho, Dwayne Johnson, Rachel House, Temuera Morrison, Jemaine Clement, Alan Tudyk.

Directed by Ron Clement, Don Hall.

Over the last few decades, the Disney studios have been concentrating on princesses or the equivalent of princesses in their animation films, from *The Little Mermaid* at the end of the 1980s, to *Beauty and the Beast*, *Mulan*, to the great success of *Frozen*. Here is the next contender, *Moana*.

Moana is a Polynesian name and the film draws on aspects of Polynesian mythology, life in the Pacific Islands, the Polynesians as voyagers. She is a young girl, part of village life, with her parents and a wise grandmother. But, she also goes on a quest.

With aspects of creation stories, and symbols for life, especially in the heart, Moana wants to contact the great hero, Maui, who will help to restore life and order. Although she is not supposed to, she gets the boat and leaves on her quest, her only company being a rooster who is there as the inevitable bird or animal companion but, unfortunately, is too stupid to be really funny, despite a whole lot of efforts.

Storms, boat overturning, but with help from the life-spirit of the ocean, she eventually is stranded on an island where she finds Maui. Maui is of traditional Polynesian build, big and solid, which gives plenty of space for the range of tattoos all over his body, giving the narrative of his exploits, his participation in creation – and, at many times, the various panels coming to enjoyable animated life.

He is voiced by Dwayne Johnson, himself with some Polynesian background, often sending himself up, bursting into a song, *You're Welcome*, with some comic episodes, but, having been stranded on his island for 1000 years, he is eager to get away and not eager to help Moana.

By hook or by crook (and Maui's quest is to find again his spirited hook), he and Moana share quite a number of adventures (and the rooster is still there!). They encounter some mini-creatures with big ships and poisoned darts who capture the heart that Moana has been wearing around her neck, but she shows that she has the warrior touch as well. Oh, and she also has some songs – and so does the spirit of her Grandmother.

There is quite an adventure at what seems a high island, whose cliffs Moana can scale more quickly than Maui, but then a huge central core-hole where Maui finds his hook but they have to deal with this big crustacean, a bejewelled sea creature, who also sings with the voice of Jemaine Clement. It might be good to note here that the credits are very very long and one can listen to the music because Jemaine Clement's Shiny creature has another minute at the very end of the film!

There is also the Lava Island, with a sinister dark giant creature that they have to confront, Moana standing firm, Maui helping on and off and then disappearing.

It's not a spoiler to say that everything turns out well for the island, its new life, for Moana and her family in the village, and for restored hero, Maui.

MONSTER TRUCKS

US, 2016, 105 minutes, Colour.

Lucas Till, Jane Levy, Rob Lowe, Danny Glover, Amy Ryan, Barry Pepper, Holt Mc Allany.
Directed by Chris Wedge.

With a title like Monster Truck, it seemed as if this would be an animation film, Monsters Inc... However, it is a live-action show – although it plays very much in the vein of an animation film. Its target audience would be children and teenagers.

Ultimately, there is a message very much in favour of the environment, the impact of drilling, discoveries in the various levels under the surface of the earth, business exploitation, lies and cover-ups. Rob Lowe is the arch-villain, manager of a drilling company, hiring yes-men as scientific advisors as well as thugs to do his dirty work. When he gives the go-ahead to keep drilling despite warnings and dangers, much of his enterprise goes up in explosions. But, the real surprise is that in hitting an underground water level, he brings prehistoric creatures to the surface!

In the meantime, Trip (Lucas Till) lives with his mother, goes to school where there is a rivalry with a rich kid with a big rich vehicle, a very serious-minded science student (Jane Levy), and an eye being kept on him by the local sheriff (Barry Pepper) who is rather keen on Trip's mother. There is also an agreeable old man (Danny Glover) who runs a local garage and vehicle destruction enterprise.

The main action is a kind of variation on Free Willy, one of the rather large creatures, looks like an early dolphin but has octopus tentacles, quite large. But, it is rather endearing in its behaviour, hiding from the boss's thugs under a truck, squeezing itself into the truck itself and, with energy and speed, can outrun any vehicle and any monster truck!

Which sets the scene for the adventures to come as well as the action stunts and special effects.

When it is discovered that there are several other creatures in the boss's captivity, looked after by a meek scientist, Thomas Lennon, who has a change of heart, of course, and wants to participate in the freedom of the creatures and return them home to the earth's depths.

This requires the reconditioning of several vehicles, with the help of the old man as well as one of Trip's friends, son of a wealthy car dealer. And, when all is ready, there is a huge chase through the mountains, the creatures powering the vehicles, barriers put across the highways, huge leaps, characters dangling from open doors – but nothing like a big tentacle to remedy the situation!

It all builds up to a huge confrontation, the creatures going back home into their deep hole,

Trip falling in but, perhaps this is a spoiler alert but everybody will be ready for it, the benign creatures saving him and restoring him to mother, sheriff, girlfriend, and a happy life because his contribution to saving the world!

MOONLIGHT

US, 2016, 111 minutes, Colour.

Alex R. Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, Trevante Rhodes, Mahershala Ali, Naomie Harris, Janelle Monae, Andre Holland.

Directed by Barry Jenkins.

The preview was in the morning and, that afternoon, news that Moonlight had won the Golden Globe for Best film, Drama. It had some strong competition but it is a compelling film.

Much of the setting is familiar to moviegoers, especially the films from the 1990s showing poverty, drug deals, the experience of racism, life in the hood. While this is the setting for Moonlight, the audience is invited to look at situations, characters and issues from a different, more humane, perspective.

This is the story of Chiron, told in three chapters, with three different actors taking the role of the boy (Alex R. Herbert), the teenager (Ashton Sanders), the man (Travante Rhodes) -one difficulty being that the actor portraying the teenager seems more slight physically than expected and not the kind of frame that could bulk up to the adult Chiron. There are three chapters: Little which is the nickname for the boy, Chiron which is his name, Black which is the nickname given to him by his friend, Kevin.

The city is Miami, some ventures into the centre of the city downtown but by and large life in the suburbs, the African-American? suburbs (the only white characters in the film seen at the end in the diner where Kevin works as chef).

Chiron is a quiet boy, particularly reticent, even speaking few words when he is encouraged. He is bullied by the boys at school, chased, stones thrown at windows... He lives with his mother, Paula, a persuasive Naomie Harris, who is a drug addict and treats her son angrily, not showing any affection.

One of the best things that happens to Chiron is that Juan, a drug dealer, finds him in an abandoned house and befriends him, taking him home, Juan's girlfriend, Teresa, able to coax him to speak. Juan, a very sympathetic Mahershala Ali, becomes the father Chiron never had, affectionate, interested, with a wonderful scene where he enable Chiron to trust him and to learn to float and to swim.

It is Juan who explains the title: Juan is from Cuba where he was told that black skin in the moonlight looks blue.

One of the aspects of the bullies is that they call the little boy faggot.

The teenage Chiron goes to school and the bullying continues, brutally physical at times, even getting Kevin to punch his friend. Chiron's mother is still the same, and Teresa is the

continued support. Chiron's reticence is still characteristic and his wondering about his identity, his sexuality – dramatised very quietly by a scene with Kevin on the beach.

The third part of the film takes place 10 years later, Chiron having been in prison, bulked up, and really assuming the character and role of Juan. The main drama of this section includes a visit to his mother in rehab and some kind of reconciliation and a tear. But, it is also the friendship with Kevin, a phone call, a visit, a meal, the lyrics of a song, remembrance of the past – and the openness for a future.

Director Barry Jenkins has created a film that is always interesting, that is very moving, that has touches of poetry, and a humanity that we may not have been expecting.

OPERATION AVALANCHE

US, 2016, 94 minutes, Colour.

Matt Johnson, Owen Williams, Josh Bowles, Andrew Appelle.

Directed by Matt Johnson.

Operation Avalanche is an enjoyably jokey film, capitalising on American propensities for conspiracy theories.

The film was written and directed by Matt Johnson along with his friend, Owen Williams, the two responsible for the small-budget, satiric Canadian film on film-making, *The Dirties*.

The film takes back to the 1960s, with two very earnest young men completing their college degrees, going to work for the CIA. It is the post-Kennedy era. In fact, the film uses a great deal of actual footage on JFK, NASA, incorporating it neatly into the film. The film also capitalises on aspects of the documentary genre, with handheld camera and the suggestion that the action is caught immediately as it happens.

The two men decide to infiltrate NASA because of the possibility of there being a mole feeding information to the Russians. There is a paranoid atmosphere, even suggesting that Stanley Kubrick be investigated because of *Dr Strangelove*. And they learn of cinema techniques to use watching the filming of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

With Kennedy's ambition of the United States reaching the moon, the two young men offer the possibilities for faking a moon landing (later the theme of the thriller *Capricorn One*) and there is a great detail of how they go about this, successes and failures, involvement of other persons.

There is also satire on those in charge, on potential moles, but getting very serious when the family of one of the partners is threatened. There is a final pursuit in the desert, a serious touch on the result of conspiracy shenanigans.

All in all, the film is very amusing, especially for outsiders who are critical of Americans and the preposterous background of faking a moon landing to save America's reputation in case of failure.

PATRIOTS DAY

US, 2016, 133 minutes, Colour.

Mark Wahlberg, Kevin Bacon, John Goodman, J.K. Simmons, Michelle Monaghan, Christopher O' Shea, Rachel Brosnahan, Jimmy O. Yang, Melissa Benoist, Alex Wolff, Themo Melikidze, Michael Beach.

Directed by Peter Berg.

It is sometimes surprising how quickly actual events make their way to a big budget film, especially in the US. Patriots' Day, the story of the Boston Marathon of 2013, the terrorists who planted explosives, killing and injuring bystanders, and putting the city of Boston into lockdown during the pursuit of the perpetrators.

Some commentators say that this kind of thing is opportunistic, taking advantage of the opportunity. However, this film is very careful to draw on actual characters and aspects of the events, especially with the real characters appearing at the end of the film discussing the issues, the police, the FBI investigator, and a young couple both of whom were injured, treated in different hospitals, had a leg amputated. The film then offers tributes to those who acted in heroic ways.

But, for the drama's sake, the central character is a fictitious policeman, drawing on various characters on the day and its aftermath. Perhaps Ben Affleck and Matt Damon were not available for the film but Boston's other famous son, Mark Wahlberg, plays the policeman. While the screenplay follows him, his character, his involvement, his contribution to the apprehension of the terrorists, there is quite a lot more going on. But, his story gets the audience in the mood, seeing him involved in a raid, injuring his leg on a recalcitrant door, his time in hospital, his love for his wife, Michelle Monaghan, his relationship with the police chief, John Goodman, and his being ragged by his fellow police because of his rather challenging attitude towards authority. On the day, he is on duty, joked about because of his uniform looking like a crossing guard, at the finishing line.

The film holds the attention – but, in some ways, it is several films in one.

The first part of the film is really Boston's preparation for the marathon, the logistics of setting up the route, the officials and their role, the assembling of the runners, the role of security, the crowds arriving, the running...

The screenplay uses the device of signalling on-screen the particular times on the day of the marathon, and then listing the hours that have passed since the explosions, over a period of several days. This also gives the opportunity to introduce a range of characters, police, Mayor, Massachusetts Governor, the runners, the young couple who were to be injured – and, especially, the brothers, the terrorists, at home, with the family, breakfast, the packing of the explosives and their setting out on their mission.

Then there is the terrorism, the explosions, the uncertainties, the fear, the reaction of the crowds, the visuals of those injured, a policeman standing guard for the day over the covered body of a young boy, the ambulances, the work in hospitals, the pressures and difficulties, amputations.

While local police are involved in the investigations, it becomes a task for the FBI, Kevin

Bacon as the official in charge, rather stony-faced (especially in comparison with the more genial real person who appears at the end of the film). The investigation is shown in quite some detail, taking over a warehouse, the drawing of the route on the floor, individual officers involved in scanning CCTV. Mark Wahlberg gets a chance to become involved when it is pointed out that he is an expert in knowledge of the local streets – and it is intriguing to watch his suggestions about the route of the suspects, who are glimpsed on CCTV with their black cap, white cap, and where they might have walked from, how much time, looking to the next camera and tracing their route.

The investigation continues during the next phase of the film which is the pursuit of the criminals themselves, their packing up, their plan to go to New York for more explosions, their taking a car, driving to Watertown with the role of the police there, and J. K. Simmons in charge. The terrorists take a hostage from the street, a young Chinese-American² (and this actually happened), who was able to get out of the car, hide in a supermarket while the younger terrorist is buying food, and phoning the authorities. There is a huge shootout in the street and the older brother is killed.

The younger brother disappears and, those familiar with the story, may remember that he hid for several days in the suburbs under a tarpaulin covering a boat in the yard, ultimately caught and, again, a shootout. In the meantime, there is also an interesting episode where the wife of the terrorist is brought in for questioning, a very tough interrogator respecting Muslim dress and manners but extremely menacing nonetheless.

In an era of terrorism, it is interesting, if often distressing, to see the re-creations of these well-known episodes. The Boston experience was not as dire as the terrorism in Paris, Brussels, Nice, Istanbul, Berlin..., but significant nonetheless, especially the terrorism on US soil after 911. Many audiences may be thinking – and at one moment the screenplay makes this explicit – that people in war-ravaged countries, especially Syria, experience this kind of devastation day by day, more extremely so, the effects on individuals, families, injuries and deaths, destruction of buildings, and the extraordinary demands made on doctors, nurses and medical personnel. Sobering.

PERFECT STRANGERS/ PERFETTI SCONOSCIUTI

Italy, 2016, 97 minutes, Colour.

Giuseppe Battiston, Anna Foglietta, Marco Giallini, Edoardo Leo, Alba Rohrwacher, Valerio Mastandrea, Kasia Smutniak, Benedetta Porcaroli.

Directed by Paulo Genovese.

Any film with the title, Perfect Strangers, is more than likely to be about people who think that they know each other, who are friends, but discover, as with the Italian title of the film, they are completely unknown to each other, even if they have been part of each other's lives since childhood.

The main part of this comedy drama is a meal, the hosts, Rocco and Eva, he a surgeon, specialising in mammary operations, she a psychiatrist – though failing dismally with her teenage daughter with whom she angrily clashes; a newly married couple, Cosimo and Bianca, he a taxi driver after failing in many jobs, she feeling initially an outsider to the group but at last feeling part of it; long married couple with two children at home plus the

mother-in-law, he seen sitting morosely on the toilet before leaving, she fussy and taking off her panties before setting out, something of significance later in the film; the last guest is Peppe, who turns up late without his partner.

Having introduced the characters, the film spends almost all of its time at the dinner. This is a good ensemble piece, the ensemble cast working very well together and off each other. All seems happy and chatty at first. Then Eva, perhaps from some deep psychological motivation, suggests they play a game, everyone putting their mobile phone on the dinner table and, allowing everybody to listen in to the call on speaker. Potential for jokes and for some serious trouble – the potential from secrets and lies.

There are some ordinary calls but things get more difficult as the meal progresses. One of the moving calls is from the angry daughter phoning her father about her date, about the possibility of a sexual encounter with her boyfriend, condoms – and the father giving some sage advice for her to make her own decision but offering many factors for her to take into consideration. The problem with the mother-in-law arises, a nursing home ringing to offer a place, much to the upset of her son.

One of the biggest complications comes when Lele confides in Peppe that he is expecting a call at 10 o'clock, a provocative photo from a woman friend and he asks Peppe to change phones with him, and claim the photo. One of the consequences is that there is more embarrassment for Lele in answering the phone calls for Pepe, a relationship that no one at the table was expecting and Lele becoming more and more awkward in covering for Peppe.

Cosimo has seen something of a man about town and that is certainly true of the phone calls that he receives, upsetting Bianca and mystifying one or other of the guests.

Dialogue, of course, is most important for the film, and it is very well written, sharp, humorous, sometimes biting, with much underlying seriousness. One of the difficulties is that as the film closes, fairly rapidly, one has to pay quite a deal of attention to work out whether there is any forgiveness, understanding, further deception... The other advantage of the film is the editing so that there is a judicious focus on the person talking and then judicious focus on the listeners, which means that the audience is comfortable, having been given enough opportunity to understand the characters speaking as well as gauge reactions.

The film has won many awards, especially in Italy, but the troubles of an ordinary range of 40-somethings will resonate with many audiences around the world.

RESIDENT EVIL: THE FINAL CHAPTER

US, 2016, 106 minutes, Colour.

Milla Jovovich, Iain Glen, Ali Larter, Shawn Roberts, Ruby Rose.

Directed by Paul W. S. Anderson.

Back in 2002, with the release of the first Resident Evil film, directed by Paul W.S. Anderson and starring Milla Jovovich who was soon to become his real-life wife, no one would have necessarily predicted that there would be a sequel, let alone five films in the franchise over a period of almost 15 years. So, Resident evil, and the computer games, have been very successful commercially and with fans.

It is always a bit ominous when a film announces that it is the final chapter.

This film opens with quite an explanation of the background from some of the previous films, always showing the ambitious technical company, Umbrella, and this time a focus on the scientist and his little girl who became ill, his quest to find a cure for her, the consequences for her – and for his unscrupulous partner, Dr Isaacs, Iain Glen who appeared in a number of the previous films. Dr Isaacs – and there are some clones of him as well – is an arch-villain with no redeeming qualities.

So, Alice, the superhero type from the previous films is given a mission. There is an anti-virus which could heal all those infected and transform the world in order for it to grow again. Alice, in Washington, and dealing with monsters leaping out at her (as we leap out of the seat), then with a giant Dragon, then evading the undead, is advised to go to the headquarters of Umbrella, retrieve the antivirus and save the world.

Then Alice is on the road, unwittingly encountering obstacles, the undead in pursuit, conflict with Dr Isaacs but thwarting him, getting a motorbike, and arriving to gather some of the faithful from the previous films to support her (and, of course, there is a traitor amongst them).

Alice is superhuman and she has to go through all kinds of superhuman feats, from human attack, from technological attack – and the audience sometimes wondering who built all these extraordinary, vast underground what they call “facilities” – where did they get the material, who did the building, who installed the technology, how were they kept secret...? But that is a distraction from the adrenaline-pumping action, near-death experiences, the loss of some of her allies, and an eventual fight, or fights, with Dr Isaacs.

Alice learns a lot about herself, her background, cloned characters who have no memories but she encounters the ailing little girl now prematurely aged (some very effective make up for Milla Jovovich in this role) and, of course, a rapidly shortening deadline for her to achieve her mission.

For the biblically minded, in this post-apocalyptic world which needs to be saved, the saviour figure does come to mind, more explicitly when Alice is advised by those close to her that she will have to lay down her life (after such superhuman suffering which does make The Passion of the Christ look milder). So, she opts for passion and death. The biblical distraction of course is resurrection and – spoiler! – because she has committed herself to die for others, she experiences resurrection and graces the world in releasing the antivirus. Whether Paul W.S.Anderson is biblically-minded, who knows? But, certainly, the gospel outline and its many secular variations are quite archetypal.

So, resurrection. Is this really the final chapter? As regards movie sequels, there is nothing against reincarnation!

SPLIT

US, 2016, 117 minutes, Colour.

James Mc Avoy, Anya Taylor Joy, Betty Buckley, Hayley Lu Richardson, Jessica Sula, Brad W. Henke, M. Night Shyamalan.

Directed by M. Night Shyamalan.

Dissociative Identity Disorder, D.I.D., is also known as Multiple Personality Disorder. Most of us do not know people suffering from this disorder. Rather, we get some ideas from films such as *The Three Faces of Eve* or *Sibyl*. What we have now is *Split*, a 21st-century version of D.I.D., the portrait of a character who has, at least 23 different personalities, one more emerging at the end of the film.

There is always a difficulty in making this kind of film, the danger of sensationalising a situation. However, the screenplay takes some pains here to explain the disorder as well as show a therapist working with the patient, alert to the different manifestations. Being a movie, it also dramatises, even melodramatises the character and situations – with the realisation that “it’s only a movie”.

The film has been written and directed by M. Night Shyamalan who came to audience attention in 1999 with what is now a classic, *The Sixth Sense*, with Bruce Willis. The director continued to pursue stories that involved touches of the preternatural including *Unbreakable*, *Signs*, *The Village* – and then falling out of favour with critics until his most recent film, *The Visit*. (He also has a cameo role for himself in each film, here working with the therapist and surveillance screens.)

What makes *Split* a very effective and rather eerie experience of the disorder is the performance by James McAvoy. Not all the personalities are shown during the film but there is a sufficient variety for McAvoy² to make them quite different, appearance, accent, way of communication, sometimes a sense of menace.

And this is all presented in the context of an abduction, three girls taken from a car in a supermarket parking lot, finding themselves confined to what looks like the equivalent of a concrete cell.

Clearly, there is a lot of tension as the girls struggle against their confinement and encounter the different personalities, the most significant of which is a man called Dennis, bespectacled, absolutely obsessive about order and cleanliness, who also seems to be in control of the other personalities (who do not necessarily know of one another). There are two main contrasts, Barry, a fashion designer with a camp manner who is generally the one shown with the therapist, Dr Fletcher (Betty Buckley). There is also a Miss Patricia who also seems to be in some kind of control and, by contrast, a nine-year-old giggler called Hedwig.

On the one hand, there is the emphasis on the girls and how they deal with their situation and the possibilities for escape, especially a girl called Casey (Anya Taylor Joy), more strong-minded than the other two – who is given more complexity by having flashbacks inserted throughout the film to her childhood, her hunter father with guns and a dead deer, to her somewhat sinister uncle.

The film builds up to a climax, a clash of personalities, leaving the audience to ponder what they have seen and the realities of D.I.D. (There is a twist, with a touch of the facetious and shifting the mood of the film, in the last minute, which will please some but have many audiences puzzled.)

xXx: THE RETURN OF XANDER CAGE

US, 2016, 107 minutes, Colour.

Vin Diesel, Donnie Yen, Toni Collette, Samuel L. Jackson, Ice Cube, Deepika Padukone, Kris Wu, Ruby Rose, Tony Jaa, Nina Dobrev, Rory Mc Cann.

Directed by D.J. Caruso.

Satellites circling the Earth, one catching fire, plunging down into Hong Kong, enveloping Samuel L. Jackson in flames – action-packed beginning and, by and large, it doesn't let up, certainly a strong fix for any adrenaline junkies. Then there is an extraordinary raid on a CIA meeting, athletic agents leaping from building to building, using all kinds of martial arts techniques, shootouts, rather large body count, except for Toni Collette as the steely and ruthless head of the xXx program once presided over by Samuel L. Jackson.

By this stage, the word that leaps to mind is “absurd” – and that really doesn't go away. And, while there is a focus on an American intelligence agency, “intelligent” is not a word that leaps to mind.

Then there is Vin Diesel high on the transmission tower in the Dominican Republic, set upon by military, leaping off the tower, going down a cliff, landing with skateboards on rough terrain, down the mountains, eluding pursuit, and why? Because the authorities had switched off transmission for the television play of a football match – the gratitude of a nation!

And, on it goes, with Xander Cage (absent from the last xXx adventure with Ice Cube – spoiler, he does make a reappearance!) with Cage being hired by Toni Collette to track down Pandora's Box, a device to control satellites and make them crash.

And, where is the gang who stole the books in the first place – in the Philippines! So, off to the Philippines, the whole area of illegal action that President Duterte might care to look into, and then, some more slam bang action as the military attack, Toni Collette in command. Despite the fact that most of the characters are introduced with some information, generally of a sardonically comic kind, ordinary citizens may find it very difficult to work out who exactly is who and on whose side they are, especially as a number of them change sides throughout the film!

And then on to London.

Cage is not very happy with Toni Collette and the military types that she has organised as his backup, so what is he to do! Bind them altogether, open the rear door of the plane and let them fall out... Fortunately, or unfortunately, they survive which makes them available for a final confrontation with Cage (spoiler – which they lose). This was unexpected as they thought they had shot him but nothing like some good body armour – and he goes out the back of the plane hanging onto a box and just releasing the parachute in time for a safe landing.

Actually, he recruits his own team, including a very tough woman who is on safari in Africa with lions in her sight but actually firing at hunters and poachers. She has an opportunity for some very accurate firing. Then there is the computer nerd, a pleasantly comic and attractive character who, to her final satisfaction, does get to handle a machine gun. Enjoyable is the big stunt driver, a Scotsman, who is desperate to chalk up his 200th crash, get it on video –

and achieves it in spectacular stunt work.

The film is been financed by Shanghai movie company so Donnie Yen is there (after his turn in Rogue One) and Thai champion Tony Jaa, blonde haired and athletic, gets a chance to be active.

There is, of course, a political twist at the end, and a dramatic twist which indicates that you really can't kill off an important security figure.

If this film makes money, and that will depend on the fans and their acceptance of the credibility of plot and characters, which is dubious, then there will be the return of the return of Xander Cage.

A STREET CAT NAMED BOB

UK, 2016, 103 minutes, Colour.

Luke Treadaway, Bob the Cat, Joanne Froggatt, Ruta Gedmintas, Anthony Head, Darren Evans, Caroline Goodall, Ruth Sheen.

Directed by Roger Spottiswoode.

Anyone who is unfamiliar with the books on which this film is based may perceive the title as one of those life on the streets, cool and mod, in an American city. Not in the least!

The Bob of the title is actually a cat, a London cat, a ginger cat, whose destiny seems to be to charm absolutely everyone, even those who are a bit averse to cats.

The film is based on books by a drug addict, James Bowen, who overcame his problems, especially with the friendship and support of Bob the cat. It should be mentioned that Bob appears as himself although there are quite a number of stand ins as well. There are quite a few photos of the real James and actual Bob during the final credits of the film – enabling an emotional response for a final time. Luke Treadaway is convincing in the role.

Actually, the film is doing two things. By focusing on Bob, it invites the ordinary audience to watch the film, to enjoy watching Bob and his behaviour, his bonding with James. James tried to raise some money by busking in the city of London, especially around Covent Garden. After he discovers Bob as an intruder in his house, Bob bonds with him, especially after visits to the vet and care for him, and plenty of food – but not the mouse who lurks behind the wall! He follows James out of the house, onto a bus which leads to James carrying Bob on his shoulders everywhere and Bob sitting, being attentive, as James sings. When the crowds gather, listening to James but looking at Bob, there are quite a lot of donations – and umpteen photos.

When James loses his job, unjustly, he is able to get more work by selling The Big Issue, the heads realising that Bob is a wonderful marketing opportunity, that for all those who want to have a photo with Bob, the payment is buying an issue of The Big Issue.

There are some jealousies and poor James finds himself again in a fix, a month with no income, his pile of coins steadily going down, himself hungry, and Bob pacing also hungry. Eventually, there is another scuffle in the city and Bob is chased by a dog, absent for days,

James pining...

For those engrossed by the cat, they are introduced to another story, a story of emotions, a broken family, a young boy becoming an addict, desperation of life on the streets, attempted busking, encounters with his father who has merit again and has a family, the trust of a social worker and entry into a methadone program, the risks of failure, the agony and days of withdrawal from methadone.

While Bob is a support, a neighbour who works as a vet, Betty Ruta Gedmintas, is also a great help to James, though shocked when she discovers that he is part of the methadone program, upset because her addict brother had died. There are glimpses of other addicts, an overdose in the streets, the dealers who stand on street corners in the suburbs.

The aim of the books on which the film is based was to attract readers who like a feelgood story as well as their experiencing of what it felt for an addict to feel bad. Audiences who may not be all that keen on cats will appreciate it but sit back and try to emphasise with the cat lovers who become absolutely absorbed.

TONI ERDMANN

Germany, 2015, 162 minutes, Colour.

Peter Simonischek, Sandra Huller.

Directed by Maran Ade.

Toni Erdmann turned out to be a very popular comedy drama in its native Germany as well as at festivals and overseas release. It has also won major awards.

Toni Erdmann is a made up name by the central character, a man who is growing older, lives by himself, is prone to practical jokes which immediately emerge when a postal deliverer arrives at his door with a parcel and Toni Erdmann pretends to have a dialogue with a made up brother, talks about his expertise in explosives, scaring the deliverer. He then makes up his face with bizarre, somewhat clown-like make up, puts in a set of upper false teeth which recur often during the film and then goes to visit his ex-wife and her husband as well as his mother, then going to a school performance for which he had put on the make up and very quickly we get some idea of who he is.

But the other principal character of the film is his daughter, Ines, a very successful business woman, a driven woman who acts as a consultant, going to Shanghai, living in Bucharest, giving advice to business heads for restructuring (which runs the risk of a lot of retrenchment of jobs). She has a very limited relationship with her father who unexpectedly turns up in Bucharest and starts to change her life.

While the film shows the tongue-in-cheek humorous side of the story, it also focuses on the very serious side, the life of the young woman, her playing up shrewdly to authority figures, going to socials to smooth the course, running the risk of clashing with bosses even though she wants to please them.

Much of the comedy of the film is in the dialogue from Toni as well as his constant turning up, surprising everyone, including the audience. The serious side comes from Ines and her

trying to deal with her father, farewelling him but his unexpectedly turning up again and having to keep up the charade that he was a visiting coaching expert. This leads to encounters with a group of her women friends, his suggesting to a woman who runs a charity that he was the German ambassador and whom he later encounters, accompanying his daughter on a difficult diplomatic mission to consult with an oil company manager.

It is not always clear where the story is going – the audiences probably have hopes that the father will transform his daughter. There are two special sequences where something of this happens, his taking his daughter to the charity where children paint eggs and then urging her to do a Whitney Houston, and her belting out the song, The Greatest Love of All, brings some kind of release. And when she has a birthday party, she decides that it will be a naked party which has very different effects on her guests – and then her father turns up disguised as a giant mammoth.

Peter Simonischek is thoroughly persuasive as the father and Sandra Huller is convincing as the driven business woman. Though, there is quite a moral message about authenticity and life and not being crushed by being driven in the business world, it is communicated with a great deal of humour.

REVIEWS BERLINALE 2017

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WILD MOUSE/ WILDE MAUS

ANA, MON AMOUR (Competition)

Romania, 2017, 136 minutes, Colour.
Mircea Postelnicu, Diana Cavallioti.
Directed by Calin Peter Netzer.

During the last decade or more, some excellent films have emerged from Romania, impressive in their stories and the treatment, winning many international awards. This film is in that tradition

In many ways it is a small story, though the running time of the film is well over two hours. It is presented in a complex manner, moving backwards and forwards in time, each segment throwing light on the other, reflection on the past, anticipation of the future. (A hint for those who might be finding it difficult to identify which time the characters are in, it is the hair of the principal actor, longer when he was younger, shorter when he is older, that is a useful key.)

The film opens with some serious discussion between a young woman, Anna, and a young man, Toma, reflections on the meaning of life and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. The two are in love. In a linear explanation, it could be said that they are in love, she is unwell, he is protective, she becomes pregnant, gives birth; there is a sketch of the early years of their marriage.

However, very early in the piece, Toma, with short hair, is seen in a consultation with a psychologist – and the audience anticipates that there have been some difficulties, quite rightly. As the film goes back and forth, it is this session with the psychologist which comes at the end, Toma speaking of a dream, trying to interpret it, the meaning of his life and marriage, leaving the audience wondering about the possibilities...

The is well acted, Diana Cavillieti being quite persuasive as a vivacious young woman who does have some psychological problems, especially concerning her father-in-law, seen when the couple go to dinner at her parents' house. She also has dizzy spells but tries to be self-reliant. Mircea Postelnicu is a genial young man, studious, always concerned about Ana, taking her to the hospital.

One of the themes of the film, seen as the screenplay goes backwards and forwards in time, is that as Ana builds the confidence and self-image, Toma becomes somewhat less confident, petulantly resigning from his job, staying at home to look after their son, his self-image getting lower.

Audiences will regret the tensions between the two because they have got to know them rather well and have sympathy for them.

The film is directed by Calin Peter Netzer, who won the Golden Bear at the Berlin A, 2013, with his film, *Child's Pose*.

EL BAR (Competition)

Spain, 2017, 103 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Alex de Igllesia.

The films of Alex de Igllesia are an acquired taste. There often seems a certain madness about them, eccentric characters, weird situations, touches of horror, black humour. Not to everybody's taste – and perhaps not always to Spanish taste for which the films are made.

Which serves as an introduction to review of El Bar which this reviewer actually liked. It may be that the director has been overdosing on a range of Spanish horror films of the last decade, especially the Rec series which it quite resembles. In those films, a virus has gone out of control, trapping inhabitants in an apartment block, trapping a photojournalist as well the authorities and introducing a welter of bloody and gory mayhem.

The title gives us the location, not a high-rise, rather a bar and a basement. As the film opens, the camera focuses on several people walking along the street, talking on their mobile phones, encountering street beggars, gossiping. And they all go into the bar which seems to be doing its ordinary trade, a collection of characters, a stern boss, Amparo, servers and behind the counter staff. Everything seems normal until one customer goes out the door a shot is heard, and the man falls down dead. Sudden shock, no explanations. Then one of the staff goes out into the street to assist and is also shot.

The apocalyptic tone enters the film when a local customer, quite deranged, quoting the Scriptures, a wild-looking man called Israel, enters and behaves erratically.

The focus of the film is on the terror amongst the group, compounded when anonymous workers in protective clothing appear and the bodies have disappeared as has the victims' blood. The group cannot go out. They do not go. They dare not go out. Then the recriminations start and a series of blame games, accusations, speculations and atmosphere of nastiness. The screenplay shows how much there is in the irrationality and eagerness to find scapegoats.

And then the group members a large man who had come in to use the toilet. Then they go to find him, the corpse bloated, eyes ablaze but dead. They search the man's mobile phone and go through all his messages, discovering that there is some kind of epidemic, that he had syringes for protection. The owner and two of the men, one a former policemen, force the others down into the basement because they had touched the dead body and are considered contaminated.

Then claustrophobia, uncertainty, silence about the discovery that the others were dead takes effect. The only way out is the hole to go down into the sewer, but the hole is tight. They send Israel but he gets stuck. Finally, the young woman is able to get through but there is a dispute about the use of the syringes, not enough for the whole group, and power struggles, especially with the apocalyptic Israel.

Once everyone is in the sewers, there are fights, deaths, – but some kind of celebration when one of the group emerges into a perfectly normal Madrid, the authorities having done a cover-up and the media reassuring everyone that all is well.

BERLIN SYNDROME (Panorama)

Australia, 2017, 116 minutes, Colour.

Teresa Palmer, Max Riemelt, Matthias Habich, Emma Bading.

Directed by Cate Shortland.

Cate Shortland has had an interesting career in both direction and writing. Her 2004 film Somersault

won most of the awards at the Australian Film Institute awards, including best film and director. She made the striking film about Germany during the war and the consequences of indoctrination, *Lore*, and also won many awards. She contributed to the writing of the excellent miniseries, *Devil's Playground*. She has not written this screenplay. It is by Shaun Grant and based on a novel by Melanie Joosten.

Once again, Cate Shortland is in Germany, but this time contemporary Berlin. A central protagonist is Clare, a persuasive performance by Teresa Palmer, initially naive and wide-eyed, sexually available, charmed by one of the locals. He is a teacher, Andi, played very well by Max Riemelt.

A classic William Wyler film of the 1960s, one of his final films, was a two-hander psychological thriller, *The Collector*, with Terence Stamp as the collector and Samantha Eggar as his victim. *Berlin Syndrome* is a 21st-century variation on *The Collector*.

Berlin in summer looks an interesting and attractive city, Clare arriving, immediately being welcomed by a group of young people to share a drink and talk, her settling into her room, phoning her mother in Brisbane, going shopping for clothes and slides because her interest is in studying the architecture of the East Germany period. She also comes across an agreeable young man, Andi (Max Riemelt) who, surprisingly, turns up again, exercising a great charm – for which she falls.

Andi is the kind of young man who looks as if he would not hurt a fly – perhaps not a fly but certainly women. He imprisons Clare in his apartment, locking her in while he goes to school, teaching English literature, the work of James Baldwin, to a young and interested class. It is a sport school and he also supervises team exercises, with an eye on the young student, Franka, which she interprets correctly to his annoyance and a moment where she sees Clare.

As might be expected from this kind of story, Andi exhibits a kind of Jekyll and Hyde personality, a pleasing Jekyll as he goes out into the world, a sadistic Hyde in his behaviour at home, tying Clare up, then attempting to spoil her by meals and gifts. He might have some head idea about what it is like to be captive but he seems to be particularly carefree, although when Clare reacts in anger, he also shows anger.

The months pass, the seasons change, from summer to Christmas, to New Year. While the action of the film goes outside the apartment, giving the audience a sense of freedom, nevertheless when we are back with Clare we share her confinement, her frustrations. We are also puzzled as to whether she is going to be an ultimate victim (it seems there has been a previous victim, one at least, from Canada) or whether she will escape.

One moment for understanding Andi is when he visits his father, a lecturer, reminisces about his mother leaving (and certainly Andi is angry at this) and then, later, find his father dead.

The film has a contemporary look and feel, perhaps not the kind of story we were expecting from Cate Shortland, but an interesting variation on *The Collector* theme.

BEUYS (Competition)

Germany, 2017, 107 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Andres Veiel.

Beuys is a documentary about the German artist and sculptor, Joseph Beuys.

Those who have not heard of Beuys or are unfamiliar with his work, will find this is an opportunity to learn something about him, see images of his work, hear him speak and discuss – and assert his opinions.

To that extent, it may not be so interesting for those who do not know the artist and the style of the film may not draw them into it with great feeling. Perhaps some understanding. For those who are familiar with the artist, his works and his ideas, it is an opportunity to watch and reflect.

There is biographical material in the film, but limited to the artist himself and his relationship with his parents, not so much about his own personal life or relationships. From the city of Cleve, his parents were rather severe on him as he grew up. He was a pilot in World War II, crashing, his co-pilot dying, he himself being severely wounded. The screenplay suggests that this experience was a strong influence on his art.

As regards the art, the audience is shown various sketches, his drawings and visual art, some sculptures. There are also some examples of installation art – puzzling for those not in the know. He also was involved in a lot of performance art.

The film is at pains to explain his various theories about art, the work of the artist, the response of people to the art, the social concerns and influence – always looking ahead, possibilities of change in sensibilities. This was exercised in the Germany of the 1960s and 70s and beyond. He also travelled to the United States where he gave classes – allowing people to interject, to oppose him, his not moving from his position but giving attention to the criticisms.

By the end, having seen Beuys himself, listening to him, seeing him in the context of his range of art, hearing his philosophies and his reactions as well as people's favourable response and criticisms, some audiences will be interested in pursuing him in his career. Others may feel that this documentary has been sufficient for them.

BRIGHT NIGHTS/ HELLE NACHTE (Competition)

Germany/ Norway, 2017, 86 minutes, Colour.

Georg Friedrich, Tristan Gobel.

Directed by Thomas Arslan.

Bright Nights was entered into the competition of the 2017 Burma now they. Which is rather a surprise because it is a perfectly ordinary (well perhaps not perfectly) story of a father-son relationship.

The setting is northern Norway. If it has been your dream to travel through the mountains in the north of Norway (not the fjords) then if you see this film you will have fulfilled your dream and not had to travel at all. There is beautiful location scenery, the mountains, the lakes, the flora and the fauna. While the director obviously enjoys filming the scenery, it is something of a dramatic mystery as to why there is a long (Rather, very long) sequence where the camera is set on the dashboard, looking out clearly through the frame of the windscreen camera getting the audience to share the view of the drive upwards on a gravel road gradually moving into fault. Well, it does give the audience an opportunity to ponder on what they have been looking at in terms of the Father and the son as well as this trip into the mountains.

George Friedrich is Michael, a builder and supervisor who is informed of the death of his father, whom he hasn't seen for five years, a hard man, who has spent his retirement in a village in Norway. The father's daughter is unforgiving and will not go to the funeral and Michael, having been somewhat upset by his partner's news that she has been given a Washington job for a year as her papers corresponded, decides to take his alienated son with him. The son doesn't really want to go but is interested to see the place where his grandfather lived.

They go to the funeral, the only mourners there, along with the priest and the gravedigger.

After this, the film becomes a road film, literally. Father and son who are still tense, the son exceedingly angry with his father and his absence from his life, surly and resentful, reluctantly agrees (what else can he do?) To go driving into the scenery of northern Norway. They camp, have arguments, risk driving without sufficient petrol and have to walk into a town on a lake where they hire a room, the boy encountering a rebellious young teenager so some moments of sharing, both anger and music.

Then the father reveals to his son that they are going on a three day hike in the mountains. Needless to say the son is not happy. However, they drove along the gravel road, into the fog and emerge in beautiful terrain, trees and bright, even red, vegetation. The father wants to confess his past philandering and abandonment to his son and the son is completely unwilling to hear this. When the father awakes in the tent and finds his son gone, he pursues him, searching through the mountains, the boy then running away, the father tackling him – and some release of anger from the boy.

Actually, nothing particularly new except the scenery – and that may be enough for audiences to follow through familiar father-son tensions and some beginnings of resolution.

BYE BYE GERMANY/ ES WAR EINMAL IN DEUTSCHLAND (Berlinale Special)

Germany, 2017, 100 minutes, Colour.

Moritz Bleibtreu, Antje Traue.

Directed by Sam Gabarski.

Bye, Bye Germany is the English title of this serious film with comic overtones. Its original German title means: Once Upon a Time in Germany.

This is a film with a serious Jewish-German theme, a focus on Jews who survived the concentration camps and came back to reconstruct their lives, not moving out of Germany, but remaining within. The setting for this story is Frankfurt, a focus on a well-established fabric company founded by the father of the central character, David (Moritz Bleibtreu) who has a plan to re-establish the company and its outlets by seconding his friends and making them travel around, interviewing housewives, persuading them to invest in the materials.

There is something of a comic tone, a light tone, in this presentation of the survivors, the bitterness and unhappiness of their memories, the challenge for them to make new lives after what they have suffered. The main desire for many of them is to be able to leave Germany and to go to live in the United States and make a new life and home there. They need money for the tickets and David becomes a central agent for collecting and saving the money.

However, it is not going to be easy for David. The occupying American authorities are suspicious of him and he is subject to many interrogations, his interrogator being Sarah, originally from Germany, having migrated to the United States with her parents in the 1930s, now seriously committed to

order in post-war Germany and interrogating David and finding him guilty of double standards. It emerges that he was in some favour with the Nazis, even travelling to Hitler's mountain retreat, having two passports, and being a cheerful man who is able to make jokes and ingratiate himself. The tragic side was a joke competition with the loser to be executed. The interrogator at one stage brings in one of the guards from the camps who identifies him as the man who made jokes.

Ultimately, interrogator modifies her harsh attitude towards David, while he is attracted to her.

Finally, David is the one who remains in Germany re-establishing his father's company while the others travelled to the United States.

An interesting issue for Jewish audiences but also for worldwide audiences asking questions about how survivors of the concentration camps were able to start again and make a future, so many thousands remaining in Germany, others going to Israel or to the United States.

CALL ME BY YOUR NAME (Panorama)

Italy/France/US, 2017, 130 minutes, Colour.

Armie Hammer, Timothee Chalamet, Michael Stuhlbarg, Amira Casar.

Directed by Luca Guadagnino.

Italian director Luca Guadagnino has made films set in Italy, both in the south and, here, in the north. His films include *I Am I Love* and *A Bigger Splash*. This film is set in 1983. A summer story with a guest from the United States, a student of the arts on a scholarship living with the family of the host.

For those who enjoy being immersed in the atmosphere of a different country, there is a great deal of pleasure in the time spent in this part of northern Italy, the countryside, the local town, the summer atmosphere.

The central character is the recipient of the grant, Oliver, played with some zest by Armie Hammer. He is quite exhilarated to be in Italy, having the contact with the academics, examining artworks and an excavation from Lake Garda. Oliver can also be the life of the party, very attractive to the local women, enjoying their company, dancing...

The other central character of the film is Elio (a strong performance by actor Timothee Chalamet a very demanding role). Elio's passion is for music, performance, writing, annotation. He is the son of the hosts for the summer, French but having their holiday mansion in Italy.

Elio is rather precocious, helping Oliver, sometimes wary of him. However, the theme of the film is sexuality, Elio and his growing self-awareness in his teenage, his attraction towards Oliver, the question of his making advances towards the adult, and Oliver's response. He is also caught up in the expectations of friendship with the local girls and, despite his seemingly short and assertive manner, he is emotionally confused. Oliver is cautious at first, but affected by the advances of Elio, the effect of their spending time together, the effect of the growing intimacy, issues of sexuality both emotional and physical, the appropriateness of the relationship and the effect on each.

After Oliver returns to the United States, the film spends time focusing on Elio, the effect of the summer on him, his self-awareness, and, especially, a strong scene where he discusses the whole experience with his listening and sympathetic father (Michael Stuhlbarg).

The film is one of those dramas where the director opts for a long focusing on the face of Elio, the audience gazing, reflecting on their response to Elio and Oliver, wondering about Elio himself and his future.

CASTING JONBENET (Panorama)

Australia/US, 2017, 80 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Kitty Green.

This is a very interesting documentary, a different kind of docudrama and interpretation of events in the 1990s. As the title suggests, the focus is on casting of actors for a film about the death of Jon Benet Ramsey, a procedure used by Louis Theroux in his documentary about Scientology, *My Scientology Movie*.

The intention of the film is not to solve the mystery of the little girl's death, nor to point the finger at a particular person. This is strictly limited. It is an exploration rather than a solution, an interpretation by the processes of casting, the response of the actors auditioning, and their interpretations. The potential actors chosen are all from Colorado, the state in which the murder took place, and all are familiar with the history. The auditions to place over a period of 15 months.

The impact of the film does not necessarily depend on knowledge of the details of the crime. By the end of the film, the audience will feel very well-informed, perhaps over-informed. There is the portrait of the Ramsey family, the background of the little girl Jon Benet, years old at the time of the, who had been promoted in shows, the reality of sexualisation of little children, the mystery of her death, her role as daughter and the portrait of her parents, of her brother, other people involved, of the police and their inconclusive investigations. The murder is still a mystery.

The crime happened in the 1990s, 20 years having passed between the crime and the making of this film. The information from the police investigations is available, the inadequacy of some of their investigations is also available, the mistakes they have made and the interrogation of all the people involved to those accused.

While the emphasis is on Jon Benet's parents, there is also the picture of the sexual predator who confessed to the killing and spent time in prison, rather eerie experience for the film.

Also brought forward is an abduction scenario which seems to have some ludicrous aspects including a precise amount specified for the ransom payment, the delay in the note being found – and that in fact the note is a rather long letter about the situation.

Holding auditions for actors to portray the characters in the case, offers an opportunity for retrospective consideration, an analysis of the characters, dramatising them as well as putting forward theories about them.

The device of the casting is introduced early in the film with a group of little girls coming in to take their chairs, eager to take the role of Jon Benet. This already highlights, with the little girls, their suggestive costumes, their behaviour, the giggling, what eagerness about the media will do to children. They chatter and give the image to the audience of Jon Benet.

There is quite a range of actors auditioning for the roles of each of the parents. Those auditioning for the role of the mother tend to appear with same clothes that were seen in her at the time of the

crime and on the media. A lot of women are auditioning, trying to put themselves in the place of the mother but also offering a great deal of speculation. The same is true of the actors auditioning for the father. A great variety of opinions.

Those auditioning for the role of the police are even more interesting times, at the different looks, the different characters, their occupations, the motives for coming to the auditions, the interpretation of dialogue presented to them, the revelation about their own work – especially the man who claims that he is a sex advisor and has to take a call from a client during the audition and who has quite a deal to say about some deviant sexual behaviour.

So that means that director Kitty Green, and her setting up this scenario, brings to the audience the central characters but also their complexities, more and more being revealed about them as the goes on, seemingly upright then something suspicious being raised, especially about the father. There are many possibilities as to what happened.

The case remains unsolved and audiences, pondering all the facets of characters and the possibilities of action will still be wondering what really happened.

COLO (Competition)

Portugal, 2017, 136 minutes, Colour.

Alice Albergaria Borges, Joao Pedro Vaz. Beatriz Batarda, Clara Jost.

Directed by Teresa Villaverde.

Colo was screened in competition at the Berlinale of 2017.

This is a long film and, except for devotees of very serious cinema, it does not hold the interest throughout. It is a very talkative film but most of the principal characters remain enigmatic.

It is a Portuguese film about family as well as about outsiders. The setting is Lisbon, streets and departments, interiors, school. The emphasis is in dialogue and conversations.

The central character is the father, around 50, retrenched from his work, full of anxiety, making phone calls to get other jobs, upset when his wife doesn't return when he expected, taking a friend from the past to the beach, threatening him about the job – the man punching the father and running away and driving off. The father is left of the beach, later stripping and going into the water, coming out wet. He says he is agreeable that his wife having another job to make ends meet, but they are gradually using up all their funds.

The wife seems quite a sensible woman, practical, but her husband's behaviour, caring for her daughter getting her down, she loses her extra job and decided it would be better if she went away for a while, living in a hotel, her husband and daughter going to live with her mother – which they do, the mother welcoming them.

The other main character is the daughter, at school, interested in design, with a boyfriend and sexual relationships, studying, puzzled about her father, supportive of her mother. She is also supportive of another girl at school who, it seems obvious, is pregnant. The pregnant girl has nowhere to go, has not told her parents, and the daughter of the family invites her to live in – the father taking compassion on her and even saying that it will take responsibility for the child.

So, with an array of characters in contemporary problems, the film is both emotional and cerebral, especially with this dialogue – and the audience is left with: so what...?

THE DINNER (Competition)

US, 2017, 120 minutes, Colour.

Richard Gere, Laura Linney, Steve Coogan, Rebecca Hall, Chloe Sevigny, Charlie Plummer, Adepero Oduye, Michael Chernus.

Directed by Oren Moverman.

The Dinner is one of those American meals where relatives and friends gather, an initial pleasant atmosphere, but then truths are told and there are savage interactions.

Oren Moverman (writer of such films as Jesus' Son and director of Ramparts, The Messenger, Time out of Mind) has adapted a novel by Howard Koch, which had already received two film versions, one Dutch and one Italian. The story has been strongly adapted to the United States, society, politics.

Audiences who may be looking forward to the details of the dinner, there is quite a lot of detail (the restaurant is rather exclusive and so the portions are quite small!) And they are presented with verbal fanfare by the maitre d' (Michael Chernus), fascinatingly elitist, with a very well-dressed and uniformed staff who serve all the courses, exceedingly well-drilled.

Much of the film is seen from the point of view of Paul, the younger brother of an ambitious politician, Stan. Paul is played by Steve Coogan, one of his best performances, manically comic and deadly serious, a man who is emotionally disturbed, is prone to rant and rave, is preoccupied with American history, the Civil War, Gettysburg, has a low opinion of the human race and is not hesitant to voice his denunciations. He is also very sulky and walks out at various moments of the dinner. It is a tour de force performance by Steve Coogan.

Richard Gere is the politician, very smooth in his manner, able to work the room with great charm, the word here, handshakes for everyone... He is accompanied to the dinner by his personal assistant and has to go to the phone many times, preoccupied about legislation he is moving and whether it has support or not. Richard Gere is very much at home in this kind of role.

Then there are the wives. Laura Linney portrays Paul's wife, Claire, the seemingly agreeable woman, mother of their son, but prone to nerviness and some illness in the past. On the other hand, Rebecca Hall plays Katelyn, Stan's wife, formerly his assistant, a woman also on some edge. Katelyn is not Stan's first wife. There are flashbacks to sequences with his first wife, Barbara (Chloe Sevigny) and the distance between the couple and her decision to go to India.

So, this is the setting. But the audience is privy to the behaviour of the sons of each couple. They are spoiled, affluent teenagers, uncaring in their attitudes, reckless in their behaviour, caught up in a very violent situation of their own creation, a lonely black woman who lives on the streets their victim.

While the audience has to assess this behaviour, which was videoed and one of the cousins is blackmailing the other for cash down, it is not difficult to be condemnatory of the young men.

Where the drama lies as the dinner continues is in the stances taken by each of the adults, the

women surprisingly wanting to defend the bad behaviour of their sons, arguing away some of the guilt. Some of the dialogue provides quite a shock to hear the women whom we had initially come to like being very hard in their wanting to defend, even excuse, look down on the victim. Paul has been kept out of the picture and so, discovering some of what has been going on without his knowledge, erupts. And, surprisingly, it is the politician who has the greater sense of justice and some compassion for the victim rather than excusing the young men.

This is the kind of film that can be called an indictment of contemporary affluent American society, white society, a blend of arrogance and complacency.

DISCREET (Panorama)

US, 2017, 81 minutes, Colour.

Jonny Mars, Atsuko Okatsuka, Joy Cunningham, Jordan Elsass, Bob Swaffer.

Directed by Travis Matthews.

Travis Matthews has been making films, especially experimental films, since 2000. He has a particular interest in male sexuality and themes of homosexuality.

This is a narrative, albeit in a non-continuous style, separate episodes, discrete episodes, which means that the audience have to be particularly attentive all the time and to extract the main thrust of the story.

The film has a reverberating soundtrack, often difficult to interpret, but bearing on the mood and atmosphere of the film.

As a framework, a woman appears who is running a video service helping people with meaning in life. She recurs throughout the film, inviting people to watch her videos – but the protagonist of the film, Alex (Jonny Mars) also wants to make videos and keeps phoning her to make an appointment, almost stalking her verbally, with the result that she cuts him off completely.

His videos seem to be concerned with male sexuality and there are a couple of comparatively explicit scenes again throughout the film.

The main character is called Alex, and we see him with a woman, discussing his life, his separation from her, her background of drinking and her trying to reform. She is very supportive of him.

We also see him going to a farm, and he is challenged by an older man who was accompanying a very, very tall man with a white beard and a shaking hand who cannot speak and is being led in his walk. Alex claims to be his grandson. As the film progresses and Alex moves in with the old man, even hiring a young man to help him look after him, the audience becomes suspicious about the relationship, the antagonism and Alex's concern and care, for example eating, dressing, washing.

What also emerges is that the man had abused Alex as a child and he is building up to revenge – which eventually happens, leading the old man down to the river, and the audience just hearing gunshots, not seeing them.

Audiences will have to persevere, some relishing all the detail and the episodes about the videos, others mystified as to what was happening and where it was leading – but it all comes together in the end.

DJANGO (Competition)

France, 2017, 115 minutes, Colour.

Reda Kateb, Cecile de France.

Directed by Etienne Comar.

As audiences go in to see Django, they will have different expectations. Jazz aficionados will be looking forward to the music, Django Reinhardt's compositions, the range of concerts and performances. They will not be disappointed – and may be surprised but will welcome the Requiem for Deceased Gypsies at the end of the film.

Some audiences may have a vague idea that Jan go Reinhardt was a jazz musician – and that Woody Allen liked his music and incorporated aspects of music and plot into his Sweet and Low down. , They may be in for a surprise.

In fact, the film takes place only during 1943 in occupied Paris, life seeming to go on as normal despite the presence of the Germans and their control.

The tone is set powerfully in an opening prologue, set in a forest, where an old blind gypsy with a powerful voice makes such an impact with his singing. It is a gypsy camp. A child goes foraging in the forest, German soldiers approach and shoot. Django later reminisces that this old gypsy had been a huge influence on him.

By this time in his career, some mention of it in the screenplay, Django Reinhardt had been recording since 1928, successfully all during the 1930s, playing with all kinds of international greats. But now, he and his wife are trapped in Paris with the German authorities pressurising him to go on a tour of concerts in Germany and Berlin to build up the morale of the troops. He says he is a musician and not a politician. However, a woman from his past, Louise (Cecile de France) urges him to be wary. Also, Django's wife is pregnant.

The concert for the Parisian audience and the Germans is an extraordinary success, the audience responding to the beat and becoming fully alive as they listen, sway, applaud. As it turns out, this is not what the Germans were expecting or wanting. The German officials seem rather puritanical in their attitude towards the music – a warning not to play a wrong note, which means avoid swing, the blues, and too much improvising on the jazz, and no dancing.

The group that Django plays with have mixed feelings. But, on the advice of Louise, Django, his wife and his extraordinarily tough mother all go to the Swiss border with the intention of crossing over, helped by the Resistance.

While waiting in the town, Django plays in the bar, goes fishing, his hobby, and meets the parish priest who invites him to the church, despite Django's professing that he did not believe, to play the organ and compose.

The Germans track Django down and order him to play a concert in a local mansion. Louise again appears, in company with German officers and encourages him to play. The audience at the Château respond exuberantly to the music and so it is stopped by an officer.

The film shows the hostility of the Nazis to the Gypsies, a flamethrower destroying the camp at the end, while Django trudges through the snow towards Switzerland.

Then, suddenly, it is May 1945, peace and Django conducting his Requiem for the Deceased Gypsies.

In many ways, classical storytelling but, more importantly, a tribute Dkango Reinhardt and his music.

FELICITE (Competition)

Belgium/ Senegal, 2017, 120 minutes, Colour.

Vero Tshanda Beya Mputu, Gaetan Claudia, Papi Mpaka.

Directed by Alan Gomis.

While the director of this film comes from Senegal and financing comes from there as well as some European countries, especially Belgium, the story is set in Congo, in the city of Kinshasa. With the filming in the streets of Kinshasa, in the villages on the outskirts, in a visit to a mansion, the audience can feel that it has been immersed in something of the life of the city and its characters.

At a bar, the camera begins to focus on Felicite, sitting among the patrons and then emerging to sing. She is a strong character, forceful and assertive, not always sympathetic, sometimes exasperating for an audience which makes it sometimes difficult to feel for and with her.

The film details her daily life, at home, the separation from her husband who is angry at her and rebukes her about her son being a thug, the boy himself being injured in an accident and finding himself in hospital and serious financial needs for his recovery.

All

The other main character in the film, Tabu, is a local friend, offering to mend Felicite's bung refrigerator, which becomes something of a principal episode in the film, Tabu not always being able to fix it properly. And a friendship grows between the two.

Much of the film involves Felicite's trying to raise money for her son, from her singing, in the bar, Tabu making a collection, even going to a wealthy man and imposing on him.

There is very little explanation about the son and, on release from hospital, he is not particularly communicative until he goes into the city, on his crutches, encouraged by Tabu who is able to bring him to life.

The film is important for those interested in African cinema, its representations of life in the early decades of the 21st century, memories of past traditions, and nation involved in civil war, poverty and survival...

FINAL PORTRAIT (Out of Competition)

US, 2017, 90 minutes, Colour.

Geoffrey Rush, Armie Hammer, Clemence Poesy, Tony Shalhoub, Sylvie Testud.

Directed by Stanley Tucci.

Final Portrait is a brief film about artist and sculptor, Alberto Giacometti, living and working in Paris in the middle of the 1960s. Much of the film is confined to his studio, his workspace, living quarters, upstairs storage and the workshop for his associate, Diego.

The film was directed by noted American actor, Stanley Tucci, his previous films in direction included *The Big Night*, *Imposters*, *Joe Gould's Secret*. Tucci does not appear in this film but his friend and collaborator, Tony Shalhoub, portrays Giacometti's assistant.

The screenplay is based on a memoir by an American, Jim Lord, who encountered Giacometti in Paris and was persuaded to remain there to pose for a portrait, taking a far longer time than Lord anticipated, but Lord agreeing to remain, fascinated by the work of the artist as well as his continually scrapping the work he had done, beginning afresh, seemingly dissatisfied, but finally producing a portrait.

This makes much of the film a two-hander, conversations between Lord and the artist, the sequences where Lord poses, is momentarily distracted, arouses Giacometti's ire...

Geoffrey Rush is obviously enjoying his interpretation of Giacometti, Moody, artistic in every way, a perfectionist always dissatisfied, working on his sketches, on his paintings, his sculptures – with the audience having the opportunity to view many of these as the camera roams around his studio.

Armie Hammer is Jim Lord, a well-to-do American, interested in the artist's work – and later writing about him.

There are some complications in Giacometti's personal life, his relationship with his wife, played by Sylvie Testud, loving her husband but also tempted to other relationships. Giacometti is not only tempted but is in a long-term relationship with a local prostitute, Clemence Poesy, who operates from a local club, is unembarrassed in her relationship with the artist, easily cavorting and canoodling with him at the club, letting him buy her an expensive car...

So, the film itself is also a portrait, a kind of final portrait not only of Jim Lord but of Giacometti himself and his artistic achievements.

HAVE A NICE DAY (Competition)

China, 2017, 77 minutes, Colour.
Directed Jian Liu.

Have a Nice Day is an animation film from China. The animation is arresting, detail in the drawing of the backgrounds, the range of expression in the characters, the dramatic and melodramatic situations – and the violence.

Had this film been a live action drama, it would have been fairly commonplace, a picture of stolen money, gangsters, hitmen... And one of the characters remarks that he has watched the *Godfather* films several times. But, course this is animation, audiences will look at it more carefully, making the comparisons with the live-action, seeing how the range of gangster and criminal characters are drawn, the shape of their faces, the suggestions of the sinister, their violent expressions.

The film concerns a bag of money and two men riding in a car, allies, but one taking the money from the other, desperate to have money so that he can finance an operation for a loved one in South Korea. The boss is not pleased and hires a hitman to retrieve the money, not always effective in his pursuit. There is a hideout in the hotel which has seen better days.

There are complications in the action, the pursuit, violence, the capture of the money eluding those

pursuing it, with a tongue in cheek ending and some prospects for progress.

JOAQUIM (Competition)

Brazil, 2017, 97 minutes, Colour.

Julio Machado.

Directed by Marcelo Gomez.

This is a Brazilian film set in the 18th century in the countryside of Brazil.

It opens very strikingly, a head on a pike outside a church and a voice-over from the dead man explaining who he was, his being part of the military authority, his search for gold on behalf of the authorities, his wanting gold for himself – but also his reading books, learning some of the philosophy of the Americans of the 18th century and their human rights and freedom, leading him to become part of revolutionary action, but his being executed, the only one of the group beheaded and drawn and quartered.

The film then goes back to see him in his activities, on expeditions and dealing with his fellow officials as well as his personal servant, slave, and local Indians. He is part of a checkpoint where the authorities examine the gold findings and see if they are authentic or not, and will lead to further exploration. There is a servant on the checkpoint, an Indian, Blackie, who serves the food, interacts with all the people, has a sexual relationship with Joachim. Later she disappears.

Joachim has some new energy, his hair is cut by Blackie, he is asked to lead a group to go out into the countryside and prospect. The group spends a lot of time, panning in the rivers. But then food and supplies dwindle and the men demand that they return to the checkpoint, Joachim unwillingly. On his return, he gives some of his findings to the governor who makes all kinds of promises then steals the findings and goes to Rio. Joachim has read a great deal, being given books by a poet. He then goes out by himself to find gold, encounters the Indians who are hostile to him, but especially Blackie who stands against him. He is released and goes back to the checkpoint.

Religion has been absent from the film but now Joachim meets a priest who is associated with a revolutionary movement, along with the poet, and Joachim commits himself to action. There is a dinner scene with most of the people concerned, discussions about revolution – and then the film ends. We have seen the ending at the beginning of the film.

This is more of film for historians of Latin America and those interested in the revolutionary movements on that continent.

THE KING'S DECISION/ THE KING'S CHOICE (Berlinale Special)

Norway, 2016, 133 minutes, colour.

Jesper Christensen, Anders Baasmo Christiansen, Karl Markovics.

Directed Erik Poppe

text

This is a film which is specially designed for Norwegian audience, a Scandinavian audience, offering memories of the of the King of Norway in World War II.

The film has been directed by one Norway's most distinguished directors, Erik Poppe (Troubled

Waters).

The film gives historical background of the establishing of Norway as a separate kingdom in the 20th century, the choice of the Danish prince who came with his family to establish the royal house which was accepted and has continued to the present.,

With the outbreak of the war, German submarines began to sail in Norwegian waters. The German ambassador to Oslo expected the King to make some kind of agreement with Germany to enable its occupation just as his brother, the King of Denmark, had done for that country.

The action takes place over only a couple of days, the pressure from the Germans, the threats from the Germans and the submarines, the king facing the decision and his advisors, some for allowing the Germans in (with the later rule of Quisling) and a number against so that during the night, the king and the cabinet left Oslo for a secret country location to make the decision. There is a vivid sequence where the train is attacked by air and passengers flee into the woods.

The dilemma for the king was whether to allow the Nazis in and have a possible peaceful occupation during the war or to defy the Germans with consequent attacks, destruction and death of civilians. The king made the decision to defy the Germans.

Jesper Christiansen is very effective as the King. His son was initially in favour of Nazi occupation but then supported his father – and eventually succeeded him.

The King's decision in 1940 was a courageous one but has held up over the decades as an example of patriotic commitment in defiance of the Nazi will to conquer Europe.

LOGAN (Out of Competition)

US, 2017, 135 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Jackman, Patrick Stewart, Dafne Keen, Boyd Holbrook, Stephen Merchant, Richard E. Grant.
Directed by James Mangold.

Dear, oh dear! Words of sympathy for Logan. When he first emerges after binge at a bar, he looks dreadful. He looks much older, certainly scruffier, bearded and lined – rather similar in look and voice to the later Mel Gibson (though taller!). Logan catches sight of some thugs stripping his car, his inner Wolverine starts to emerge, as well as his shears, and there is some familiar mayhem. There is this story of Logan going to go... where?

One of the first things to note is that it is the year 2029. And we discover that Charles Xavier, a proud nonagenarian, memory and concentration lessening, in need of constant medication, is hidden and protected by an albino (Stephen Merchant), Caliban, who has to protect his head and whole body against light.

The real drama starts when a Mexican woman appeals to Logan to help her and her daughter. Professor Xavier senses the daughter is a mutant and needs protection. This very quickly emerges when a tough mercenary type, Pierce (Boyd Holbrook) turns up with armed guards and threatening Logan. Pierce is a nasty piece of work, especially when he deals with Caliban, torturing him with the light, but he and his mob are carrying out the orders of Zander Rice (Richard E. Grant), the executive in charge of an experimental facility, which is seriously playing with genetics, implanting codes from mutants, including Logan, into Mexican women who are then disposed of.

The plan is now to move on to a next phase, more deadly, the children as weapons, more machine-like and without soul. They are rounding up mutant children who have escaped, including Laura (Dafne Keen in quite a striking performance). By now, we can see where the film is going – and the destination is named, Eden in North Dakota, allegedly a refuge for mutant children (though Laura's protector got this information only from an X-Men? comic). The film is going to be a road movie, Logan driving hell for leather and beyond, Charles Xavier as his passenger and needing care, Laura, not speaking, fiercely determined, a fierce weapon.

Along the road there is a visit to a shop which Laura has never experienced and a clash with the assistant. There is a motel stop with Laura watching a lot of scenes from Shane which Charles Xavier tells her he saw when he was her age. There is a visit to a casino in Oklahoma City, buying new clothes. And there is an episode along the road with some horses running across the highway and Professor Xavier able to calm them, the grateful family inviting the group to a meal and a quiet night. Well, not quite...

As the film moved towards its close, we realise that this is an end to an X-Men? era, Logan ready to lay down his life for Laura, battling a clone that the facility has created of him, confronting Xander Rice who gets short shrift in the middle of an impassioned speech, and a realisation that a new era of mutant action films is in store.

LOST CITY OF Z (Berliale Special)

US, 2017, 140 minutes, Colour.

Charlie Hunnam, Robert Pattinson, Sienna Miller, Tom Holland, Angus McFadyen?, Franco Nero.
Directed by James Gray.

In terms of marketing, Lost City of Z, may not be so successful for promoting the film. On the one hand, the title sounds very much like a blockbuster adventure, even fantasy. On the other hand, it is a reference to exploration expeditions to Bolivia and the search for a city lost in the jungles of Amazonia. Which means, it is a rather more serious historical film.

The director is James Gray, much better known for small-scale American stories, with criminals in Little Odessa, of relationships in Two Lovers or reminiscence about people arriving in America, The immigrant. He has written a screenplay and directed, recreating Ireland and England in the first part of the 20th century, action in Amazonia, the jungle, the rivers, falls, animals – and the continued threat of the spear-throwing inhabitants.

The film opens in Ireland in 1905, the gentry assembled Hunt, helped by the military, especially with the lieutenant, Percy Fawcett, played very seriously by Charlie Hunnam. It is he chases and kills the stag but is unacceptable to society because of his father's disreputable reputation. He is deprived of medals and promotion, returning home to England with strong-minded wife, Nina (Sienna Miller).

It is quite a surprise for Fawcett when he is invited by the Royal Geographical Society to lead an expedition to Amazonia, the area between Brazil and Bolivia, to determine the borders because of rubber barons and their clashes. Fawcett was an excellent cartographer in his study days. The expedition will last at least two years.

The film highlights the distance between England and Bolivia, the liner in the Atlantic, train travel in Bolivia, slow riding by horse, walking. The adventurers are surprised to find a city in the jungle with

its own opera company performing (for film buffs, echoes of Hertzog's Fitzcarraldo). As they go into the jungle, Fawcett is accompanied by a journalist who becomes his friend, Costin (Robert Pattinson) as well as a military attache, a local Indian guide and various carriers. As expected, things are not easy in the jungle, snakes, piranha in the river, hunger – and the shooting of a boar when they are desperate for provisions. There are also dangerous encounters with the local Indians as well as making friends with them, and hearing of the possibilities of cities covered over by jungle. Fawcett uses the term Lost City of Z, which, if found, would contribute to the ethnographic understanding of the world.

Fawcett is welcomed on his return but is eager to go again, giving talks to the Royal Geographical Society, mocked by some of the members about his theories, others being enthused and offering to accompany him. His wife would like to accompany him, stressing her capabilities and those of women, but Fawcett is rather old-fashioned in his expectations of what women can and cannot do. She remains at home over the years and they have three children.

The second expedition achieves some things but, an encounter with a cannibal group, one of their benefactors, Murray (Angus McFadyen) is cowardly, is sent off with provisions after his capsizing their boat – and, when Fawcett goes again to the Society, Murray is there to denounce him and demand an apology.

World War I intervenes and Fawcett goes to the trenches, quite graphically pictured here, showing heroism and being blinded by chlorine gas and repatriated.

Five years pass, his oldest son Jack (Tom Holland) who had regretted his father's absence and influence on his family has become something of a hunter and proposes that they are going in to Amazonia, raising American finance which is met by British finance. And the Society acknowledges Fawcett's work in awarding him its highest medal.

Fawcett and his son disappear – and the film speculates about their being taken by local Indians who respect them but lead them to their deaths. There is a postscript to say that in the early 20th century, there have been some discoveries of Amazonian cities (and a reminder that Machu Picchu was discovered in the early 20th century in Peru).

A film about Intrepid British explorers rather than an action blockbuster.

MAUDIE (Berlinale Special)

Canada/Ireland, 2017, 117 minutes, Colour.
Sally Hawkins, Ethan Hawke, Gabrielle Rose.
Directed by Aisling Walsh.

Maudie is a portrait of a painter from Nova Scotia, Maudie Lewis. It is based on a true story.

Some commentators have noted that the screenplay simplifies Maudie Lewis's life, that she had painted early in life, that she had some sales earlier than is shown in the film. She was also a very small woman, suffering severely from rheumatoid arthritis and disfigured spine.

Nevertheless, Sally Hawkins shines as Maudie. A versatile actress, Sally Hawkins made quite an impact in her award-winning performance in Mike Leigh's Happy Go Lucky. Despite her illness and her hard and harsh life, Maudie emerges so often as happy-go-lucky.

Suffering severely from her childhood, Maudie is offloaded on her maiden aunt, Ida (Gabrielle Rose) by her brother sells the family house against her knowledge and will. I had it is something of a severe woman who resents having to support Maudie, makes her life extremely restrictive, humiliating her.

An opportunity arises when Maudie goes shopping season is a notice in the store from a local fisherman-fishmonger, Everett Lewis, played quite intensely and somewhat savagely by Ethan Hawke for help in his house. Maudie answers the notice and walks to his house, not an easy interview, but she perseveres and stays and Everett giving some begrudging consent to her presence, as long as she keeps the house clean and. He tells her that the priority in the house is: me, the dog, the chickens, you.

When Maudie finds some paint, she starts to do pictures on the wall of the house, simple flowers, cats, landscapes. Again Everett is rather begrudging, wanting some wall space without pictures. It is when a woman visiting from New York City calls to the house about the delivery of fish and discovers Maudie's paintings, buys one, continues to affirm Maudie and promotes her paintings in the US and through the media, comes different for Maudie.

To Everett's bewilderment, visitors come to the house, buying Maudie's paintings and, especially, the greeting cards, and giving commissions.

There is an emotional development at the end of the film concerning the baby that Maudie had borne when very young and the verdict that it was not healthy. Sad moments for Maudie – but, as the film shows, despite her own illness and disabilities, despite her sufferings, she was a woman of strong spirit and achievement.

A FANTASTIC WOMAN/ UNA MUJER FANTASTICA (Competition)

Chile, 2017, 100 minutes, Colour.

Daniela Vega.

Directed by Sebastian Lelio.

Sebastian Lelio has made a number of interesting films, the controversial Sacred Family and the award-winning Gloria. He tackles a contemporary issue, gender, transgender. His title focuses on the central character, as female, and as admirable.

The central character is called Marina, played by Daniela Vega, herself a transsexual. She gives a very serious performance, affectionate in her relationship, dignified in her conduct after the death of her partner and the antagonism from his family, feeling the grief of the death of the partner – and an outlet in classical singing lessons and final performance.

The setting is Santiago, an urban setting presented as ordinary but detailed. The action takes place over two days.

We are introduced to Orlando, a 57-year-old businessman having a massage – and then going to a club where he listens to Marina singing. They go to his apartment and we realise that they are partners. However, he awakens during the night, ill and is rushed to hospital. He dies.

Given the title, Marina is a woman of some dignity, courteous to people, but upset by a

policewoman coming to voice suspicions about Orlando's death, bruises on his body, and wanting to examine Marina. But this is nothing compared with the animosity of Orlando's family, his son coming to the apartment, verbally abusing Marina, taking the dog which was hers. Orlando's ex-wife is even stronger, demanding that Marina bring the car, forbidding her to come to the funeral, wanting to talk directly about the relationship, Marina and her trans-situation, but talking directly means talking insultingly.

There is the issue of Marina being excluded from the funeral, emphasising the sensitivities of the family, although Orlando's brother is much more sympathetic and understanding.

The drama also offers examples of homophobia and anger, leading to violence, targeting people whom they do not understand.

Marina is also taking lessons in classical singing – and, at the end, this is a symbol of her coping and succeeding in the future.

Transgender issues are in the news at the present time, many people mystified by persons with difficulties in identifying their gender as well as having surgery to fortify their choice. In telling this story, with a sympathetic central character, audiences may have an opportunity for greater understanding if not empathy.

ON BODY AND SOUL/ EL TESTROL EL LELEKOL (Competition)

Hungary, 2017, 117 minutes, Colour.
Mirocsanyi Geza, Alexandra Borbely.

Directed by Ildiko Enyedi.

On Body and Soul is quite a striking film, Hungarian in its storytelling and perspectives but with a powerful universal impact.

The film is set in an ordinary city, scenes of people's apartments, restaurants, but most of the action taking place in an abattoir.

With the abattoir and the focus on the cattle, penned, prodded, close-ups of their eyes, their deaths, the carcasses and the blood, the hanging meat, the workers going about their tasks calmly, the abattoir as something of an image of life and human experience. While there is a lot of detail of the abattoir – and the final credits note that animals were harmed during the filming but not by the film crew because they simply photographed an abattoir at work – it is not confined to the slaughter but also to the range of members of the staff, Finance Director, Human Relations director, supervisor, as well as the various women in diverse domestic jobs.

At the film begins with another image of animals, beautiful shots of a stag and the doe in the snowy forest, their instincts, their meeting, moving towards each other and an animal affection. As it turns out, these are the animals in the dreams of the two central characters, therefore highly symbolic. Peter is the finance director at the abattoir, Maria is a supervisor and inspector. When he first sees her, standing aloof and alone as she usually does, he is fascinated, meets her in the dining room, begins a conversation – but she is very awkward in responding. As we can see almost immediately from her behaviour, she is both compulsive and obsessive in the detail of her work, in neatness, in remembering sequences and dates in exact order.

An event in the abattoir, the stealing of some pharmaceuticals, leads to a psychologist visiting and questioning all the workers, rather intrusive questions about sexual behaviour, the nature of dreams... Peter is very offhand whereas Maria is absolutely precise. It is here that the audience sees that the two have the same dreams, the psychologist thinking this is a joke and Peter not disillusioning her. Interestingly, she actually does pinpoint from her examination who the culprit is.

Quite a deal of the film focuses on Maria, her attempts to begin some kind of communication with people, getting advice from the rather raunchy old lady who cleans on what to wear and how to walk, buying a mobile phone which she has never had, contacting Peter, having conversations which lead to a theoretical intimacy. She also goes to a music store, listening all day to records but finally buying that recommended by the woman at the counter.

Peter, meanwhile, dislikes one of the workers, warning him about having care for his work on the animals, suspecting him of the theft – and later apologising when the man is not the thief. Peter has an injured arm, lives alone quietly, a slapdash kind of life. Maria brings something out of him but, both of them being awkward, there are some misunderstandings – which will almost lead to tragedy.

The film is very well acted, the dialogue always interesting, the situation is identifiable with, the exploration of human nature, human bodily illness, the reality of the soul. This all makes *On Body and Soul* a film of high quality.

The film won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale, 2017, as well as the prize of the Ecumenical Jury and the jury of the International Film Critics.

ON THE BEACH AT NIGHT ALONE (Competition)

Korea, 2017, 101 minutes, Colour.

Kim Min-hee.

Directed by Hong Sang-soo.

The director is always interested in relationships, power, sexuality (Woman is the future of man, Haewon). This is a contemporary film.

The first part of the film is set in Germany, in Hamburg, an actress is visiting and staying with a friend. For 30 minutes, the film is really conversation between the two women, revealing the past of the actress and her relationship with the director and her deciding to leave Korea and visit Germany, the other woman being older, a good friend, who prefers to live alone. There are comparatively few Germans to be seen, but the older woman sees an agent about renting an apartment, they go to a music store where they meet a friendly composer and buy his book of music, and are hosted by a German couple at a meal.

The second part of the film is longer, set in Korea. The actress has returned to Korea and is meeting with friends. Once again, the film is primarily conversation, but it is conversation generally in groups. The actress finds a friend who is now working in a restaurant, reminiscing about the past, making some advances, but he is committed to his work and to the woman who runs the restaurant. There are other conversations, involving older friends.

There is a lot of smoking and drinking, and the actress swings in her moods, sometimes being

sensible, other times flirtatious and challenging. She plays with the idea of living with another woman, kissing her friend.

However, the conversation simply rouses the past for the actress and she goes to walk on the beach, lying down and going to sleep. She is awakened and invited over to join film technicians who are scouting locations. She is at home with them – and invited to a meal where the director with whom she had a previous relationship is present. They talk, he gives her a gift of a book after reading a passage about relationships, but she has been drinking and is stirred up to talk to the director, to remember the past, to criticise him, to judge him.

And then, she is lying on the beach again – woken up and she realises that she has been dreaming. It is what might have happened – and what might happen.

THE OTHER SIDE OF HOPE (Competition)

Finland, 2017, 98 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Aki Kaurismäki.

The Other Side of Hope is a humane film looking at the refugee situation in Europe during the years of the civil war in Syria. There were national crises in various countries of Europe, especially in Eastern Europe, with borders being blocked. On the other hand, refugees were welcomed in Germany as well as the more northern countries, especially in Scandinavia.

It is been directed by one of Finland's pre-eminent directors, Aki Kaurismäki, who has had a long career, sometimes with comedies and music, sometimes with films about relationships, and often with a social conscience.

It is clear where the director's stance on refugees is as we look at the title.

The film opens dramatically at a wharf in Helsinki, the camera focusing on a cargo of coal and a man emerging from the coal, covered in soot, but making his way out of the ship, walking the streets, finding a place to shower, and then handing himself into the police asking for asylum status. In fact, the police seem sympathetic and help him with his situation. Soon there are sequences where he is being examined by immigration officials and we hear his story, a mechanic in Damascus, returning home to find his house flattened and his parents dead, getting help from his boss, the father of his dead fiancé, to pay people smugglers to get himself and his sister out of Syria, into Turkey and across to Greece.

At the closed border of Hungary, he is separated from his sister and has spent a great deal of time and effort travelling around the Balkans and into Eastern Europe to find her. He is helped onto a ship and finds himself in Finland.

The central character, Khalid, is a very sympathetic young man and the audience is on his side hoping that he will be given refugee status – but one of the hard aspects of the film is hearing the presiding official in the court declaring, despite the audience seeing the bombings and terrible suffering in Damascus on the television, that it is safe for him to return to Syria. He effects an escape and disappears.

The film has also introduced us to a businessman, a salesman packing and leaving his wife who is alcoholic. He sells his stock of shirts and decides to buy a restaurant, and in the under-the-counter

kind of deal, the previous owner takes the money and literally runs to the airport, not paying his staff. But, since the central characters of this film are quite genial, a situation arises where the owner takes out the rubbish and finds Khalid huddling in the street. It is not hard to guess where this is going to lead, with Khalid getting a job in the restaurant, getting a forged passport rather easily, dealing with the eccentric members of the staff who provide touches of comedy in their performances. There is also some comedy as the restaurant owner tries out different ways of generating business including turning the restaurant into a sushi centre with Japanese tourists and then a curry centre...

With the story being gentle on the whole, it should mean that there is a sympathetic audience, ready to appreciate the refugee situation. And this is added to by the picture of various groups of neo-Nazis, bashings and the ugly face of bigotry.

This is a film of its time touching on the sensibilities and sensitivities, especially of Europeans, but of all people facing the mass migrations of the early 21st century and those are intent on closing borders.

THE PARTY (Competition)

UK, 2017, 77 minutes, Black and white.

Kristin Scott Thomas, Timothy Spall, Patricia Clarkson, Bruno Ganz, Cherry Jones, Emily Mortimer, Cillian Murphy.

Directed by Sally Potter.

Over the decades Sally Potter has made quite a number of interesting, often offbeat films, remembering Orlando, The Man who Cried, Rage, and Ginger and Rosa.

In this film, photographed in very effective and sharp black-and-white, she also shows how much material can be condensed into 77 minutes of running time.

It is something like this: Sally Potter has called on several top actors, three British, two Americans, an Irishman and a German, written them some very sharp and telling dialogue, directed them to interact with each other, mounting tension as the film goes on, many in the audience remembering the effect of this kind of social drama in the confines of a meal as in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

The film opens with Janet, Kristin Scott Thomas, opening the front door and raising a revolver. We have to wait only about 75 minutes to know what this is all about – and be surprised. Kristin Scott Thomas portrays a politician who has just been announced as an opposition minister, for health, having campaigned long and hard and put her socialist principles into practice. This is the other meaning of the Party, the political party. Then we see Bill, her husband, sitting depressed and forlorn, rather haggard and not with it, listening to music, waiting for the guests for a celebratory meal. He is played by Timothy Spall.

The first visitors to arrive are April and Gottfried, Patricia Clarkson and Bruno Ganz, an unlikely couple, she very sardonic, even cynical, American, close friend of Janet, full of opinions and certainly in no way hesitant to express them, some offhand, some calculated – and often the calculation is to upset and hurt. On the other hand, Gottfried is a genial German who admires April immensely even though she expresses the desire to separate from him and keeps putting him down in front of everyone. He is a personal coach, anti-Western medicine, interested in breathing, self-help, self-healing, and considering doctors' diagnoses the equivalent of voodoo or curses.

The next couple to arrive and Martha and her partner Jinny, Cherry Jones and Emily Mortimer. Martha is an intellectual, university professor, trendy in many ways, common-sensed. Jinny is much younger and is about to announce that she is not only pregnant but is expecting twins, more than a shock for Martha.

Another couple is expected, husband, Tom, Cillian Murphy, and Maryann who does not arrive. He easily breaks out in a sweat despite his very dapper suit, and relies on cocaine fixes in an attempt to calm his anxiety. He has also brought a gun but decides to throw it into a garbage bin.

This review, having introduced the characters, will leave the rest for the audience to experience, be surprised at, sometimes laugh, sometimes be dismayed, wonder about human nature and its follies and foibles.

Each of the characters has a story. Many of the stories are intertwined and cause quite some surprise and anxiety, outbursts of affection, outbursts of violence, and the problem whether Janet will continue in her role as the new minister.

In fact, a well-written, well-directed, well-acted, contemporary issues drama.

POKOT (Competition)

Poland, 2017, 128 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Agnieszka Holland.

Agnieszka Holland has made films all over the world, in her native Poland as well as in the United States. Here she returns to Poland.

This is a slow-moving drama, a focus on an older woman (and perhaps this was the attraction for the director, able to identify with this woman in age and in outlook). The woman teaches English in a local school but is criticised for her unorthodox methods of dealing with the young children, taking them on excursions into the woods, and is fired from her position.

The synopsis for the film would indicate that there is quite a deal of action – and that is true only that the action takes a long time and the film moves very slowly.

The portrait is that of Janina, living alone, interested in astrology, love for her pets whom she finds killed, concerned about environmental issues, friendly with the young woman in difficulties in the town, friendly with the young man, an epileptic, who helps her.

In the meantime, there are quite a number of authority figures in the town, the police chief, the mayor, the parish priest. They are concerned with activities that Janina does not approve of, hunting, a casino... And, throughout the film, each of these characters is found murdered.

There is an interlude where a Czech scientist, examining ants in the forest, is confronted by Janina but they form a friendship after the finding of yet another body.

It is highly likely that the audience will work out halfway through the film who was responsible for the deaths – which might make the buildup to the revelation, and the burning of the church and the

death of the parish priest who has been severely critical of Janina and her belief in animal souls and environmental causes, seem somewhat anticlimactic.

For some audiences the film might be hard going, depending on identifying with the Polish sensibility, the feminist sensibility and the environmental causes and the consequences.

REINA DE ESPANA, La/ THE QUEEN OF SPAIN (Berlinale Special)

Spain, 2017, 128 minutes, Colour.

Penelope Cruz, Antonio Resines, Chino Darin, Javier Camara, Jorge Sans, Cary Elwes, Mandy Patinkin, Clive Revill, Loles Leon, Neus Assensi.

Directed by Fernando Trueba.

This kind of film is usually described as a romp, with words to describe it like “rollicking”!

This is an ambitious production, written and directed by Fernando Trueba, Oscar-winner for Best Foreign Language Film, *La Belle Epoque*, 1992. At first, the title could refer to Queen Isabella of Spain and her rule, and dominance, in the late 15th century. However, there is a strong focus on a glamorous Spanish actress who goes to Hollywood, marries a prominent producer, divorces, is seen as a star, returns to Spain for the filming of *The Queen of Spain* – but it is the actress who is, of course, the Queen of Spain.

The setting is the late 1940s into the early 1950s. The film is very helpful in offering an initial collage of scenes showing the experience of Spain from the Civil War, the emergence of General Franco, Spain’s role during World War II, the end of the war, the Franco era and the sense of control, even repression. Part of the collage is showing the glamour of Hollywood in the 1940s, star popularity, the fans and gossip, the popularity of the movies.

Penelope Cruz is the star, the queen. She gets the start treatment from the press, from the American producers – the filming of the film within the film has American money, something Franco Spain is happy to accept. There is an American director played by Clive Revill who is generally asleep, wakened to say action or cut, something of a parody on John Ford. Mandy Patinkin is the writer, doing hack work because he has been blacklisted during the McCarthy era. There is an American actor, Cary Elwes, playing Ferdinand, quite a camp character and, self-important.

On the set is a range of characters, some oddball, who are part of the Spanish set – but who have an important role in the latter part of the film, eccentricities and all. There is the costume designer, married to a homosexual head of Department; there is a Spanish actor who has seen better days, who is to play the Moorish king, but has hopes of an invitation to Hollywood; there is Trini, the star’s personal assistant – not afraid to spread the gossip; and there is the assistant director, played by Javier Camara, frequently in Almodovar films, serious in his work and managing things so that all goes well.

There is a serious tone when a former director who has been missing for many years turns up, welcome back even though everybody thought he was dead – but was in a concentration camp. He is given work as second unit director and seems ready for a comeback when he is suddenly arrested, disappears to a working site where an enormous cross is being erected out of stone in memory of the recent past. He is the target of this attempts on his life.

This all comes together in a plot initiated by the star, and aided by one of the young technicians

whom she has seduced, to get the motley troop to affect and escape for the prisoner. This is where the film becomes particularly rollicking, the plan, the execution, using the filming of soldiers on horseback, with the star disguised as one, extricating the prisoner and eluding the authorities to get him out of Spain. A happy blend of humour and excitement.

Plenty of characters, plenty of ingredients, scenes from the actual film – including an extraordinary insertion of Queen Isabella singing the contemporary song, Granada, roaming the battlements!

At the end, Generalissimo Franco decides to visit the set, keeping the Americans and they trying to keep in favour of Spain. While the film has been very anti-Franco, it is a scene where the star, now an American citizen, his father was killed in one Franco's prisons, speaks out a defiance against fascism.

A movie movie, so to speak, with a great deal of humour, with a great deal of gossip, and many serious undertones.

RETURN TO MONTAUK (Competition)

Germany, 2017, 105 minutes, Colour.

Stellan Skarsgaard, Nina Hoss, Suzanne Wolfe, Niels Arestrup.

Directed by Volker Schlöndorff.

A significant factor for the success of this film is that it was co-written by celebrated and award-winning novelist, Colm Toibin (Brooklyn, The Testament of Mary). He has worked with the German director, Volker Schlöndorff, who has been directing films since the 1960s.

In fact, this is the story about a novelist, played by Stellan Skarsgaard. It opens with a rather long monologue by the author, talking about his father, a philosopher, and about the writer's life, meditating on the things that were done and were mistakes as well as on the things that were not done and should have been done. It is then revealed, as the camera moves back, that the writer is doing a reading for the public, a novel, rather than from his life – although, as the film continues, it is quite clear that much of the novel is autobiographical.

There is a whole lot of hoopla about the novelist coming back to New York City after an absence of 10 years. He is a German author but spent time, especially studying, in New York. At a reading, he encounters Walter (Niels Arestrup) who had been his mentor in the past, especially when he was studying with Rebecca with whom he had a relationship but had suddenly broken it off and lost contact with her.

With the title, it is return to New York City as well as, eventually to Montauk on Long Island.

Max, the author, has a companion, (Suzanne Wolfe) who has been in New York preparing his visit. There is also a PR person guiding him through his visit, arranging interviews. However, it is very clear that Max would like to find Rebecca again, gets her address at work, she comes down to see him but seems quite unwilling for any further contact. He then goes to her apartment, starting to think about the past again – and it appears, not only to Rebecca, but to the audience, that Max is living a dream, that he is rather self-centred, that he would like to plan a future that panders to himself and his wishes.

The exploration of this theme involves Rebecca inviting him to drive with her to Montauk to see a

house that she is interested in buying. But Montauk was a place where they had been together, at a hotel, walking the beach... Which is something they do again. But, it is Rebecca who emerges with far more credibility than Max, her shock at his departure, her having to cope, her meeting someone who supported her in her work but who suddenly died, her grieving. After 10 years she is a prominent lawyer, working with a prestigious firm, often headhunted for other firms, able to command a sizeable fee.

Max goes back to New York where he has upset people by his absence. He has to face his companion and her dismay at the way that he has treated her.

The film is always interesting in its portrayal of the character of Max and Stellan Skarsgaard's effective performance. It is always interesting in its exploration of the character of Rebecca, played by famous German actress, Nina Hoss. And it is interesting in its resolution and its non-resolutions and the audience left wondering what exactly Max's future will be.

SAGE FEMME/ THE MIDWIFE (Out of Competition)

France, 2017, 105 minutes, Colour.
Catherine Frot, Catherine Deneuve,
Directed by Martin Provost.

It is a pleasure to see two important actresses working together. In 2016 Catherine Frot made a powerful impression as Marguerite, the French equivalent of the off-key singer, Florence Foster Jenkins. Catherine Deneuve, in her early 70s, has been making films, quite prolifically, and receiving top billing since 1964, a French icon.

The title, Sage Femme is the French for Midwife. The emphasis is very female – but there are lines of dialogue in this film to indicate that the name will have to be changed, both in French and English, with men becoming significant in birthing. The son of Catherine Frot's Claire tells his mother that he is stopping his medical studies but that he intends to work as a midwife.

The film opens with quite a number of births scenes, an opportunity to show Claire and her skills, her ability to deal with mothers giving birth, to encourage, to cajole, to sympathise, and spreading her expertise to the attending nurses. There are other sequences throughout the film enabling us to appreciate Claire's commitment and professionalism. She is also unhappy at the move to great technological change in care for mothers and birth, moving away from the personalised midwife care.

And Catherine Deneuve? She plays an older woman, Beatrice, who wants to get in contact with Claire's father with whom she had a relationship decades earlier. This puts a great strain on Claire who is very serious at the best of times. It means going back into her past, her attitude towards her father, her resentment towards Beatrice, her long held the ring that Beatrice had betrayed her.

The main complication is that Beatrice announces that she has terminal cancer, tumours. Claire is very positive in her outlook on illness and recovery and, at first, it is her sense of medical duty that she gives attention to Beatrice. Which is not always easy because Beatrice is one of those people who can never settle down, is always out on the town, is still smoking despite warnings, fond of a drink, and a propensity for gambling. She switches moods in an incident, upset, then over-gracious.

There is one other complication, apart from Claire's son and his fiancée announcing that she is

pregnant. Claire has a garden plot on the outskirts of the city, working with her vegetables, and encounters the son of the manager, Paul (Oliver Gourmet) an international truck driver who befriends Claire, a genial and obliging man, someone who can open up Claire and her capacity for one-to-one affection. There is an exhilarating scene at the end where Claire, Beatrice and Paul go for a country drive in the lorry and Beatrice gets the opportunity to drive.

So, it is a great pleasure to see the two actresses embody these two characters, their interactions, the changing relationship, going back into memories, and the possibilities for some reconciliation and forgiveness. Bringing to birth, so to speak, a new life of relationships.

T2 TRAINSPOTTING (Out of Competition)

UK, 2017, 117 minutes, Colour.

Ewan Mc Gregor, Ewen Bremner, Johnny Lee Miller, Robert Carlyle, James Cosmo, Shirley Henderson,

Directed by Danny Boyle.

Trainspotting became a classic of the 1990s, based on a novel by Irvine Welsh, it was setting Edinburgh but in the sub culture of drugs in the city, focusing on four men in their 20s, their exuberantly reckless life, the impact of drugs – and a certain move toward self-destruction.

But, here they are again, 20 years later. Have they changed at all? Have they learned from their experiences? And what have they been doing during the previous 20 years? This is a story of four men in their mid-40s, also Edinburgh, and there is still something of a drug-culture.

For those who appreciated the first film, there is no doubt that this film will be more than interesting. One very serious reviewer remarked that all the “magic” from the original film had gone. “Magic” is not exactly the word that comes to mind when considering Trainspotting. There is a lot of sentiment, of the affectionate and affable type as well as the hostile and aggressive type, but there is also a great deal of reminiscing with one character remarking that they were “tourists in their own nostalgia”, something which many of the audience will be indulging in as well.

And what has happened? Ewan Mc Gregor is Mark Renton returns to Edinburgh after 15 years in Amsterdam, a finance course, a job, a wife – but this all now collapsing. Johnny Lee Miller Simon is involved in blackmailing clients of a prostitute that he is set up with a camera and has inherited a derelict pub. Ewen Bremner’s Spud, quite an interesting character in this film, has been on drugs, tried rehabilitation, been on several jobs but, there is an enjoyable collage showing how he turns up an hour late for everything and is now on his own, yearning for his wife and son. And Robert Carlyle’s Begbie? In prison all these years, but now with a brainwave to get a fellow prisoner to stab him so that he has to go to hospital and where he can walk out, trying to resume his life, meetings wife and son, the son intended to go to college but his father forcing him to go on a botched burglary expedition.

So, there we are. What will they do now?

Mike finds he doesn’t want to go back to Amsterdam, is reunited with his father, experiences the animosity of Simon but then decides to stay and help on a project where Simon can turn his pub into a sauna (that is, brothel). He is in a relationship with the prostitute he set up, Veronica, who is from Bulgaria and a shrewd operator as well. Spud helps with the renovation of the pub meanwhile writing down his stories which Veronica is fascinated with. And Begbie, he is after some revenge on

Mark.

All this happens, more or less, but Simon does get charged for his blackmail, but not before going to members of a fund to appeal for a grant and then going to a club where he and Mark Steele all the credit cards and, in a high point in the film, because all the crowd is loyalist and hasn't forgotten the Battle of the Boyne, are forced to sing the song, Mark improvising, the song being 1690, and the end of each chorus is "not a Catholic left" which is an amazing hit with everybody vigourously joining in.

There is a buildup to a climax with Begbie attacking Mark, defended by Simon, and Begbie delivered in the boot of the car to the prison gates. And Veronica, with the help of Spud, is no mean exploiter herself, especially with the financial grant money.

Trainspotting fans may well be invigorated by this sequel – but it does present a kind of sub- culture world, some dead ends in life unless one is in exploiter. but Spud is a great success with his stories, going to see his wife and son and she suggesting a title for them!

VICEROY'S HOUSE (Out of Competition)

UK/India, 2017, 106 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Bonneville, Gillian Anderson, Michael Gambon, Manish Dayal, Huma Qureshi, David Heyman, Om Puri, Simon Callow.

Directed by Gurinda Chanda.

Where is the Viceroy's House? It is in Delhi, and it is 1947, the year for Britain's solving its role in India's move for independence, which led to Partition into India and Pakistan, Hindu and Muslim.

For those interested in British history, especially in India, this is a film which recreates the atmosphere and dramatises the personalities and events of the time. The viceroy is Lord Mountbatten, who had achieved significantly during World War II in Burma. He is accompanied by his wife, Lady Edwina Mountbatten.

The task that Mountbatten was given by the British Parliament was to move India towards the independence that it for and which had been fostered by Mahatma Gandhi. This independence was not to be an easy task because of Hindu traditions, of the Muslim traditions, the cultural and religious clashes, in 1947 turning into local massacres, uprisings and a general sense of unease. Hindus were led by Nehru and the Muslims by Jinnah. It was very difficult times to arrange meetings between leaders.

As a way of bringing the audience into the thinking of the issues, there is a kind of Romeo and Juliet story underlying the political activity. Jeet (Manish Dayal) is a Hindu who has worked in prisons but is now promoted as a personal servant to the Viceroy. Also promoted in the Viceroy's House is a young Muslim woman, Aalia (Huma Qureshi). Jeet is in love with her since he looked after her father in prison. She has been promised to someone else and it would seem that their love has no future.

Hugh Bonneville portrays Mountbatten, an excellent choice, bringing dignity and status as well as some compassion to the role trying with his wife (Gillian Anderson) to move amongst the people, meeting with the governors, the political leaders, facing the reality of a low Partition for many, including Gandhi, are against it.

An expert, who had actually never visited in, is called in to determine the borders between India and

Pakistan, as well as establishing East Pakistan, later Bangladesh. He is played by Simon Callow. One of the main advisors to the Viceroy is General Ismay (Michael Gambon), who eventually reveals to the border expert that there had been a long plan for Partition, sponsored by Winston Churchill, no longer Prime Minister, a plan that had not been shown to Mountbatten who had reported well to the Parliament which decreed that the solution was to be named after him.

In the meantime, the romance between the two young people does blossom, the girl's father (Om Puri) appreciates Jeet. At the same time, as the riots and massacres break out, the intense differences are manifest amongst the clashing servants who eventually, when Partition is to have to make a decision whether they want to stay in Pakistan or in India. This leads to an enormous migration throughout the subcontinent.

Audiences interested in British politics in 1947 should see a United Kingdom, the story of the King of Bechuanaland and his marrying an English woman and the consequent racial difficulties and decisions of the British Parliament under Atlee under Churchill to preserve links with South Africa where apartheid was officially emerging. During the final credits, there is a note that the director's grandmother was caught up in the searches at the time of Partition so that there is great personal investment in the film as a memoir.

Beautifully photographed, an excellent re-creation of the period, a very watchable political and social film.

WILD MOUSE (Competition)

Austria, 2017, 103 minutes, Colour.

Joseph Hader, Georg Friedrich, Jorg Hartmann, Pia Hierzegger, Denis Moschitto, Crina Semciuc.
Directed by Joseph Hader.

An Austrian comedy.

Wild Mouse is the work of Joseph Hader, actor, writer of the script and director of the film. The Wild Mouse of the title is a restaurant – although the character, Georg, is something of a mouse at the age of 50 but, having been fired from his paper and 25 years of music reviews, he discovers that there is more to life and his being a mouse becomes rather wild – even excessively so.

This is a film that people of middle age will relate to. Those, who around 50, find it difficult to get employment after losing their jobs, will also identify.

Hader creates quite a character, a rather self-satisfied man, and snobbish. He is married to Joanna, a therapist, something which creates a variety of complications especially with a recalcitrant client and his relationships.

At first, Georg does not want to admit the truth, goes out to work every day, sits in the park, is amazed that his successor still uses some of his reviews (with his wife astounded they are so friendly). One day, at a fair, he sits on the train designed for children and families which leads to his meeting the driver, a friend from school days (whom he remembers bullying him). The driver also loses his job but is supported by his Romanian girlfriend with whom he will cannot converse, Georg using Italian to get to know her.

With Georg coming to life, one of the main things that Hebrew on is a possible revenge on his boss

who sacked him. And that is where the film leads, with some surprises, Georg failing in his intent, falling asleep in the snow and having to phone his wife to come to help him.

The film ends with the audience wondering whether Georg can ever explain everything to his wife.

Quite entertaining, often amusing – despite the fact that Georg is so often disagreeably petulant.

THE YOUNG KARL MARX (Berlinale Special)

France/Germany, 2017, 118 minutes, Colour.

August Diehl, Stefan Konarske, Vicki Krieps, Olivier Gourmet, Hannah Steele.

Directed by Raoul Peck.

Probably a film about an older Karl Marx might not be all that interesting, the ageing thinker and writer in London, in a kind of exile, sitting in the British Library, writing *Das Kapital*. So, if he is to be acknowledged in the cinema, then it is definitely best to go for young Karl Marx.

Interestingly, the film is very strong in its depiction of Marx's friend and co-writer, Friedrich Engels, probably a character more suited to a film than Marx.

The setting is the 1840s, a decade of social unrest, and a decade in which a number of established monarchs and leaders fell and, in 1848, revolutionary leaders emerged – as well as in the culmination of this film, the *Communist Manifesto*.

The locations are quite varied, from Germany, in the city of Frankfurt, in France in Paris, in Belgium in Brussels and, in England, some significant scenes in mill-factory in Manchester as well as other British locations for socially-concerned meetings.

Marx, as played by August Diehl, is a genial young fellow in his 20s, easily stirred by social injustice, and, not having a comfortable background, having a great empathy for people in poor circumstances and dire straits. He writes articles, the authorities close down his magazine and the editor and staff find themselves temporarily in jail. Which means that Marx has to move on, going to Paris and writing and thinking, and the same in Belgium. He is strongly supported by a young woman from a more wealthy Frankfurt family, Jenny (Vivki Krieps), whom he marries and who is consistent in her belief in her husband and his ideas. He also becomes a family man.

In the meantime, the German Friedrich Engels is in Manchester at one of the mills with his father, an enterprising capitalist who is hard on the workers and intolerant of any outspoken objectors, taking no notice of the injuries and the harsh mill conditions. One of the most vociferous is a young woman, Mary (Hannah Steele). Engel seeks out the workers because he wants to do research work on the conditions. They are initially suspicious, physically assaulting him, but he is saved by Mary who will later become his wife and his most ardent supporter.

Marx and Engels know each other and admire each other's writings. When they eventually meet, there is a strong collaboration, lots of writing, encounters with significant social writers of the time, especially Proudhon (Olivier Gourmet). As the 1840s go on, Marx and Engels disagree with and are able to oust his followers, Engels demanding to speak and being persuasive so that the leaders of the Justice E allow Engels to be the official delegate and to speak.

In the meantime, Marx, supporting Engels, is finding it hard to make ends meet, is becoming tired,

wants to retire from public appearances and to write. Engels meanwhile is fired up and is finally able to persuade Marx to write the draft of The Communist Manifesto.

Audiences will have varied views on this film depending on their admiration or not for Marx and Engels and their perspective on the subsequent history of communism. But the film does offer the opportunity to see the two men and their story, and their action, and their eagerness

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ALONE IN BERLIN
AQUARIUS
BITTER HARVEST
DAVID STRATTON: A CINEMATIC LIFE
GREAT WALL, The
HIDDEN FIGURES
I AM BOLT
JASPER JONES
LOGAN
MISS SLOANE
RED BILLABONG
RINGS
RULES DON'T APPLY
T2 TRAINSPOTTING
TRUTH BENEATH, The

ALONE IN BERLIN.

Germany/UK, 2016, 97 minutes, Colour.
Emma Thompson, Brendan Gleeson, Daniel Bruehl.
Directed by Vincent Perez.

Alone in Berlin pays tribute to a middle-aged couple and their private (and small) resistance to the Nazi government and to Hitler during the early years of the war. The screenplay is an adaptation of a popular novel about the couple.

The film is quite an international mixture, perhaps disconcerting for German audiences to see strongly German characters as well as police and Nazi officials all speaking in English – but that is the way of the commercial world, so many international directors making their films in English. Perhaps surprisingly, this film was directed by French actor, Vincent Perez, best known for his romantic and, sometimes, swashbuckling roles like Queen Margot and Fanfan La Tulipe.

The film opens with a very young German soldier running through the forest for his life, pursued by the Resistance, shot by them, lying dead in the field gazing towards the sky only for his soldiers to attack and run-off the Resistance.

In Berlin, there is a certain amount of public elation with the prospect of the defeat of France and the hope of the defeating England by the end of the year and Germany becoming the greatest and richest country in Europe. People are joyful in the streets.

A postmistress on her bike, seemingly friendly with authorities, of being seen to be kind towards people in the apartment block, especially to an elderly Jewish lady, delivers the letter to the parents of the young man, who died in giving his life for his country.

It is his parents who are the focus of the story, Anna and Otto, played very seriously and with dignity by Emma Thompson and Brendan Gleeson. Anna is an ordinary housewife although she belongs to the union of mothers, even having to confront the wife of an official who claimed an exception to war wives working. Otto, on the other hand, is a foreman in a factory with further demands being made for Hitler himself and for the war effort, Hitler demanding increased quotas. Otto does not belong to the Nazi party and, when challenged, says he gave to the Fuehrer his greatest possession, his son.

But the key thing about Otto and Anna is that Otto decides to write, disguising his handwriting, messages on the back of postcards, telling mothers that their sons would be sacrificed, denouncing Hitler and claiming a free press. Quietly, he places the letters in various strategic points – almost 300 of them with 275 being handed in to the authorities. He hopes he can make some difference in awareness. Anna works with him, helping with some of the deliveries.

In the meantime, Gestapo authorities are not happy with this spate of cards and the police chief, Daniel Bruehl, is commissioned to find the culprit, who is nicknamed Hobgoblin because of his evasive tactics. There is a subplot with one of the police officers coming to Otto's building to apprehend the old Jewish widow whom local burglars had robbed, but she had given been some help by the couple and by a kindly but outwardly severe judge.

It is the same police who are charged with finding the card-writer. Eventually, the ex-husband of the postmistress is apprehended, tortured, proven to be not the culprit but, under pressure from the Gestapo, the policeman kills him claiming that it was suicide.

Otto and Anna are quite stoic in their continued mission of their card writing and delivery. However, they know it will only be some time before they are apprehended.

The film shows the interrogation of Otto, some brutality, especially the congratulatory-toasting officials smashing their glasses on his head. The results are inevitable, Otto seeming to accept that he would be condemned and executed but had decided that this is what he had to do during the war. Anna shares this.

There is a symbolic ending with the cards fluttering again down from the building onto the streets – and the sad acknowledgement of what he had done by the policeman, somehow admiring Otto, promising to release and but failing to – and experiencing some kind of disillusionment, especially after he was bashed in the face by the Gestapo chief, and remorse.

AQUARIUS

Brazil, 2016, 146 minutes, Colour.

Sonia Braga.

Directed by Kleber Mendonca Filho.

In this film, the title, Aquarius, belongs to a building. It is not exactly the age of Aquarius. Rather, this rather long film is a portrait of a woman in her 60s, Clara, a very effective portrait by Brazilian actress, Sonia Braga.

The setting is the city of Recife, shown in opening sequences in black-and-white photos, then opening up to a beachfront and the Aquarius building in 1980. Clara's family are celebrating the birthday of an aunt and she herself is recovering from cancer surgery. The screenplay is divided into three chapters: Clara's Hair (which she has lost because of the chemotherapy); Clara's Love which brings Clara, now in her 60s, into the present, the main part of the film which shows her day-to-day life; the final chapter is called Clara's Cancer – but not a recurrence, rather a symbol of a fight she has been having with developers.

Clara in 1980 is a genial person, with a loving and devoted husband and three young children. There is a birthday celebration for their Aunt Lucia, one of those very active Brazilian women, socially concerned and who spent some time in jail – in some ways, she serves as a comparison for the later Clara.

In the present day, Clara lives alone, her husband dead for 17 years, but in good contact with her children and grandchildren. She lives alone in Aquarius where she had brought up her family. She is the only one left in the building and the developers are literally knocking on her door, trying to persuade her to move out so that they can demolish the building and rebuild “the New Aquarius Project”. Clara is not for moving.

So, while there is all kind of detail about Clara's ordinary life, there are memories of her past as a music critic and her producing books and articles, visits with her children, babysitting a grandchild, conversations with quite a number of friends in the surrounding area and swimming and walking along the beach.

The development situation gets rather heated, a young developer, smiling and charming whom she attacks as passive-aggressive, allows a very noisy and rough party to go on in the room above her, bringing in mattresses and then burning them in the courtyard, approaching Clara's children to try to persuade her to take a substantial financial deal and to move out. The sequence of her meeting her children and the discussions, especially with her daughter taking the aggressive position, are very effective.

The final chapter with Clara's Cancer is actually a cancer of the woodwork in the Aquarius building, the developers having brought in wood rotten with termites in order to eat away

foundations and columns. Just as Clara conquered her cancer in 1980, the end of the film indicates that she is going to conquer this kind of cancer and, definitely, survive.

There is a great attention to detail in film, quite a range of characters, the plot sometimes meandering, but overall a significant portrait of Clara.

BITTER HARVEST

Canada, 2017, 103 minutes, Colour.

Max Irons, Samantha Berks, Aneurin Barnard, Barry Pepper, Terence Stamp, Tamer Hassan.
Directed by George Mendeluk.

This is what one might call a very worthy film and some audiences around the world have considered it very important that audiences should be introduced to this story of Ukraine, Stalinist oppression, the Communist tactic of famine in 1932 and the consequences for Ukraine.

As the film released in 2017, one wonders what the intention of the filmmakers was – more than probably a Ukrainian stance against the contemporary Russian regime, the invasions by Vladimir Putin, the hostility towards Russia, the feel for Ukrainian independence, and are calling on a significant episode in the past for boosting morale in the 21st-century. And, to that extent, Bitter Harvest is successful.

It was filmed in Ukraine which also gives the film an authentic and some power.

On the other hand, while the film is worthy, and has an emotional impact as well its propaganda effect, it is not the best written or directed film which is a danger in undermining the power of the message. Some of the dialogue is very conventional, familiar and expected, lessening the impact of the characters and action. Another difficulty is that the characters are types that are expected.

The opening of the film takes the audience back to 1917, the end of the reign of Tsars, the oppression in Ukraine, the rise in takeover of the Bolsheviks, the execution of the Tsar and his family. The centre of the film is a village, the focus on a young boy and girl, the attraction, as well as the ordinary range of citizens, farmers and workers, family members, including a warrior uncle played by Terence Stamp. As the action moves into the 1920s, the situation in the Ukraine and the now satellite countries is becoming more dire, the Bolsheviks and ruthless control, merciless military men, putting into practice Stalinism and rigid control of the countries of the Soviet Union.

There are some sequences set in Moscow and glimpses of Stalin working with his associates, smiling, ruthless.

The young boy and the girl are grown-up, now Max Irons and Samantha Barks. With the presence of the Russian military, and the task of making sure that every farmer now belongs

to the Collective, there is a great deal of fighting, a film of action, but also of intrigue, of cruelty towards women, and the men taking to the fields, uprisings, vicious reprisals.

There is a sadness about the relationship between the young man and woman and the continued frustrations, fuelling audience antipathy about the cruelty that the Russians impose on the villagers.

The name given to the desperate famine engineered by the Russians is called Holodomor. It is not as well-known as other famines and genocides in the early part of the 20th century and those who are supportive of Ukraine are very glad that this film is dramatises this history, the suffering, acknowledging the past – but, it would seem, reminding audiences how relevant it is to the present.

DAVID STRATTON: A CINEMATIC LIFE

Australia, 2017, 105 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Sally Aitken.

What a pleasure!

David Stratton, who came from England in his 20s during the 1960s, made his home in Australia but also made his career home in Australia in cinema. As director of the Sydney Film Festival for almost 2 decades, he would have made his mark with this alone. However, diligent from his childhood in keeping files on all the films he watched, including an early viewing of *The Overlanders*, writing reviews, he moved into the world of reviewing especially for the American magazine, *Variety*. He also programmed world cinema screenings for SBS television.

However, this would not have made him a household name. But, his popular collaboration with Margaret Pomeranz on *The Movie Show* for almost 30 years, first on SBS, then an ABC television, meant that he was an immediately recognisable personality and, a tribute to their success in the programming and their on-screen collaboration as well as sparring, they became an Australian pair who did not need their surnames to be mentioned, they were just David and Margaret.

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This is a very carefully made film, an opportunity to see something of David Stratton's biography, his family in England, his father's war service, his father's non-comprehension of David's interest in cinema, a good deal of commentary from David's brother, David deciding to go to Australia and deciding to stay. There are some photos of David during his Sydney Film Festival era, a bit of a shock for those who did not know him at that stage with his long hair, long beard, moccasins, a far cry from the seemingly fastidious silver haired and bearded gentlemen of later decades (though Margaret has quite a number of shots during this film about how poor she thinks his style and grooming are!).

During this film, David travels in the outback, to a range of Australian locations, admiring

and delighting in the beauty of the Australian environment. And illustrating how well the films have capitalised on these environments.

But David Stratton, although he reviewed films from all around the world, has a great admiration for Australian cinema, reminding us that in the 60s there was almost nothing, but there was a breakthrough with such films as *Wake in Fright* (with extensive clips here), a film he still has on a pedestal.

What he does in this film is to incorporate clips from a great number of Australian films, those he admires, like *Muriel's Wedding*, and even those he does not admire, like Brian Trenchard Smith's *Turkey Shoot* which he condemns for its ultraviolence (although the film offers Trenchard Smith an opportunity for rebuttal) and Geoffrey Wright's *Romper Stomper*, again with interviews with Wright still maintaining his antipathy towards David and the episode of his throwing a glass of white wine over him – and that he would do it again but it would be red!

One of the advantages of having all these clips as well as the continued interviews to camera by David Stratton is that the editor can come and do all kinds of inserts and cuts, sometimes characters in one film answering the dialogue of a character in another – and sometimes, the film character responding to some comments by David Stratton himself. It is an engaging device and treated lightly as the clips moved briskly from one to another.

For those who have lived with the industry since the 1980s, this is a wonderful opportunity to reminisce, to be nostalgic, to be amazed, to admire – for instance the memories of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. This means that an Australian audience has much to be proud of, the films, the style, the directors, the actors, a great number of whom are interviewed for this film. It should mean for non-Australian audiences a wonderful introduction to Australian cinema.

Each member of the audience will bring their own experiences – this reviewer (a month older than David Stratton) who has been reviewing since 1968 and has lived through the development, and has met David and Margaret over the last decades, found the experience of watching the film exhilarating, affirming, delightful, and the continued desire to share this appreciation of Australian cinema and be thankful for David Stratton's contribution.

THE GREAT WALL

US/China, 2017, 103 minutes, Colour.

Matt Damon, Jing Tian, Willem Dafoe, Andy Lau, Pedro Pascal.

Directed by Zhang Yimou.

With *The Great Wall* as a title, many, including the present reviewer, were looking forward to a good slice of Chinese history. And with Zhang Yimou as the director, and remembering his films of the late 1980s into the 1990s, really bringing Chinese history and culture alive (*Raise the Red to Lantern*, *The Story of Qui Ju*), and then his modest stories of Chinese life (*Not One Less*, *The Road Home*), but also remembering his move to martial arts, *The House of the*

Flying Daggers, and his work for the Beijing Olympics, hopes were high for The Great Wall.

A great disappointment.

The film opens with a comment about the building of the Great Wall of China and the many centuries it took to complete. It then mentions the history of the wall – and refers to legends. This film opts for legends.

While it is an American-Chinese² co-production, and the director is Chinese, the screenplay was written by Americans and quite a number of the producers are also American. Nevertheless, it was highly successful at the Chinese box office. (The dialogue is matinee-basic.)

In fact, this is not Chinese history but a monster movie. Or, to be accurate, a monsters movie, thousands of them. A lot of technical know-how went into the action sequences, quite spectacular in their way, the effort to enhance this film is in the area of special effects, especially for the horrible monsters, huge, metallic, seemingly armour-plated, gaping mouths, fierce teeth, a propensity for blood and gore and death.

These monsters are alleged to appear every 60 years, attacking the humans, to test the humanity of their motivations. When the monsters appear, humanity is almost forgotten.

This is the time of the Dark Ages in the West, with two foreigners arriving to try to find black powder, gunpowder, and take it back to the west. They have been involved in many wars, mercenaries. They are played by Matt Damon (William) and Pedro Pascal (Tovar). Also in the cast is Willem Dafoe, eager to get the black powder, steal it and transport it to the west. No surprise that he does not survive – death by gunpowder.

When William and Tavor are captured, and about to be executed, the monsters attack and they are free to help in the fight. While the film runs for about 100 minutes, the first 30 minutes are very much occupied with the attack of the monsters and a fierce battle; and in the second 30 minutes the monsters attack again; and in the last 30 minutes, the monsters have borrowed through the Great Wall and have reached the capital where they are mounting an enormous attack (actually the monsters look more like millions rather than thousands this time).

The general of the Chinese is killed in action and bequeaths the leadership to a young woman, Lin (Jing Tian). Needless to say, there is initial rivalry and standoffishness between William and the new general, he showing his skills with arrows, she urging him to trust and to dive from the parapets. Not at first – but, it is inevitable that he will, going down into the midst of the monsters to slay them.

At the end, there are hot air balloons to take William and Lin to the capital, to use the gunpowder against the monsters but, particularly, the Queen so that if she dies, all the rest stop their aggression

So, if you are expecting history, don't. If you like monster movies (this is something of a higher class monster movie), then this may be one of your favourites.

HIDDEN FIGURES

US, 2016, 127 minutes, Colour.

Taraji P.Henson, Octavia Spencer, Janelle Monae, Kevin Costner, Kirsten Dunst, Jim Parsons, Mahershala Ali, Aldis Hodge, Glenn Powell, Kimberly Quinn.

Directed by Theodore Melfi.

Here is a film which should please many audiences. It received Oscar nominations including for Best Film.

There is an ambiguity in the title: more obviously, it refers to the women, the African-American women, who worked assiduously for the American space program. But, with so many of them and their computer skills, the hidden figures were those on the computers and, more especially, the formulae and equations that had to be developed for spacecraft, for astronauts, for the competition with the Russians, for the race to the moon.

While the film is predominantly about the space program, is also a film about American racism, the realities of segregation at the beginning of the 1960s, at the time of greater progress for Civil Rights and the work of Martin Luther King.

The opening sequence of the film is set in 1926, in the south, a young girl, Katherine, being taken to an examination board for possibilities of a scholarship, and her quick and ingenious solutions to blackboard equations. Well-educated, by 1961 she is at work in the computer room, the Coloured Computer room, working on computers with a good number of her black sisters, supervised (without the official title and salary as Supervisor) by Dorothy Vaughan.

Katherine is a wonderful opportunity for Taraji P.Henson, well-known for television work and supporting film roles. She brings great energy as well as a courtesy and decorum (and some insistent communications when necessary) to the portrait of a woman who was a maths expert. Oscar-winner Octavia Spencer (also nominated for this role) brings strength as well is humorous support as Dorothy. The third person in the trio of significant women for the film is Mary Jackson, Janelle Monae, who has the skills to be an engineer but authorities find it difficult to conceive of a woman, let alone a black woman, as a NASA engineer.

The setting is NASA and the three women, all with families, live in Virginia. The film shows a great deal of the realities of segregation, special parts of transport at the back, particular rooms, specific entrances, drinking fountains, and, especially, separate toilet facilities. It is hard to believe as we see this discrimination but civil rights legislation was yet to come a few years later.

In charge of the space program is Al Harrison, played with authority by Kevin Costner, a character who wants the best maths advisors and who comes to admire Katherine very

strongly (and facing the reality of separate toilet facilities when he discovers the effect on Katherine and her work). The women's supervisor is Mrs Mitchell, played by Kirsten Dunst, a rather prim woman, devoted to rules and regulations, a surface sympathy for the women under her supervision – but, later in the film, when she declares to Dorothy that she is sympathetic, Dorothy replies that she believes that Mrs Mitchell sincerely believes that she is sympathetic.

Jim Parsons plays Paul Stafford who works with Katherine, not sympathetic, even rather supercilious, but who, in the end, is to acknowledge Katherine's genius.

The drama of the film is the preparation for spaceflights in 1961, especially in the aftermath of Yuri Gagarin going into space and the blow to American pride in coming second. There is extraordinary intensity of work, calculations for flight paths, re-entry points, circumstances changing within minutes and more calculations required. Katherine uses a blackboard and is able to show clearly her skills in calculations. Later, she makes the point about going into briefing sessions to be up-to-date with changing circumstances – and Stafford's complaint that this is not the place for a woman, let alone a black woman.

In 1961, NASA introduces huge IBM computers but the experts do not have the know-how to program and to use the computers – something which Dorothy, going into the computer room in her spare time, is able to work out, teach her computer staff to use, and they are transferred as a group to staff the computers in 1961-62.

There are some human stories in the background, Katherine being a widow with two daughters and a military man, retired (Mahershala Ali) who begins to court her, Mary Jackson and her husband's wariness about her studying to be an engineer (where she takes her case to a Virginia court because the only locations for her course is a whites-only college).

The audience is also introduced to Alan Shepherd on the preparations for his flight and, especially, a very genial John Glenn who trusts Katherine's calculations, especially for the uncertainties for his flight and orbits.

Audiences may be familiar with all this background from the 1982, *The Right Stuff*.

While the film is interesting with its characters and storylines, it is also a tribute to these women – with photos and footage at the end of the film of the actual women, and the trajectory of their careers, Dorothy seen as an expert with computers, Katherine, 97 at the time the film was made, having contributed to the space travel over many decades.

I AM BOLT

UK, 2016, 107 minutes, Colour.

Usain Bolt, Palais, Serena Williams, Sebastien Coe, Yohan Blake, Ziggy Marley, Chronixx.
Directed by Benjamin Turner, Gabriel Turner

While there was no one in the world without doubt who Usain Bolt was at the time the film was released, future interest will depend on how well an audience is aware of Bolt, his talent, his career, his record Olympic gold medals...

This is a British documentary about Bolt, the fastest man alive. It shows him as an athlete but it also shows him, quite strongly, as a person.

The film serves as a biography, outlining Bolt's Jamaican background, his birth in 1987, the portrait of his mother and father and their comments about him as well as their watching his achievement in the Olympics, his life at school, his sport success, the initial coaches and their prognostications, training him. There are also a number of talking heads with his friends, filling in his background as well as their personal esteem of him.

While the film shows him as a teenager, it is when he is about 20 that he starts to win gold medals and starts to break records. The film has a great deal of video footage and records of his sprints.

While the film, outlining his career, opens at track events in Beijing in 2015, there are quite a lot of flashbacks, and the earlier part of the film showing the races in Beijing and his gold medals; the flashbacks to the London Olympics occur in the latter part of the film, no less exciting even though one knows the results, just having the opportunity to watch the races from various angles, hear Bolt's comments on them afterwards, and all with speeds under 10 seconds.

The film indicates that Bolt can be nervous before events, but he seems a fairly calm personality, with religious undertones and invocation of God, enjoying partying and mixing with people, finding the ascetic discipline for sports very difficult, but able to submit himself to the rules and regulations for the regimen. His personal coach makes a lot of appearances, giving information about training, health, demands, and seems a very genial personality.

Prior to the Rio Olympics, Bolt seem to be at wary of participating but, according to the film, all of which was being made during the years preceding Rio, Bolt listens to Justin Gatlin, who had been disqualified for drug offences, but had made a comeback expecting to beat Bolt but failing to win the events. He broadcast a challenge before Rio, Bolt accepting – and, of course, ultimately succeeding.

There was also injury before Rio which required him to have some time off, go to a doctor in Germany who understood his injuries and was able to diagnose what was wrong and help him to recovery.

The film is interested in the talking heads who give their testimony, sports personalities like the Brazilians footballers Peke and Reyer, like friend and four times Olympic gold winner, Serena Williams, Lord Sebastian Coe, as well as commentators and Jamaican musicians like Ziggy Marley and Chronixx from Jamaican media (and scenes of jubilant celebrations in the streets). These are combined with the biography sequences as well as the training sequences,

keeping audience interest.

Bolt had achieved his record nine gold medals before the age of 30. After the film was released, it was revealed that one of the runners in the 2012 4 x 100 m relay was found to be influenced by drugs and the gold medal withdrawn – which Bolt took rather philosophically.

For those interested in sports, this film is a must. For those not interested in sport – it is almost a must.

JASPER JONES

Australia, 2017, 102 minutes, Colour.

Levi Miller, Aaron L. Mc Grath, Anghourie Rice, Kevin Long, Toni Collette, Hugo Weaving, Matt Nable, Dan Wyllie, Myles Pollard, Susan Prior.

Directed by Rachel Perkins.

You don't meet many (or any) Jasper Jones's around the place. Which makes his name a standout for the title of this film. While his presence initiates the drama, he is not the central character. This character is Charlie Bucktin – but how many people would think that they needed to see a film entitled Charlie Bucktin!

This film, co-written by the author of the original novel, Craig Silvey, is set in Western Australia, in the wheat belt, in 1969. Corrigan seems an ordinary enough town, familiar Anglo-Saxon-Irish types, some aboriginal presence, but on the outer (including mixed-race Jasper Jones himself), a family from Vietnam (which does seem rather early in the history of migration from that country), a sense of civic spirit, especially during a meeting where the townspeople gather and volunteer to search for a missing girl, a love of cricket, especially for the Vietnamese boy, Geoffrey (a sprightly Kevin Long), who is bullied by the locals, and his mother subject to insult through a woman who has just heard that her son has died in Vietnam the day before.

So, the film is taking us back into the past, the taken-for-granted ordinariness in Australia but, now in hindsight, open to extensive critique.

As has been said, Charlie Bucktin is the centre of the film. He is a 14-year-old, bookish rather than athletic, helped by the strong screen presence of Levi Miller (who was also present in Western Australia in 1969 as the central character in *Red Dog*, *True Blue*). Jasper is played by Aaron L. Mc Grath, a teenager, on the outer in the town, but approaching Charlie to help him with the body of a young girl whom he found hanging. Charlie, reluctantly agrees to help Jasper, involving him in situations that he was not prepared for, the disposal of the body, keeping quiet, deceiving his mother and father as to where he has been, following Jasper in his suspicions of the mad old man who lives on the periphery, Mad Jack (Hugo Weaving) and his attachment to the dead girl sister, Eliza (Anghourie Rice).

On the one hand, the film details the day by day life of Charlie, at school, reading, friendships

with Geoffrey, watching Geoffrey at last triumph at cricket, discussing Breakfast at Tiffany's with Eliza as well as try to appreciate his parents, his somewhat reclusive teacher father (Dan Wyllie), a gentle man who retires to his study to write, gradually alienating his outgoing wife, who becomes more and more exasperated with his quiet and seeming inactivity. She is played well, as always, by Toni Collette.

The plot does not quite play out as one might have expected, the death of the young woman more complicated, the role of the family the subject of critique, the revelations about Mad Jack more benign than we might have thought.

The film is directed by Rachel Perkins (Radiance, Bran Nue Day). There is much that is dark and sinister, no denying that, and the ending is not exactly easy for most of the characters, and, while an amount of the action takes place at night, and in the bush, the scenes in daylight make it not quite as oppressive as it might have been.

LOGAN

US, 2017, 135 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Jackman, Patrick Stewart, Dafne Keen, Boyd Holbrook, Stephen Merchant, Richard E. Grant.

Directed by James Mangold.

Dear, oh dear! Words of sympathy for Logan. When he first emerges after binge at a bar, he looks dreadful. He looks much older, certainly scruffier, bearded and lined – rather similar in look and voice to the later Mel Gibson (though taller!). Logan catches sight of some thugs stripping his car, his inner Wolverine starts to emerge, as well as his shears, and there is some familiar mayhem. There is this story of Logan going to go... where?

One of the first things to note is that it is the year 2029. And we discover that Charles Xavier, a proud nonagenarian, memory and concentration lessening, in need of constant medication, is hidden and protected by an albino (Stephen Merchant), Caliban, who has to protect his head and whole body against light.

The real drama starts when a Mexican woman appeals to Logan to help her and her daughter. Professor Xavier senses the daughter is a mutant and needs protection. This very quickly emerges when a tough mercenary type, Pierce (Boyd Holbrook) turns up with armed guards and threatening Logan. Pierce is a nasty piece of work, especially when he deals with Caliban, torturing him with the light, but he and his mob are carrying out the orders of Zander Rice (Richard E. Grant), the executive in charge of an experimental facility, which is seriously playing with genetics, implanting codes from mutants, including Logan, into Mexican women who are then disposed of.

The plan is now to move on to a next phase, more deadly, the children as weapons, more machine-like and without soul. They are rounding up mutant children who have escaped, including Laura (Dafne Keen in quite a striking performance). By now, we can see where the

film is going – and the destination is named, Eden in North Dakota, allegedly a refuge for mutant children (though Laura's protector got this information only from an X-Men? comic). The film is going to be a road movie, Logan driving hell for leather and beyond, Charles Xavier as his passenger and needing care, Laura, not speaking, fiercely determined, a fierce weapon.

Along the road there is a visit to a shop which Laura has never experienced and a clash with the assistant. There is a motel stop with Laura watching a lot of scenes from Shane which Charles Xavier tells her he saw when he was her age. There is a visit to a casino in Oklahoma City, buying new clothes. And there is an episode along the road with some horses running across the highway and Professor Xavier able to calm them, the grateful family inviting the group to a meal and a quiet night. Well, not quite...

As the film moved towards its close, we realise that this is an end to an X-Men? era, Logan ready to lay down his life for Laura, battling a clone that the facility has created of him, confronting Xander Rice who gets short shrift in the middle of an impassioned speech, and a realisation that a new era of mutant action films is in store.

MISS SLOANE

US, 2016, 132 minutes, Colour.

Jessica Chastain, Mark Strong, Mbatha Gugu Raw, John Lithgow, Sam Waterston, Alison Pill, Jack Lacey, Chuck Shamata, Douglas Smith.

Directed by John Madden

There's something to be said about a serious film that presents machinations, manipulation, Machiavellian strategies and tactics. Which means that there is a lot to say about Miss Sloane, an intriguing (in all meanings of the word) of such machinations and manipulations in the screenplay that is able to draw on all kinds of tactics and strategies and bring them to a striking conclusion.

The location for this story is Washington DC and Capitol Hill. It is a world of lobbyists – not the most attractive of worlds to live in but fascinating to watch. At the core of the film is a bill to restrict the presence of guns and for background investigations for owning guns. It has been pointed out that this film did not do well at the US box office and that the gun lobby actually agitated against the film, posting negative comments, running the film down – an example of the effects of lobbying in itself.

The Miss Sloane of the title is a lobbyist played by Jessica Chastain, a very astute actress in recent years succeeding in a variety of roles. Elizabeth Sloane is a woman in her 30s who has no other life than her lobbying, no family, no indication of background, suffering from insomnia but eager to spend all her waking hours lobbying, competitive, desperate to win. The only outlets are the taking of pills and her connection with a Washington escort, for momentary sexual release.

The framework of the film is a Senate hearing, presided over by Senator Sperling (John Lithgow) examining difficult issues in Sloane's career, particularly in providing finance for senators to go on education trip to Indonesia repercussions and importation of palm oil. But, on the whole, this is a red herring, though some documentation is key to findings of the hearing.

What it is all about is the fact that the gun lobby had tried to headhunt Miss Sloane to enable them to get a majority to defeat the intended bill, arguing that the potential for the campaign is to focus on women, not just in terms of gun violence but as people need to take up arms to defend themselves. This is not Miss Sloane's perspective, she rejects for her, and takes her staff with her when she goes to work for a company lobbying to find senators to pass the bill.

One of Miss Sloane's principles is that when the enemy has played their trump card, then you produce your trump card. The latter part of the film is quite dramatically exhilarating showing the effectiveness of this tactic, the audience and Miss Sloane's associates not anticipating it at all.

Miss Sloane does not want a sympathetic response though she does acknowledge the reality of emotions and sympathy but they are not part of make up or tactics. Her boss is played by Mark Strong, an honest man who has principles. One of the staff is a young woman was terrorised in a gun episode in an Indiana School, hiding from a shooter. She is played by Mbatha Gugu Raw (Belle, Concussion, The Whole Truth).

The company that the gun lobby uses is headed by a seemingly venerable elder statesman, yet sinister, Sam Waterston, and the head executive, Michael Stuhlbarg is a ruthless lobbyist. One of the key sequences to illustrate the no holds barred lobbying takes place on a television interview, each talking over the other, and Miss Sloane then pulling a trump card that turns the spotlight relentlessly on someone's privacy.

The dialogue in this kind of film is very important, the conversations, the plotting, the tactics, the working rooms at society gatherings, the pressure by powers that be – one Senator being told that if he does not comply with orders his career would be annihilated with an explanation of the origins of annihilated.

While this is an American story, one of the things that nags under the enjoyment of seeing such goings-on is: what is it like in the pressures and lobbies of local government, as bad as that in the United States, the same or worse? It would be very interesting in to see a local version of Miss Sloane.

RED BILLABONG

Australia, 2016, 113 minutes, Colour.

Dan Ewing, Tim Pocock, Jessica Green, Sophie Don, Ben Chisholm, Gregory J.Fryer.

Directed by Luke Sparke.

With billabong in the title, audiences will know that this is an Australian film – and wonder about the red billabong, suggestions of blood.

It is worth saying at the outset that many aspects of the film will seem quite absurd to the ordinary viewer. This means it is also worth saying that the target audience for this film is those who like to go to horror fests or movie monster fests. It is there kind of film – and the ending, the confrontation with the monster, is clearly designed to get this kind of audience both cheering and laughing. Which rather precludes most other audiences.

Apart from the prologue where the audience is introduced to the monster, The Bunyip, and the death of a significant character, the screenplay is ordinary enough, one brother managing a farm, but also dealing in drugs locally, and the other coming from the city, asked for advice, especially as their grandfather had left a letter before his sudden death asking that the land be left to the local aborigines or for consideration of the sale.

Then a group of rather unappealing thirtysomethings all turned up, a drug dealer who is full of himself, his associate whom he dominates, and three women who trail along. Capita meal, they get high, while the serious older brother is examining documents and getting suspicious about the sale of the land.

There is an estate agent with an American accent who is eager to have the land minute with all that is found to be on the property – with documents indicating the grandfather was a scientist, researching aboriginal law and especially, The Bunyip, which the men's father (who returns) and the agent are wanting to exploit.

One of the visiting girls go swimming in the billabong and is taken possession of by The Bunyip, and this happens to another of the girls. An aboriginal leader turns up with advice and indicates that the Bunyip needs three women under control and that this situation needs to be prevented. The rest of the film is The Bunyip, the search, the women and the dangers, deaths...

As indicated, this is a film for those who like monster movies – it would not be credible to any other audience.

RINGS

US, 2017, 107 minutes, Colour.

Matilda Lutz, Alex Roe, Johnny Galecki, Vincent D' Onofrio, Amy Teegarden.

Directed by F. Javier Gutierrez.

The producers of Rings seem to be under the impression that audiences all over the world cannot get enough of the Ring stories. It is not Lord of the Rings – but, rather those phone calls that audiences became aware of in the late 1990s in the Japanese horror film, Ring and its sequel, then to American versions soon afterwards.

In case there are some in the audience who are not familiar with the ghostly video, featuring the emergence of a young girl and her sinister behaviour and look, which, when anyone watches it, they get an immediate phone call telling them that they will be dead in seven days, there is a prologue. We see a young man in a plane, explaining his situation to some young women, his telling them that his seven days were up, his fears, his bleeding nose, hiding in the toilet – but the plane then (perhaps limiting the screening of this film as an in-flight feature) goes into crash mode.

Now that we're all familiar, more or less, it's time to take the story further. Not that the sinister video is not seen in whole or in part many times throughout this film – and we live to tell the tale or write a review. By now, a university lecturer (John Galecki) who tinkers with technology, has seen the film, has not died, but has obviously made copies and passed them on. He has also begun a course at the University, enlisting the participation of students who see the film, make a copy and pass it on, and so survive – and, in case there are difficulties, he finds “tails” to protect the student or to become the next victim, not to die but to make a copy and pass it on...

In the meantime we have been introduced to Holt and Julia (Alex Roe and Matilda Lutz), a couple in love, he going off to the University and admiring the professor and becoming part of his program. While Julia is mystified, a young woman comes onto her computer screen screaming about Holt, which certainly disturbs Julia enough that she gets into her car and drives to the University, going to a lecture, confronting the lecturer, following him to his laboratory and rather shocked at what she finds. But she is even more shocked when she goes to the young woman's apartment and finds herself locked in a room while Skye realises that her seven days are up and, no matter what plugs she pulls or what screens she smashes, the sinister Samara emerges and Skye dies, it looks like from fright.

At this stage, Rings does seem rather familiar but then it takes a turn and moves towards the development. Julia is no frightened heroine. Rather, she decides to watch the film, save Holt, but starts her own investigations as to what was behind the film. She then has several visions, about Samara, and visions of her pregnant mother. Julia is a young woman of initiative, tracking down locations, finding Samara's grave (with some rather terrifying moments when she is locked inside, a feeling of her being buried alive), tracking down a church, retired blind man (Vincent D' Onofrio) who reassures her.

But she's also told about a priest in the town, now retired, who seems to have taken on a woman and made her pregnant...

So, anyone interested in finding out what the consequences of this are (and there are a few shocks and frights), it is necessary to see the film.

Some fans have complained that it is not enough of a horror film – it does have some scary jump out of your seat moments but, on the whole, this is a film about Julia solving the mystery of Samara. And, just to be sure, the makers have set up situations where one might expect a sequel, or sequels.

RULES DON'T APPLY

US, 2016, 127 minutes, Colour.

Warren Beatty, Lily Collins, Alden Ehrenreich, Annette Bening, Matthew Broderick, Candice Bergen, Haley Bennett, Paul Sorvino, Taissa Farmiga, Oliver Platt, Alec Baldwin, Steve Coogan, Dabney Coleman, Paul Schneider, Hart Bochner.

Directed by Warren Beatty.

Billionaire, Eccentric.. Two words which describe noted 20th century American industrialist and producer, Howard Hughes, even during his lifetime. And, at the end of his life, another word, reclusive. There have been a number of films about Howard Hughes, his life and his career, but it is now half a century since his death and he is part of American history.

However, Warren Beatty became interested in Hughes, has written a screenplay and directed the film, casting himself as the eccentric and reclusive Hughes. Warren Beatty himself will be 80 this year so it is not a stretch to portray the elderly Hughes. Because Hughes thought himself above most people, *Rules Don't Apply* is not an unreasonable title (and is given further emphasis by the film's song and its lyrics).

While the plot is rather complicated, one thing emerges that must have interested Beatty and his co-writer. These days, confronted by eccentric behaviour, or idiosyncratic behaviour, words that come to mind include autistic and Asperges, "on the spectrum". But this is one of the interesting things about this film that Hughes is particularly obsessive, especially when it comes to aviation, plane design and preoccupations about this. His reclusiveness, self-protection, seeming inability to be aware of others sensitivities, expecting everyone to jump to his commands, and a preoccupation with his father's memory, his father's achievement in the tool industry and his inheriting the company, resenting and firing anybody that he thought was trying to be a father-figure to him.

This portrait certainly makes the film worth consideration.

However, the context is 1964, his connections with the government under consideration, and the media concerned that he is not compos mentis. In his refusal to make himself available to the media and make a statement to reassure them, the plot goes into flashback, the late 1950s, the RKO Studios and Hughes having a number of starlets under contract, providing lessons for them at the studio but not necessarily providing any movies for them to appear in.

Devout Christian, Marla Maybury (Lily Collins), comes with her protective mother (Annette Bening) to audition for Hughes. Drivers are provided for the starlets and the man assigned to her, Frank, (Alden Ehrenreich) himself rather devout, becomes attracted to her. Marla is quite strong-minded in many ways and determined to meet Hughes and have an audition. Frank is supportive, falling in love with her, having to deal with a fiancée in Fresno, but finding himself also asked for advice by Hughes who takes a shine to him and makes him a close assistant. Marla is faced with great moral challenges.

This gives the opportunity for audiences to see something Hollywood in this period, the star system, the starlets system, the personal interactions, the casting couch, career decisions and ambitions, disappointment and disillusionment.

Marla has been attracted to Hughes and he to her with consequences that neither of them expected – but the screenplay uses the consequences to galvanise Hughes into action with the media, Frank still there working for him but the plot bringing Marla and Frank together again...

One of the advantages of the film is that there are all kinds of character actors in brief roles, including Martin Sheen, Ed Harris, Amy Madigan, Matthew Broderick, Candice Bergen, Steve Coogan, Alec Baldwin...

THE TRUTH BENEATH

Korea, 2016, 102 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Kyoung-mi Lee.

The Truth Beneath is a rather ominous title, indicating truth of the of the surface and the deceptions which might underlie this.

This is a Korean drama, with a political setting as well is a story that involves a domestic situation. It moves very rapidly, involving the audience in the election and campaigning, the abduction of the daughter of the new candidate, the mother's search for her daughter – and the revelation of the true truths which lie under the surface of what seems to be apparent truth.

The situation shows a Conservative leader, in power for years, who is now being challenged. The new candidate campaign steadily, has good support, but needs to keep his reputation. With the abduction of his daughter, he fears that this might be used by his opposition to discredit him.

His wife, has a different opinion, and wants the campaign stopped, with the parents to concentrate on finding their daughter again. The candidate is wary of social media which might want to exploit the situation against him and so he does not want the disappearance of his daughter immediately revealed.

In the meantime, the wife begins her own search, collaborating with the police, searching her daughter's computer, getting lists of people that she was in contact with, discovering the identity of a close friend, from a poor family whom the daughter was trying to help. They also played in a band together with songs about the family and touches of rebellion.

Further investigations take the wife to the school and discussions with the homeroom teacher who indicates that the reports on the daughter had improved over the years.

Then the girl's body is discovered. In further investigations, the friend gradually reveals more and more of the truth, especially the two girls setting up a camera which spied on the teacher and her relationship with a lover – who turns out to be the father, stating disparaging words about his rigid wife. The teacher was sending exam questions to help the girls who were blackmailing her and eventually demanding money which was to be for the poor family.

Any mergers that a hitman was hired by the teacher and by the politician – and the girl had run him over, a hit run on the night of the abduction.

The wife is angry with her husband – for many reasons. After she attacks him, she decides that he should live and bear the burden of his responsibility even though he has just won the election.

Quite an interesting drama.

T2 TRAINSPOTTING

UK, 2017, 117 minutes, Colour.

Ewan Mc Gregor, Ewen Bremner, Johnny Lee Miller, Robert Carlyle, James Cosmo, Shirley Henderson,

Directed by Danny Boyle.

Trainspotting became a classic of the 1990s, based on a novel by Irvine Welsh, it was setting Edinburgh but in the sub culture of drugs in the city, focusing on four men in their 20s, their exuberantly reckless life, the impact of drugs – and a certain move toward self-destruction.

But, here they are again, 20 years later. Have they changed at all? Have they learned from their experiences? And what have they been doing during the previous 20 years? This is a story of four men in their mid-40s, also Edinburgh, and there is still something of a drug-culture.

For those who appreciated the first film, there is no doubt that this film will be more than interesting. One very serious reviewer remarked that all the “magic” from the original film had gone. “Magic” is not exactly the word that comes to mind when considering Trainspotting. There is a lot of sentiment, of the affectionate and affable type as well as the hostile and aggressive type, but there is also a great deal of reminiscing with one character remarking that they were “tourists in their own nostalgia”, something which many of the audience will be indulging in as well.

And what has happened? Ewan Mc Gregor as Mark Renton returns to Edinburgh after 15 years in Amsterdam, a finance course, a job, a wife – but this all now collapsing. Johnny Lee Miller as Simon is involved in blackmailing clients of a prostitute that he is set up with a camera and has inherited a derelict pub. Ewen Bremner's Spud, quite an interesting character in this film, has been on drugs, tried rehabilitation, been on several jobs but, there is an enjoyable collage showing how he turns up an hour late for everything and is now on his own, yearning

for his wife and son. And Robert Carlyle's Begbie? In prison all these years, but now with a brainwave to get a fellow prisoner to stab him so that he has to go to hospital and where he can walk out, trying to resume his life, meeting wife and son, the son intended to go to college but his father forcing him to go on a botched burglary expedition.

So, there we are. What will they do now?

Mike finds he doesn't want to go back to Amsterdam, is reunited with his father, experiences the animosity of Simon but then decides to stay and help on a project where Simon can turn his pub into a sauna (that is, brothel). He is in a relationship with the prostitute he set up, Veronica, who is from Bulgaria and a shrewd operator as well. Spud helps with the renovation of the pub meanwhile writing down his stories which Veronica is fascinated with. And Begbie, he is after some revenge on Mark.

All this happens, more or less, but Simon does get charged for his blackmail, but not before going to members of a fund to appeal for a grant and then going to a club where he and Mark Steele all the credit cards and, in a high point in the film, because all the crowd is loyalist and hasn't forgotten the Battle of the Boyne, are forced to sing the song, Mark improvising, the song being 1690, and the end of each chorus is "not a Catholic left" which is an amazing hit with everybody vigorously joining in.

There is a buildup to a climax with Begbie attacking Mark, defended by Simon, and Begbie delivered in the boot of the car to the prison gates. And Veronica, with the help of Spud, is no mean exploiter herself, especially with the financial grant money.

Trainspotting fans may well be invigorated by this sequel – but it does present a kind of sub-culture world, some dead ends in life unless one is in exploiter. But Spud is a great success with his stories, going to see his wife and son and she suggesting a title for them!

SIGNIS REVIEWS APRIL 2017

ALTAMIRA/ FINDING ALTAMIRA

AMERICAN PASTORAL

ANTHROPOID

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

BEFORE I FALL

BIRTH OF A NATION, The

BOSS BABY

COLOSSAL

CRUSHED

CURE FOR WELLNESS, A

DANCE ACADEMY

EAGLE HUNTRESS, The

DEATH AND LIFE OF OTTO BLOOM, The

DENIAL

FENCES

FEW LESS MAN, A

FIFTY SHADES DARKER

GHOST IN THE SHELL

IMPERIUM

I.T.

KONG, SKULL ISLAND

LAND OF MINE

LEGO BATMAN, The

LIFE

LOVING

MAN CALLED OVE, A

SALESMAN, The

WHOLE TRUTH, The

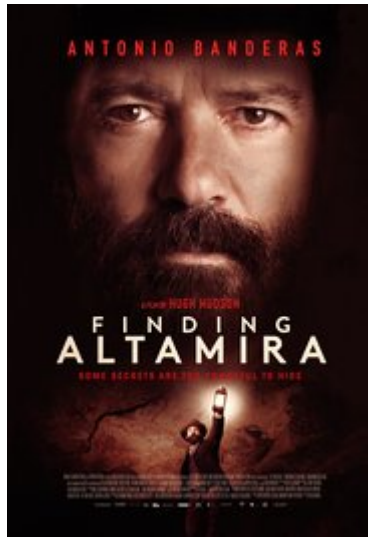
ZACH'S CEREMONY

ALTAMIRA/ FINDING ALTAMIRA

UK/France/Spain, 2016, 97 minutes, Colour.

Antonio Banderas, Golshifteh Farahani, Clement Sibony, Rupert Everett, Nicholas Farrell, Irene Escalar, Allegra Allen.

Directed by Hugh Hudson.



This is the story of Spanish cave paintings which were discovered in northern Spain in the latter part of the 19th century, at Altamira.

The film is a French Spanish coproduction with Antonio Banderas in the lead for a Spanish audience. Spanish locations were used for the filming, the village of Altamira, the surrounding mountains and caves. However, the director is British, Hugh Hudson, best known for his Oscar-winning Chariots of Fire. There is an international supporting cast with the British Nicholas Farrell as well as Rupert Everett as a smug monsignor in the town.

While the film does describe the finding of the caves and the paintings, the initial set up is a contrast between the 19th century attitude of scientists, especially after Darwin, and the proclamation of the superiority of science contrasting with the stances of the church, the status of the Scriptures as regards creation and evolution. A pre-credit sequence shows the scientist standing at his lectern on one side of the screen, the monsignor in his pulpit on the other.

Antonio Banderas portrays Marcelino, the local grandee, benign patriarch of the family, especially with love of his daughter who is intelligent and shares her father's enquiries and studies, even to the finding of the paintings as she stumbles around the newly-discovered caves with a lantern.

The family expect that the scientific world will be amazed at the discovery and its contribution to Palaeolithic studies. Even the King visits the caves and is impressed. However, a local scientist is jealous, the local monsignor is aggressively antipathetic and what was meant to be a gala occasion at a congress in Lisbon turns into a condemnation of forgery, of disbelief, and of personal condemnation of Marcelino himself.

For dramatic satisfaction, Marcelino's wife, rather tentative in her knowledge of science and support of her husband, goes to the monsignor to confession and roundly denounces him.

The film ends 20 years later, with the discovery of the caves and the paintings in the Dordogne in France, the scientist who had denounced Marcelino finally coming to Spain, witnessing the paintings and, belatedly, because Marcelino is long dead, writing an article and issuing an apology.

The film is of particular interest to a Spanish audience and their knowledge of the caves and the paintings – and the film can be seen in companionship with Werner Herzog's 3-D documentary on the French cave paintings, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.

AMERICAN PASTORAL

US, 2016, 108 minutes, Colour.

Ewan Mc Gregor, Jennifer Connolly, Dakota Fanning, Peter Reigert, Rupert Evans, Uzo Aduba, Molly Parker, Valorie Curry, Samantha Mathis, David Strathairn.

Directed by Ewan Mc Gregor.



American Pastoral is based on a novel by Philip Roth.

Over the decades, a number of Philip Roth's novels have been filmed from *Portnoy's Complaint* to *The Human Stain* and *Indignation*. This film is a work of devotion by Ewan Mc Gregor who has directed the film as well as taken on the central role.

American Pastoral is an ironic title. The narrative opens during World War II, the central character, Swede Lvov (Ewan Mc Gregor) is an all-American sportsman, and idol of his time. He enlists, but returns as the war ends, moving in to manage the glove factory in New Jersey founded by his dominating Jewish father, Peter Riegert. However, he wants to marry the local beauty queen, a Catholic, Dawn (Jennifer Connolly) who is willing to be interviewed by his father and stares him down despite his objections, winning him over.

The American Pastoral years are those immediately after the end of the war, Swede and Dawn marrying and having a little daughter, Meredith. Idolised by her parents, she nevertheless has a

stammer and they take her to a therapist, Molly Parker, who indicates that this might be a control mechanism.

As the story moves to the end of the 50s and into the 1960s, Meredith sees images of a Buddhist monk on television, self-immolating, and is emotionally upset, thinking that people do not care.

The pastoral ends with the Vietnam war and Meredith, age 16 (Dakota Fanning) an embittered young woman, resenting her successful parents, meeting up with like-minded young people against the government, eventually throwing a bomb into a baker's shop in New Jersey and having to go on the run.

For the rest of the film, Swede is obsessed with finding his daughter, cruelly tantalised by one of her friends who pretends to be researching the glove industry but is really trying to get money out of Swede. Dawn, on the other hand, is hurt by her daughter's antagonism and opts to ignore her, deteriorating mentally with a strong scene and a diatribe against her husband and all that he stood for and how she should not have married him.

The framework of the film is a 1990s school reunion where a writer, David Strathairn, encounters Swede's brother and finds that Swede is dead and about to be buried.

The funeral scene has quite some pathos, the writer observing, Dawn present with ambiguous grief – and Meredith finally turning up to stand by her father's coffin.

The acting is very good, Mc Gregor always reliable, Jennifer Connolly with some strong scenes and a surprising Dakota Fanning in the role of Meredith. An opportunity to reassess the transition in the United States from the 1950s into the 1960s and the violent years beyond.

ANTHROPOID

UK, Czech Republic, 2016, 120 minutes, Colour.

Cillian Murphy, Jamie Dornan, Toby Jones, Bill Milner, Charlotte Le Bon, Anna Geislerova.

Directed by Sean Ellis.



There have been a number of films about Hitler's occupying of Czechoslovakia, the sending of his lieutenant Reinhold Heydrich to Prague and his ruthless control of the Czech population, leading to a plot to assassinate him, ultimately successful, but drawing down enormous reprisals, especially on the village of Lidice.

Even during World War II, there was already a film highlighting this, Hitler's Madman.

In the 1970s, there was a reconstruction of the episode, a focus on the young men, Czechoslovakians, parachuted in from London who were to do the execution. This was shown in an effective film, Operation Daybreak, directed by Lewis Gilbert. Kenneth Branagh played Heydrich in Conspiracy.

It is interesting to ask why there has been this renewed interest in the events more than 70 years later in Operation Anthropoid.

Cillian Murphy and Jamie Dornan portray the two young men parachuted into Czechoslovakia by night, injuring themselves in the fall, picked up by a partisan who is willing to betray them to the Nazis, taking his truck, driving into Prague where they find that their contact has disappeared. Nevertheless, they are received by the local Resistance, especially by the veteran Uncle, Toby Jones, and find accommodation with a family and the support of two young women.

Cillian Murphy portrays the leader, a stern man, committed to his mission, allotted a young woman to help him with his cover, becoming emotionally attached to her and grieving at her death during the execution of the mission. Jamie Dornan, on the other hand, falls in love with his young woman and has moments of fear and doubt.

The film shows Prague and the ordinariness of its way of life, even the trams running on the streets, during the Nazi occupation. When Heydrich is to return suddenly to Berlin, the time of the attack is advanced, double checking with the authorities in London, some of the locals wondering why they are prepared to kill Heydrich and risk the reprisals which eventually take place. In many ways the attempt was botched, a gun jamming, explosives thrown, Heydrich not immediately dying, a pursuit of those responsible, betrayal by one of the locals who was also tortured, and escape to safety in a church and a siege which, in real life, lasted for six hours, before the attackers were all killed.

The massacre in Lidice is mentioned but not visually shown – rather, the suffering of particular individuals is highlighted and visualised, the siege in the church, and the taking of suicide pills.

World War II stories and films continue to be of great interest – and, as the decades go by, probably a necessary prodding to memory and sensibilities.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

US, 2017, 128 minutes, Colour.

Emma Watson, Dan Stevens, Luke Evans, Kevin Kline, Josh Gad, Hattie Morahan, Emma Thompson, Ewan McGregor, Ian McKellen, Audra McDonald, Stanley Tucci, Nathan Mack, Gugu Mbatha Raw.

Directed by Bill Condon.



Lovers of fairytales and, especially, those who love the 1992 animated version of Beauty and the Beast, know the characters and the plot very well indeed. Soon after the release and success of the animated film, Disney included it as part of their live-action entertainment at Disneyland and Disneyworld and adapted it for the Broadway stage. With the success of live-action versions of fairytales, Maleficent, Cinderella, The Jungle Book, Beauty and the Beast is ideal for this kind of cinema treatment.

It looks as though the Disney executives were not wrong with the immediate box office success of this version.

Immediately we are introduced to the Prince (Dan Stevens), living the lavish life, with many courtiers, opera singer and piano accompanist, but arrogant and self-centred. An old woman comes begging hospitality and he sneeringly refuses it, the enchantress then transforming him into the Beast and freezes his castle, warning him that when the last petal falls from a rose, there will be no chance for change or redemption.

Transition to the town of Villeneuve, and the well-known song that welcomes Belle into the story, moving through the markets, the streets, the busy activity of all who are selling, buying, watching – a large ensemble chorus. This really gets us in the mood, especially if the song is familiar from the past. And Emma Watson proves herself charming and lovely.

Then we are introduced to Gaston (Luke Evans) and his assistant, Le Fouo (Josh Gad). At one moment, Gaston is glimpsed gazing at someone with words of love and affection – the audience then seeing it is his reflection in the mirror! Another tone is set. The contrast is with Belle's father, Maurice (Kevin Kline), sitting at home mending things, going to the market, getting lost, discovering the Beast's Castle and, rather upset (although they are very comic characters) by the talking candlestick, clock, teapot... He picks a rose to take to his daughter and is taken by the Beast and imprisoned.

When his horse returns home, riderless, Belle mounts it and goes in search of her father, confronting the Beast, putting herself in his prison, having him release her father.

The very nice part of the story is how Belle responds to the Beast, thinking to escape, responding to some courtesy, discovering his library and discussing Shakespeare, drinking her soup from the plate in sympathy with him, taking walks, talking, getting to know each other, building up to a ballroom sequence for two.

In the meantime, we are treated to all kinds of funny dialogue and antics with Cogsworth the clock, Lumière the candles, and Mrs Potts. And they all sing Be our Guest.

When Maurice tries to get the townspeople to go to save his daughter, they mock him with disbelief about his stories of the Beast, Gaston offering to save the day but, feeling thwarted, abandons Maurice to the wolves.

While the townspeople start a vicious siege of the castle, once they get in it is much more farcical as all the crockery and furniture become very involved in getting rid of the attackers. Gaston confronts

the Beast – to his great disadvantage! But love overcomes everything, the enchantress reverses her spell, the crockery and furniture all become their real selves again – and the forms of Ian McKellen, Ewan McGregor, Emma Thompson, Stanley Tucci, Audra McDonald, Gugu Mbatha Raw.

What else to do but have a dance with Mrs Potts reprising the very popular theme song, a tale as old as time...?

BEFORE I FALL

US, 2017, 99 minutes, Colour.

Zoe Deutch, Halston Sage, Logan Miller, Kian Lawley, Jennifer Beals.

Directed by Ry Russo-Young.



Before I Fall is based on a novel for young adult readers, principally female young readers.

The film opens with the repetition of sequences that remind audiences of Mean Girls, a group of teenagers who are very sure of themselves on the surface, relying on one another and a leader to validate their self-image, critical of others, catty amongst themselves, condemnatory of the girls that they do not approve of.

These opening sequences are a reminder that it is necessary to wait till the end of the film because the tone could well change – and with this one, it does.

Samantha, Zoe Deutch, is at the centre of this film, the I of the title, speaking in voice-over about herself and this special day in February, Cupid's Day at school, where roses are distributed amongst favoured girls. What Samantha says is rather ominous because it sounds as if something terrible is going to happen to her.

However, we follow her during the day, rather haughty, not wanting to get up, critical of her little sister with her gift of an origami bird, rather neglectful her parents, meeting the girls in her clique, travelling to school, class, the roses, encountering a young man, Kent, in the school corridor, Samantha with a condom because of the plan to connect sexually with boyfriend, Rob, that evening. At the party where they all gather, an isolated girl, Juliet, whom they loathe appears and is ridiculed, running out of the room. Samantha then finds herself in the car and it crashes – only for her to wake up in bed and it is the same day.

And older audiences are remembering Groundhog Day.

Which means that Samantha has to live the day over and over again, the audience noticing the sameness, the differences, Samantha becoming a bit more appropriately self-conscious, seeing through Lindsey, the catty leader of the group, befriending the young man in the corridor – but, basically, the same things again.

And, eventually, this is where the moral of the story comes in. Samantha begins to take stock of herself, critical of her attitudes towards her sister and her mother, becoming nicer to both and to her father, speaking directly to Lindsey and the other girls, befriending Kent and having deep and meaningful discussions with him, learning more about the disliked Juliet and the reasons for the dislike, especially unjust attitudes from Lindsey.

The ending is not quite what we were imagining – but, Samantha has become a better person from her living the same day over and over again, a kind of purgatorial experience for her.

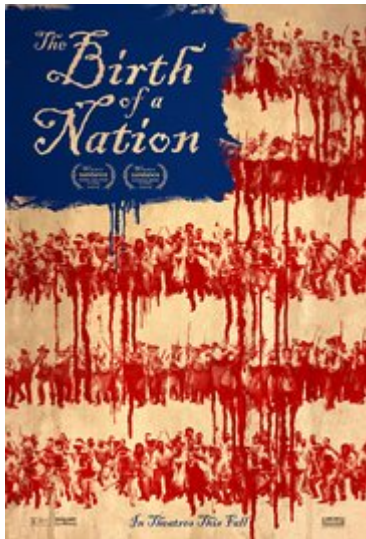
Which means that there is a moral for the young adult audience and a bit of saving grace for the older audience.

THE BIRTH OF A NATION

US, 2016, 120 minutes, Colour.

Nate Parker, Armie Hammer, Penelope Ann Miller, Jackie Earle Haley, Mark Boone Jr, Anjanue Ellis, Dwight Henry, Roger Guenver Smith, Gabrielle Union.

Directed by Nate Parker.



It was in 1916 that pioneer film director, D. W. Griffith released his quite epic treatment of the American Civil War, *The Birth of a Nation*. Almost immediately, commentators raised difficulties because of the perceived stances of the and the director, some racist attitudes towards the African-Americans and a seeming glorifying of the Ku Klux Klan.

100 years later, African-American writer-director, Nate Parker, has made a film of the same name but taken very different stances.

The film is actually set in the pre-Civil War period, from 1809 into the 1820s and 30s. The settings are the usual plantation, the white family in the homestead, the black community living a rather impoverished existence, slaves, working in the cotton fields. This is well conveyed in the use of the locations.

The film also focuses on a young boy, seen as somewhat prophetic and special, celebrated in rituals – but, his father and other elders being persecuted pursued by slaves-dealers. As he grows up, he has a talent for reading, is a friend of the son of the plantation owner, the same age, invited into the household, nicely dressed, and taught to read by the plantation owner's wife (Penelope Ann Miller). However, he is not invited to meals in the house and has to return home. When the owner dies, he is forced back to work in the fields.

Writer-director Nate Parker portrays Nate Turner as he grows up, talented in reading and leading the slaves, knowledgeable of the Bible, able to conduct religious services, yet still working in the fields. The new plantation owner is his boyhood friend, Sam, played by Armie Hammer. There is still the difference between black and white although Sam seems to be much more open than others.

At one stage, Nate accompanies Sam to the town and views the slave market, a young woman being savagely oppressed, Sam buying the slave, taking her home, her turning on Nate but then finding him sympathetic – and, ultimately, they marry.

In difficult financial times, some religious leaders have the idea that Nate should go round the black communities and preach, but highlight the emphasis on obeying masters as a key Biblical concept. He does, but finds it oppressive even as he carries out the orders. When his wife is molested by a white dinner guest, it is the last straw.

The latter part of the film is about the black uprising, Nate able to gather so many of the slaves around him, the attack on the white settlement, the intervention of the military – leading to a hanging.

Mark Boone Jr is the religious minister who encourages Nate's preaching. Jackie Earle Haley is the embodiment of all that is evil, oppressive, molesting, about white slavers.

This sympathetic emphasis on the black uprising as one of the prologues to the Civil War is distinctive for 2016 but its stances and attitudes are the opposite of the classic pioneering film of 1916.

US, 2017, 97 minutes, Colour stop

Alec Baldwin, Steve Buscemi, Jimmy Kimmel, Lisa Kudrow, Miles Christopher Bakshi, James McGrath.

Directed by Tom McGrath.



For once, a trailer was quite misleading. It emphasised the baby wearing a suit and having a briefcase, ingratiating itself with its parents while spurning the older brother.

The scenes occur rather early in the film and, in fact, the two brothers work together and get on rather well together, more than might have been anticipated.

The film is based on the children's book by an author and illustrator, Marla Frazee, *The Boss Baby*, published in 2010. Readers of the Book would know well what to expect. Those of us who have not read the book will be kept in suspense – well not exactly in suspense but in surprised anticipation.

This is a brightly animated film, fully rounded characters, bright colours, lively locations, with more than a touch of fantasy.

The story is told from the adult point of view of the Templeton baby and then seven-year-old, Tim (older Tim voiced by Tobey Maguire, younger Tim by Miles Christopher Bakshi). He is absolutely devoted to his absolutely devoted parents (Jimmy Kimmel and Lisa Kudrow), who read him stories, give him hugs, sing him his favourite song – while he has all kinds of imaginative adventures and is forever rescuing his parents.

One night at hugs, stories and song time, we notice that mother is pregnant and he doesn't – and when asked whether he would like a little brother his offhand reply sounds like a definite no.

So, if all this is happening in Tim's head and being recounted by his older self, then we can indulge his fantasy of where babies come from and how to deal with a brother – as did the film, *Storks*, in 2016. This time it is an assembly line at Babycorps, somewhere up above a, with the song playing is

I'm in Heaven! Most of the babies come properly down the assembly line, all races represented, then successfully tickled and registered for allotment to family. But, sometimes, there is the odd baby out and this happens to the Boss Baby, his head in the opposite direction, not responding to the feather tickle and designated for Management. Off he goes, in a suit and tie, with his own briefcase, to an enormous office where all the management babies are sitting at their desks.

When he arrives at the Templeton house, he does all the goo-goo things, but is fairly self-centred, making his parents run ragged looking after him and alienating Tim. When Tim overhears him talking (with the boys of Alec Baldwin) on the phone to the office, and discovers his cohorts outside, it looks as if there is going to be huge conflict. Not at all.

The two babies suck on their dummies which enables Boss Baby to help Tim see the background of Babycorps, the portrait of the founder on the wall, the pie chart which indicates how much Love is available – for babies and for puppies. It looks as though the puppies are winning out so something has to be done! A bit difficult because both parents work for a pet business.

Between the jigs and the reels, the two babies decide that they must work together – even going to a Puppycorps show in Las Vegas where they discover some truths that are unexpected about the founder (Steve Buscemi), where they see that the pie chart is indicating more love for puppies than babies, where Boss Baby is in danger of becoming a real baby and has to be shaken back to his real self. Because Tim had imagined all kinds of adventures, it is not a far stretch for him and Boss Baby to confront the villain, aided by his associate Elvis impersonator, rescue the parents, revert the process for too much literal Puppy Love, and Boss Baby to receive the acclaim of everybody at Babycorps

And he has the chance to go on to the assembly line again and be tickled because Tim has found that Baby has a ticklish foot be assigned to family. So, all is well and Tim is well able to cope with the baby brother.

There is an amusing epilogue where Tim and Ed, the grown-up Boss Baby, talking with Tim's daughter when there is a doorbell ring – and the little sister is arriving, another boss Boss Baby!

COLOSSAL

US, 2016, 110 minutes, Colour.

Anne Hathaway, Jason Sudeikis, Dan Stevens, Tim Blake Nelson, Austin Stowell.

Directed by Nacho Vigalondo.



Early in *Colossal*, Anne Hathaway's character, Gloria, scratches the top of her head, stating that she has a persistent itch. Perhaps scratching the head is a suitable symbol for responding to *Colossal*. It can be quite puzzling.

The puzzle begins immediately when a little Asian girl searching for a doll in the park suddenly experiences a giant monster (perhaps a cousin of Godzilla!). The film indicates: 25 years later.

The title of *Colossal* also appears, ironically, in very small type.

Gloria is arriving home, her boyfriend (Dan Stevens) questioning her about where she has been. She lies. She has been drinking with friends, hangover, sleeping it off. And his response in concern for her wayward life year and her not being able to find a job is to oust her from the apartment, his having packed her bags. She goes back to her family home in the town of Mainhead. (Nothing about the monster so far.)

She goes to an empty family home and buys an inflatable mattress, encountering a school friend, Oscar (Jason Sudeikis) who invites her to his bar. She likes what he is done in renewing the bar but prefers the back area and its atmosphere which he has not been able to renew. In the bar are two of his friends, Garth (Tim Blake Nelson) and Joel (Austin Stowell). They talk, they drink, and Gloria wakes up on a park bench with a hangover – and concerned calls from her boyfriend.

Oscar keeps giving her furniture, a television set – on which she sees that a monster is on the loose in Seoul, Korea, trampling the inhabitants, everybody fleeing in fear.

And this is where even more intense scratching the itch on the head (on the part of the audience, that is) becomes more aggravating.

If you take the film at realism value, it seems pretty absurd. If you take the film at symbolic value, then it becomes something of a psychological case, a friend referring to it as "Monsters from the Id". Then there is the question of whether the monsters (on the rampage in Korea) are projections from Gloria's

Id and from Oscars as well because, confronting the monster, is a giant monstrous robot. What we are dealing with is not rational logic but image and symbolic logic. Not rational logic but emotional logic. The monsters are what T.S.Elliott might have called “objective correlatives”.

What Gloria discovers is that actions she does on a playground in Mainhead, are mimicked by the monster in Seoul (which everyone watches on television) – and the same for Oscar and the robot.

Things go downhill for the friends, animosity arising, jealousy and resentment, physical confrontations and slaps, all reproduced by the fighting monsters in Seoul.

What is Gloria to do? Go home with her boyfriend? Or, rather, go to Seoul and resolve the situation – not quite in the way expected.

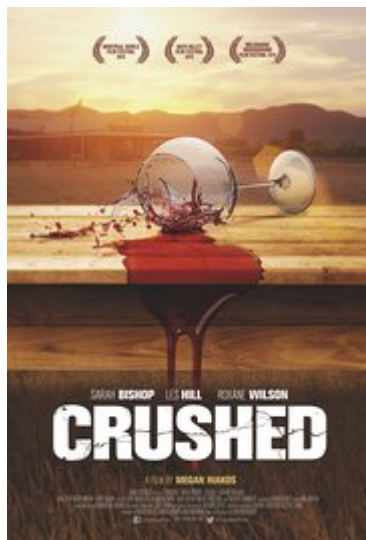
As may be seen from this review, this is a realist/surrealist fable, both comic and serious, which may become a cult film for Psychology Conferences – but not at the multiplexers.

CRUSHED

Australia, 2015, 111 minutes, Colour.

Sarah Bishop, Les Hill, Roxane Wilson, Helmut Baitis, Aaron Glenane, Millie Spencer-Brown, Robert Preston, Jamie Irvine.

Directed by Megan Riakos.



Crushed is quite an ambiguous title for this film. The Vineyard settings, there is obviously a reference to the crushing of grapes. Then, a significant character is

murdered, crushed against a wall. And then, the central character experiences a great deal of being crushed emotionally.

This is an Australian story, the story of Vineyards in north-western New South Wales in the Mudgee area. The film opens in Melbourne, focusing on Ellia, a young woman with business ambitions who has escaped from her family and the family business after a traumatising experience.

However, she receives the news that her father is dead and returns home for the funeral. What she discovers makes her involved in sorting out what actually happened, the alleged accidental death of her father turning into a murder. She is suspicious of her mother and of the foreman of the vineyard.

She is helped by her younger sister, trying to get over the memories of her dead brother. There is also a moody younger brother as well as a local policeman to whom she is attracted but who seems to be acting suspiciously and another worker at the vineyard. There is also a problem about chemicals being blown over neighbouring vineyards and one of the owners losing all his crops.

Enough ingredients to be intriguing – especially as audiences may not be anticipating who the murderer is.

The film keeps audience attention, well-written with its entry and interesting performances, including from Sarah Bishop as Ellia.

A CURE FOR WELLNESS

US/Germany, 2017, 146 minutes, Colour.
Dane De Haan, Jason Isaacs, Mia Goth, Celia Imrie, Harry Groener.
Directed by Gore Verbinski.



An arrestingly ironic title. We do not know what to expect – and on hearing that the film runs for almost 2 ½ hours, there may be a great deal to expect. And, on hearing again, that the director is Gore Verbinski, whom we associate with the Pirates of the Caribbean, we have to be prepared for anything.

At the beginning, the film seems to be a drama about Wall Street and shady financial difficulties, a focus on the young executive, Lockhart (Dane De Haan), sitting on the train, phone and computer, urging a colleague to be ruthless. He is then invited upstairs to the board room of the company, praised, alerted that there are some shady aspects of his deals, needing signatures to avoid investigations by authorities, and commissioning him to go to Switzerland to find an executive who has gone to an institute for his health and to bring him back for document signing.

The audience does not get back to the United States, the rest of the film all taking place in Switzerland, Lockhart travelling from the station to an elaborate mansion which houses the health Institute, confident that he can get the executive very quickly and travel back to New York. Big mistake, of course. Lockhart is certainly interested in looking at all the patients or clients, all dressed in white, playing croquet or doing exercises on the lawn, all older, chatting with some of them, hearing some of the history of the building. He signs in at reception but is told he will have to wait – and the executive declaring that he does not want to leave.

Lockhart is injured in a car accident, a crash into a deer, and finds himself in bed in a ward, his broken leg in plaster, being reassured by the staff, especially the smiling doctor, Volmer, who is in charge of the Institute. But, Lockhart is ever curious and spends a great deal of the film wandering around the Institute, wondering about the young girl, Hannah, who stands on the parapet (eventually persuading her to take him down to the town on her bicycle after stealing some documents about the executive and trying to verify what was happening).

So, the film becomes more and more sinister, Lockhart wandering the corridors, going into the spas, having a water treatment that almost kills him, continually reassured by the doctor, talking with an

English lady, Mrs Watkins (Celia Imrie) who fills him in about the background of the Institute 200 years earlier, the peasants burning the building, the Baron being killed, his incestuous relationship with his sister who may or may not have been pregnant or barren...

By this stage, with a mixture of sunlight on the lawns and the cheery patients and very dark sequences in the corridors, in the cells, in the underground pool, the film takes on something of Gothic horror.

Ultimately, all is revealed, and Jason Isaacs as the head of the Institute, seemingly pleasant, doing a variation on what might have been a role for Christopher Lee, has to confront Lockhart with the revelation about who Hannah really is.

Just when you think all is well and the situation resolved, Lockhart and Hannah are on their bike, going down the mountain and crash into a car containing the board members from New York who have come to sort everything out. What else to do but continue bicycling down the mountainside to...

DANCE ACADEMY

Australia, 2017, 101 minutes, Colour.

Xenia Goodwin, Alicia Banit, Jordan Rodriguez, Dena Kaplan, Keiynan Lonsdale, Miranda Otto, Tara Morice, Thomas Lacey, Nick Westaway, Julia Blake, Matt Day, Lewis Fitzgerald.

Directed by Jeffrey Walker.



It is fair to give a warning for audiences contemplating seeing Dance Academy. It is definitely a film for those who have a passion about dancing and, especially, about ballet. Audiences who do not share this passion will probably not be absorbed by the film.

2010-2013 saw a very popular television series, Dance Academy, nominated for many awards and winning a number for children's television prizes. A group of teenagers lived together at the Academy, at close quarters – with some expected consequences – and are put through a rigorous course and routines.

Most of them return for this feature film, written and produced by the creators, Samantha Strauss and Jennifer Werner, and one of the directors, Jeffrey Walker (young director also well-known for the Jack Irish telemovies).

What happened to the characters in the years after the Dance Academy?

The film focuses on Tara (Xenia Goodwin) who is seeing with a group preparing storylines about what might have happened. It emerges what happened to Tara was that she felt twice, breaking her back, twice going into rehabilitation and, finally, being able to dance again (though with continued apprehensions which are still realistically visualised at key points in her dancing) but working as a waitress. She has a lawsuit against the National Ballet, for \$1 million, but her main desire is to become part of the ballet ensemble again.

She is in love with Christian (Jordan Rodriguez) who is now teaching young children in Sydney how to dance. When she meets an important member of the ballet board, Madeline Moncur, Miranda Otto, they have a conversation which leads her to believe that she should audition again and drop the suit. It is not as easy as all that, she is not chosen, while another member of the group, Abby (Dena Kaplan) has been successful. In the meantime, another member of the group, Kat (Alicia Bennett) is appearing in very popular television series, Belle, and is feted all around New York and the US, until she pulls a publicity stunt releasing suggestive photos which the studio heartily disapproves of.

Ben is dancing in the US but has developed leukaemia and is living in Texas with an Australian couple, the wife played by Tara Morice who was an instructress in the series. There is a new character, Ollie, a would-be singer who fails at auditions.

Disappointed, Tara goes to New York where most of the action of the film takes place. She auditions and auditions, finally becoming despondent and going to visit Ben in Texas. Together they conceive a dance routine which they want to take to the Festival in New York City – and do, but not with the expected results and Tara having to make a key decision for her life. But, the whole group is brought together in New York.

There are a number of cameos from veteran Australian actors including Julia Blake, Matt Day, Lewis Fitzgerald.

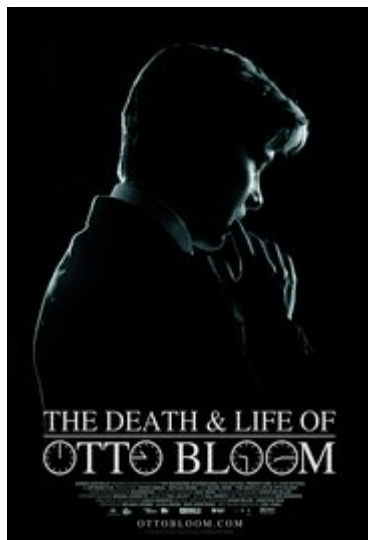
A lot of dancing, a lot of ballet, both auditions and performance, and quite a deal of young adult angst – but audiences will leave the cinema in a more buoyant frame of mind.

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF OTTO BLOOM

Australia, 2017, 85 minutes, Colour.

Xavier Samuel, Rachel Ward, Matilda Brown, Rose Riley, Terry Camilleri, Amber Clayton, Jacek Koman, Tyler Coppin, Suzy Cato- Gashler, John Gaden.

Directed by Chris Jones.



Whew! And that's an understatement.

It may or may not be helpful to be informed that this is a film which dramatises physics and metaphysics: what it is to exist, to exist in time, what is identity, what is consciousness, what is memory. This may sound off-putting but, on the other hand, it could be seen as challenging.

The setting is Melbourne and film is set in the early 1980s through to the early 1990s.

In under 90 minutes, the screenplay invites its audience into a narrative about a young man, Otto Bloom (Xavier Samuel). He is found homeless by the police but is not a vagrant – but he has no idea who he is. The person who tries to discover his identity is a psychologist an enthusiastic young woman, Ada (Matilda Brown) who studies him, is attracted to him, forms a relationship with him.

What emerges is the extraordinary revelation that Otto is living in two directions at once. (It may be useful to recall the curious case Benjamin Button and the fact that his physical growth was from adulthood to infancy but Otto's change is in his consciousness). Physically, Otto's growth has been ordinary, from infancy to adulthood. His significant problem is that he is unable to remember the past. As he lives his life, he cannot remember anything. But, and here is the extraordinary aspect of the story, his memory moving from the future to the present, his memories are all of the future.

Watching the film, it is very difficult to get one's mind around this double dynamic let alone imagine it.

The dramatic device for the audience understand more about Otto is the introduction of six characters of significance in Otto's experience (though he does not remember them), presented as talking heads, interspersed throughout the film revealing more of Otto as a character. As we struggled to comprehend the consequences of Otto's consciousness journey from the future, we need the commentaries from these observers. Fortunately, the selection of actors for these roles is very effective. Rachel Ward is the older Ada, engaging the audience in her exuberance in memories as well as the sadness and regrets. Other observers include philosophers, scientists, the policeman, an arts manager... Jacek Koman, John Gaden, Terry Camilleri... (For good effect Rachel Ward and Matilda Brown are actual mother and daughter.)

Quite an amount of the dialogue raises issues of time, relativity, Einstein, a nod to Stephen Hawking, the audience sometimes tempted to consider some of the dialogue as sententious. This is not to suggest that the film narrative has no plot development. In fact, it is divided into chapters, tracing what happens to Otto, celebrity, achievement (especially in art) but also the decline and fall of Otto Bloom, a media darling, then rejected, and mocked by the media, curious about his relationships, with Ada, with a singer and her being in the public eye becoming too much for her, taking up with an American manager.

The scope of the film is quite ambitious for writer-director Chris Jones – and, to be fair to him, to Otto Bloom and his admirers, the film should probably be seen again.

DENIAL

UK, 2016,

Rachel Weisz, Tom Wilkinson, Timothy Spall, Andrew Scott, Jack Lowdon, Caren Pistorius, Alex Jennings, Harriet Walter, Mark Gattis, John Sessions.

Directed by Mick Jackson.



Younger audiences may not know who David Irving is, his writings, his denial of the Holocaust, the libel case against American author, Deborah Lipstadt. Perhaps Irving has now been relegated to the dustbin of history where he belongs. However, older audiences will remember his campaigns, his talks outbursts, his prejudices and his denial.

The film introduces us to Irving with a clip and his claim that there were more deaths in Edward Kennedy's car at Chappaquicick and than during the Holocaust. We have been introduced to Deborah Lipstadt, conducting a class at a university in Atlanta, strong statements about the Holocaust, with Irving present and offering \$1000 to anyone who could prove the Holocaust. Deborah Lipstadt refuses to debate with him.

The action of the film takes place from 1994 to 2000, opening with the class, Lipstadt clashing with Irving, then Penguin Books ringing her in Atlanta to tell her that Irving had instituted a libel case – and her discovering with a visit from Anthony Julius, the solicitor for Penguin Books, that English law requires the defendant to prove the case.

Over the coming years, Deborah Lipstadt visits London a number of times, is introduced to Anthony Julius's team, young lawyers, research assistants (who have to spend years going through David Irving's vast diaries). She also meets the barrister who will conduct the case for the defence in court, Richard Rampton.

The film has a very strong screenplay written by playwright, David Hare. It also has a very strong cast, British, although Rachel Weisz is playing a strong American woman with a Queen's accent, vigorous in her personal stances. Tom Wilkinson gives one of his best performances as Richard Rampton. Andrew Scott plays Anthony Julius. However, the striking performance is from Timothy Spall as David Irving.

A key scene is a visit by Rampton, Deborah and the associates to meet a Polish professor at Auschwitz. It is Auschwitz in winter, bleak, the entrance, the events, the ruins of the gas chamber and the steps leading down to it. Rampton asks serious questions for the defence and Deborah is upset, thinking him insensitive and almost desecrating the memory of the survivors. After his personal interventions, she apologises to him.

The issue of the survivors is important with Deborah wanting them to take the stand and give testimony. Anthony Julius is against this as well as her testifying, reminding her that the case is against Irving and that there should be no opportunity for him to humiliate her or the survivors. A character played by Harriet Walter is a survivor requesting Deborah to let the survivors speak.

Alex Jennings plays the judge, the defence team having requested judgement rather than a jury. The court proceedings are very interesting, Irving never feeling abashed but vigorously asserting himself and his theories, challenged by a history professor about his books and his defence of Hitler, the Polish professor giving testimony about the gas chambers, cyanide, the chimneys – with Irving asserting that there were no holes in the roof and the journalists reporting “no holes, no Holocaust”. In these scenes Tom Wilkinson is excellent in his handling of cross examinations.

There is an awkward moment when the judge asks Rampton whether Irving truly believed that there was no Holocaust and therefore he was in good faith in his denials. Ultimately, the judgment was against Irving, the defence team and Deborah overjoyed, the survivors satisfied – and an ironic sequence where BBC interviewer, Jeremy Paxman is himself, interviews Spall as Irving with Irving trying to twist the judgement that it was really in favour of him.

Appropriately, the final scene of the film, drawing the audience back into the key issue, is that of Auschwitz.

THE EAGLE HUNTRESS

UK/ Mongolia, 2016, 87 minutes, Colour.
Narrated by Daisy Ridley.
Directed by Otto Bell.



This documentary is set in remote areas of Mongolia. It opens on the mountains, rugged, snow-swept. It then introduces us to a Mongolian hunter, eagle on his arm, riding a tough horse up the mountainside in order to sacrifice a lamb so that the eagle might eat and then, after seven years with the hunter, fly to freedom.

One of the main pleasures of watching this film is to see the range of Mongolian countryside, the mountains in various seasons, the vast plains, the tents for the nomadic people to carry around and live in. And this is contrasted with scenes of modernity, 21st-century Mongolia, the children going to school, the classrooms and buildings familiar from almost every culture, father picking up daughter on a motorbike, and the celebration of a festival for Eagle Hunters.

The title belongs to a Aisholpan, a young girl who turns 13, goes to school like all the others, boards at the school with her brother and sister five weekdays and then returns to the family settlement on weekends. She states that she would like to become a doctor. She does all the chores but has a desire to be an Eagle Huntress. Her father is very supportive, her mother willing that she do this. But, there is a collage of the Mongolian elders, all very solemn patriarchs, giving their views that it is inappropriate for a female to be a Huntress, saying very patriarchal things about the place of women, the fact that they should cook and prepare the house, and that they are weaker than men, which all excludes them from eagle hunting.

The father, however, encourages his daughter and takes her out into the mountains looking for eaglets and, when one is found, lowering her down the mountainside so that she can put a blanket over the eaglet, send it up to her father while he pulls her to the top. There are many scenes where she trains the eagle, her father coaching her, her growing assurance in handling the eagle.

It is not a surprise that when there is a festival and competition, it is she who wins it. The patriarchs will have to reconsider, some are unwilling to change, others becoming a little more open...

For the rest of the film, the audience accompanies father and daughter and their very rugged horses as they travel up the mountainside's in search of foxes, whose pelts are used to make furs for the family and community for the bleak winters. It is impressive for the horses who tend to be overlooked, trying to balance themselves on ice, going flank deep into snow, yet persevering on the track.

The film doesn't make it easy for Aishopen to let her Eagle do its work for the first time and capture the fox. There are several attempts but, ultimately, success.

The film shows the society in transition, the long traditions of the nomads, the patriarchs, the Eagle Hunters as well as modern schooling (it would seem that the children are also learning English), contemporary transport, the use of the radio and internationality despite the remoteness in the 21st-century.

FENCES

US, 2016 139 minutes, Colour.

Denzel Washington, Viola Davis, Stephen Henderson, Jovan Adepo, Russell Hornsby, Mykelti Williamson, Saniyya Sidney.

Directed by Denzel Washington.



African- American playwright, August Wilson, who died in 2005, was an award-winning author who captured the life of African-Americans at the various stages of the 20th century. He adapted some of his plays for the screen – but did not live to see this version of his play, Fences, which won Tony awards on Broadway including for its stars, Denzel Washington and Viola Davis.

Wilson wanted an African-American to direct the screenplay and now Denzel Washington has brought the play to the screen, repeating his role and receiving an Oscar-nomination as well as winning Golden Globe, and Viola Davis receiving most of the major awards for Best Supporting Actress.

The setting is Pittsburgh in the mid-1950s. Denzel Washington plays Troy, working with his friend Bono (Stephen Henderson) on a garbage truck and its rounds – and one of his ambitions being to drive the truck. He lives at home with his wife, Rose, married for 18 years – with a son from a previous marriage and a teenager son of this marriage.

While the screenplay has opened the stage drama out somewhat, although most of the action takes place in the yard of the house, and its interiors, where Troy builds a fence (symbolically keeping people in as well as keeping people out). There are a few scenes outside the house, collecting the garbage, visiting an office... Which means that the film relies very much on dialogue, spoken words and gestures, some silences, a focus on reactions. And, at two hours 20 minutes running time, this can be somewhat demanding.

Denzel Washington is very good as Troy though, as many have remarked after seeing the film, if only he had shut up various times! Viola Davis, on the other hand, initially is a person of reactions and smiles, her powerful dramatic scenes coming later in the film.

Troy is a complex man, born in 1904, a difficult upbringing, especially from his severe father, leaving home young, involved in theft, time in prison (where he met Bono), a son who visits and is something of a musician. In many ways, Rose has been his redemption, especially when his potential baseball career, at which he excelled, does not come to the fulfilment he expected, whether because of age, because of race issues, or both. This has hard repercussions on his son, Corey, who wants to be a footballer but his father treats him very severely, not wanting him to give himself to sport, but to having a good job – which leads to some powerful scenes between father and son.

Also in the mix is Troy's brother, Gabe (Mykelti Williamson) who suffered injuries during the war and lives in his own world, sometimes in an institution, often visiting family, genial and friendly.

The final act is rather quieter, the family gathering for Troy's funeral.

This all means that the film immerses its audience, especially the African-American audience, in the hardships of life, a great deal of servitude, African-Americans on the margin of American cities, but the changes which were beginning at this time leading to the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Despite Denzel Washington's incessant talking, this is a film of great value, of insights and empathy, a testimony to the hardships experienced as well as the breaking through to greater freedom.

A FEW LESS MEN

Australia, 2017, 92 minutes, Colour.

Xavier Samuel, Kris Marshall, Kevin Bishop, Ryan Corr, Sasha Horler, Deborah Mailman, Shane Jacobson, Lynette Curran, Jeremy Sims.

Directed by Mark Lamprell.



Words and phrases go through the mind, like fools, dills, dopes, some four-letter variations – but, the word chosen to describe the central characters of this film: idiotic.

Not that the writer, Dean Craig, whose principal credits include the American and the British versions of *Death at a Funeral* as well as this film's predecessor, *A Few Best Men*, didn't write them as idiotic intentionally and created a multitude of idiotic situations for them to display their idiocy. If an audience is in the vein, they may feel that this is the way to go for a laugh. If they are not in the vein, and the initial sequence, in animation form during the credits and then in actuality, with a fourth member of a bridal party of groom and best men falls over a cliff, grabbing the bottle of wine, saved from a number of death dangers and surviving – until crushed by a falling rock! And his body being laid out, complete with an erection which his three friends do their utmost to get rid of... If that does not get some laughs, and with some audiences it definitely won't, then this film might be a lost cause.

Which in some ways is a pity because there are quite a number of key Australian performers in cameo roles who give their lines more than they probably deserve, including Jeremy Sims as an ill-fated pilot, Sasha Horler as an games park guide, Deborah Mailman with a few moments as a local policewoman, Shane Jacobson as a lonely outback man whose inspiration for hospitality comes from Norman, his mother and the Bates Motel, Lynette Curran perhaps trying to re-live her randy role forty + years earlier in *Alvin Purple*...

But the focus of attention is on the groom, Xavier Samuel who has to be the common sensed anchor in the group even when he loses his cool (and, with his two friends, he has every reason to). It is the two British actors who appeared in the earlier film, Kris Marshall and Kevin Bishop, who have to represent all that is really stupid in human nature – as embodied in British men in their 30s. At one stage, the groom refers to Kris Marshall's Tom as a horny 15-year-old, which is something of a compliment. But, the most stupid is Kevin Bishop's Graham, absolutely obtuse, absolutely unself-aware, putting his foot in his mouth all the time, actually inciting an audience to wish that he would be bumped off the screen (and the audience being willing to facilitate if only they could). Early in the piece, sitting in the cockpit of the plane, he touches an emergency button after being told not to and causes the plane crash...

The point of the plot is that they have to get their deceased friend back to London for his funeral, threatened by his cousin, London gangster (Ryan Corr blustering and shouting) – and their travels through Western Australia, carrying the coffin, through the desert, to a wild festival, to a roadside

diner, to a country house, to Perth and to a mortuary. It might be a spoiler to say that they actually do get there despite all the odds but there is final mayhem, at the eulogy for the dead man.

And, just in case the audience did not get the point, there is over three minutes' recapitulation and series of outtakes after the final credits!

FIFTY SHADES DARKER

US, 2017, 118 minutes, Colour.

Dakota Johnson, Jamie Dornan, Eric Johnson, Bella Heathcote, Rita Ora, Luke Grimes, Victor Rasuk, Bruce Altman, Kim Basinger, Marcia Gay Harden.

Directed by James Foley.



In 2016, for St Valentine's Day, the world was bequeathed the first film version of an E. L. James novel, Fifty Shades of Grey. Two words were important for that release: curiosity and notoriety. While the story was billed as a love story, it had overtones of sadomasochism which excited a certain prurience. Dakota Johnson portrayed Anastasia steel and Jamie Dornan the millionaire Christian Gray. Marcia Gay Harden appeared as Christian's mother.

In comparison, the sequel is rather quieter on all fronts.

At the end of the first film, Anastasia was alienated by Christian and his dominance and her experience of submission (seen in an extraordinarily detailed and obsessive contract), her walking out on him, he and his pleading with the possibility of his becoming more humane and loving. At the beginning of this film, she is still feeling alienated though he is sending huge bouquets of flowers to encourage her in her new job at a publishing firm in Seattle.

It is not long before they do meet, the audience realising as she does that she is still attracted to Christian, even in love with him. Despite his stern manner and stubbled look, he declares his love for her.

In fact, it is really all the film is about, the different encounters between Anastasia and Christian, the lovemaking, the suggestions of the sadomasochism (which do increase, rather more slightly than expected, throughout the film, especially with his SM mechanisms and his special room and equipment). The two spend a lot of time together, they go to a very lavish masked ball and charity auction, he flies his private plane and crashes, though the suspense is short lived and he returns rather more quickly than expected as his family are in the middle of watching television reports, he has a birthday, a party and a proposal.

One of the main features of the film is its affluence, money is no object or difficulty for the Grey family, Christian has everything he wants and can afford everything he wants – it may be a real world for those who live it but it is a fantasy land for most of the audience.

One of the main difficulties for Christian is his character, the background of his mother's death, his sadomasochism, and Elena explaining that without her he would either be dead or in jail.

There are two main sources of tension apart from the growing relationship between the two. First of all there is Elena who had initiated the young Christian into sexuality, remains a friend of his mother, but is still infatuated with him and sees Anastasia as a threat. She threatens in return, leading to an ultimate confrontation and a clear indication of who is going to be one of the villains in the forthcoming *Fifty Shades Freed* (Valentine's Day 2018). She is played by Kim Basinger.

The other source of tension is Anastasia's work, which she enjoys, is good at, is promoted – especially after a groping attack from her boss, Jack (Eric Johnson). And, of course, it is signalled at the end that he will be around for the sequel, not smiling but scowling.

Anastasia has family and friends, Christian has family, so there is a touch more humanity in this one than there was in the first film. Nevertheless, this is the world of the bestseller, of bestseller affluence and bestseller sexuality with the touches of darkness.

GHOST IN THE SHELL

US, 2017, 100 minutes, Colour.

Scarlett Johansson, Pilou Asbaek, Takeshi Kitano, Juliette Binoche, Michael Pitt, Chin Han, Peter Ferdinando, Anamaria Marinca.

Directed by Rupert Sanders.



Ghost in the Shell is based on a Manga comic, with an animation film version in the 1990s. This time it is an international production, an American remake but much of the finance coming from China.

For the ordinary audience, this will serve as the futuristic action adventure – though the shootouts, American movie style, are a bit much for this film and there is, surprisingly, a Transformer tank confrontation at the end. Manga fans have been a bit more ambiguous.

Otherwise, this is science-fiction exploring what are now familiar themes of humans and robots, the future of robotics, the substitution of robots for humans.

The future city, looking somewhat like Hong Kong, has excellent production design, harking back to the Los Angeles of Ridley Scott's *The Blade Runner*, the darkness, the bright city lights, the skyscrapers, travel, and huge holograms on the walls of the buildings. And *The Blade Runner* theme of replicants is given a new twist – some months before the release of the new *Blade Runner* film. These are also the themes of such films as the two *Total Recall* films.

There is some cautionary information given at the opening, some lines about robotics, humans, and what this could mean for the future. Then there is a transition to a laboratory, surgery, a brain being transferred to a robotic body. In fact, this is a successful operation after 98 failures where the new creature is physically robot, interiorly human, the ghost in the shell or, as a scientist refers to it, the soul in the shell is human. This creation is called Major.

And Major is in the form of Scarlett Johansson, no hesitation in showing the form frequently, her going into action often with a skin-toned body-stocking. It is interesting that Scarlett Johansson has taken on this role. In recent years she has been seen in three variations on these themes, *Under the Skin*, *Her*, *Lucy*, as well as appearing in the *Avengers* films, one of the few female superheroes. (Probably someone is at a university at this minute submitting a topic for a thesis on Scarlett Johansson and these roles.)

Major is destined to be a weapon, used by the state, under the control of Amaraiki (an interesting role for veteran director Takeshi Kitano, who speaks only Japanese in this film, with subtitles, finally getting the opportunity to rise from his office chair and indulge in action for which his own films are

famous). He is responsible to the Prime Minister but the control of Major is very much in the hands of Cutter (Peter Ferdinando) the head of the robotics company.

Major does not always obey commands and intervenes at a business dinner when thugs open fire and Major attacks the robotic geisha, which opens up investigations into robots similar to herself while she has been told she is the first. This links to her further disobeying orders and trying to track down the sinister presence she discovered, Kuse (Michael Pitt).

She is backed up by a friendly giant, Batou (Pilou Asbaek), good with a gun, with banter, able to be continually repaired – and even get a new set of penetrating eyes.

Perhaps a surprise presence in the film is that of Juliette Binoche as Dr Oulet, the scientist in charge of these transformations, not telling the truth to Major, not allowing her to have her own memories, although she has glimpses. Dr Oulet is the humane presence in the film, a scientist, but motherly.

Of course, this is building up into a confrontation with Major discovering something of her past, including a mother, and so has to come to terms with Kuse as a failed experiment, her own identity, and whether she is to continue in her weapon role.

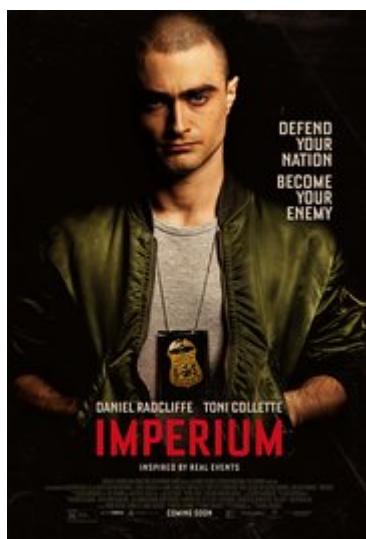
Fairly continued action, an exciting imagination of the future, philosophical questions about humanity and identity – and the screenplay finally coming down on the side of humanity.

IMPERIUM

US, 2016, 100 minutes, Colour.

Daniel Radcliffe, Tony Collette, Tracy Letts, Sam Trammell, Nestor Carbonell, Chris Sullivan, Burn Gorman.

Directed by Daniel Ragussis.



It is a surprise to find this title used for the contemporary story of white supremacist movements in the United States. There is a reference to the Roman Empire and its Imperium and the ambitions of the supremacists.

This is an interesting FBI thriller, a story of undercover work and infiltration of the supremacists by an FBI agent. The agent is played by Daniel Radcliffe – and his Nate is not all that far from Harry Potter in the sense that he is once again a small man, quiet and introverted, intelligent – and determined.

The film opens with the FBI solving a case with arrests and the ensuing interrogations where Nate shows his ability to empathise in many ways with the criminals and their motivations. He catches the eye of an important agent, Angela (a very effective Tony Collette) who is a thorn in the side of her fellow officers. She sees him as an ideal type who could convincingly infiltrate the supremacist organisations. He is reluctant, a more gentle soul interested in reading and music, but with a hard family background which he is trying to overcome by excelling at his work as an agent. She puts him through various paces persuading him how to be empathetic and convincing in his undercover role.

The bulk of the film sees him very persuasively ingratiate himself with a range of groups. He is able to mix with some thugs, the leader liking him and trusting him a lot while one of the underlings is most suspicious. Nate is able to continue his credibility by pointing out their sloppy approach to surveillance, communications, anger on the spot.

He has the opportunity to ingratiate himself with the leader (Tracy Letts) of the neo-Nazi group from Ohio who are wanting to spread their influence to Virginia. During a parade, the leader is attacked and is rescued by Nate, who is then given the opportunity to visit the sites, comment on the weaponry and its effectiveness and the suitability of the site for a camp.

And he also meets a theoretical supremacist, Jerry (Sam Trammell), a bookish man with a family but who has been convinced by the supremacist ideology and is persuaded to take a further step into subversive action. There is also the Ku Klux Klan.

The FBI are aware that there is to be some kind of sabotage by explosion and the film builds up to a tense confrontation with Nate in danger in the middle of it.

The picture of the subversive groups, quite number of collages taken from actual footage, raises the alarm about the susceptibility of the American public towards the philosophies of racism and racial hatred.

I.T.

US, 2016, 95 minutes, Colour.

Pierce Brosnan, James Frecheville, Anna Friel, Stefanie Scott, Michael Nyqvist.

Directed by John Moore.



Hell hath no fury... But this time it is not a woman scorned but rather an IT employee scorned and fired. And he has a vast IT palette on which to wreak his fury.

This a contemporary thriller, especially in the IT world. Pierce Brosnan portrays a multimillionaire who has developed his company, built it up, has become wealthy, is married to a glamorous wife, Anna Friel, and is devoted to his teenage daughter, Stefanie Scott. This means that the film starts with a: who could ask for anything more?

At a company demonstration, there is a glitch in the IT presentation. Technicians work hard behind the scene but the situation is saved when a young man, Ed Porter (James Frecheville) is able to fix everything and the presentation proceeds. Brosnan is particularly impressed, praises the young man, even offers him the prospect of a job.

But, we soon discover the young man has problems. While he is an expert, he is not the personality that he wants people to think he is. He is a loner, has built up a reputation which is based on half truths and imagination and ambition. He begins to intrude more and more into the life of the millionaire and his daughter.

Brosnan's millionaire was grateful but resents intrusion into his family life and so is very short with the young man, warning him off in no uncertain terms.

So, revenge, stalking, hacking into the technology of the company, extreme surveillance, readjusting data leading to financial disaster.

Swedish actor Michael Nyqvist, known from *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo*, portrays a quiet expert recommended to remedy the situation – which, in a calm and controlled way, sitting at a cafe, using the stolen phone of Brosnan's daughter, watching everything on a screen while Brosnan invades the high-tech apartment and gear, is achieved.

Actually, the film becomes more melodramatic at this stage, the young man able to pretend to play the victim, ensure that the police are suspicious of the millionaire rather than himself. And there is more melodrama as the young man threatens the wife and daughter, leading to the inevitable...

KONG: SKULL ISLAND

US, 2017, 118 minutes, Colour.

Tom Hiddleston, Samuel L. Jackson, Brie Larson, John C. John Goodman, Corey Hawkins, John Ortiz, Tian Jing, Toby Kebbel, Jason Mitchell, Shea Whigham, Thomas Mann.

Directed by Jordan Vogt- Roberts.



King Kong has been part of movie consciousness for over 80 years, his first appearance in the 1933 classic which introduced him on his island, his being transferred to the United States and the famous climax on the Empire State Building.

There were sequels, variations on the theme, remakes in 1976 and, by Peter Jackson with Naomi Watts, in 2005.

And now, here he is again.

The audience is not left in suspense because Kong makes his first appearance at the very beginning of the film, 1944, a South Pacific island, planes crashing, a Japanese and American confronting each other – only to find themselves confronted by Kong.

The action in this adventure takes place in 1973. President Nixon's announcing the cessation of hostilities after so many years in Vietnam. Some of the military, especially Packard (Samuel L. Jackson) are reluctant to leave action and go back to civilian life. When an opportunity arises for him to take his men on a special mission to the South Pacific, he agrees with alacrity.

The background of the mission is an expedition to an unknown island. Leading a delegation to Washington and an appeal to a senator is a wealthy man (John Goodman) and some scientists – the senator, Richard Jenkins, thinks that the mission is nonsense but is persuaded to support it when he hears that it might become a cold war pawn with the Russians.

The other significant members of the mission are Jim Conrad, Tom Hiddleston, an SAS man who is strong on security, and a photojournalist, who has covered the war in Vietnam in order to promote peace and human respect, thought to be a man because of her name, Mason, played by Brie Larson.

As the ship sails towards the island, it is covered in fierce storm clouds and so helicopters are sent in, explosions set off in order to rouse the creatures on the island.

Needless to say, Kong is not very happy at being so disturbed and there are vivid sequences where he destroys so many of the helicopters as if they were little toys in his hands. Packard is very aggressive and terms the weapons on Kong, wounding him.

After his attack, there are two groups on the island, one centred on Packard who wants to get the weapons and to destroy the creature, the other centred on Conrad and Mason, she busily photographing everything, he wanting to lead them back to the rendezvous.

Much easier said than done because of the range of creatures on the island, prehistoric giant creatures, a huge water buffalo, an enormous spider, a large squid, devoured by Kong, ferocious lizards and pterodactyl swooping for prey. As a fierce creature and monster film, this one does very well.

There is one surprise in the form of John C. Reilly, the surviving American who landed at the beginning of the film, who has made friends with the rather silent and painted inhabitants of the island, advises them that Kong is friendly but that there is another enormous lizard creature who wants to destroy Kong – and, in a long sequence, we see the two fighting and the bad creature doing his best to destroy the good Kong.

Needless to say, not everyone survives, but Conrad and Mason, climbing a cliff to fire a flare for the rescue, come face-to-face with Kong and there is the expected moment of Beauty and the Beast, Mason touching Kong, he rescuing and cradling her.

Which means to say that as a version of the King Kong story, this is not bad at all.

LAND OF MINE

Denmark, 2016, 100 minutes, Colour.
Roland Moeller, Oskar Boekelmann, Emil Belton, Oskar Belton.
Directed by Martin Zandvliet.



Land of Mine has an ambiguous title. It is a Danish film and, as Carl the sergeant in charge of the squad defusing the mines, after bashing a German soldier holding the Danish flag, declares: this is *my* country. And, with the beach setting, with over 1 million mindset on the Danish coast, Denmark is a land of mines.

This film has won many Danish awards and was Denmark's official entry for the Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film.

There have been many war stories and many post-war stories but this one has not been told very often. Denmark was occupied by Germany for five years. There were huge resentments in Denmark against the Germans as evidenced in this film. The final credits indicate that there were over 2000 prisoners of war still in Denmark in 1945 and that they were put to work, especially in defusing the mines along the Danish coast.

This is a story of a small squad of German soldiers. However, it is evident that they are young boys, conscripted, forced to fight, very Germanic in their obeying orders, even from Carl the sergeant, taken prisoner but having very limited experience. (As a point of reference and comparison, they are the same age at the end of the war as Joseph Ratzinger and a reminder of boys being forced into Nazi youth groups – which means that any of them who are alive today are now 90.)

The group of ten are allotted a particular section beach, a map with the placement of all the mines, their work to meticulously make progress along the beach, metre by metre, poking four times to try to locate the mines. We have seen them practising defusing, being urged on by the Danish officer who has only contempt for the men, then defusing actual mines. As the days go on, with the prospect of three months to finish this section of the beach, they become more proficient. As might be expected, there are some explosions, some loss of limbs and death and the discovery that sometimes two mines could be placed one on top of the other.

In the meantime, we get to know more and more about the boys – which makes the film quite an experience as our sympathy causes us to imagine what it might be like in such a prisoner situation and in such a dangerous role in the defusing.

The boys have very limited experience and have hopes for work when they return home. They are sequestered in their heart, locked in at night, very little food, an episode in stealing food from the barn results in rat poisoning, a certain camaraderie in their interactions.

The character of Carl, the sergeant, is very interesting, hostile as is seen from the beginning, treating them as prisoners and not as persons, supervising their work, locking them in, but concerned when one boy is injured and he takes him to hospital. He becomes conscious of their lack of food and gets bread and vegetables from the store, criticised by fellow officers. He begins to talk with the boys as persons, even setting up a soccer match. He himself is a loner but is devoted to his companion dog.

At the farm, there is a woman with a young daughter, hostile to the Germans, more than satisfied at injuring some when she learns that they have been affected by the rat poison.

While the film shows and explores the character of the boys, highlighted by twins and their bond with each other, it also shows us the character of Carl, with touches, perhaps, of the reverse of the Stockholm Syndrome, his beginning to identify with his prisoners. His is a journey from harshness to humanity.

In many ways a severe watch, but a film well worth watching.

THE LEGO BATMAN MOVIE

US, 2017, 104 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Will Arnett, Rosario Dawson, Michael Cera, Ralph Fiennes, Siri, Zack Galifianakis, Jenny Slate, Jason Mantzoukas, Conan O'Brien, Billy Dee Williams, Zoe Kravitz, Eddie Izzard.



In recent years there have been quite a number of Lego movies, extremely popular in cinemas and on television. With the popularity of Lego and children using the different blocks for building all kinds of creations, it is understandable that the film companies decided that this would be an effective and profitable type of animation.

There have been some Lego Batman movies but this one is designed for wide popular release and was very successful. It also benefits from a talented voice cast ranging from Will Arnett as Bruce Wayne/Batman, Rosario Dawson as Brenda Gordon, the collaborator in the fight against crime in Gotham city, Michael Cera as the orphan, Dick Grayson, Zach Galifianakis as the Joker, Ralph Fiennes as Alfred the butler.

While the story and the look of the film are designed for the younger audience who will delight in all the shapes and colours in action (often non-stop), there has to be something for the adults accompanying the children! This is immediately found in the opening sequences where the voice-over explains a lot of the techniques how action films work and then illustrates this (which they do at the end of the film is well). Actually, there is a lot of verbal and visual satire and the dialogue which may go over the heads of the children but entertains the adults.

The film is zany to say the least. After referencing all the previous Batman films, we are introduced to the Joker, plans for defeating Batman, rounding up all the DC comic villains, borrowing from Suicide Squad and with references to Superman and General Zod. But things are changing in Gotham city, Jim Gordon is retiring as the police chief, his sister Barbara taking over, acknowledging the contribution of Batman but believing that there should be collaborative effort in the fight against the Joker and crime.

Then there are the orphans, especially a very pushy young fellow, Dick Grayson (voice of Michael Cera) who twists Bruce Wayne's words about adopting orphans and finds himself not only adopted but a part of the Justice team. Bruce Wayne is rather narcissistic, a hero-figure loner.

There are all kinds of sequences for the combating of the villains, Barbara being a force for good, and even Alfred somewhat critical of his master (in Ralph Fiennes voice) but also becoming part of the active crime-fighting team.

In many ways it is in one eye and out the other, a quick entertainment which is bright and breezy – but, with a more philosophical note at the end, acknowledging the perennial fight between good and evil, Batman and the Joker realising that they have to have their stances otherwise there will never be any stories and no conflict!

LOVING

US, 2016, 123 minutes, Colour.

Joel Edgerton, Ruth Negga, Marton Csokas, Alano Miller, Bill Camp, Nick Kroll, David Jensen, Jon Bass, Michael Shannon, Matt Molloy.

Directed by Jeff Nichols.



Loving sounds like a pleasantly innocuous, obvious kind of title. However, there is much more to it. The central couple of this film are certainly a loving couple but that is also their name. And, their name went into American Constitutional history in a significant case concerning the state of Virginia and issues of miscegenation, rights and inter-racial marriage.

Loving takes its place with a number of African-American films which received acclaim, award nominations for 2016: Fences, Hidden Figures, Moonlight.

The film opens in the backwaters of Virginia in 1958, Richard Loving, a white bricklayer, is in a relationship with Mildred, an African-American woman, in a rather tight-knit community. Mildred announces she is pregnant, Richard wanting to build a house for them and buying a lot, then deciding to drive to Washington DC to marry because this is forbidden in Virginia. They put their marriage certificate on the wall but, in a night raid, the local sheriff descends on the house, arrests them and puts them in jail.

A friendly lawyer is able to help them with his friend, the judge, but it means pleading guilty and accepting that they must leave the state of Virginia for 25 years. They sadly accept this but, when it is time for the birth of the child, Mildred want Richard's mother to be the midwife and they return.

This is the time of the major stirrings of the Civil Rights Movement, and the Loving family (three children by now, the boys very energetic, continually running around) are living in DC, see glimpses of the March on Washington on television. But Mildred is encouraged to write to Robert Kennedy and does so.

Over the following years, at a slow pace, civil rights movements become interested in the Loving Case and challenge the past decisions with the Virginia judge, his rejecting the plea, young lawyers

taking the case to the state of Virginia, losing again – and deciding, ultimately, to take the case to the Supreme Court.

Of themselves, Richard and Mildred Loving might be called simple folk. This is especially true of Richard, rather laconic, talented in fixing motors and participating in drag racing, constant in his bricklaying work, feeling hard done by the law, rather reluctant to move into the race-legal issues, wary of the media, but a devoted father and completely loving his wife. He is played particularly well by Joel Edgerton. Mildred is more knowledgeable than her husband, becomes interested in the issues though always deferring to Richard. She finds suburban DC oppressive, especially for raising the children and wants to return to live in Virginia. Ruth Negga received an Oscar nomination for this performance.

The film was written and directed by Jeff Nichols who has made a number of very interesting films in recent years including *Take Shelter*, *Mud*, *Midnight Special*, all focusing on families and relationships and crises. Michael Shannon is a regular in his films and it is pleasing to see his brief, rather humorous cameo as a photographer for *Life Magazine*.

This is an important piece of Americana, a challenge to a state and victory in the Supreme Court, a challenge to legislation based on false interpretations of separations of race from the Bible, the heritage from the slave era.

A MAN NAMED OVE

Sweden, 2016, 116 minutes, Colour.
Rolf Lassgard, Bahar Pars, Filip Berg, Ida Engvoll.
Directed by Hannes Holm.



It is probably best to give this film some time to work its way on our emotions. The beginning is rather severe – and the film could have been called *The Man Named Cantankerous* (and that is something of an understatement!).

Ove (an extremely persuasive performance from Rolf Lassgård) is a 59-year-old widower, in charge of supervising the community area where he lives, absolutely meticulous, not afraid of confronting offenders, a letter of the law kind of person (the exact, exact letter of the law).

He is grieving the death of his wife, Sonia, some months earlier, is called in by the bosses where he works and let go (with a token gift of a spade for him to work in his garden). These are two of the white shirt men that he so loathes, bureaucrats, idiots – as he calls most people that he encounters.

Often visiting his wife's grave, he is determined to go to her and tries to commit suicide several times (though he succumbs to temptations to open the door to visitors). The suicide attempts provide the occasion for significant flashbacks, to the little boy and his relationship with his father, the death of his mother, his father's kindness, love of motors, work on the railways. Another flashback shows the adult Ove, bringing his exam results to his father – which leads to tragedy. Developers want to take over his house because it does not meet requirements – and, as he rescues an adult and child from a burning neighbouring house, sparks set fire to his own home. With nowhere to go, he lies down on a train compartment seat – and wakes to find a sympathetic young woman opposite him.

As Ove goes about his business, criticising everyone, carping with disappointment, his life begins to change when a family with two children parked illegally, reverse into his letterbox, and experience his wrath, but the mother, from Iran, generally takes no-nonsense and offers him food, her husband borrowing a ladder, with Ove giving him the manual, gets help from Ove with her driving, inveigling him into looking after her children, and persuading him to take in a stray cat.

There is a significant sequence where he rescues a man who has collapsed on railway tracks and is tempted to stay there himself. And there is a running story of his friendship rivalry with his neighbour, very much focused on the rivalry between Saab and Volvo.

Once we are involved in this kind of interaction, we know where the film is headed and it is a matter of wanting to learn more about Ove and his marriage to Sonia, why they have no children, and his greater involvement with more of the the locals, a young man who is trying to mend his girlfriend's bike, a gay young man whom he takes in after the young men's father rejects him, and a lot more activity with the family across the street. There is a particularly moving scene where he and the mother have coffee and cake in the restaurant where he and his wife did the same every Saturday (from 1 o'clock to 2 o'clock exactly) and the story of Sonia, very moving, is revealed. Ida Engvoll is a very attractive Sonia.

There is still more action in the film, and a play, both happy and sad, and the doctor's diagnosis that Ove has a big heart.

The film was one of the five nominees for 2016 is Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.

(Since the actor playing the young Ove resembles actor Domhnall Gleason, the thought comes to mind that for the English-language version of this film, Gleason's father, Brendan, would be a good casting coup.)

THE SALESMAN/ FORUSHANDE

Iran, 2016, 125 minutes, Colour.

Shahab Hosseini, Taraneh Alidoosti, Babak Karimi.

Directed by Asghar Farahdi.



This is a very fine film, a portrait of two ordinary people, a married couple, difficulties that they encounter, the effect on each of them and how they deal with these difficulties.

This reviewer has been following the films of the director, Asghar Farahdi for over 10 years, a strong director in Iranian cinema. His early films were social dramas focusing on marriage and relationships, on criminal behaviour. In 2009, he broke through to an international audience with a complex drama about friends, interactions, disappearances, About Ellie, screening at the Berlinale that year and winning awards.

Two years later, Farahdi won the Golden Bear Berlin, the ecumenical award and many others and, finally, the Oscar for Best Foreign Language film, 2011. And this impressive film was called A Separation. It was the first Iranian film to win an Oscar. Two years later he made another very fine film about marriage and relationships, set in France, The Past. And then, three years later, The Salesman – and the winning of his second Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. With President Trump's ban on travellers from some Islamic countries, including Iran, Farahdi was not present at the Oscar awards but a strong statement was read on his behalf.

But that is background to the release of the film.

The title refers to a husband-and-wife and their putting on a play in Tehran, Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. During the opening credits, we see the stage being prepared for the various sets for the

action of the drama. And, there are several scenes of rehearsal as well as performance throughout the film. While there are no immediate parallels between the central characters and the play, the elderly man who sells goods on the street and appears at the end of the film is, in fact, a salesman – offering a reflection on the title of the film and the Miller connection.

The film opens ominously with residents having to abandon immediately a building which seems to be in a state of collapse, with images of a building site adjacent and the equipment there shaking the earth and foundations – thus giving a symbolic image of the action of the film and the possibilities of all kinds of collapse.

The film is very well written, strong dialogue, fine delineation of characters, not only the central couple but also the actors and the director involved in the performance of the play. The husband also teaches at school, trying to interest young men in literature. As he travels home in a taxi, an anxious woman sitting next to him becomes upset and wants to change places with one of the students in the front seat. This is a device to set audiences on edge with a woman feeling threatened by a strange man.

This comes to the fore when the couple have moved into a new apartment, have discovered that the previous resident used to have clients visiting, to the disgust of the neighbours. When she thinks she is letting her husband into the apartment, it is actually a stranger who attacks her. And this has strong repercussions on the wife, her becoming instantly apprehensive, continually fearful, trying to act in the play but being overcome and unable to continue performance. This has an increasingly dark effect on the husband, his moods and frame of mind, caring for his wife, puzzled at her behaviour, then becoming more and more angry at the unknown assailant and determined to find out who he is and to confront him.

While this does happen, it has different repercussions from what we might have been expecting, both on the part of the wife and on the part of the husband and the identity of the assailant.

Not only is the film well-written, but it is beautifully edited, the director may making fluid transitions between characters and situations, continually involving the audience, immersing them in the experience emotionally and morally.

This film serves as a strong reminder that the Iranian film industry has been one of the best for many decades and one of the best in exploring stories with basic human values.

THE WHOLE TRUTH

US, 2016, 95 minutes, Colour.

Keanu Reeves, Renner Zellweger, Gugu Mbatha Raw, Gabriel Basso, Jim Belushi, Jim Klock.

Directed by Courtney Hunt.



The title reminds the audience of the oath at the beginning of any testament in a court case, the telling of the whole truth. In fact, this film is basically a court case.

The film is also a star vehicle for Keanu Reeves, one of his better roles. He is an able lawyer, with a good reputation, asked to defend young man, aged 16 (Gabriel Basso), who has confessed to the murder of his father will standing by his corpse. He has refused to make any comment beyond the confession and refuses to speak to his lawyer whom he has known for some years as a friend of the family. This means that his lawyer is hamstrung in terms of a way of defence as well as of interrogating witnesses.

Most of the action takes place in the court although there are substantial flashbacks to the life of the family, a wealthy family in the south, an arrogant and bullying father played by Jim Belushi, who has been violent towards his wife, demanding of his son, especially for his college studies. His wife is played by Rene Zellweger (exhibiting the disadvantages of her having had facelift treatment). She is presented as a rather timid wife, verbally abused and physically battered.

The court also appoints a young lawyer whose father had a reputation in the town as the assistant to the defence (Gugu Mbatha Raw).

The film shows the interrogation of the witnesses, especially the flight attendant on a private plane and her relationship with the dead man, his behaviour on flights, defending him – although there is a good scene where she is re-questioned by the new assistant and her testimony is seen as questionable.

The police are also interrogated but, with the confession of the young man, there was no need felt for further suspects.

Eventually, the young man speaks, and has a story of his father sexually abusing him for some years. Is this the truth or is the young man trying to defend his mother?

If the audience were to be told that there is a twist at the end, perhaps the most improbable twist, then this is actually what the end of the film does produce!

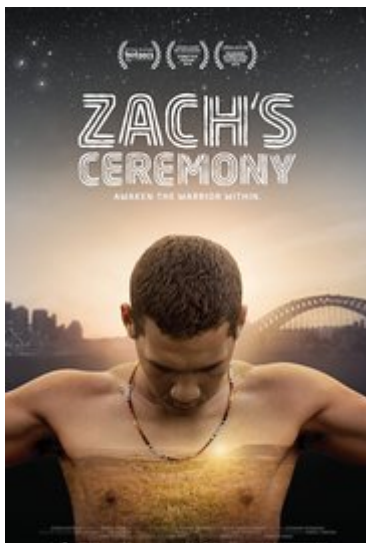
Which means that this is something of a minor drama, an interesting court case and an entertainment.

ZACH'S CEREMONY

Australia, 2016, 97 minutes, Colour.

Zach Doomadgee, Alec Doomadgee.

Directed by Aaron Peterson.



This Australian documentary offers 97 minutes of information, emotions, conscience-challenging for Australian audiences, both indigenous as well as descendants of those who settled, and for international audiences who have questions about the place of aboriginal people in Australian society.

As the title indicates, the centre of the documentary is Zachariah Doomadgee, son of Alec.

Initial information tells the audience that while Alec took home videos of his son Zach, of his daughters, of his young son Bailey, it was only when Zach was 10, in 2009, that he began filming more consistently and in earnest. This means that the audience sees a portrait of Zach from age 10 to 16.

It is important to note that there is an introduction to aboriginal history, done with stylish and effective animation, to remind audiences what has happened in aboriginal history, in post-British settlement history, and the aboriginal sense of country and belonging to the land.

In order to appreciate this portrait of Zach, the audience has to remember that it is based on quite an amount of film stock, that editing decisions have been made, what to include, what to exclude, and the director's perspective on Zach's story as well is that of his father who was one of the producers.

At 10, Zach is extraordinarily articulate, thoughtful, giving a young boy's insights into his family situation, the lightness of his skin (too light in the aboriginal communities, too dark in Sydney), his desire for understanding his background in aboriginal culture and the beginnings of his talking about experiencing the rituals and ceremonies which will mark his rite of passage to adulthood.

In these years, father and son have an extraordinary relationship, Alec very affirming, able to express emotions, love of his son, urging him to great things – and practically illustrated by training his son in boxing, Alec winning a bout, Zach also doing some public boxing. This bond between father and son is quite moving (a counterbalance to the famous cartoon by Bill Leak indicating that aboriginal fathers did not even know their sons' names).

This is all the more moving because, as the years go by, Zach becomes a not untypical adolescent, stealing out of the home at night to meet girls, experimenting with alcohol and drugs, feeling resentful towards his father, stating that his father has too much in his attitude to shaping his son's future. Zach wants to be free.

While he goes to Concord Boys High and suffers some bullying and racial discrimination, he is able to go to his father's home country in the Gulf of Carpentaria, meeting his cousins, experiencing the bush, meeting some of the elders, avidly listening to the traditions and becoming more at home there. One of his main regrets is not often seeing his mother who has separated from his father and keeps her distance. In 2010, Alec marries again, a sympathetic white woman, Amy, who does her best to be stepmother to the children.

In 2014, Alec has the opportunity to go to the United States and sharing the experience of Native Americans – and, it is during his absence, that Zach begins to throw over some of the traces.

Nevertheless, Zach has this perpetual yearning to experience the Ceremony. His father arranges this, visits to North Queensland and to the Northern Territory, contact with the elders, with the keepers of the lore, taking some time to prepare the ground where the Ceremony will take place, a group of boys increasing the numbers with Zach, including Bailey. Zach still has some mixed feelings, especially wanting his mother to attend the ceremony.

The elders have given the director permission to film aspects of the Ceremony. Most audiences will have wondered about the Ceremony and what it means, what happens, as the advertising tag for the documentary says "awakening the warrior".

While the film is very much male-oriented, there are glimpses of Zach's sisters, a finally happy visit to his mother, the support and love Amy and her participation in the Ceremony, and interviews with a number of older women, their presence at the Ceremony, their singing.

Of course, this story is open-ended. Zach is only 16 (and, in many ways, his 16th birthday party, the crowds, drink, the police intervening, Zach wanting to control it, is a great disappointment). On the one hand, he seems more settled, even has a happy visit to his mother. He also participates in dancing at an aboriginal celebration at Circular Key. What he will do with his life is still open. But, the audience sees that he has been given more opportunities than so many aboriginal young men, with a comment of the number of suicides even in the town Doomadgee, 14 in the year, including one of Zach's cousins.

It would be interesting to see what has happened to Zach in five year's time and how he has begun his adulthood.

REVIEWS MAY 2017

BAD GIRL
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BAD GIRL

Australia, 2016, 87 minutes, Colour.

Sara West, Samara Weaving, Benjamin Winspear, Felicity Price, Rebecca Massey.

Directed by Fin Edquist.

In many ways, despite the setting in the present, this is something of an old-fashioned

melodrama, a drama about a psychotic character and the havoc that she can wreak.

Bad Girl was filmed in Western Australia, the countryside and a small town with the prospect of wealthy homebuyers attracted by modern architecture to move out of the city to live in comfort. At the opening of the film, we see the Anderson's, Peter and Michelle (Benjamin Winspear and Felicity Price), with their rebellious daughter, Amy (Sara West), sitting in the back of the car, sullen, only 17 but having had trouble with the police and institutions. The parents hope that she will be rehabilitated and bond with them as they move to the modern house that Peter has designed. Actually, things are not all that easy and he is becoming dependent on visitors from China to purchase his units.

Some of the neighbours are friendly, and a young girl, Chloe (Samara Weaving), turns up offering to clean the house as she says she is doing for other homes around the town. She is a very pretty girl but Peter Anderson is wary though Michelle reaches out to her.

A good part of the film shows the bonding between Amy and Chloe, especially as Amy intends to run away from home but those who are going with her fail to show up and a drunken Amy walks on the local bridge railings in the middle of the night, only to be rescued by Chloe. Chloe does the jobs in the house, has long talks with Amy, especially after Amy runs away again and has commandeered the car owned by two young men and drives it recklessly. Amy reveals that she has been adopted, Peter and Michelle having adopted out their baby when they were studying and were too young to keep it. Chloe's idea is that Amy should go on to a website and the people to her natural parents to make contact – which they seem to do.

Things are difficult at home, Amy and Chloe become firm friends, especially with a sexual attraction.

Review should probably end here, not taking the plot developments any further but leaving them to the audience as the details become more and more complicated, Chloe becoming more and more part of the household, seeming to become indispensable to Peter and Michelle while Amy seems to be more and more rebellious, disappearing from the house.

The plot becomes more melodramatic towards the end, with touches of blood and violence, keeping the audience fairly alert, some suspense and twists, with a happy ending coming as something of a relief!

Not bad of its kind.

CHIPS

US, 2017, 100 minutes, Colour.

Dax Shepard, Michael Peña, Jessica Mc Namee, Adam Brody, Ryan Hansen, Kristin Bell, Jamie Bock, Vincent D' Onofrio.

Directed by Dax Shepard.

There is no major reason for making your decision to see Chips. In fact, there is really no minor reason either.

Fans of the television series which ran from 1977 to 1983, 139 episodes, may find the

skeleton of a plot and the characters they liked but an entirely different take, sometimes tongue in cheek, always suggestive, even vulgar. Contemporary audiences may get something of a kick out of the characters and their adventures but there are so many similar stories in film and television. Somebody remarked that younger audiences these days seem to get a thrill out of crass comedy so this might appeal here.

This is a police-partner, sometimes buddy, though odd couple, who team up, one going undercover in the California Police Highway enforcement to uncover corrupt police who are staging elaborate robberies, laundering money by buying artworks to get them to Mexico. There is violence and also a couple of murders.

The partners are Michael Peña as Ponch, being transferred to California from Florida where he has had some unfortunate incidents, partners being shot, and a predilection for ogling women and becoming involved with them. The other is Dax Shepard as Jon Baker, inept at most things, with a touch of hypochondria, hopeless at shooting but a star champion in riding a motorbike. He's also rather obsessive in his interpretation of the law. Needless to say the obsessive tangles with the freewheeling causing all kinds of clashes and, again needless to say, their beginning to understand each other and help solve the crimes.

Vincent D' Onofrio is the arch villain, the police chief behind the robberies, along with other members of the force – including some twists in revealing characters.

Despite the pressures and the efforts of the corrupt police, Ponch still has his roving eye and several of his female police workers are more than willing to be roved upon.

Jon Baker's alienated wife is played by Kristin Bill, Dax Shepard's wife in real life.

This version of Chips won't enhance the popularity of the original television series and a further film, Chips 99. It is certainly not an enhancing kind of film.

THE FATE OF THE FURIOUS

US, 2017, 139 minutes, Colour.

Vin Diesel, Charlize Theron, Dwayne Johnson, Michelle Rodriguez, Jason Statham, Luke Evans, Tyrese Gibson, Chris 'Ludicris' Bridges, Kurt Russell, Nathalie Emanuel, Elsa Pataky, Scott Eastwood, Helen Mirren.

Directed by F. Gary Gray.

So, this is what world taste looks and sounds like! As it hurtles towards bringing in \$1 billion in box office returns, this is what millions of people want to see in 2017.

In fact, this is the eighth film in the series of Fast and Furious action movies that began in 2001. And, of course, there is every reason that there will be a ninth.

One of the curious aspects of the series is that, except for one film, the star is someone who does not really exude charismatic screen presence, Vin Diesel. The charismatic one, Paul Walker, was killed in a car accident in 2013 but the subsequent films invoke his memory, as does this one, especially in its final scene and the naming of a baby, Brian, after him.

In the beginning, this was a series about cars, fast cars, drag races, American settings, overtones of the law with touches of lawlessness, and aspects of the drug world. Since then, the action has become international. In fact, this one opens in Cuba, a kind of Havana that Fidel Castro may never have dreamt of (or had, perhaps, thought that he had overthrown). Dom and Letty (Diesel and Michelle Rodriguez) are honeymooning in Havana when the screenplay offers the opportunity for a huge drag race (after plenty of ogling of the young women in the capital), a big opening because Dom is driving something of a jalopy with a fierce engine inserted and actually finishes the race driving in reverse!

It is this quality, rather than his personality, that is attractive to the villain of the film, a blonde dreadlocked, Cipher, Charlize Theron who threatens him (the audience does not quite know why only that he looks at a photo) and he has to betray his friends and work for her.

With the introduction of Cipher, as well as Mr Nobody of the CIA (Kurt Russell) and his assistant, Little Nobody (Scott Eastwood) and tracking down Hobbs at his daughter's football match (Dwayne Johnson) and setting up action sequences in Berlin, the streets of New York City, and, eventually, snowclad northern Russia, the whole thing moves somewhat into James Bond territory. The rest of the crew get the call, Tej, Romano and Ramsay.

One of the complications is that Hobbs finishes up in prison but his escape is organised, along with his nemesis from the previous film, Jason Statham. And, by the end of the film, Jason Statham's brother from the previous film, Luke Evans. And for good measure – very good measure – but only briefly who should turn up with as the brothers mum, Helen Mirren!

The New York chase with all its complications is an engaging set piece. But then, in Russia, there is a huge submarine, an explosive with a deadly time setting, Cipher in her plane, the whole gang on all kinds of vehicles driving through snow, submerging in the ice, the submarine ploughing through ice and snow – and the goodies achieving world peace! Also, of course, finally with the help of Dom.

Many will enjoy the scenes with Jason Statham and his goo-gooing with the baby!

(And, temptation not resisted, is it the Fury of the Fatuous!)

FRANTZ

France, 2016, 104 minutes, Black and white/ Colour.

Paula Beer, Pierre Ninney, Ernst Stotzner, Marie Gruber, Johann von Bulow, Anton von Lucke, Cyrielle Clair.

Directed by François Ozon.

For over 20 years French director, François Ozon, has made a variety of films, mostly serious, a touch of the musical, some comedy. This is one of his most touching films.

In the early 1930s, director, Ernst Lubitsch made a war drama, Broken Lullaby. This forms the basis for Frantz.

The principal setting is a town in Germany, 1918-1919, the impact of the defeat of Germany in World War I, the memories of so many young men who were set eagerly to war and who

died. We see a young woman walking through the town, going to the cemetery to put flowers on the memorial headstone for her dead fiancé. The young woman, Anna, lives in her fiancé's house, his father a doctor, his mother a kindly woman, all of them grieving. The name of the dead son is Frantz, with pacifist views, an artist and a violinist.

Anna sees flowers at the gravestone and then a young visitor. She tracks him down at the local hotel and discovers that his name is Adrien. Adrien comes to the house, wanting to knock on the door but is unable. When Anna meets him, she encourages him to come but, when the doctor hears that he is French, he refuses at first to come to meet him. While the doctor is grieving, he is also bitter against the French, something fostered when he goes to the local tavern and has a drink with the other fathers of young men who have not returned.

He eventually does speak to Adrien who recounts to the family his memories of Frantz, times in Paris, Frantz's interest in art, a painting by Manet which he cherished – although it is a painting of a suicide. Listening to Adrien has an effect on the doctor who comes to realise that it was the parents who were eager to send their children to war, but the adult generation supplied the weapons for the war, the weapons that were the occasion with their children's deaths.

It should be noted that basically the film is in black-and-white but there are a variety of colour sequences, especially the flashbacks in Paris, and, more sombrely, for flashbacks to war in the trenches.

As Adrien becomes more involved with the family, he becomes uneasy and decides to leave.

What Adrien has told the family is not exactly exact and he wants to explain to Frantz's parents his relationship with their son. Anna offers to do this but glosses over the truth, leaving the parents with Adrien's happy memories and stories.

The parents are eager that Anna go to France to meet Adrien who has not responded to her letters – and finds that he comes from a wealthy family, is able to track him down at his mother's estate, realising that she has developed affections for Adrien. She is helped in her commitment by going to confession to a local priest who encourages her not to tell the truth to the parents.

Ozon is able to involve his audience very emotionally in the situations, with the characters, compassion for the parents, especially for the doctor who comes to realise the enormity of a country sending its sons to war and to their deaths, to Anna and her feelings, to Adrien and his wanting to visit the family – and, as with so many stories from France in the war, there is not an entirely happy ending.

FREE FIRE

UK, 2016, 91 minutes, Colour.

Cillian Murphy, Armie Hammer, Sharlto Copley, Brie Larson, Sam Riley, Noah Taylor, Jack Reynor, Enzo Cilenti, Babou Ceesay.

Directed by Ben Wheatley.

If ever there was a film with a free-for-all shootout, a long free fire, then this is that film.

Someone, with a penchant for rhetoric, instead of asking “why?” used to ask “to what purpose?”. This particular question arises often during the film? Why? To what purpose?

The director has a strong reputation for small budget films with intense characters and has a different perspective on violence: Kill List, Sightseers, High Rise. There is no doubting his skills as a director, working with his wife, Amy Jump, on screenplay as well as with editing. All in all, the film has a great many admirers, critics, fans of offbeat cinema, and it is a piece of bravura filmmaking.

The film runs for only 90 minutes but, with so much of the action taking up in the incessant shooting, it often seems a long 90 minutes.

The director has assembled a very strong cast. First of all there are the Americans (the setting is said to be Boston 1978) who are the arms dealers. Over them all is a quietly suave Ord (Armie Hammer with a beard and penchant for marijuana) who has to keep in control the bizarre and chattering dealer, Vern (Sharlto Copley with his strikingly disturbing South African accent). They have two drivers, Gordon and Harry (Noah Taylor and Jack Reynor). Then there are the buyers, with Frank the go-between (Michael Smiley), a man with a machine to count the transaction money (Babou Ceesay) and the only woman in the deal, Justine (Brie Larson who won the Oscar as Best Actress for Room). They also have two drivers, Stevo and Bernie (Sam Riley in possibly the most intense performance amongst other intense performances, and Enzo Cilenti).

Stevo has been bashed the night before and is complaining – only to find as the deal is drawing to a close, the money counted, the crates lifted, that Harry recognises him as having attacked his sister leading to the fight and the bashing. Harry pulls a gun, fires at Stevo – and for the duration we have everybody taking cover, everybody firing, some woundings, some attempted bargaining, the case with the money out there in the open, and, surprisingly, two outsiders coming into the warehouse with rifles.

While there are many eventual casualties, everybody firing the shots tends either to miss or to wound rather than to kill – prolonging the free fire.

The only concession to audiences who might not like violence is the playing of several John Denver songs!

The dramatic question, of course is, who will survive and, although this is a spoiler, only one does. Who?

GOING IN STYLE

US, 2017, 97 minutes, Colour.

Michael Caine, Morgan Freeman, Alan Arkin, Ann- Margret, Matt Dillon, Christopher Lloyd, Joey King, Peter Serafinowicz, John Ortiz, Siobhan Fallon Hogan.
Directed by Zack Graf.

As Going in Style was released, Michael Caine and Morgan Freeman discussed the potential audience in a radio interview. They quickly pointed out that this was a film for an older audience – and that film makers had really discovered in recent years that there was an eager

older audience, especially after the success of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. They also remarked that this older audience was often sick and tired of just sitting in front of the television and were eager to go out to see a film but there were not so many that they really wanted to see.

Robert Redford was 80 in 16. In 2017, Warren Beatty, Jack Nicholson, Dustin Hoffman, Vanessa Redgrave, Jane Fonda all turn 80. As regards *Going In Style*, Michael Caine was born in 1933, Alan Arkin in 1934 and Morgan Freeman amongst those turning 80 in 2017. Plenty of older star power around, just mentioning in passing Judi Dench and Maggie Smith.

In fact, the first version of *Going In Style*, which was released in 1979, starred George Burns who was 83, Art Carney who was merely 61 and dramatic teacher, Lee Strasberg, 78. But, 80 is not what it used to be either for the actors or for the audience. There are a lot of 80-year-olds happy to go out to see the film!

Actually, this is a bank robbery film. Early in the piece, Michael Caine's Joe is having a grim talk with his financial advisor because he is receiving notices that his home will be reclaimed by the bank when there is an expert robbery, executed by masked men and carried out within three minutes and an effective escape. But that does eventually give Joe some ideas, especially when he and Willie (Morgan Freeman) and Albert (Alan Arkin) go to their factory and find that production is going to foreign countries and not only that but the pension scheme has collapsed. What else is an elderly person to do but rob a bank!

They make meticulous preparation, but have to do a fair number of rehearsals to get their movements agile and ready for a successful under three minutes robbery. They have connections who give them advice, some fake guns and blanks, and make the pledge that they will only take the money that they would have accrued in pensions if they were to live for several years, anything over for charity.

Joe has a daughter and granddaughter living at home and doesn't want to lose his house. Willie and Albert board together and, unknown to the others, Willie has tumours. Albert has the touch of the pessimist but certainly is attracted by the woman at the local store, played by Ann- Margret (only 75!).

The investigator for the original robbery is played by Matt Dillon, obviously the younger lead in the film (though 52 at time of filming). He is conscientious, has his suspicions, questions the suspects, follows them – but, a very entertaining part of the film is the dramatising of their alibis, very well thought out, the use of masks, playing to video surveillance and deceiving it. The three belong to a local club where they go to have their dinners, a charity club does get involved in charity work and the days of the fair is on is a cover for the robbery. Christopher Lloyd (78) plays the rather doddering manager. And the club is the recipient of a hefty donation – and the flirtatious waitress at the diner, who does give them some pie gratis when they haven't the ability to pay, also ruled receives a substantial tip.

And, at the end, wedding bells for Albert and his girlfriend, and everybody gathered in dancing, definitely going in style. Nothing particularly great about the film but an entertainment for its intended audience.

BACALAUREAT/GRADUATION

Romania, 2016, 127 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Christian Mungiu.

Christian Mungiu is one of the most distinguished of the new wave of Romanian directors in the first decades of the 21st century. His *4 weeks, 3 months, 2 days* won the main prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007. He followed this with his collection of short stories, *Tales from the Golden Age* and then the film about exorcism in Romanian Orthodox situation in *Beyond the Hills*.

This time he goes to a country town in Romania, showing the surfaces of families and the depths within the families, a father who has high expectations of his daughter and her scholarship to England, the daughter interested in study but more in a relationship, the father and his relationship with his emotionally fragile wife and his conducting an affair.

While all this can be covered by the seeming respectability, when the difficulties surface, they have all kinds of repercussions for the people concerned.

This is a very strong drama, very well written and well performed – and, while it is Romanian in its focus, it has universal themes.

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY VOLUME 2

US, 2017, 136 minutes, Colour.
Chris Pratt, Zoe Saldana, Dave Bautista, Vin Diesel, Bradley Cooper, Michael Rooker, Karen Gillen, Pom Klementieff, Sylvester Stallone, Kurt Russell, Elizabeth Debicki, Chris Sullivan.
Directed by James Gunn.

To write a review of this adventure for the numerous fans would be a waste of energy. They thrilled to the first film, most are very happy with the second. Rather, this is a review for those who are not fans of the Guardians of the Galaxy or who do not understand who they are and what they are about.

This is material for a children's audience and, probably especially, for adult children who delight in the characters, the special effects and action, the jokey repartee, the blend of the serious and the comic. These films are, via writer and director James Gunn who obviously is enjoying himself with the stories, the outlandish aspects of the characters and their adventures, playing with all the special effects, as even some of the more serious reviewers have said; a lot of fun for the fans.

The origins of the film are in Marvel comics (and creator, Stan Lee, has a cameo as usual, and reappears at the very, very end after all the credits). Speaking of credits, there are quite a number of inserts into the final credits with all the characters – and promise of adventures to come.

In the first film we saw the team of Guardians putting some order into the universe. On paper, they seem the least likely of Galaxy guardianship. Peter Quill, Chris Pratt, does seem to be some kind of superhero, half human and half galactic, with a sense of ironic humour. Then there is the green-coloured Gamora, Zoe Saldana (changing from her blue in *Avatar*),

something of a superhero type, joining Peter in action, attracted to him but suppressing any desire to express this, labelling it as “unspoken”. Drax, Dave Bautista, is a giant -like hero, not always quick on the uptake, but generous in going into action.

One of the stars of the show is Rocket, rather fox-like, but mistaken for all kinds of other animals, which he rather resents. He is voiced by Bradley Cooper. His cheeky, something of a rogue, stealing batteries from a high priestess at the opening, rather flexible in his attitude towards the truth, not above slinging off at everyone. Then there is the mini-material doll, Groot, with all the limitations of small size, childlikeness, able to make a few sounds rather than words (although Vin Diesel is credited as the voice of Groot and Diesel non-fans will think that Groot is much more lively and personable than any of Diesel’s screen characters, including all the Fast and Furious films). Sylvester Stallone, oh. Though he is better at the end and during the final credits.

For the first half of the film, older audiences may wonder why they are sitting there and whether they should leave all the shenanigans to the younger audience. However, there are intimations of father-son clashes. Defying belief, Kurt Russell is made up near the opening as a young man in the 1980s, but later, we see him as he more ordinarily is, although he is Ego, with superhuman powers, his own planet, seeking a son who has powers like his – finding them in Peter Quill. Actually, Kurt Russell is pretty good in the role of Ego.

All is not as it seems, Peter has been brought up by another rogue of the planets, Yondu, quite a substantial role for character actor, Michael Rooker. He turns out to be the true father-figure who is prepared to sacrifice himself for his son.

Another of the clashes is the sister-sister struggle between Gamora and Nebula. And, with more clashes, there is a gold-plated priestess with her own space vehicle and attendants, Ayesha, played by Elizabeth Debicki.

This may not explain Guardians of the Galaxy or its appeal but it indicates something of how the film is made and how it comes across. And early box office results indicate that fans all around the world love it.

LES INNOCENTES

France, 2016, 116 minutes, Colour.

Lou de Laage, Agata Buzek, Agata, Kulesza, Vincent Macaigne, Joanna Kulig.

Directed by Anne Fontaine.

It is very significant that 2016 saw two films which explored Catholic themes in a profound way. There was Martin Scorsese’s *Silence*, the story of the Jesuits in Japan in the 17th century and the fidelity of the laity, even to martyrdom, as well as issues of challenges to faith. There was also *Les Innocentes*, directed by Anne Fontaine, the harrowing story of a convent of Polish sisters who were abused and raped by invading Russian soldiers during World War II and have to deal with the aftermath in terms of location and faith.

Les Innocentes is a French/Polish production, a French director and two inch actors but production and the rest of the cast will Polish. This is a stark picture of Poland and the Polish countryside in the post-war winter of 1945.

An interesting comparison is the 2014 Oscar-winner for Best Foreign Language film, *Ida*, a story about a Polish nun, a child during the war, her adoption and the discovery of her Jewish background and her later having to deal with this in terms of vocation.

Silence and *Les Innocentes* are powerful reminders of Catholic sensibilities, Catholic sensitivities and the depth of Catholic themes.

Audiences who remember the 1959 film, *The Nuns' Story*, will remember the similarities in the life of the nuns in the convent, contemplative, enclosed, austere, penitential, an emphasis on obedience, of the vows, the dominating role of the superior. This kind of religious life is only memory for older audiences, a surprise for younger audiences – although there are pockets of religious communities like this around the world today. The stone convent looks grim, the main action takes place in winter, the audience is taken into the chapel frequently for the chanting of the Office, to the corridors, the cells, the refectory. It is interesting to remember that in exactly 20 years, the sessions of the Second Vatican Council would be completed and changes in convent life were in the offing.

Of key importance for the audience is the impact of the rape story, the horror for innocent women, nuns, virgins, with the physical experience of the assault, with the psychological impact of the violation. The nuns are reticent about their condition, embarrassed, some mystified by their experience, a sense of shame, a sense of self-blame, the concealing of pregnancy beneath ample habits, moral issues with which the sisters have to cope.

Of significance is the perspective of the superior, wanting to keep the reputation of the convent respectable, concealing what had happened.

One of the sisters leaves the convent to find some medical help, from the French doctors and nurses present in the Polish village to tend to French wounded before they are repatriated. The focus is on a French nurse (and the film based on a memoir of these events before she died, prematurely, in 1946). She has a Communist background and so the convent tends to be alien territory. As portrayed by Lou de Laage, she is a fine woman, a volunteer, a woman of concern and compassion, engaging with the liaison Sister Maria (Agata Buzek) who speaks French and becomes more and more frank in her discussions with the nurse.

She learns a great deal of medical skills as well as compassion from the nurse and begins to confide in her, even more sympathetic with the sisters when she herself is attacked and threatened by a Russian convoy. She enlists the help of the Red Cross doctor who is Jewish, his family killed in Auschwitz and who interprets the reaction of the superior as anti-Semitic. Nevertheless, he assists with the births.

As the time comes to give birth, many of the sisters are fearful, ashamed, prudish and ignorant. Each of the sisters reacts in her own way, some avoiding the reality, others conscious of their becoming mothers. (In later decades, issues of the appropriateness of abortion in such circumstances were raised in moral and theological discussions. In the last 20 years there have also been quite a number of films about women who were raped in the Balkan wars of the 1990s, questions of abortion, issues of raising the children and the consequences for the children and their origins and legitimacy in Balkan society)

It is important to note that the nuns have to deal with situations themselves, the chaplain not

being present, no explanation given but the audience presumes his arrest or his death. These are women's issues and are dealt with by women assisted by the doctor.

It is the nurse herself who comes up with a solution which is positive for the sisters as mothers and for the local orphans who have been seen playing in and wandering the streets.

In fact, this is a film of faith but, ultimately of hope and charity, symbolised by a charming group photo of the sisters, the children, and the visitors who have been able to come, at last, for the profession of vows by the novices.

The experience of *Les Innocentes* (the innocents being the sisters as well as the babies) is, at times, emotionally harrowing, always morally challenging, probing the meaning of innocence suffering and the place and role of God, of faith.

MEDECIN DE COMPAGNE/ COUNTRY DOCTOR

France, 2016, 102 minutes, Colour.
Francois Cluzet, Marianne Denicourt.
Directed by Thomas Lilti.

Stories about country doctors and country practices have been very popular on film and, especially, television series. Those for whom the idea of a country doctor and his country practice seems appealing will find a lot to like in this French version.

There is a sobering moment right at the beginning. The country doctor, played by popular and versatile French actor François Cluzet, is something of a loner, his wife having left him, his son living in the city. He goes to see a doctor friend and the diagnosis is not good. The friend urges him to ease off from the pressures of his work.

Of course, he does not.

Audiences who feel that there is an authentic atmosphere about this film and its characters, the various visits, the treatments, then this is because the writer-director, Thomas Lilti, was actually a country doctor himself before he began making films for a living.

His practice is fairly wide-ranging and we soon see glimpses of several of his patients, his kindly dealing with an old man who finds it difficult to dress, a friend involved on a building site... Somehow or other, his continuing with his practice seems rather to invigorate him.

His friend sends along a doctor assistant, a woman in her 40s who has spent some time being a nurse but has studied medicine and has a good sense of how to deal with people – except that the doctor sits in on his assistant's interviews, is rather critical, is not particularly gracious or helpful. But, life goes on.

One night he is called out to the friend on the building site who has had a severe accident. The doctor himself stumbles and falls in the dark and needs x-rays for his shoulder, something which his assistant sees but does not let him know she is aware of his condition. They continue with their work.

There are some moments of relaxation, especially a country dance, some very enthusiastic line dancing. There are also local committees who are trying to assess improvements to medical services. And the doctor himself organises a group to take care of the old man whom he has abducted from the hospital for personal home care.

Familiar material, more or less, but with the strength of the performers and the humanity of the anecdotal stories as well as the challenge to the doctor about his health, his life, some toning down of his unfriendliness and having regards for his assistant, this is an interesting and enjoyable film.

NERUDA

Chile, 2016, 106 minutes, Colour.
Luis Gnecco, Gael García Bernal, Mercedes Morán.
Directed by Pablo Larraín.

For a Chilean audience this would be a significant film. Pablo Neruda, Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1971, was the nation's significant literary personality, was a politician, had ambassadorial duties, but also had a lifelong commitment to the Communist Party and suffered periods of being hunted and exiled.

For a worldwide audience, with, perhaps, limited knowledge about Pablo Neruda, a googling of his name, seeing the biography in Wikipedia, would be a fruitful exercise.

The film is directed by Pablo Larraín who is emerging as one of Chile's most significant directors, *Tony Manero*, *The Club*, *No*, *Jackie*. It is interesting to note that his 2013 drama, *No*, focused on the 1988 election which challenged the authority of General Pinochet. At one moment in this film, showing the prisons and the political prisoners in 1948, the man in charge of the camp is Pinochet.

The action of this film takes place in 1948, corresponding to the time when Neruda (Luis Gnecco) had been a successful Communist Senator in the Parliament, had been critical of the US, pro the Soviet Union with and Communist principles, but was criticised by fellow senators and then exiled by the President and hunted, a number of escapes from the police, moving from place to place with the help of Communist security guards and drivers, ultimately escaping to Argentina across the Andes.

While the film seems to play like a historical narrative, establishing the character of Neruda, his politics, his staunch Communist stances and sympathetic approach to ordinary people and workers, his marriage to his French mentor, Delia, and her accompanying him in hiding, the fact that he was also a womaniser, but, above all, in the mind of the Chilean people, he was a great poet.

However, the screenplay is something of a fantasy, a blend of fiction and reality. The voice-over narrative is that of the police officer in charge of the pursuit, Oscar Peluchennau (Gael García Bernal), whose mother was a prostitute and whose putative father was the establisher of a strong police force. Oscar has a commission from the authorities to hunt down Neruda, searching from house to house, place to place, almost catching up with him, Neruda leaving copies of detective stories with messages for him.

In fact, this is a fictitious character, giving a symbolic meaning to the hunted and the hunter. Neruda seems to flirt with being caught, going out against the wishes of his minders, leaving the messages for Oscar. There is a significant scene in a brothel, where a transgender prostitute sings, encourages Neruda to recite his poems, and pledges his loyalty to Neruda while interrogated by Oscar.

Ultimately, there is a confrontation in Argentina, Neruda escaping by car, then on horseback, into the snow. Oscar's motorbike breaks down, he also rides a horse into the snow for an ultimate confrontation with Neruda.

For a non-Chilean audience, the narrative and the fiction are interesting but the audience still might feel somewhat detached from the situations and Neruda's character. For a Chilean audience, the film is an exploration of a significant historical era, the eventual emergence of Allende as president, with the support of Neruda, followed by Allende's assassination and the oppression of General Pinochet.

PERSONAL SHOPPER

France, 2015, 105 minutes, Colour.

Kristen Stewart, Lars Eidinger, Sigrid Bouaziz, Anders Danielson Lie, Ty Olwin, Nora von Waldstätten.

Directed by Olivier Assayas.

Strongly divided opinions about this one. It was greeted by boos at the critics' screening at the Cannes film Festival, but then it did win the Best Director award for Olivier Assayas and has received warm reviews.

Kristin Stewart, who had previously worked successfully with Assayas in *Clouds of Sils Maria*, is Maureen, the personal shopper of the title. She works for a temperamental actress, at her beck and call, but seemingly willing to do this work. There are quite a number of sequences where she goes to shops to pick up a range of clothes for her employer – and revealing a growing interest in the clothes and the possibilities of trying them on, of wearing them.

But, this is not the main focus of the film. she has some psychic powers, the sense of the presence of powers from the beyond, the possibility of ghosts. We see her spending the night in a house trying to get a sense of whether there are mysterious persons present – which brings her in contact with a number of celebrities who are interested in her powers. There is also a murder.

While Maureen herself has something of a personal life and relationships, she spends a lot of her time alone, going on trips, even to London, for personal shopping. Gradually, there are eerie aspects of her life, sensing of other people, much of it centring on the experience of the death of her brother – and something of his restlessness in the afterlife.

In the meantime, she goes to visit her boyfriend who is working in Morocco in IT.

Over the running time, so much of film action time is taken up with people on the phone. In this film, Maureen spends an inordinate amount of time with her smart phone, receiving mysterious texts, puzzling over them, communicating by text, the camera often in close-up on the messages, on the texts. This seems to be a very frustrating way of taking up film time, communicating message, and having the central character so dependent on text.

And, by the end, with the beyond-this-world suggestions, many who are sceptical audience will find these developments too much to take, not quite credible – which makes the booing at the Cannes Film Festival quite understandable.

A QUIET PASSION

UK, 2016, 125 minutes, Colour.

Cynthia Nixon, Jennifer Ehle, Duncan Duff, Keith Carradine, Jodhi May, Joanna Bacon, Catherine Bailey, Emma Bell, Annette Badland.

Directed by Terence Davies.

This is a portrait of the 19th century American poet, Emily Dickinson.

It is a film written and directed by Terence Davies, who made an impression in the past with his classic *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* in 1988 as well as *The Long Day Closes* in 1992.

Davies also made a screen version of Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* and a very telling remake of Terence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea*.

Davies might be called a fastidious director, great attention to detail, a great sensitivity to human feelings, and setting them within a historic and cultural context. *A Quiet Passion* is set between the 1840s and the 1880s and Davies re-creates the period, its look, its feel, costumes and decor, sensibilities meticulously. The period covers the lives of very proper Bostonians with a Protestant and evangelical religious outlook, the challenge of the Civil War, the unsettled aftermath. It also covers the media of the period, the newspapers and magazines, especially for outlets for the publication of poetry.

The film opens with Emily asserting herself at the religious school for young ladies, some in the group choosing to be women of faith and Christianity, others choosing to be women of faith but not committed to Christianity, with Edith standing in the middle, her own woman, defying the threats of hell from the prim women in charge. She feels it necessary that her family come to rescue her, her patrician father and her younger sister and brother. She returns to their quiet, comfortable and settled life in Boston. She is skilled in writing poetry but it is not the done thing for young women to be published – especially when they go to a concert and her father disapproves exceedingly of a woman singing in public. Despite the objections of her aunt, the father does make contact with an editor and a poem is published.

Externally, nothing very much happens in Emily Dickinson's life, though there is an intensity in her inner life. She is played, very effectively, as a traditional spinster by Cynthia Nixon (a long way away from *Sex and the City*). Her sister is played by Jennifer Ehle, one of those smiling, kind and gentle performances at which Jennifer Ehle is expert. The patriarchal father is played by Keith Carradine.

Edith and her sister stay at home, with some views on slavery and the Civil War, religious in outlook but Edith, especially, refusing her father's invitation to actually go to church. Their mother is loving but is sickly and dies.

Edith is self-contained, has no desire to marry, is happy and secure in her home life, with some women friends who pass in and out of her life. There is quite a moral crisis when she finds that her brother is unfaithful to his wife with whom Edith is friendly, sharing books and other matters of taste. She emerges as quite intolerant, unforgiving, despite efforts by her sister and brother to mollify her outlook – and she does, at times, admit that she can be far too harsh.

As she grows older, she becomes unwell – and the scenes of her illness and treatment are quite forthright.

On paper, it might be said that the life of Emily Dickinson is not a subject for a feature film. Rather, it might have been effective as a piece of theatre. As it is, it is a film of words with many of the Emily Dickinson's problems being recited by Cynthia Nixon – although, poems which require more than one reading to grasp their meaning and tone, something not possible with the film. It is a film of tableaux. To that extent, *A Quiet Passion* is quite theatrical but, with Davies' sensitivity and sensibility, it does offer an audience an opportunity to get to know and appreciate Emily Dickinson.

GRAVE/ RAW

France, 2016, 99 minutes, Colour.

Garance Marillier, Ella Rumpf, Rabah Nait Oufella, Laurent Lucas, Joanna Preiss, Bouli Lanners, Marion Vernoux.

Directed by Julia Ducournau.

The Australian distributors of this film are Monster Pictures. And, indeed, some of the characters are monstrous in their behaviour but not in the world of fantasy but in the real world.

The basic narrative is fairly straightforward: the younger daughter of a family goes to begin her veterinary studies and is immediately forced into the hazing that goes on for many days in "Rush Week", a period of humiliations and ultra-raucous behaviour (showing extreme amount of controlling peer group pressure). She is a vegetarian and is forced to eat a piece of raw rapid liver – with dire consequences, starting with shingles, her feeling unwell, and then developing an appetite which is certainly not vegetarian. The people involved with this changing her are her older sister, also studying to be a vet, and her gay friend.

This is a first film by young French director, Julia Ducournau, was obviously interested in psychological allegory with more than a touch of horror, with quite an emphasis on blood and gore. That is, in itself, a warning for those who have different tastes (actually that serves as a pun on the themes of the film).

Searching around for her to describe the allegory, the following description came up: the emergence from the vegetarian of a subconscious increasingly voracious carnivorous compensation. This means that the film is definitely a psychological drama with effects that

are both psycho and somatic.

Justine, the younger sister, resists the emergence from the subconscious, is exceedingly puzzled by it, shocked at the various episodes with herself and her sister, and not dealing with them well at all. Another drive that emerges is the sexual.

Just as we might be puzzling about the final episodes, there is a vivid reminder that the influences on a person's life both nature and nurture, and that it is wise to find out what has been inherited from parents.

In recent years, the French have made a number of films like this, psychological dramas but moving into areas that remind audiences of the drives that are seen in vampire, zombie and living dead films.

TABLE 19

US, 2017, 87 minutes, Colour.

Anna Kendrick, Lisa Kudrow, Craig Robinson, Tony Revolori, Margo Martindale, Stephen Merchant, June Squibb, Wyatt Russell.

Directed by Jeffrey Blitz.

There won't be any great indent in your life, any emptiness, if you don't manage to see Table 19. On the other hand, if you do happen to see it, it is a reasonable enough 90 minutes looking at human nature and many of its troubles.

The action of the film takes place mainly over one day, a wedding. We are introduced to Eloise (Anna Kendrick) debating over whether she will accept the invitation to the wedding: yes, no, attempting to burn the invitation, changing her mind and going. We assume that there is some kind of romantic barrier hindering her going to the wedding.

In fact, she has broken off her relationship with the Best Man, Teddy (Wyatt Russell) who was taken up with an old and now new girlfriend. Eloise has helped with the table placements but, after the breakup, she has withdrawn as maid of honour and is now at the outpost table, 19.

We are shown the other guests at this table receiving their invitations, debating whether to go or not. The most eager is the very elderly former nanny, June Squibb (so good in the film, Nebraska), an awkward young man preoccupied with sexual matters (Tony Revolori, so good in The Grand Budapest Hotel), the owners of a diner whose rather long marriage has become rather brittle (Lisa Kudrow and Craig Robinson) and, finally, a very awkward and gawky guest, the very tall Stephen Merchant (The Office).

There are many awkward moments at the table, very many awkward moments. Eloise absents herself at times, arguing with Teddy, dancing with a good-looking seeming-guest (Australian Tom Cocquerell, accent and all) who, in fact, it is rather two-timing. Things come to a head when Eloise is upset, the nanny quickly discerning that she is pregnant, and there is an upset to the wedding cake with them all repairing to the nanny's room, some pot, some mutual

help. They then go for a walk, an opportunity for everybody to have a good talk and attempt to sort things out.

Problems, problems. On the whole, we probably don't mind being in the company of these characters with their eccentricities and hope that things will turn out for them.

THEIR FINEST

UK, 2016, 117 minutes, Colour.

Gemma Atherton, Sam Claflin, Bill Nigh, Jack Huston, Paul Ritter, Rachel Sterling, Richard E. Grant, Henry Goodman, Jake Lacey, Eddie Marsan, Jeremy Irons, Lily Knight, Francesca Knight.

Directed by Lone Scherfig.

This is the kind of British entertainment that suggests itself for a collection of The Best of Britain.

While it has been made in the present, and some of the dialogue is more 21st-century than the dialogue that appeared in the films of 1940 to 1941, in fact, this is a film about films and filmmaking in that particular war period.

It is very British in tone, characters, situations, some underplayed interactions, low-key humour – which does worry the Ministry for War and the Ministry for Information at the time because they want the film that they are making to make an impact on American audiences so that America will consider entering World War II and not just think that Britain has caved in after the Battle of Britain. The ending that was originally intended for the film the Brits are making gets feedback from the American distributors – not enough oomph!

Which is probably how Australians will like Their Finest, especially older cinemagoers who would seem to be the intended audience.

The central character is a young woman from Wales, Catrin, a very good starring role for Gemma Arterton. Catrin has come to London from Wales with her artist husband, Jack Huston, who has been wounded in the Spanish Civil War and so has to serve as an air raid warden. She thinks she is going for a job as secretary but, as she presents herself, especially to a committee who are making propaganda films (with scenes of audiences laughing at the kind of British rah-rah film of the time), she makes a good impression and is hired as a screenwriter, first of all for little fillers which are morale boosters shown between the supporting feature and the main feature.

The Ministries are after stories which are authentic and optimistic. Catrin goes to investigate a Dunkirk story, twins, Rose and Lily, who take their alcoholic father's boat, sail across to the French coast to help with the rescue of the British soldiers at Dunkirk. Well, it didn't quite happen like that in fact, but the story seems to be too good to pass up and so Catrin, her co-writers, especially the sardonic Buckley (Sam Claflin) who thinks that Catrin can do the 'soppy stuff' (the dialogue for the women), begin to work on writing the screenplay.

The film is very interesting showing the writers, their whiteboard, the stickers with key characters and events, the spaces between, the way that they invent more material to flesh out

the story, sometimes inventive, sometimes hackneyed, always with an eye on what the Ministries were expecting (they react at the story of a boat breaking down which would denigrate British shipbuilding), on the effect on the audience, on the box office and, when they are forced, to introduce an American character and try to work out how on earth he was a Dunkirk.

There are many scenes of the filming, on the Devon coast and later in the studio. Key to all of this is a self-important actor, played with his usual sardonic aplomb by Bill Nighy, who expects to be the hero, that finds that he is to be the alcoholic uncle Frank. Eventually, he is charmed by Catrin, and relies on her completely for his character, not wanting any dialogue except hers. He also has an agent, Eddie Marsan, who is killed in a raid and he has to deal with the agent's sister, a haughty Helen McCrory?.

At times one can imagine the screenplay meetings about scenes for this film, especially in terms of Catrin and her husband, her breaking down the hostility of Buckley, and where this might lead. Actually, it does not lead in the directions that we might have been anticipating.

Scenes of the Blitz, the bombings, taking refuge in the Tube, lots of ordinary London people in the streets, the air raid wardens, the technical crew and the difficulties of making a film during wartime – and, ultimately, Catrin going to see the film with an ordinary audience who respond perfectly, laughs, fears, anticipation, tears, enthusiastic morale.

Interestingly, the film was directed by Lone Scherfig, a Danish director who has made a number of films in the UK including *Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself* and *An Education*.

VICEROY'S HOUSE

UK/India, 2017, 106 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Bonneville, Gillian Anderson, Michael Gambon, Manish Dayal, Huma Qureshi, David Heyman, Om Puri, Simon Callow.

Directed by Gurinda Chanda.

Where is the Viceroy's House? It is in Delhi, and it is 1947, the year for Britain's solving its role in India's move for independence, which led to Partition into India and Pakistan, Hindu and Muslim.

For those interested in British history, especially in India, this is a film which recreates the atmosphere and dramatises the personalities and events of the time. The viceroy is Lord Mountbatten, who had achieved significantly during World War II in Burma. He is accompanied by his wife, Lady Edwina Mountbatten.

The task that Mountbatten was given by the British Parliament was to move India towards the independence that it for and which had been fostered by Mahatma Gandhi. This independence was not to be an easy task because of Hindu traditions, of the Muslim traditions, the cultural and religious clashes, in 1947 turning into local massacres, uprisings and a general sense of unease. Hindus were led by Nehru and the Muslims by Jinnah. It was very difficult times to arrange meetings between leaders.

As a way of bringing the audience into the thinking of the issues, there is a kind of Romeo

and Juliet story underlying the political activity. Jeet (Manish Daval) is a Hindu who has worked in prisons but is now promoted as a personal servant to the Viceroy. Also promoted in the Viceroy's House is a young Muslim woman, Aalia (Huma Quereshi). Jeet is in love with her since he looked after her father in prison. She has been promised to someone else and it would seem that their love has no future.

Hugh Bonneville portrays Mountbatten, an excellent choice, bringing dignity and status as well as some compassion to the role trying with his wife (Gillian Anderson) to move amongst the people, meeting with the governors, the political leaders, facing the reality of a low Partition for many, including Gandhi, are against it.

An expert, who had actually never visited in, is called in to determine the borders between India and Pakistan, as well as establishing East Pakistan, later Bangladesh. He is played by Simon Callow. One of the main advisors to the Viceroy is General Ismay (Michael Gambon), who eventually reveals to the border expert that there had been a long plan for Partition, sponsored by Winston Churchill, no longer Prime Minister, a plan that had not been shown to Mountbatten who had reported well to the Parliament which decreed that the solution was to be named after him.

In the meantime, the romance between the two young people does blossom, the girl's father (Om Puri) appreciates Jeet. At the same time, as the riots and massacres break out, the intense differences are manifest amongst the clashing servants who eventually, when Partition is to have to make a decision whether they want to stay in Pakistan or in India. This leads to an enormous migration throughout the subcontinent.

Audiences interested in British politics in 1947 should see a United Kingdom, the story of the King of Bechuanaland and his marrying an English woman and the consequent racial difficulties and decisions of the British Parliament under Atlee under Churchill to preserve links with South Africa where apartheid was officially emerging. During the final credits, there is a note that the director's grandmother was caught up in the searches at the time of Partition so that there is great personal investment in the film as a memoir.

Beautifully photographed, an excellent re-creation of the period, a very watchable political and social film.

THE ZOOKEEPER'S WIFE

Czech Republic/UK/US, 2017, 127 minutes, Colour.
Jessica Chastain, Johan Heldenbergh, Daniel Bruhl.
Directed by Niki Caro.

A film about Warsaw, 1939 to 1946, a film about the Jews in the ghetto, a film about gentiles and their hiding the Jews in their homes and helping them to escape. In many ways, the story of Anne Frank and her diary became the archetypal story of the concealment of the Jews. Schindler's List was also an archetypal story on gentiles saving the Jews. At the end of that film, Oskar Schindler is honoured in Jerusalem as being a righteous citizen. At the end of The Zookeeper's Wife, we learn that Antonina and Jan Zabinski were also honoured in this way.

It is significant for the style and impact of the film that it is based on the work of women, Diane Ackerman as the author of the bestselling story, Angela Workman as the writer of the screenplay and Niki Caro as the director. There are many touching scenes in the film, and frequent tenderness in the treatment of the characters and their hardships.

Jessica Chastain has emerged as a significant actress in recent years and contributes another fine performance. She is Antonina, who works in the Warsaw zoo with her husband, Jan (Jan Heldenbergh). They have a young son. The range of animals in the zoo is displayed during the opening credits and there are many sequences with the animals, the difficult birth of a baby elephant, a pet cub in the house, a young camel running through the zoo with Antonina as she rides her bike.

This, course, makes the German invasion of Poland and the bombing of the zoo all the more harrowing, the frightening noises for the animals, the destruction of their precincts, their running wild, their deaths.

While the summer of 1939 was quite sunny in Warsaw, everything changed on September 1 with Hitler's invasion of Poland.

The citizens were bewildered, the Zabinski family having to deal with how they could cope with the destruction of the zoo – and coming up with an ingenious solution to present to the Germans, especially to the world-renowned zoologist, Heck (Daniel Bruhl) who has been friendly with the family but is now Hitler's zoologist. The suggestion is that the plant of the zoo be used as a pig farm to provide food for the German soldiers – using the garbage from the ghetto to feed the pigs and a cover, in the truck under the garbage, for the rescuing of many Jews and negotiating their escape while others continued to live in the zoo residence for years.

While these stories have been seen frequently over the many decades, it is important to keep the memories alive, to appreciate the plight of the Jews, in the hardships of the ghetto with people hungry and dying in the streets, the brutality of the German soldiers (even to the rape of a young girl), the strict silences to be observed by those hiding in the house so they would not be discovered during the day, getting some moments in the early hours of the morning for getting out into the air.

While Antonina covers everything at home, Jan drives the truck and is instrumental in the escapes, especially when the man in charge of the ghetto approaches him to countenance further escapes. There is a touching character, an old man, the teacher, who is offered the possibilities for getting out of the ghetto but who always refuses, staying with the children, even accompanying them on the trains to Auschwitz.

And, there are complications with Heck and his attraction towards Antonina, his experimenting with bison in the zoo, his loyalty to Hitler, his confrontation with the Zabinski son, his reaction to Jan being in the Warsaw uprising, Antonina and her appeal to him to find her husband.

It seems a bit churlish to say that the ending is rather emotional – emotions being important in real life but, somehow other, sometimes seeming a bit too much in the dramatic telling of the story. Nevertheless, this film is quite a vivid recreation of the era and what the citizens of Warsaw, Jewish and Gentile, experienced.

REVIEWS JUNE 2017

20th CENTURY WOMEN
AFTER THE STORM
ALIEN COVENANT
BAG OF MARBLES, A/ UN SAC DE BILLES
CASE FOR CHRIST, The
CHURCHILL
DOG'S PURPOSE, A
DON'T TELL
EMO, THE MUSICAL
FUOCOAMARE/ FIRE AT SEA
GET OUT
HANDSOME DEVIL
I AM HEATH LEDGER
JOHN WICK, CHAPTER 2
KING ARTHUR, THE LEGEND
NORMAN/ THE MODERATE RISE AND TRAGIC FALL OF A NEW YORK FIXER
PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES
PROMISE, The
SCIENCE FICTION VOLUME 1: THE OSIRIS CHILD
SENSE OF AN ENDING, The
SNATCHED
WONDER WOMAN

20th CENTURY WOMEN

US, 2016, 119 minutes, Colour.

Annette Bening, Elle Fanning, Greta Gerwig, Billy Crudup, Lucas Hedges, Jade Zumann, Alison Elliott.

Directed by Mike Mills.

Or more precisely, some 20th-century American women. While the stories of the three women at the centre of this film can resonate in different parts of the world, the tone and style, the atmosphere and many of the issues are particularly American. They may not resonate at all in a vast number of societies around the world.

The setting is 1979, the place Santa Barbara, California. It is a comfortable city, comfortable homes, the beaches, the wonderful California coast, sun is shining. While the film is anchored in this year and place, it does take us back into the past, with black-and-white inserts of the Depression period, the 1940s and 50s, and memories of the Vietnam war, just over. And it does go forward at the end, giving us glimpses of what will happen to the various characters of 1979.

The writer-director is Mike Mills, director of such films as *Thumbsucker* and *Beginners*. The film is partly autobiographical, the teenager of the film born in 1964, the director in 1966, sharing a lot of the atmosphere of the times and the influence on their growing up and their teenage years.

However, the central character is Dorothy, played with quite some intensity by Annette Bening, who is now divorced, mother of Jamie, giving birth to him at age 40. She has brought him up. They don't quite live alone because they have two boarders, Abby (Greta Gerwig), born in 1955, discovering she has cervical cancer, eccentric in her manner but wanting to please. The other boarder is William, Billy Crudup, once a hippy, skilled at mechanics, and a love of making pottery. He is in process of re-doing up the house.

And, while the focus of the film is on Dorothy, it is also on Jamie, played by Lucas Jade Zumann, rather short for his age, sometimes precocious, sometimes not at all, understanding his mother and, more and more, challenging her – Dorothea ever telling him that he has no right to judge her or speak to her like this. He gets on well with Abby and William, accompanying Abby to get her doctor's report, working with William around the house but not experiencing him as a father-figure.

The other significant figure in all their lives is Julie (Elle Fanning), just a bit older than Jamie, daughter of a psychologist up the street (who insists that her daughter sit in on all the group sessions), who has been quite permissive in her sexual behaviour but does not see Jamie at all in this light, even when he sometimes does, and much prefers to be his friend.

Jamie often remarks that his mother grew up during the Depression and that this explains her. Dorothea reminisces about the events from 1964 to 1979 in the US which were influential on her son's early years, including the war in Vietnam, the political experiences of the Nixon era. There is a significant scene where the group and some of their friends sit listening to Jimmy Carter deliver a speech about values, identity, anti-consumerism – which Dorothy applauds but which some of the others say signals the end of Carter's presidency.

Which means then that there is a lot to observe in the life of these characters even if it is Southern Californian, extroverted in its way, reminiscing about pretty music like *As Time Goes By* yet acknowledging the beat and the raucousness of the about-to-be changes in rock music, lyrics and sound.

There is also a lot to think about, the characters with whom we identify, the characters with whom we don't identify, the characters, their values, their striving to find meaning in life, the mistakes they make, the values in relationships – and finishing the film by watching glimpses of what their lives were to be after 1979.

AFTER THE STORM/ UMI YORI MO MADA FUKAKU

Japan, 2016, 117 minutes, Colour.
Hiroshi Abe, Yoko Maki.
Directed by Hirokazu Koreeda.

This is a quietly serious and humane film that tells a Japanese story which has universal interest and appeal.

Over a number of years, the director, Hirokazu Koreeda, has made several films which have been very moving indeed, including *Nobody Knows*, *Like Father Like Son*, *Our Little Sister*. They are well worth seeing, as is this film, *After the Storm*.

The director's themes are from ordinary Japanese life, perhaps best described as middle-class or lower middle class. He is interested in families, in marriage, separation and divorce. He is also interested in the relationship between the generations. And, particularly, in the three films mentioned as with this one, parenting, often between fathers and sons.

The father in this film, Ryoto, has been a successful novelist, winning an award but not progressing in his career. He has married but has not been successful in relating well to his wife whom he loves or being a strong presence in the life of his son. At this stage of his life, he is working as a private detective (with a very enthusiastic young associate). The key problem is that he has a gambling problem, sometimes winning at the velodrome (as we see him here), playing machines, buying lottery tickets, sponging on his young friend – and even deceiving some of his clients to get more money from them.

The other central character in this film is his mother. A widow after 50 years of marriage, never having quite had the life she might have imagined, living in the same apartment for 40 years with very mixed memories of her husband, she has both a son and a daughter. Whenever these two meet, they clash. But Ryoto likes to visit his mother, always in search of some money or something that he might pawn (something which his father did a great deal), remembering his abilities as a novelist but unable to make any progress.

His mother is devoted to her children though she sees them fairly objectively. She fusses over them, provides them with meals, enjoys talking with them, walking with them.

Japan has many typhoons and, here, the year has had a record number of them. As the weather changes, and the father takes his son out for the day, lavishing on him money that he does not have (though damaging a pair of cleats so that he can ask for a discount, and also pretending not to be hungry as he takes his son for a burger, and buying him expensive lottery tickets), he decides to take his son to see his grandmother, tells him stories about his own relationship with his father. He invites his ex-wife, who now has someone else in her life who serves as a father-figure for the boy, to come to his mother's to collect him.

With the oncoming typhoon and the rain, the family stay the night, a joy for the grandmother, an opportunity for some serious sequences where husband and ex-wife reflect on their lives, with the ex-wife talking with her mother-in-law for whom she has great respect, with the father talking to his son.

With the sun coming out the next day - and the novelist does get a boost from finding one of his father's more valuable possessions - he walks off into his day without any assurance that life will necessarily be any better – but, as the title suggests, after the storm the sun comes out.

ALIEN: COVENANT

US, 2017, 122 minutes, Colour.

Michael Fassbender, Katherine Waterston, Billy Crudup, Danny McBride², Demian Bechir, Carmen Ejogo, Jussie Smollett, Callie Hernandez, Guy Pearce, James Franco.
Directed by Ridley Scott.

Covenant is a word with religious overtones, especially in the understanding of the major world religions of the outreach of their God or gods for a response from humans, God's/gods' grace in our lives. This is not quite the understanding of Covenant in the title of this further chapter in the Alien series. However, there are religious implications throughout the film, about creation, about God or, at least playing God, and the consequences. The main character, in fact, can be seen as a Lucifer=figure, defying his creator and creating all kinds of ills and damnation for humans.

This theme is fairly evident right from the beginning with a scene of industrialist, Weyland (Guy Pearce) significant for the episode prior to this film, Prometheus. Weyland authorised the space expedition of Prometheus and created a very sophisticated android, David, created perfection (Michael Fassbender), to accompany the flight and even to control it. The dire consequences were seen in Prometheus.

Alien Covenant takes up the story 10 years later, an expedition already underway, 2000 colonists, embryos, and most of the crew put into a deep sleep for the seven years needed from Earth to their paradise destination. This is the kind of expedition we are getting used to in films such as Passengers, Life, Even Ridley Scott's former film The Martian. All seems to be going well, under the direction of another android, Walter (also Michael Fassbender), until there is a malfunction and some of the dormant crew are killed by fire – which provides a moment as the captain's grieving widow, Daniel's (Katherine Waterston) looks at some footage where we find some moments of the captain in the form of the ubiquitous James Franco.

With some of the crew now awake, authority now falls to Oram (Billie Crudup) challenged by sounds being received, of John Denver's 'Country Road'. The overall controlling computer, Mother, indicates a nearby planet which has conditions for living, similar to that of Earth. Daniels registers disapproval but Oram decides that they should land. For some moments, all seems to be well, the discovery of wheat, the discovery of a spacecraft which has crashed. But, this is the Alien series always shows, and we know, that there are monsters lurking, waiting to emerge (often from the interiors of the humans, a tradition since 1979).

When some of the crew are bloodily overcome, the request goes out to the mothership, controlled by Tennessee (Danny McBride), to come to the rescue. However, there is a vast and complex storm over the planet – and whether to come in or not... A further complication is that several of the crew are married couples and reactions are very emotional.

At which stage the android, David, appears, leading the remaining crew to a vast location of the dead where he, not human but android, has survived for ten years, venerating the memory and picture of Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace of Prometheus) for ten years after the destruction of the Prometheus. David is pleased to encounter his "brother", Walter. As was seen in the opening sequence, David is fully conscious of his own self-perfection and begins to talk like Lucifer – and, eventually, to act like Lucifer, ultimately a Satan presuming that he is God.

While there are these philosophical and religious implications, most of the time is spent on

the adventure, the ugly and destructive monsters wreaking vengeance, fights and heroics, even David fighting Walter. And then there is the buildup to the Covenant and its escape, with Daniels doing more heroics than even Sigourney Weaver's Ripley did in the original film, swinging from (over, under, beside) the rescue vehicle, to destroy an intruding creature.

UN SAC DE BILLES/ A BAG OF MARBLES

France, 2017, 110 minutes, Colour.

Dorian Le Clech, Batyste Fleurial, Patrick Bruel, Elsa Zylberstein, Bernard Campan, Kevin Adams, Christian Clavier.

Directed by Christian Duguay.

This is a very moving film and can be recommended, not for light entertainment but, rather, for entering into a sad and dangerous period in French history, of being immersed in German-occupied France, of the strains on family and, especially, two young boys who have to make their way from Paris to the Free Zone, to the Mediterranean and Nice, who have to flee Nice and take refuge in a high alpine town until the liberation of France.

The film is based on a true story, on a book written by the younger of the two boys who experience this physical and emotional journey, JoJo², Joseph Joffo. It was published in the mid 1970s and now, 40 years later, there is this moving film version. It has been directed by Christian Duguay, his earlier career was marked by quite a number of action films in France and in the United States but who, more recently, has moved to telling stories about children, Belle and Sebastien, the Journey Continues (also with a World War II setting).

The title is intriguing. As the film opens, the Germans have occupied Paris, 1942, Roman Joffo, the father, manages a barbershop (and some German soldiers are tricked into coming for haircuts). There are two older brothers who work in the shop. The film opens with the young boys playing marbles in the street and, soon after, when all Jews have to put the yellow star on their clothes with the word Juif, a little boy approaches Jo Jo, liking the star and its colour and offering to exchange his bag of marbles for the star. Sadly, the bag of marbles is left behind, JoJo² clutching one blue marble right throughout the film.

When the older boys go to the Free Zone in Nice, with their parents to follow, the two little boys are sent on alone, Maurice and Jo Jo, riding by train, almost discovered by the German soldiers when a kindly priest indicates that they are with him, gets them to eat apples to make this seem more real, and assures them that he didn't lie to the soldiers and that all children were with him. (Incidentally, priests are presented very sympathetically in this film, another in Nice showing them the way and, when the Gestapo tell Maurice that he has 48 hours to provide baptismal certificates because they are claiming to be Catholics, the parish priest authenticates the documents to the Nazi who does not believe him, even threatening to report him to the Archbishop and then to Rome).

They are resourceful boys, trudging their way through the mountains, getting lifts from sympathetic truck drivers, finally reunited with the family in Nice. But, the Germans are in this Free Zone and the family is once again threatened. Interestingly, the boys find themselves placed in a Catholic institution, a cover for many Jewish children, a bit like a military camp. But, they are caught and, as indicated earlier, interrogated by the Gestapo.

In the later years of the war, they have trekked through the mountains and come to an Alpine town in Haute Savoie where they have local jobs, delivering newspapers, working in a restaurant kitchen, aware of the Resistance, witnessing executions, listening to the anti-Semitic ravings of the book shop owner and his brutal military son.

By this stage of the film, the audience can share the joy and the dancing in the streets with the news of the liberation of Paris and the taking down of the Nazi flag from the local castle.

The two boys portraying Maurice and JoJo² are completely convincing. While the story is familiar, this kind of story needs to be told and retold – and, challenging a 21st-century audience to contemplate and ask who are the refugees in the contemporary world and how they can survive.

THE CASE FOR CHRIST

US, 2017, 120 minutes, Colour.

Mike Vogel, Erika Christensen, Faye Dunaway, Robert Forster, Frankie Faison, L.Scott Caldwell, Brett Rice.

Directed by Jon Gunn.

Since *The Passion of the Christ*, there has been an American market for faith-based films and they have been quite successful at the American box office. There are some limits on the audiences overseas, although there are many evangelical, Pentecostal, community churches beyond the US which supply a niche audience for this kind of film.

The Case for Christ is more interesting than many of the others, the central character being an investigative journalist and the film showing his pursuit of a police case, a frame up, his believing the police evidence and then challenging it. This is intercut throughout the whole film which is based on the atheism to faith journey of award-winning Chicago Herald Tribune journalist, Lee Strobel. The action takes place during the 1980s.

It is also a family story which makes it more appealing to the average audience, the marriage of Lee (Mike Vogel) and his wife Leslie (Erika Christensen), their daughter Alison, Leslie's pregnancy. Emotions are affected early in the film when Alison suddenly chokes in a restaurant – and her life is saved by a nurse, Alfie (L.Scott Caldwell), who had changed her mind about where she was going to eat and come to this restaurant. She uses Jesus language and talks about Providence so that Leslie, grateful, is challenged to think about her childhood churchgoing, prayer and faith. Lee rejects any kind of transcendent intervention.

Leslie becomes more and more involved in reflection on faith and prayer, brings a gift to Alfie at her hospital, is persuaded to go to the Community Church for a service, decides to go back. The main difficulties is in telling Lee who is angry at his wife's decision, saying that he wanted his wife back. In a moment of concession, he does go to church with Leslie and Alison but confronts Alfie and warns her off. When Leslie experiences a baptism of immersion, Lee observes from a distance but then leaves and angrily drinks.

A complication is that Lee is alienate it from his father, Robert Forster, which means that this experience of his father serves as a model for his imagining God whom he rejects. It is only when his father dies and he attends the funeral that he discovers his father's wallet with the

article about Lee's career and a whole album containing articles by him. His also challenged by psychologist (Faye Dunaway), an agnostic who picks that is anger against God is due to his relationship with his father.

While he is investigating the police case, he asks questions about belief in Christ, focusing on the resurrection. Taking the resurrection as the key issue, he sets up an office with a white board, tacking up notes with his questions and his investigations. He goes to a number of experts, religious ministers with faith, the Catholic scholar, Father Marquez, who was an archaeologist but gave it up for priesthood and explains to him textual criticism, the antiquity of texts, the many fragments from the Gospels, the psychologist with whom he discusses mass hysteria, a doctor who is able to explain and analyse the effects of the scourging, the carrying of the cross, the physiology of crucifixion and the piercing of Jesus' side.

Meanwhile at the office, he is supported by a friendly father-figure journalist who urges him to support his wife no matter what he feels, and is challenged by another journalist who reminds him that he sees only what he wants to see and refuses to see anything else.

Ultimately, all the evidence, the core experience of disciples seeing the risen Christ no matter what the differences in detail in the narratives, persuades him and leads him to faith. His particular kind of faith, based on facts, investigation, experts, is a very rational faith. This is by way of contrast with his wife's profound experience, the saving of her daughter's life, the community experience of church, the witness of a friend.

Since the 1980s, Lee Strobel has been a minister at Community Churches and has written a great number of books including cases for faith, grace, hope...

CHURCHILL

UK, 2017, 98 minutes, Colour.

Brian Cox, Miranda Richardson, John Slattery, Julian Waterman, Ella Purnell, James Purefoy, Richard Durden.

Directed by Jonathan Teplitsky.

Over the decades there have been many films about Winston Churchill. In many polls, especially at the beginning of the 21st century, Churchill was the number one choice for voters for the most significant Briton who ever lived.

In the 1970s, there was Young Winston. In more recent times Albert Finney has played Churchill in *The Gathering Storm*, Churchill in the 1930s. This was followed by Brendan Gleeson, *Into the Storm*, going into the war period. Michael Gambon also played Churchill in *Churchill's Secret*, focusing on his political ambitions in the mid 1950s. Now it is the turn of Brian Cox – who, perhaps, looks more like Churchill himself, facially, size, stoop and walking, anger and arrogance...

The timespan for this film is June 1944, the four days before D- Day, 6 June and the Normandy landing. This is indicated in captions as the time of the invasion gets closer.

Significantly, Churchill is first seen walking along the beach, remembering his action in World War I, the disappointments that he experienced with the failure of the landing at

Gallipoli, his sense of guilt – looking at the waves coming into the beach, and their being blood red as he remembered the number of men killed. He has similar apprehensions about the death toll in the forthcoming landing, Operation Overlord.

While the film shows Churchill's activities in some detail, his work in the war room, those assisting him, his moody outbursts critical of his secretaries, his continued drinking, his tiredness, even his rather haughty prayer on his knees asking God to send bad weather so that the invasion would not take place.

In all the films about Churchill, his wife Clementine, is most significant. Here she is played by Miranda Richardson. Their marriage was long, Clemmie able to support her husband in his down years as well as in his successes but, at this stage of the war, when he was being so crabby, she talks strongly to a number of times, appealing to his commonsense, urging him not to be a warrior but a statesman who would leave the country in the war effort and moved towards peace. This means that there are some dramatic moments, outside the war, where the tensions between husband and wife are interestingly dramatised.

Very important other sequences where Churchill goes to meetings in the country, for security, to discuss the invasion with General Eisenhower (John Slattery) and General Montgomery (Julian Wadham). Churchill is fiercely against the invasion of France and the potential loss of life, makes no bones about confronting the military chiefs, with some attempts by his assistant, Field Marshal Smuts, whom he has known from Boer War, for reason, calm and respect.

It is interesting to watch, as Churchill did, the final meetings to decide when the invasion should begin, with experts, of the weather and its difficulties, cloud cover and the possibility for aerial support and other strategies.

A human touch is introduced with one of Churchill secretaries, Ella Purnell, who he chooses but, can't buy his wife, and responding to the secretaries outburst in his pessimistic speechmaking, finds that she has fiancée one of the boats – and he makes an effort to find out whether fiancée is and how he fared in the landing and his safety of the beaches.

There is a fine scene with James Purefoy as George VI discussing their presence at D- Day.

There will be many more films about Winston Churchill. The value of this film is to appreciate how important was his leadership during the blitz and the Battle of Britain, and how, with some pig headedness, he might have had a derogatory effect on the Normandy landings which eventually lead to the ending of the war.

Direction is by Jonathan Teplitzky, Australian director who made *Getting Square* and the fine reflection on the Japanese war and prisoners of war, *The Railway Man*.

A DOG'S PURPOSE

US, 2017, 100 minutes, Colour.

Josh Gad, Dennis Quaid, Peggy Lipton, Bryce Gheisar, K.J. Apa, Juliet Rylance, Luke Kirby, Gabrielle Rose, Michael Bofshver, Britt Robertson, Kirby Howell- Baptiste, John Ortiz.

Directed by Lasse Halstrom.

Most humans know the purpose of the dog, our best friend. However, this film offers the opportunity to hear the nature of the canine purpose from the dog's own mouth. He is Bailey, voiced by comedian Josh Gad, who narrates the whole film, has a doggy approach to life, frequently asking about the purpose of life but taking refuge even more frequently in considerations of having fun and eating.

Since there are millions of humans around the globe who are dog-lovers, there is a strong target audience for this canine autobiography. Those who are not dog lovers or those who are rather indifferent to dogs might not be so enchanted, perhaps thinking and feeling that it is all a bit silly.

The film is based on novels by W Bruce Cameron which have proven very popular.

One of the presuppositions of Cameron's dog lives is reincarnation. A touch of reincarnation since the director, Lasse Halstrom, made an impact in the 1980s with his *My Life as a Dog*.

A Dog is Born but is soon, after nursing and nestling, taken by the dog-catchers. And then the first of a number of rebirths, this time as Bailey, found by a young boy, Ethan, who is allowed to keep the dog by his parents. Bailey tells us this is all wonderful, has commentary on the family life, his reactions to Ethan, the adults, games and play, fetching balls, enjoying his food, perfecting a trick whereby an old football is tossed in the air, Bailey leaps over Ethan's back and catches the ball in his mouth (a rather crucial fact for the ending of the film).

Then Ethan becomes a teenager, teased about his love for Bailey. But Ethan is a top football player, encounters a young girl at a fair, Hannah, and is smitten, the couple enjoying each other's company during the summer, and including Bailey in all the activities.

But all is not well, Ethan's father drinks and is abusive, leaves. And a jealous boy from school has a prank with a firecracker which leads to the burning down of the house, some heroics from Bailey, and a disastrous accident for Ethan, some wallowing in self-pity which includes ousting Hannah from his life. For those not in the know about reincarnation, this happens surprisingly halfway through the film as Bailey pines and dies.

The next thing, birth, and his next incarnation as female, Elle, working for Hispanic Carlos, a widower, on the Chicago police force, training Elle as a sniffer dog – at which she excels. There is a crisis when a thug abducts a young girl, the action on a vast water flow and filter, the girl in the water, Elle rescuing her. And just as were settling into that story, death again, birth again.

This time Bailey makes the acquaintance of Maya, a student at college, rather quiet in herself, not comfortable in being invited to study meetings, staying at home reading with her dog who seems to read her mind as to what they will eat, pizza being a pleasant choice. When Bailey in his new incarnation tangles amorously in the park with a rather bigger dog, Roxy, he finds that Roxy belongs to the young man who offered Maya, the invitation to the group. Happy together, couple and dogs, wedding, children, family. And just as we were settling into this story, death again, birth again.

This time Bailey, remembering everything and telling us so, is taken up by young woman

who lives in a trashy neighbourhood and a trashy house, her partner eventually abandoning the dog. And where does he find himself, but back in Michigan, one day scenting the adult Hannah, realising he is back in Ethan's territory, and tracks him down (Dennis Quaid). This time he is called Buddy but he rejoices, so he tells us, in being with Ethan again, in running away and having Hannah bring him back home, in bringing the two together – but the only thing is for Ethan to recognise that he is Bailey (and that is where that trick, mentioned earlier, does the trick).

Were Bailey to mention a rating for this film, he would probably suggest five woofs out of five.

DON'T TELL

Australia, 2017, 110 minutes, Colour.

Jack Thompson, Aden Young, Sarah West, Rachel Griffiths, Jacqueline Mc Kenzie, Susie Porter, Gyton Grantley, Robert Taylor, Martin Sacks, Robert Coleby, Kiara Freeman, Ashlee Lollback.

Directed by Tori Garrett.

This is a significant film, and important Australian film. It should be seen by all Australians.

The subject, which is most disturbing but which has become part of our lives, part of our consciousness, is institutional sexual abuse. The survivor of the abuse here is a young girl. So many of the stories, especially those from the Royal Commission, are of the abuse of boys, are fewer about girls. So many of the witnesses to the Royal Commission told stories of institutional church abuse. While Catholic stories have been told in the Oscar-winning *Spotlight* and the television miniseries *Devil's Playground* (for thousand and 14), the church in the spotlight here is the Anglican church, the church in Queensland.

The specific setting is in the Queensland city of Toowoomba. The school is the Anglican School for girls, Toowoomba Prep. The time is 1990. There is a civil trial which is at the core of this film which took place in 2001.

The film has been sensitively directed by Tori Garrett. The central character of the film is Lyndal, abused when she was 11 in 1990, at the centre of the case in 2001. She is played extraordinarily persuasively solely by Sarah West, an angry young woman whose life has been severely damaged, whose emotional growth was stunted, educational opportunities lost, experiences of running away from home, alcohol and drug addiction, and the carrying of the burden of her secret.

The screenplay is based on the book by Lyndal's solicitor, Stephen Roche, he played so well by Aden Young, the Toowoomba lawyer, with a family, a daughter the same age as Lyndal when she was abused. The film opens with his handling the case of a victim, not a survivor because she hangs herself during the proceedings, placing a burden on Roche, emotionally and, of concern to his wife, financially.

Lyndal is having therapy from a counsellor, Joy Connolly, played by Rachel Griffiths. They approach Stephen Roche – but, in the mentality of the time, especially for churches, the expectation is of a financial settlement with confidentiality clauses. Lyndal rejects this and,

despite the wariness of the chief barrister, Bob Myers (Jack Thompson at his best), a civil hearing goes ahead in Toowoomba with a very strong-minded lawyer, Jean Dalton (Jacqueline Mc Kenzie at her best) defending the church's interests, sharing with Stephen Roche the cross examination of a range of witnesses, school staff, Joy Connolly, the previous principal.

The film reminds audiences that in 1990, for most Australians, this kind of abuse was unthinkable. There is a lot of talk about the child and imagination, making up stories... Parents are reluctant to believe the stories or, if they do, very reluctant for them to be made public, especially in court.

Audiences may remember the 2003 resignation of Archbishop Peter Hollingworth as Governor General of Australia. Some of the reasons for his resignation include his handling of this case when he was Archbishop of Brisbane. He is seen opening a new wing at the school, the emphasis on Toowoomba Prep is a Christian school with Christian values. But there are also sequences, parallel with many meetings that have gone on over the decades with school boards, church councils of all denominations, discussing limits of financial payments, a wariness of going to court, discussing protecting the reputation of school and church and individuals, many defending the abuser as a person of good character and reliable work in the school.

One of the key factors in this case is that the abuser, Kevin Guy, committed suicide, leaving a suicide note naming number of girls. Eventually, the church admitted Kevin Guy's guilt (and so his suicide note was deemed inadmissible).

At times audiences will find it difficult to identify with Lyndal, her anger, her sullen behaviour, trying to understand and appreciate it. With the flashbacks, which dramatises what Lyndal is remembering during the hearings, and the telling of her story, the audience will come to appreciate much better experience as a little girl (Kiara Freeman), damaged girl and the consequences. At some moments, the flashback memories are very disturbing. But, this is the kind of narrative drama that really brings home some of the realities of the abuse experience.

There have been many newspaper reports and articles, radio interviews, television coverage and interviews, items on social media, but the power of the theatrical and cinema drama can enable an audience to be drawn into the story, to empathise with the characters, to feel appreciate their experiences.

The end of the film has, statements about the characters we have seen and Lyndal's subsequent history, there is also the terrible reminder that abusers threaten impressionable children that they are not to tell anyone, that this is their secret, or that if they do reveal it, something terrible will finally happen before the credits say to the survivor: Don't Listen.

FUOCOAMMARE/ FIRE AT SEA

Italy, 2016, 106 minutes, Colour.
Samuele Caruana, Maria Costa.
Directed by Gianfranco Rosi.

This film is billed as a documentary, and so it is, but with its focus on a family, especially young 12-year-old boy, Samuele, who really becomes the centre of the film, it works not just as a documentary but also as a kind of fiction feature. It is directed by Gianfranco Rosi, whose documentary on the road surrounding the city of Rome, *Sacro GRA*, won the golden lion in Venice in 2013. That was a particularly local film, the customs of the area in different lives of characters on the ring road.

For this film, Rosi the lived for several months on the island of Lampedusa, an island which has become more famous in recent years, not far of the Sicilian coast, not far from the Libyan coast, an island where so many boats, so many rickety boats, crammed with refugees, have landed – unless the boats have sunk with lives lost, a frightening statistic that is given at the beginning of the film.

While the issue of refugees from Africa and, by extension and ultimate explicit mention, from Syria and Middle Eastern countries, there are explicit reference to Islamic State.

But, the film is something of a jigsaw puzzle, the scenes of the refugees punctuating the narrative about life on Lampedusa, especially for the young boy, Samuele Caruana, and his family.

Samuele is an enterprising young 12-year-old, seen chopping branches in order to make a slingshot, aiming at birds, instructing his good friend how to make a slingshot and fire it – and the two of them frequently mimicking shooting with machine guns. We see them at school, testing out the meanings of words in English and Italian. We see Samuele going to the doctor, being tested for his eyes, discovering he has a lazy eye and will have to wear a patch to strengthen it, which he tests out in various slingshots.

His father is a fishermen and Samuele goes out on a boat only to find that he becomes seasick and is advised to go onto the jetty to get used to having a balance and controlling his stomach. He also has a lesson in rowing, which he desperately needs, otherwise he would be trapped between boats. He is a strong screen presence and audiences welcome him, with scenes at home, meals where he incessantly slurps his spaghetti, talking with his father and cared for by his grandmother.

Actually, the grandmother has significance in the film, cooking, cleaning, making the beds – and ringing the rather friendly DJ on the local radio with requests for songs and commemorations to be made.

But, back to the refugees, the pictures of the boats, the picture of the Italian navy and its efforts to find the refugees, sometimes there being unable to give their coordinates with the inevitability of drownings and death. The Italians seem to be doing their efficient best. Exhausted and dehydrated men are lifted off the boats, some of them not surviving. And there are some telling interviews with Africans, especially from Nigeria, making their way to Sudan, through the desert, arriving in Libya, possibly imprisonment there, and the desperation to get on a boat to Europe.

So, this is a strong humanitarian film, destined to win Human Rights awards. There was a rather similar film from Malta in 2015, *Simshar*, with both films reminding audiences of the contemporary issues of African refugees, death by drowning – but without the answers as to

what will become of them.

Interestingly, with the visit of Pope Francis to Lampedusa and gaining world coverage, there is no reference to this in the film and no explicit presence of the Catholic Church (as there is in Censure).

Winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlin are they, 2016, as well as winning the Ecumenical Award and a prize from Amnesty International.

GET OUT

US, 2017, 104 minutes, Colour.

Daniel Kaluuya, Allison Williams, Catherine Keener, Bradley Whitford, Caleb Landry Jones, Marcus Henderson, Betty Gabriel, Lakeith Stanfield, Stephen Root, Lil Rel Howery.

Directed by Jordan Peele.

Get Out has been one of the surprise hits of 2017. It has been promoted as a horror film, there are certainly those aspects, but it is more than that.

The film is the work of Jordan Peele, best known as a comic actor and writer with his television partner, Keegan -Michael Key the Key and Peele series. They appeared together in a film they wrote in 2016, the cat film Keanu, with its parody of gangster films and American thugs, Hispanic thugs, and everyone's love for cats! This film is quite different, written by Peele but he does not appear in it.

The film opens with themes about racism, a young couple discussing a potential visit to her parents, he being African- American, she being white. She says she has not warned her parents but that they are very open and understanding. He, Chris, is a genial young man, a professional photographer, played by Daniel Collier. She, Rose, is attractive and agreeable, played by Allison Williams.

On the way to her parents' home, Rose driving, they suddenly hit a deer and encounter a touch of racism in the police officer's demand to see Chris's license even though he was not driving. Rose stares him out, revealing some fierceness in her character.. Later, with a stag's head on the wall, Rose's father, Dean (Bradley Whitford) declaims that the deer are a pest and this contribution to culling is something most welcome. Even later, the meaning of this proclamation seems much more sinister as does some action with the stag's head.

Everything is agreeable, a luxury mansion, a groundskeeper (with a suspiciously vacant look), and maid (with a cross eyed smile). Dean has a medical background and his wife, Missy (Catherine Keener) is a psychologist who believes in hypnosis – and makes an offer because Chris is trying to give up smoking. Lots of conversation, a tour of the house, Chris unable to sleep and going downstairs for a smoke, the groundskeeper hurriedly jogging towards him, Missy still awake and offering to hypnotise him, he unwilling, but she stirring her tea and knocking the teaspoon against the cup. He wakes up in bed feeling that he has experienced a nightmare, falling into a vast sunken space.

The next day the family has a reunion, friends and neighbours all gathering to have drinks and refreshments on the lawn. They are all elderly, all white – though one woman has an

African- American in tow (who also has a strange look in his eyes). There is also a blind curator of a photography museum (Stephen Root) who is praising of Chris and his work.

If one were looking for cinema antecedents for this film one might say that it was a *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* meets *Stepford* and discovers *Ghosts in the Shell*.

To discover what that actually means, it is best to see the film, the psychological twists, the race issues, and, especially, a critique of complacent affluent white American citizens and their presumptions, and the heritage of racism and slavery.

And, for those who go to see *Get Out* because of its reputation, they will finally be satisfied as Chris fights to assert himself. Some anticipated blood and gore.

Actually, he has the friendship of a rather comic character, an officer in the terrorist police team, who is minding the house for Chris, but gets alarmed about the African-American [man](#) seen at the party, elaborates a hypothesis to the police who laugh him out of the room, but uses his skills at detecting to...

Get Out does what it intends, psychology, race issues, comic touches, horror themes, and does them very well.

HANDSOME DEVIL

Ireland, 2016, 95 minutes, Colour.

Fionn O' Shea, Nicholas Galitzine, Andrew Scott, Moe Dunford, Michael Mc Ehlarton, Ruairii O' Connor, Mark Lavery, Jay Duffy, Ardal O' Hanlon, Hugh O' Conor.
Directed by John Butler.

There has been a long tradition of films about boys' boarding schools, some comedies about difficulties, some dramas about misfits, rebels, some clashes between students and teachers, some physical violence, sexual abuse.

This one, set in Ireland and filmed in an actual Rugby school, starts out fairly conventionally. A young student, Ned (Fionn O' Shea) gives his voice-over version of his father after his mother's death, marrying his young stepmother, their living in Dubai, his resentment at having to go to boarding school and his giving serious consideration to being expelled. As soon as he arrives, he is the subject of sneers and bullying. But, he has a room to himself where he can be quiet, play his favourite (older) music, take refuge from the other students.

He soon tells us that the preoccupation of staff and students is Rugby, past tradition of winning (though not lately) and the preoccupation with the sport, bolstered by the enthusiasm of the Rugby coach, Paschal (Moe Dunford). The principal shares the preoccupation and has quite an open attitude toward some of the teachers and students – though he wishes that they were devoted to Rugby.

Ned's peace is disturbed when a troubled new student, expelled for fighting from his previous school, Connor (Nicholas Galitzine) is to share his room. He has a reputation as a Rugby champion – and has scenes of opportunity, training and play, to demonstrate this fully. Some of the team members are bullies and, insinuating that Ned is gay because of a film poster on

his wall, purge Connor to be cautious. When Ned finds him doing push-ups, he puts up a barrier between the two beds, his own Berlin Wall, and keeps aloof.

In the meantime there is a new English teacher, Mr Sherry, a very interesting and provocative performance from Andrew Scott (Benedict Cumberbatch's Moriarty). He wants students to think for themselves, exercises a discipline, is not particularly interested in Rugby, but encourages Ned and Connor who have found some bond in playing guitar and songs to prepare for participation in an interschool concert.

By this time, the audience may be alert that there will be sexual identity themes, not quite as predicted, perhaps predicted with Mr Sherry, but making the relationship between Ned and Connor very awkward, so much so that Connor wants to opt out of the final match to win the championship.

Early in the piece, Ned tells us that there are moments in life that we will always truly regret – and there is certainly one here in his treatment of Connor. However, the experience of school, his not fitting in, his beginning to have a friend, enables him to defy his parents and try to persuade Connor to come back for the match.

This is a film about tolerance but, more, about understanding, especially about sexual identity and enabling people to be themselves, to be honest about their identity – which makes the team confrontation in the dressing room and the final expected Rugby triumph all the more joyous and exhilarating.

Handsome Devil (not really the most helpful title) obviously campaigns against homophobia – and has a sincere hope that there will always be understanding outcomes.

I AM HEATH LEDGER

Heath Ledger's family, friends, professionals, actors.

Canada, 2017, 90 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Adrian Buitenhuis, Derik Murray.

Heath Ledger achieved a great deal in his film career, acting and moving into directing, in his short life of 28 years. He died in January 2008.

This is a Canadian documentary and might well have been called The American Life and Career of Heath Ledger. While there are scenes in Perth and Bondi Beach, there are no references to his Australian films, Two Hands or Candy and only the briefest references to Ned Kelly, an occasion for having a conversation with Naomi Watts – with some Australian bush scenery in the background, so different from American scenery.

However, the film makes a very good case for Heath Ledger and his career achievements.

The film also has the advantage of the director interviewing Heath Ledger's parents and his four sisters, noting their admiration for him, his early ambitions to act, his rather prodigious skill at chess, his venturing out of Perth at age 17 to go to Sydney and appear in the television series Roar (but no mention of his being in 10 episodes of Home and Away). While he did make Paws and the crime thriller, Two Hands, he went very quickly to the United States,

wanted the lead role in 10 Things I Hate About You and got it.

Mel Gibson tutoring him for The Patriot, a dramatic scene from Monsters Ball, rehearsals for dancing and adjusting for A Knight's Tale, surfing and skateboarding in California for Lords of Dogtown, Ang Lee commenting on him with scenes from Brokeback Mountain, for the Bob Dylan drama, I'm Not There, but, most of all, a more detailed look at his thinking into his role of The Joker in The Dark Knight, filming, striking sequences and, finally, his make up in costumes for his last film, The Imaginarium of Dr Parnassus (but no Brothers Grimm of Casanova).

But, what is interesting for those who know his films is his continual use of camera from his young days, learning how a camera works, lighting, styles of performance, with many excerpts here from these home movies. With his love of music, he actually moved into directing music videos, quite stylish and experimental in their way.

The film wants to celebrate his life and career and so does not dwell on his death. However there is enough information about his intensity and energy, his being wide-awake and not sleeping, this gradually taking its toll and his need for medication to sleep.

Heath Ledger was popular with women, a relationship with Naomi Watts, his relationship with Michelle Williams, starring in Brokeback Mountain, with whom he had a daughter, Matilda.

This is a documentary for those interested in the star himself, his life and career, but also for those who are interested in the film industry, production, stardom, publicity (which Heath Ledger disliked intensely) and the potential for creativity.

JOHN WICK CHAPTER 2

US, 2017, 122 minutes, Colour.

Keanu Reeves, Ian Mc Shane, Franco Nero, Lawrence Fishburne, Ricardo Scamarcio.

Common, Ruby Rose, Lance Reddick.

Directed by Chad Stahelski.

John Wick was an extraordinary success with audiences in 2014, fans of the violent genre and stories of hitmen, appreciating the toughness of the story and its treatment, Keanu Reeves as a tough, silent, even stoic martial arts expert confronting the criminal elements of the city. So much so that a sequel was strongly anticipated. And the fans have been pleased with this Chapter 2.

The genre fans have been very appreciative of how well this new chapter works, Reeves still his familiar self, but involved in a wider range of hits as well as being challenged in his life as to whether he can give up his violent ways and become a new person. Probably not likely!

This is the kind of film that those who are not fans of the genre, who find a lot of physical violence hard to take, who are repelled by an enormous body count, would be well advised to give it a miss – they might even think that the action, the hard attitudes as well as the myriad deaths border on the ridiculous.

The film opens with John Wick trying to get his wrecked car back from the dealers. And they

are more than dealers, involved in drugs – talking of Wick and his reputation, sitting in apprehensive silence as they hear the mayhem going on in the garage below. And, not to be outdone, there are wild car chases.

The main thing is that an Italian mafioso type, played by Ricardo Scamarcio, gives Wick a marker because he has done him a favour in the past. Wick is now to go to Rome to kill the gangster's sister so that he will have a seat on the board controlling crime. Wick is unwilling but submits to the advice of Winston, Ian Mc Shane of the previous film, and goes to Rome where he finds a variation on La Dolce Vita, finds the sister in fashionable ruins where she slits her wrists and Wick shoots her.

At which stage, it would seem to be hundreds of criminal footsoldiers pursuing Wick through the ruins, most seeming willing to run instantly into the line of fire with deathly results. Another hitman, played by Common, is determined to destroy Wick but, after a fight, they land in the bar of another mafioso type – a cameo turned by Franco Nero.

Then it's back to New York but word has gone out electronically that Wick is to be killed with a huge bounty on him. It seems as though everybody New York City is eyeing him and pursuing him, especially, with a deadly confrontation on the New York subway.

Then it gets even more exotic, a visit to a local gangster, a cameo by Laurence Fishburne, and then a confrontation with the mafioso boss, all taking place in an enormous art installation, with plenty of mirrors and reflections and dangers.

However, Wick breaks the code and kills his marker – which makes him excommunicado amongst the gangsters and hitmen and hit women, electronic messages going out in abundance as an even more enormous bounty on him as he walks the streets of New York – surely into Chapter 3.

KING ARTHUR AND THE LEGEND OF THE SWORD

UK/US, 2017, 126 minutes, Colour.

Charlie Hunnam, Jude Law, Astrid Berges-Frisbey?, Eric Banner, Djimon Hounsou, Aidan Gillen, Freddie Fox, Tom Wu, Neil Maskell.

Directed by Guy Ritchie.

An example of the differing ways of film reviews. Within a few hours of its publication, two friends quoted the review of King Arthur and its mere one and a half stars. Obviously, not a film to go to see. However, the decision was based not on the contents of the review and its reasoning but, rather, on the prestige of the newspaper in which it appeared.

On reading the reasons for such dislike for the film, it seemed that these were the very reasons that this review would praise the film!

There has been a King Arthur the film for almost every decade for the last 100 years, the 30s and 40s with A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, the 50s and Knights of the Round Table, the 60s and Camelot and the Sword in the Stone, the 70s and Monty Python and the Holy Grail, the 80s and what is considered a classic, Excalibur, First Knight in the 90s, King Arthur in 2005 and now telling for this decade.

This film has been criticised by some as being “laddish” with comment on previous British gangster films by the director, Guy Ritchie. If one were facetious, one might say that this King Arthur film is “Lock, Stock and one Smoking Sword”! Actually, the point is that the film ends with the coronation of Arthur King and his, literal, building of the Round Table. This is a story, rather, of the young Arthur, the fate of his father Uther, his exile in Londinium and his not knowing his ancestry, growing up in a brothel, on the wharves, the victim of his jealous uncle, Vortigern, who belatedly discovers that his nephew is still living and rounds up every young man of that age to try to draw Excalibur from the rock.

Already, the screenplay has hints of Macbeth (including three sea witches) with overtones of the kingly murders of Hamlet, with the young Arthur somewhat bewildered by his destiny and reluctant to follow it.

Author, Joseph Campbell, who explored the hero with 1000 faces, would probably be very interested in the screenplay, especially in the sequences where Arthur has to go into the dark woods, experience his own demons as well his monsters, in order to emerge as an authentic hero.

Audiences who are fond of Game of Thrones, the films of Tolkien’s novels and other realms of fantasy will enjoy many aspects of this King Arthur film.

As regards the “laddishness”, that is some of the point, the young man growing up in the slums, a collage of him learning how to box and fight, doing deals to build up his box of coins, allying Viking sailors, pals with the young men on the wharves, an origin story of Arthur which then is transformed into his becoming king and ruling in Camelot.

The film has a big budget but is so spectacular in the first 10 minutes or so that it looks it as if it has already spent its budget. There are monsters in Camelot, massive destruction, scenes of battle, King Uther confronting Mordred, the exteriors and the interiors of the palaces and the kingdom. And, the special effects do not really let up and there are many, many battle sequences, leading to the ultimate confrontation between Arthur and his uncle.

Charlie Hunnam portrays Arthur, a short somewhat stocky lad, on the wharves of Londinium, struggling to find his regal identity and, ultimately succeeding. Jude Law enjoys himself as the villainous Vortigern. Astrid Berges Frisbey is the Mage who is delegated by Merlin to protect Arthur. Eric Bana is a heroic Uther. The rest of the cast is generally made up of vintage British character actors.

Obviously, this interpretation of Arthur would not suit everyone, especially if there is a conception of Arthur as a king of great dignity and prowess. But, as in imagining of pre-Camelot Arthur, this interpretation has a great deal going for it.

NORMAN/THE MODERATE RISE AND TRAGIC FALL OF A NEW YORK FIXER

US/Israel, 2016, 118 minutes, Colour.

Richard Gere, Lior Ashkenazi, Michael Sheen, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Dan Stevens, Steve Buscemi, Jonathan Avigdon, Yehuda Almagor, Hank Azariah, Harris Yulin, Josh Charles,

Ann Dowd.
Directed by Joseph Cedar.

Who is Norman? He is Norman Oppenheimer, a street person of no fixed abode, always wearing an overcoat and cap, embodied perfectly by Richard Gere in one of his best performances.

We are first introduced to Norman chatting on a New York street with his nephew, Philip (Michael Sheen), talking about making contacts, financial enterprises, Norman jotting down names on a piece of paper, sketching in the links. A subtitle added to the film describes him: The Moderate Rise and Tragic Fall of a New York Fixer.

Then he is seen pursuing a young man jogging, making all kinds of propositions, not even hearing the word “no” except that it seems to urge him on in his pursuit. Then he goes to a talk, a stage interview of an Israeli politician, and notes one of his assistants, Eshel (a good performance from Lior Ashkenazi). He follows him down the street, biding his time, helping him to window shop and take him into an expensive store and buys him shoes, the most expensive shoes. This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship – as well as a tragic one.

Norman the fixer tries to link Eshel with a businessman but fails, going to visit his synagogue, comforted by the music, feeling at home there, though this is not his home.

The film is constructed in four Acts: A Foot in the Door, The Right Horse, Anonymous Doner, The Price of Peace. Three years after the initial events, Eshel is Prime Minister of Israel, visiting Washington, encounters Norman and embraces him, photographers flashing, his being introduced to celebrities, politicians, businesspeople.

Norman has the talent for ingratiating himself, but this is difficult with politicians, Eshel’s minders begin to refuse to take his calls. Norman has encountered Alex (Charlotte Gainsbourg) on the train from Washington to New York and finds that she is a top official in handling American criminals in Israel and Jewish criminals in New York. Ultimately, this seemingly friendly meeting, leads to the undoing of Norman and his plans.

At first, Norman is somewhat alienating for the audience, not believing for one minute his various stories and put off by the way that he follows people, makes the links, offers favours. He is definitely a conman, fixer, but, ultimately, with a heart of gold, the favours he seeks generally for the betterment of the people he wants to help.

There is also a complication with his nephew, Jewish, but wanting to marry a Korean and in need of some kind of religious preparation, which leads to the rabbi of Norman’s synagogue whose building is being acquired and her needs \$14 million, Norman offering to assist, to purchase the building.

The film shows there are risks in do-gooding, especially when one of the beneficiaries is the Prime Minister of Israel, wanting a piece program, being attacked by politicians (actually filmed in the Knesset) and her needs to survive, even to get a lucky bonanza.

Which means that Norman becomes a sacrifice, a self-sacrifice, for the love and the friendship of others.

The film was written and directed by Israeli, Joseph Cedar, his previous films, Beaufort and The Footnote are worth seeking out.

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES

US, 2017, 129 minutes, Colour.

Johnny Depp, Geoffrey Rush, Javier Bardem, Brenton Thwaites, Kaya Scodelario, Kevin R. McNally, Golshifteh Farahani, David Wenham, Stephen Graham, Bruce Spence, Orlando Bloom, Keira Knightley.

Directed by Joachim Ronning, Espen Sandberg.

What more is there to say about the Pirates of the Caribbean? After all, this is the fifth episode. Probably the main thing is “more of the same”.

One of the things to remember about the series is that it is based on a theme park from Disneyland so that the films are the visual, moving pictures version of the popular ride. It is interesting to note that many of the critics feel exasperated that the series does not aspire to greater art, forgetting that the intention of the films is “a bit of fun”. And that’s what it provides, not particularly demanding, but reintroducing us to Captain Jack Sparrow, Captain Borbosa, and the Pirates’ life.

What is new about this particular episode is that the central character is Henry, the son of Will Turner and Elizabeth Swann. At first, we see him as a young boy, venturing out in a boat, going down on the anchor to find his father doomed to spend his afterlife on The Flying Dutchman. Actually, this gives us an opportunity to see Orlando Bloom after all these years as Will. However, Will is reluctant and Henry returns to his way of life, becoming a sailor on a British ship in the West Indies. He is played by Brenton’s Thwaites (from Cairns). He goes in search of Jack Sparrow who has a compass which could lead them to the place of Neptune’s Trident, which has the power to break all spells.

During a ceremony of inaugurating a new bank on the island San Martin, presided over by the Mayor (Bruce Spence), Jack Sparrow is discovered asleep in the vault – and his men organise the stealing of the vault, except that they cannot get it through the back door of the building, and so there begins a mad pursuit around the town with the horses dragging not only the vault but the whole bank with them, a whole deal of slapstick comedy, as a lot of the town is destroyed.

There is also a young lady, Carina (Kaya Scodelario) who is being condemned as a witch because of her scientific knowledge – between the jigs and the reels, she and Jack are about to be hanged until Henry does a bit of derring-do and they escape from the vindictive police officer (David Wenham).

And, so, to sea, Johnny Depp doing his usual, even more delirious, madcap Jack Sparrow, meeting up with Geoffrey Rush’s Captain Borbosa and also meeting up with a phantom ship, a dead crew, and their Spanish Captain Salazar (Javier Bardem). Lots of swash and buckle here, boarding of ships, canons and muskets, swords and knives...

Carina can read the stars and so they can arrive at the island where the Trident is to be found

– and, with a reminder of Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea, down they go into a watery chasm, dangers and all, breaking of spells, and some heroics on the part of everyone, especially a revelation about self-sacrificing Captain Borbosa.

Probably many were hankering after a glimpse of Keira Knightley when Orlando Bloom earlier returned to the film – and, without spoiling anything, she does appear again (and Orlando Bloom and Keira also appear in a short sequence for those who remain after the credits).

Just a rollicking bit fun.

THE PROMISE

Spain/US, 2017, 134 minutes, Colour.

Oscar Isaac, Charlotte Le Bon, Christian Bale, Daniel Gimenez Cacho, Shohreh Aghdashloo, Marwan Kenzari, Angela Sarafyan, Tom Hollander, Tamer Hassan, Jean Reno, James Cromwell.

Directed by Terry George.

The title sounds somewhat generic, any possible promise. However, this is a far more serious and interesting film than the title might indicate.

The main question an audience might ask itself while watching the film and, especially, afterwards, is how much they know about the 1915 genocide of the Armenians at the hand of the Turks of the dying Ottoman Empire. There have not been so many feature films about this significant theme of early 20th century history, the Turks themselves never having admitted that the elimination of over 1 million Armenians was a genocide, a kind of ethnic and religious cleansing. Canadian director of Armenian ancestry, Atom Egoyan, did make a film about the genocide and its impact, *Ararat*. In 2007, the Italian Taviani Brothers made a dramatic film about the events, *The Larks' Farm*. Because of the few films about the genocide, *The Promise* becomes more important.

The film opens in an Armenian village in southern Turkey, the central character, Mikael (Oscar Isaac) the local apothecary whose ambitions it is to be a doctor. He becomes betrothed to a local girl with the support of his parents, her father giving him 400 gold coins which will enable him to travel to Constantinople and study medicine. His promise is that he will return, marry, grow to love his wife.

This is 1914. Constantinople is an impressive city but the Ottoman Empire is in decline. German officers are present in the city, making allies of the Turks for participation in World War One. Mikael enjoys the city life, at home with his uncle and cousins, comfortably off with their shop, studying at the University where he meets Emre, a wealthy playboy who is studying medicine to avoid military service, and his friend Chris Myers (Christian Bale), an American journalist with Associated Press. He has already met Chris's partner, Ana (Charlotte Le Bon), who tutors his young cousins.

All seems well until war breaks out, jingoistic Turks rise up against the Armenians, smashing shop windows and destroying stock, literal dancing in the streets. When Mikael and Emre are called up, Emre gets an exemption because he is a medical student, using his father's name to

get an exemption for Mikael. His father, an imperious Imperial man is not pleased and Emre goes into the military and Mikael is arrested and sentenced to hard labour in the Turkish mountains, the building of a rail track.

The soldiers are brutal, the work hard, injured men shot. There is a cameo by Tom Hollander as a prisoner who used to be a clown, who entertains with a little performance but who is willing to carry explosives, an explosion which enables Mikael to escape.

One of the complexities is Mikael's falling in love with Ana, his disappearance, his being able to return to his village and being persuaded by his mother to survive by marrying his betrothed.

And all the time, in the film, there is the background of the rounding up of the Armenians, many sequences reminding audiences of the uprisings against the Jews before World War II as well as the genocide. There is a powerful sequence where Chris Myers drives into the desert, discovers a long line of Armenians walking into their exile or to deaths, a woman collapsing and a soldier brutally shooting her. He sends reports of these events to the newspapers, gaining a controversial reputation but somewhat safe was America has not entered into the war. The Turkish authorities deny all his stories but there are some harrowing scenes of prison and an intervention by Emre.

And while the war continues and the persecution of the Armenians, there is a complication of the love triangle and Mikael and his promise.

Circumstances bring the three characters together again, a Protestant minister working to protect Armenian children and get them to the coast to safety.

There is a particularly chilling sequence where Mikael discovers the people of his village shot to death by the river, piles of prone victims on the riverbank. As the Turks pursue the refugees, there is a buildup to the confrontation in the mountains by the coast, a French steamer coming in to attempt a rescue, and some tragic deaths.

There is an aftermath when Mikael, who has survived, decades later is in the United States celebrating the marriage of a young cousin, remembering the past, but also the statement that the best revenge is in surviving.

Some commentators have mentioned Dr Zhivago as a kind of parallel story, occurring at much the same time. The value of these dramatisations, along with the romance included, means that an audience will be caught up in the stories, the personalities – and appreciate the devastating realities.

SCIENCE FICTION VOLUME 1: THE OSIRIS CHILD

Australia, 2016, 95 minutes, Colour.

Kellan Lutz, Daniel Mac Pherson, Isabel Lucas, Luke Ford, Rachel Griffiths, Temuera Morrison, Brendan Foster, Teagan Croft.

Directed by Shane Abbess.

The title sounds rather portentous, the focusing on Science Fiction as well as the referene ti

Volume 1. It will be interesting to see whether writer-director, Shane Abbess, continues his narrative into sequels.

This is an Australian film from the writer-director of the rather apocalyptic thriller about angels and devils, Gabriel, and another space exploration film, Infini. While the production is Australian, most of the characters speak with mid-Pacific accents, making it accessible to the broader American market.

The screenplay is divided into chapters with headings, the device also helping the action to move along more quickly.

The film opens with a father, Kane, involved with work on the space station on a distant planet spending some time with his daughter, bonding with her after devoting himself to his work and separating from his wife and child. He promises to be closer to his daughter. He is played by Daniel Mac Pherson and she is a lively young girl played by Teagan Croft.

Meanwhile, back on the space station, there is an impending crisis, an apocalyptic crisis, being managed by the General, played by Rachel Griffiths. She has a scenario to wreak wide destruction by allowing the city of the planet to be destroyed, with great loss of life. She is rather cold and calculating.

Kane then decides to take a plane, lands on the ground and makes his way to the city to ensure the safety of his daughter. Life on the ground is also rather precarious, especially because of experiments going on whereby prisoners in the high security jail are being transformed into monstrous creatures. The prison is presided over by another cold and calculating character played by Temuera Morrison.

Kane meets Sy (American Kellan Lutz) in the desert and they make an agreement to help each other. As the narrative goes on, the audience learns more and more about Sy, his work as a nurse, an accident involving his wife, her death, his killing the young man responsible for the accident and his being sentenced to the prison, as well as his escape.

While the film is reminiscent of many space adventures, it shows an influence of the Mad Max films when the two men encounter a bar, pretty raucous, and Bill and Gyp (Leon Ford and Isobel Lucas), who have a truck but take a long time to be persuaded (as well as the money), to drive the two men to the city. They also encounter two isolated men who sell them weapons – but, the monsters are on the prowl and soon go into action.

The film moves apace with the rescue of the daughter, driving into the desert, in search of a tunnel with a coded entrance where they can escape the apocalyptic destruction.

In many ways, familiar themes, but presented with some verve – and the added horror of the monstrous beasts, especially in the climax of the film, rather unexpected.

THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

UK, 2016, 108 minutes, Colour.

Jim Broadbent, Charlotte Rampling, Harriet Walter, Michelle Dockery, Matthew Goode,

Emily Mortimer, James Willby, Edward Holdcroft, Billy Howle, Freya Mavor, Joe Alwyn, Peter Wight.
Directed by Ritesh Batra.

The Sense of an Ending is a very British drama, one of those intelligently satisfying entertainments with articulate and inarticulate characters, with said situations which are gradually revealed, memory, forgetting, and sometimes the dire consequences of actions. It is based on the Man Booker Prize-winning novel by Julian Barnes.

This film has a very significant cast as well as being well directed by Indian director, Ritesh Batra, famous for his moving film The Lunchbox. And it has an excellent cast portraying the older present generation and the younger generation in flashbacks.

Jim Broadbent has been a sterling figure in British and world cinema for many decades, winning an Oscar in 2001 for his role in Iris. Here he is Tony Webster, who is heard reminiscing about the nature of memory, life, forgetting. He is an older man by this, living alone after the divorce from his wife, Margaret (an excellent Harriet Walter), with a 36-year-old pregnant single mother daughter (Michelle Dockery), with a shop selling cameras, his hobby and expertise, and to all intents and purposes rather a curmudgeon.

Where could a story about Tony Webster go? And the answer is: back into the past. There are many significant flashbacks in this film, the reliability and unreliability of memory. Tony (Billy Howle) is in his final year at high school, with a number of friends, rather quiet in manner, walking out of a party and encountering a young woman, Veronica (Freya Mavor), shyly becoming infatuated with her, awkward in sexual encounters, but being invited to visit her family and stay with them, and an encounter with her mother, Sarah (Emily Mortimer) who warns him against her daughter.

A new friend (Joe Alwyn), Adrian, comes to the school and seems to be also infatuated with Veronica. However, there is tragic news which bewilders Tony. There are further flashbacks about Tony's reaction to Adrian, a card not sent, a vitriolic letter...

In the present, Tony receives a message that he has been bequeathed something by Veronica's mother, Sarah, who has just died. He discovers that it is Adrian's diary. With some help from his old friends, and gradually explaining the situation to Margaret, he is able to make an appointment with Veronica (Charlotte Rampling), which does not end well. Tony is intrigued, latent memories coming to the surface, his following Veronica, making discoveries that shock him and challenge him to reassess his past behaviour.

There is a sense of an ending as all this develops, Tony discovering more about himself and acknowledging it, mellowing, rapport with his ex-wife, his assisting at the birth of his grandchild, a message to Veronica, some happiness – and even offering a cup of coffee to the postman whom he has regularly ignored.

A thoughtful film for a thoughtful audience.

SNATCHED

US, 2017, 90 minutes, Colour.

Amy Schumer, Goldie Hawn, Ike Barinholtz, Tom Bateman, Christopher Meloni, Wanda Sykes, Joan Cusack.
Directed by Jonathan Levine.

Sometimes amusing and funny time-filler depending on your response to the two stars.

Amy Schumer, mainly seen on television (the series, *Inside Amy Schumer*) but also in the film, *Trainwreck*, and her comic style, is something of an acquired taste. She portrays the awkward American woman, not classical beauty with jokes about that, eager to please but also energetically eager to displease. Her often wry comedy has a certain appeal.

In the past, Goldie Hawn was also an acquired taste, but an exceedingly popular acquired taste, from her early films in the 1960s, including an Oscar-winning performance in *Cactus Flower* (1969) as well as her often calculatedly ditzy presence in *Laugh-in*. During the 1970s and into the 1980s, she was an extremely popular screen presence. It seems very strange but she has not been on the cinema screen since 2001 in *The Banger Sisters*. Seeing her again, just the same as she always was except that she is now into her 70s, reminds us that we have missed her absence.

This is one of those broad comedies that seem to be being made up as it goes along, all kinds of sequences that don't necessarily follow the previous ones, sometimes bizarre, sometimes hilarious, but then on to the next sequence...

Amy Schumer is Emily, bossy in a clothes shop until we realise she is the salesperson not the customer, and then she is fired. At lunch with her boyfriend (and she does enjoy eating), he suddenly informs her that they are breaking up. Goldie Hawn is her mother, Linda, forever phoning her, with more than a touch of claustrophobia with so many locks on the door, rarely going out, but worried about Emily while her son, Jeffrey, (a *Game of Thrones*, *Harry Potter* etc ultra-nerd, Ike Barinholtz) lives at home, giving piano lessons.

The trouble is that Emily has bought two tickets, non-refundable, for two to Ecuador and nobody wants to go with her. She tries to persuade her reluctant mother – to put back the “fun” in “non-refundable”. Suddenly they are in Ecuador.

There are the usual jokes about American tourists living in luxury, mingling with the locals, getting all kinds of thrills they would not have at home, especially when British James teams up with Emily and takes her and her mother on an excursion. With the title, *Snatched*, we are not wrong in guessing that they will soon be abducted.

A lot of the film is about mother-daughter shenanigans in escaping from the abductors, using quite some nous at times, Emily exercising some martial arts skills in knocking out the abductor's cousin, later rather loose-handed with a spear, getting rid of the abductor's son. No wonder he keeps pursuing them. They are on their way to Bogota, contacting the embassy and an exasperated official at the other end, especially when they contact Jeffrey and he continually hounds the official who hounds him back. Then there are Ruth and Barb, on holidays, Barb being an ex-special Ops expert (Wanda Sykes and Joan Cusack) who do their best but are not as effective as we might have expected. Then there is Roger (Christopher Meloni) an ex-chef with terminal cancer who offers to guide them through the jungle.

Obviously, it all comes together, mother and daughter confronting the abductor, the local

troops and American agents all arriving for an arrest (with Jeffrey intimating that he had organised it all).

There are some pleasing scenes where Emily actually stops to help local women in the jungle with their water carrying. She is redeemable – and, in Kuala Lumpur, a year later, there is Linda, just like Goldie Hawn of the past, exuberantly living it up.

Some amusing scenes and lines, for Amy Schumer fans – and the pleasure of seeing Goldie Hawn again.

WHITNEY: “CAN I BE ME”

US, 2017, 105 minutes, Colour.

Footage of Whitney Houston, relatives, friends, musicians, bodyguard.

Directed by Nick Broomfield, Rudy Dolezal.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Whitney Houston was one of the most celebrated singers in the world. By 2012 she had experienced lack of success, criticism, marriage and divorce, the birth of her daughter, and the ruining of her voice. She committed suicide – although, a friend at the beginning of this documentary states that she died of a broken heart.

Nick Broomfield, British director, has been making documentaries for over 40 years, many award-winning documentaries. He has ventured into all kinds of fields including American music with his documentary about Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur, Biggie and Tupac, as well as a documentary Kurt and Courtney, about Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love.

Fortunately for a comprehensive look at Whitney Houston, her life and career, a lot of film and television footage was available and is used to present Whitney Huston as a character in her own life, a focus on her mother and father, especially her gospel singing mother, Cissy Houston, interviews with her brothers, a close friend Robin, with a variety of the musicians who backed her up, various entrepreneurs who guided her career, her husband Bobby Brown, with glimpses of her daughter as a child on stage with her mother, and some telling comments by her sometime British bodyguard. All this material is judiciously edited to provide a narrative, Whitney Houston’s life from birth to death as well as frequent dipping into her performances in her career.

Born in 1963 in New Jersey, Whitney Houston had a religious upbringing, singing with her mother in church, a precocious talent which her mother encouraged. However, given the times and the careers of her brothers, she was introduced to drugs at an early age, using a range of drugs until she became dependent on them and, in fact, an addict. This is a theme throughout the film, with many commentators, some wondering whether there could have been an intervention, the revelation that she went into rehabilitation but lapsed.

One of the difficulties for Whitney Huston was her success with white American audiences. In the 90s, she was booed by the black audience condemning her for being “too white”. At first, this did not worry her; she had hit records, many awards, interviews and performances on television. The television interviews with significant television hosts including Johnny Carson, Katie Couric, Barbara Walters, continued through her career.

There was also talk about her sexual orientation and behaviour, her close relationship with Robin, her main friend for many years, encouraging her. Questions were raised about a lesbian relationship – and, in fact, at the end of the film, there is information about Robin living with her lesbian partner and their raising twins. An encounter with Bobby Brown, hyperactive extroverted entertainer, led to a relationship, despite his infidelities on the road, and their eventual marriage, the birth of their daughter Bobbi Christina – but, ultimately, a divorce (and the very sad information that at age 22, Bobbi Christina had drug problems and took her own life in 2015.)

For most audiences, awareness of Whitney Houston focused on the film *The Bodyguard* with Kevin Costner and this film provides some background to the making of the film, her singing, the success and Oscar nominations – quite a contrast to 8 years later when she was fired from singing at the Oscars because of erratic rehearsals.

Whitney Houston seem to be a very sympathetic personality and so this story of her rise and fall is very emotional and tragic. The film is another addition to the exploration of celebrity life, ambitions, dedication, the pressure of family and friends, difficulties in dealing with celebrity, erratic behaviour in relationships, drug addiction. Whitney Houston achieved a great deal – but at what cost?

WONDER WOMAN

US, 2017, 141 minutes, Colour.

Gal Gadot, Chris Pine, Connie Nielsen, Robin Wright, Danny Huston, David Thewlis, Said Taghmaoui, Ewen Bremner, Eugene Brave Rock, Lucy Davis, Elena Anaya, James Cosmo. Directed by Patty Jenkins.

Her many fans are enthusiastic about Wonder Woman and the comics of the past. She did make an appearance on screen, on the television screen, in the latter part of the 1970s, 60 episodes in the series with Lynda Carter as her embodiment.

That's 40 years ago. Quite a delay in getting her onto the big screen – although she did make an appearance in 2016 in *Batman versus Superman*, a significant contribution to the plot and offering an alert that she was about to get a superhero movie of her own.

And here it is – with a great deal going for it.

One of the advantages of the screenplay is that it is a blend of fantasy and realism. And, as with the more recent *Batman* films, it goes back into Wonder Woman's origins. The first part of the film is set on a Greek island, quite exotic, the home of the famous Amazons, those warrior women ready for any invasion, especially from the gods, and, more especially, from the hostile God of War, Ares.

We are introduced to the daughter of the Queen of the other Amazons, her name is Diana. She is a vigorous young girl, eager to train like the older women, but protected by her mother (Connie Nielsen). But she does get a lot of attention from the General, Antiope (Robin Wright with a strange accent). Over the years she grows up into the form of Israeli actress, Gal Gadot (who was the incarnation in *Batman versus Superman*). She has combat talent but has to learn the hard way, being knocked down, getting up, using her wits. And that would

seem to be her life even though her

And, on a bright sunny day, who should land on shore but Steve Trevor (a genial Chris Pine) who has come through a time barrier from World War I. (This may surprise the fans of the television series which was set in World War II, fighting the Nazis.) Actually, German troops aboard a frigate are in pursuit of Steve and what follows is a battle between the Germans and the Amazons. Diana wants to leave her to help Steve who defended them against the Germans – and her mother reluctant to let her go, revealing to her that she has divine power entrusted to her by Zeus. She has the power to be a God-killer.

Ares had better look out!

The film makes a quick transition to the London of World War I, Diana bemused by what she says is an ugly city, trying out all kinds of new outfits to blend in (though having to get rid of the sword and shield which Steve's secretary, bubbly and engaging suffragette Etta (Lucy Davis) confirms does not go with her outfit)! There is a nice scene where Diana eats ice cream for the first time and cannot believe how wonderful it tastes.

It is 1918 and the Armistice is almost a done deal. Meanwhile, in Germany, a diabolical general (Danny Houston) is in league with a super-scientist, Dr Poison (Elena Anaya), specialist in nerve gases. He is dead set against the Armistice, confident in ultimate German victory. In the meantime, in England, Sir Patrick Morgan, a leading politician, quietly endorses Steve and Diana (and an extraordinarily ragtag band of followers) to track down Dr Poison.

This means travelling to Belgium, becoming involved in trench warfare, the hardy Diana moved by the plight of the bereft widow leading the British troops across no man's land defying the German guns.

Needless to say, there are a lot of spectacular scenes, explosions, a confrontation with the German general, with Dr Poison, a crisis when a plane load of lethal gases threatens the world – and an unexpected twist for those not in the know where an aggressive and confrontational Ares appears, quite a supernatural conflict between him and Diana.

One of the advantages of this screenplay is that it is quite intelligent, has some substance in its portrayal of the Amazons, their philosophy of peace, the intrusions of war, Diana's hope that in her destroying Ares all humans then will want to be peaceful and her having to discover that there is something in human nature that is forever cruel and warmongering. Actually, there is also quite an amount of deadpan dialogue which is also amusing.

Gal Gadot fits Wonder Woman perfectly, able to speak hundreds of languages but not particularly well-informed about marriage. She is tall, beautiful, strong, articulate, and, for once, the female superhero.

She is going to appear in 2017 in the film of the Justice League. But, no problems if she gets another exclusive film of her own!

REVIEWS, JULY 2017

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ALL EYEZ ON ME

US, 2017 140 minutes, Colour.

Demetrius Shipp Jr, Danai Gurira, Kat Graham, Annie Ilonzeh, Dominic L.Santana, Jamal Woolard, Cory Hardrict.
Directed by Benny Boom.

An audience needs to be well informed about the American Rap scene in the 1990s, especially about Tupac Shakur and his meteoric rise to success and his sudden death at age 25. If encountering this story for the first time or with a vague awareness about it, the 140 minute film needs a strong amount of commitment to stay with it.

It is very well made, recreating America from the 1970s to the 1990s, especially in terms of the world of the African-Americans², the immediate aftermath of the political uprisings of the 1960s and outspoken leaders of a more revolutionary vein than Martin Luther King like Malcolm X and the Black Panther movement. The film opens with Tupac's mother (a strong and nuanced performance from Danai Gurira who has to change dramatically over the quarter century of the film's action) released from jail, having conducted her own defence, pregnant, giving a defiant speech on the steps of the court.

Tupac is born in 1971, grows up in his early years in New York City, not knowing his birth father but bonding with his stepfather, Shakur, attending meetings, absorbing the revolutionary atmosphere. However, after a smug and brutally racist raid by the FBI, his mother decides that the family should move to Baltimore. His mother is also very strong on education and Tupac is seen as a teenager performing a soliloquy from Hamlet with the prospect of becoming an actor. However, his mother goes on the move again, this time to

California. His close friend in Baltimore (and who later challenges his way of life) is Jada Pinkett (who has been married to Will Smith for many years).

Tupac experiences a sudden transition in California from his acting possibilities to music, to Rap music, to creating some stark stories, often stories of African-American? experiences, in the drug world, unwanted pregnancies, suicide. (At one stage, Vice President Dan Quayle begins a campaign against the songs and is joined by a group of African-American? women who object to the portrait of the black world.)

The rest of the film focuses on Tupac and his music, some MTV clips from the time, performances, with need for close attention by audiences not quite accustomed to Rap lyrics.

Tupac, 20, begins a steep rise to success, performing in some films, arguing with record producers about the value of his bleak lyrics, going on tour, making albums in rapid succession which go to the top of the charts. However, he gets caught up in the glamorous though often sleazy world of women, exploitation, criminals. He forms a bond with Quincey Jones' daughter. He is frequently arrested – and ultimately goes to prison when he is set up for a rape accusation, not guilty, but sentence because of molestation.

He is harassed without cause by sneeringly violent police (and this is the period of Rodney King).

He does not stay long in prison but is taken up by record producer Suge Knight and becomes friends with performer, Biggie Smalls. This leads to complex negotiations, the founding Death Row Records (with artists like Dr Dre) and great success, his being asked to set up the branch on the East Coast.

Tupac Shakur was shot dead in a drive-by incident in 1996. There have been several other films about Tupac, a documentary by the British Nick Broomfield, Biggie and Tupac, as well as a portrait of Biggie Smalls, Notorious (with the same actor Jamal Woolard in Notorious and here). An afternote indicates that the murder has never been solved.

A comparison might be made with the 2015 Straight Outer Compton, a different take on the development of African-American? musicians in the 1990s.

BAYWATCH

US, 2017, 116 minutes, Colour.

Dwayne Johnson, Zac Efron, Priyanka Chopra, Alexandra Daddario, Kelly Rohrbach, Ilfenesh Hadera, Jon Bass, Yahya Abdul Mateen II.

Directed by Seth Gordon.

Yet another movie version of a popular television series of the past. In fact, in the latter part of the 1980s to 2000, the series, Baywatch, had over 200 episodes, capitalising on the popularity of David Hasselhoff and the glamour of Pamela Anderson. Both of them have cameo roles here, Hasselhoff being particularly unconvincing in his scene with Dwayne Johnson in an IT shop, but pleasant in chat during the final credits, and Pamela Anderson, in the last minutes, sashaying on to the set without saying a word (perhaps she never had to).

Dwayne Johnson has proven to be a very popular action hero in a wide range of films, including some of the Fast and Furious actioners. Here he is incarnating Hasselhoff in 2017, a strong presence on the beach, absolutely dedicated to his lifeguard job, often giving speeches about teamwork and team effort. On the other hand, there is Zac Efron as Brody, an Olympic medallist who has blown his chances, not a team player at all, self-satisfied with few grounds for this self-opinion, rather dovey in his general knowledge. He works on the presumption that he is God's gift to the world and, of course, is to be taken down a peg (well, a long ladder of pegs) as he displays his skills but is defeated by Johnson.

And then there are the female lifeguards, Kelly Rohrbach incarnating CJ (Pamela Anderson's role) but a bright, strong, glamorous presence along with Stephanie (Ilfenesh Hadera) the 2IC. Alexandra Daddario is a trainee – who, not quite inevitably, will finish up kissing Zac Efron.

There is also another would-be trainee, Ronnie, played by Jon Bass, rather in the vein of Jonah Hill, in need of some exercise, sex-preoccupied (Rather more explicitly than might have been expected), bringing to mind that Zac Efron has been described as “cocky”, rather emphasising a thematic presentation throughout the film. And, of course, in the tradition of the series, there is quite a bit of ogling.

Baywatch can't exist on friendships and rivalries alone so a drug theme is introduced, with a Dragon Lady, Victoria Leeds (Priyanka Chopra), lording it over the local police and city councillors, importing drugs, wanting to buy up local property, with thugs to impose her presumptuous will.

Brody has conversion experience after letting down the team, has rushed into some rescue operations recklessly, now wants to do his best – but this is sorely tested when they go to the local morgue to check on a murdered councillor (a reminder that there is no personal privacy in a morgue), hide themselves in containers and have a very upsetting experience.

The plot and the trapping of the Dragon Lady (and her dispatch) are comparatively innocuous, as is the whole thing, despite the ogling and the frequent innuendo.

CARS 3

US, 2017, 102 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Owen Wilson, Cristela Alonso, Chris Cooper, Nathan Fillion, Larry the Cable Guy, Armie Hammer, Tony Shalhoub, Bonnie Hunt, Kerry Washington, Margo Martindale, Isiah Whitlock Jr.

Directed by Brian Fee.

While there have been many entertaining Pixar animation film is, it is only Toy Story (four episodes) and now Cars, three episodes, which have led to substantial sequels.

For those coming on the Cars franchise for the first time, they will need to do quite a lot of revision because we are now seeing Lightning [McQueen](#) in his (comparatively) old age, not doing as well in the races as he did in the earlier films but still held in enormously high regard. Owen Wilson is back again voicing Lightning in his familiar and easy-going drawl.

At this time he has to learn that there is a younger generation, with highly improved and modern technology, some mocking attitude towards their elders, and plenty of arrogance as they win their races (one, especially, Jackson Storm, voiced by Armie Hammer).

The moral of this episode is that cars (and, of course, people) have to acknowledge that they grow older, that they haven't quite the stamina of the past. But, this does not mean that they need to give up. They need to capitalise on their abilities, channelling them perhaps in different directions.

Behind all this is the story of Doc Hudson (formerly voiced by Paul Newman, with a credit in this film with some voice engineering), who was a champion, admired by Lightning, his protégé and, with the help of quite a number of old-culture cars and trucks, especially Juice (voiced by Chris Cooper), encouraged to try again on the racing circuit, doing some extraordinary training in a very modern centre, even with simulator, and coached by a perky female car, Cruz (a confidently forceful Cristela Alonso)

Lightning also does a whole lot of training out in the desert, learning to whirl in the dust on curves, finding the open spaces and windows in getting through a herd of cattle, all of which helps in the final testing race.

It does seem fairly obvious halfway through the film that Lightning is on the way out as a racer, despite his best efforts, but that he will come to realise that Cruz, even though she is labelled a trainer, has all the abilities to be a winner. (There has been a lot of comment in recent times about roles for women on the screen – and this time there is acknowledgement of equality between men and women or, at least, between male and female cars, and Cruz is also Hispanic).

A lot of the old characters are back, there is a lot of special effects work to make the races more effective, that the audience feels that they are in the middle of them. And, for those who wait through the rather long credits, there is an enjoyable little epilogue with Larry the Cable Guy doing his ditzy thing as Mater.

DESPICABLE ME 3

US, 2017, 90 minutes, Colour.

Voices: Steve Carrell, Kristin Wiig, Trey Parker, Julie Andrews, Steve Coogan, Pierre Coffin, Jenny Slate.

Directed by Kyle Balda, Pierre Coffin.

If you have been following the career of intense mastermind criminal, Gru, as well as his conversion to the side of right, and also his devotion to agent, Lucy, then there is no doubt that you will want to see what they are up to in this third Despicable Me film. And, of course, of course, there are the Minions, still with their bright yellow, still some of them with a touch of personality while there are hosts of almost anonymous others, with their particular intonations and language which we scarcely understand, and their propensity for being on the side of those against the law.

The animation is the same and it has delighted audiences, especially younger audiences, in the previous two films and the Minions' own feature and short films. While there could have

been more of the Minions in this film, they turn up at various times, bringing a sense of comic relief, in their turning against Gru because of his law-abiding missions, rounded up and going to prison and causing more than a rumpus there, escaping and flying through the air in their own contraption and able to help out in final confrontations.

Steve Carrell voices again the character of Gru, and Kristin Wiig is Lucy. If you have seen the preview, then you won't be surprised that one of the plot developments is the introduction of a villain par excellence, Balthasar Bratt (voiced by Trey Parker of South Park), a superstar child of 1980s television, a young successful criminal. After a bout of acne, he loses popularity and decides to retire to be a criminal in real life, seeming to have unlimited funds (probably his royalties) to create robots, planes, weapons.

Gru has a mission to capture Bratt but just misses out so he is fired from the agency as is Lucy when she stands up for him. They retire to home with their three daughters and all seems to move towards a quiet film. But, then comes the news that Gru has a twin brother, Dru (also voiced by Steve Carrell but in a higher register), so Gru contacts his making-whoopee mother (voiced by, of all people, Julie Andrews!) who tells him the truth and he goes to find his long-lost brother who has yellow hair while Gru has none. The whole family moves into Dru's luxurious home.

But, Bratt is not to be put down and has stolen a jewel from Paris – which means, of course, that Gru will be after him again, with the help of Dru (who actually wants to be a criminal). So, finally, plenty of action as Bratt takes his plane and then his giant robot of himself and laser in a pretty successful attempt to demolish a lot of Hollywood, only to be defeated by Dru – and the Minions coming to the rescue.

And there it is, more or less what we might expect, a lively entertainment, especially for younger audiences.

FIRST GIRL I LOVED

US, 2016, 90 minutes, Colour.

Dylan Gelula, Brianna Hildebrand, Mateo Arias, Pamela Adlon, Tim Heidecker.

Directed by Karen'srem Sanga.

First Girl I Loved is a serious reminder of how themes of sexual identity and orientation have changed since the reticence of half a century ago, the late 1960s, and now with contemporary films.

This is a significant film for and about 18-year-old girls as well as their parents and for those who are apprehensive about facing issues of sexual identity, the psychological, emotional as well as ethical repercussions.

It is surprising that this film has been written and directed by a man, Kerem Sanga, who also wrote and directed a film about teenage pregnancy, *The Young Kieslowski*. *First Girl I Loved* seems very much a female film, in the characterisations, in the dialogue between the two girls, even to their chatter and mannerisms, and alertness to female sensibility.

The central character is Anne, Dylan Gelula, a strong-minded 18-year-old who, nevertheless,

is revealed as very confused. In the opening scenes we see her photographing a young woman, Sasha, Brianna Hildebrand, a softball champion and we realise the attraction. However, the next sequence shows a young Hispanic student, Cliff, at home with his grandmother, receiving a phone call from Anne to come and look at her new bike. They are best friends, confidantes, talking over all the issues but with Anne hesitant about the key factor in her life – although we realise, as the film goes on, that Cliff has a presupposition about his sexual relationship with Anne.

On the pretext of doing an interview for the school magazine, Anne visits Sasha, ask her awkward questions, but the two get on well and do a great deal of texting, especially about teenage sexual satisfaction, as well as meeting, going to a clothing shop, sharing experiences.

When Anne' bike is stolen, she has a clash with Cliff whom she suspects and is violent towards him, suspended from school, to the shock of her disabled mother who react badly and slaps her daughter, instantly regretting it. Which means that Anne asks Sasha whether she can have a sleepover at her house. It is then that the complications arise, especially when they sneak out at night to go to a club, dance and kiss, are photographed by an onlooker, a photo which causes deep problems.

Anne becomes more and more confused, remembering an encounter with the young man who took the photo, succumbing to Cliff's requests but then declaring herself to him, to his bewilderment.

When the photo is published, Sasha's parents are highly indignant, there is a school meeting with Anne's mother and Sasha's parents, with the school counsellor who has listened to Cliff's story, with Sasha and her hesitation in telling the truth.

Finally, Anne gets a sympathetic ear, declares her orientation and is prepared to move forward in her life.

The value of the film is in its insightful depiction of the characters and their problems, the uncertainties of this age, expectations of them, sexual developments and sometimes inability to deal with these, especially in a society where there do not seem to be any norms and helpful moral compasses.

HOTEL COOLGARDIE

Australia, 2016, 83 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Pete Gleeson.

A number of commentators on this documentary have mentioned that its treatment is the fly-on-the-wall kind, close observation of situations and characters.

One of the problems with responding to the film is that this is not particularly the kind of wall that one would like to be a fly on!

Coolgardie is a small town in Western Australia, right in the outback, in the desert, distance from Perth but not far from the larger town, Kalgoorlie. It is an old mining town with a rough kind of heritage, some modern amenities, but old pubs and old drinking traditions. In fact, at

times audiences who know the novel and the film, *Wake in Fright*, will be alert to some of the similarities.

This is the story of two young women from Finland who holiday in Bali and are robbed, finishing up in Perth, deciding that they will get some temporary work and build up their money reserves. In the meantime, we have seen the owner of a pub in Coolgardie, pretty rough and ready himself, who has a system of employing young women for a couple of months as temporary barmaids, putting them up at the hotel, seeing them as something of an attraction for the mainly male customers at the pub – and there are some female customers as rough and ready as any of the locals.

The girls, Steph and Lina, accept the job, travel by train, meet the owner, and are set to learn the ropes with the friendly girls who are finishing up as barmaids and a very helpful. Actually, Steph and Lina are not very good at their work to the impatience of the owner who has outbursts about their inefficiency and lack of listed their work. When they arrive, they are advertised as new girls which means that the men will turn up, drink and flirt, be openly crass in their comments. There are some young men who water know and be better but virtually in an apprenticeship to be coming older sex obsessives. However, there are some sympathetic customers, especially in old vagrant who lives with his dog in a very unhygienic van but who offers to take them out on local trips.

The girls live in accommodation in the hotel, find they have covered the sites of Coolgardie in about five minutes, and find whole situation boring and alien (something which is probably shared by quite a number of the audience). It is a world of isolation and, despite the open spaces, claustrophobia.

The owner goes away and there are several temporary managers of the hotel who are more sympathetic and more helpful to the girls. One of the difficulties is that Lina has severe diabetes and goes into a severe turn and has to be hospitalised.

It probably seems best that the girls be terminated with their work, which happens, and back they go to Finland – with a strange, very partial, experience of Australia.

There are some momentary glimpses of an aboriginal or two but indigenous people are notably and noticeably missing from Coolgardie and the hotel.

Many of the reviewers have praise the film as being fascinating. Maybe. Another reviewer referred to the whole thing as being fascinating and appalling. Fascinating in a bizarre kind of way – and a reminder that there are many appalling aspects of Australian culture, of the attitudes and behaviours of Australian males, especially in a pub context.

THE HOUSE

US, 2017, 88 minutes, Colour.

Will Ferrell, Amy Poehler, Jason Mantzoukas, Ryan Simpkins, Nick Kroll, Alison Tolman, Rob Huebel, Jeremy Renner.

Directed by Andrew Jay Cohen.

After the final credits, to the ushers at the cinema asked how the film was. The spontaneous

response was, “Terrible”. That had certainly been the response during the first hour of the film – but some modifying moments during the last 28 minutes held out a little hope but, the spontaneous response was “Terrible”.

Yes, it was in many ways a spoof. Yes, in many ways it was a farce. Yes, a lot of the performances were over the top. And, it was too expletive for this kind of small-scale comedy. And the director wrote the two *Bad Neighbors* films as well as *Mick and Dave Need Wedding Dates*.

Will Ferrell and Amy Poehler have done a lot of very funny comedies and even Jason Mantzoukas can be funny in an irritating kind of way. It started placidly enough with devoted parents, Scott and Kate, hoping that their daughter, Alex (Ryan Simpkins), will get into the local college as they had. Nevermind their druggie and larrikin-like past, the important thing was better behaviour now.

And, of course, this film is filled with the opposite.

When the smug head of the local council publicly announces that all city finances are to go to the building of a new pool and that college scholarships are abolished (after all everybody likes swimming more than allotting funds to students), Scott and Kate realise they don’t have the funds, despite all kinds of appeals for loans, to send their daughter to college.

In the meantime, their neurotic neighbour, Frank (Jason Mantzoukas) with a gambling addiction that exasperates his wife no end comes up with a brainwave to set up a hidden casino in his house, in partnership with Scott and Kate for him to get money to pay off his mortgage, regain his wife, and for them to send their daughter to college.

Perhaps a funny idea – but it soon turns into a bit of a wallow, mean-minded middle-classly affluent citizens with nothing better to do every night but go to a casino and waste their money. And bet on fights between bickering clients. And, defying credibility, the space in the house for the casino and the continually more expensive machines and decor certainly make it look like a mini Las Vegas. And, Scott and Kate, despite their dialogue and discerning, become more and more involved in making even more doom-ridden decisions, even Scott getting the reputation of *The Butcher* demanding payment of debts and, with its own bits of blood and gore, his chopping off a finger as well as the hand of the local criminal boss (unexpectedly played by Jeremy Renner).

There is a kind of obnoxious about the characters of Scott and Kate, let alone the evermore eccentric Frank, their behaviour and their steadily growing self-absorption, preoccupation with money, enjoying lording it over their neighbours.

Then there is the subplot about the head of the local council, more than duplicitous in many counts, the local police officer and his moral decisions – though that is an overstatement.

At moments, Scott and Kate come to their senses – but they don’t stay there long.

What might have been a sharp 10 minute spoof on *Saturday Night Live*, given the talents of the stars, this is a generally unfunny, even objectionable, look at the American middle class.

HOUNDS OF LOVE

Australia, 2016, 108 minutes, Colour.

Emma Booth, Ashleigh Cummings, Stephen Curry, Susie Porter, Damien De Montemas, Harrison Gilbertson.

Directed by Ben Young.

What to say about Hounds of Love? It is expertly made and has compelling performances. However, and for some audiences this could be a big however, it is extremely unsettling to watch and, ultimately, gruelling. This is the kind of story that takes its audiences behind the headlines or the news items on television about murders, abductions and psychological and violent torture.

The acting is first rate, to be commended. Ashleigh Cummings is Vicki, the 17-year-old whose parents have separated, who bonds with her father but blames her mother for walking out on the marriage and ruining her life. Stephen Curry, rather puny in many ways, with is self-assertive moustache, is John, who lives in the street a couple of blocks away from Vicki and her mother. Perhaps best performance of all is from Emma Booth as Evelyn, John's partner, wanting to bring her two young children to live with them.

The film quickly establishes a tone and mood as the audience watches a group of schoolgirls playing netball, the view from a car, voyeuristic, an obsessive gazing at the girls, then one of the players being offered a lift home, accepting...

When Vicki decides to defy her mother go out one night to a party, she is offered a lift by John and Evelyn, quietly chatty, pleasantly persuasive, offering some drugs, with Vicki getting into the car, going to their home, Evelyn nicely persuading her to come inside and have a drink – which is drugged.

Much of the rest of the film takes place inside the home, disturbing for the audience because this is Perth 1987, December, in ordinary suburbs, in ordinary houses, in ordinary streets, with ordinary people living quiet lives. But, inside the house, John and Evelyn, portrayed in an increasingly co-dependent way, especially for Evelyn, who was been with John since she was 13, loving him, her sexual intensity, yet his using her. He buys her a dog which prevents Vicki trying to escape – but there is a later scene with the dog who has a habit of sorting the floor inside, provoking John to sadistic anger which may be the trigger point for the resolution of the film.

With the audience empathising with Vicki and her being tied up, emotionally drained, abused, there seems to be very little letup. John exhibits no qualities which would make him likeable let alone audiences empathising with him. On the other hand, there is always an ambiguity about Evelyn which makes her character the most interesting, audiences understanding her co-dependence while wishing she could see through it, but dismayed at her often sadistic behaviour, a seemingly innate cruelty and, while she can't dominate John although he depends on her, she can dominate Vicki.

The audience has seen Vicki with her parents, Damien de Montemas her father, and, impressively, Susie Porter (who also played the mother of the victim girl in Don't Tell) as her mother, trying to deal with her daughter's antagonism and the desperation of her disappearance. And there is a cameo by Harrison Gilbertson as Vicki's boyfriend who has a

key role in leading towards some kind of resolution because of the letter that John and Evelyn force Vicki to write saying that she had gone to Adelaide and that they were not to worry.

There have been similar kinds of stories from the United States and other countries, often the basis for horror films or genre films with touches of blood and gore. This film is rather different, while it has some graphic moments, it is more of a cinema study of the psyches of two serial killers and of their relationship as well as of the frightening impact on the abducted girl.

IT COMES AT NIGHT

Joel Edgerton, Christopher Abbott, Carmen Ejogo, Riley Keough, Kelvin Harrison Jr, Griffin Robert Faulkner.

Directed by Trey Edward Shults.

Given some news from the United States where angry patrons have denounced and/or walked out of this film because they were waiting for “it” to arrive, a worthwhile comment is that this is a psychological drama, with some overtones of horror, not for the multiplex audience but more for arthouse audiences. This is nothing of a monster-fest but what might be called a serious imagining of the human condition in crisis circumstances.

Actually, it is a bit hard to work out what the title actually means. During the film and at the end we are asking ourselves what “it” actually is. While much of the film is at night, there is also a great deal of daylight.

Nevertheless, this is a very well acted film, a film with a great deal of atmosphere, a great deal of tension. Something drastic has occurred in major North American cities, making people flee from the cities, making them live in isolation in the woods, water and food is scarce, no electricity or communications. The drama at the opening of the film consists of a man, obviously highly infected with some mysterious disease, his relatives wearing gas masks, acknowledging his death, burying and burning him.

Within the house, the family, consisting of father, Paul, Joel Edgerton, his wife Sarah, Carmen Ejogo, and their 17-year-old son Travis, Kenneth Harrison Jr, can take off their masks, sit rather solemnly, wondering what is going to happen and how they will cope. Suddenly, there is a banging at the door, someone trying to get in and they treat him with utmost suspicion.

With this atmosphere and mystery, and with the man identifying himself, looking for refuge for himself and his wife and son, the film shifts into a movement away from paranoia (and one reviewer did make the remark that the film was about post-apocalyptic paranoia – was this the “it”?) and an attempt for the families to live together.

Joel Edgerton is a former history teacher taking on patriarchal responsibilities (and he and his wife are in a mixed race marriage). The other interesting character is the son, Travis, who experiences strange dreams, probably some premonitions about what might come.

As indicated by the angry responses of American horror and monster fans, the film leaves us with the mystery, the paranoia, the suspicions, the violence, and the uncertainty of how to

survive in a world turned extraordinarily mysterious.

KEDI

Turkey, 2017, 79 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Ceyda Torun.

If T.S.Eliott could write a suite of poems about cats, and if Andrew Lloyd Webber could compose a successful musical based on Elliott's poems, there is no reason that Turkish director, Ceyda Torun, should not make an 80 minute film about cats in Istanbul.

Whether the film is a success will depend on your love of cats. Any devotees of cats will have no difficulty with the film and think it is probably too short! On the other hand, if you are a dog person or of cats don't particularly attract or interest at all, then it may well be hard going. It does remind us that dogs (a few of them actually do appear here) are able to show, even express in their face and demeanour, a great deal of devotion more than cats are able to. Cats can look at you but there seems to be something of a glacial stare at times and/or lack of personal interest.

So, there are plenty of picture postcard views of the city of Istanbul, many of them by helicopter above the buildings, always interesting and attractive, especially for those who have visited.

And there are quite a lot of humans in the film, many of them absolutely devoted to cats, some of them dotty about them, both males and females expressing their love for cats, patting them, feeding them, doting on them. Some have personal names. Actually, those in the audience who appreciate cats might enjoy doing a bit of cat-spotting, able to identify all the breeds and variations.

The first part of the film focuses on female cats and their kittens, the devotion of the mothers scrounging around the city picking up food for the kitties, or else looking pleadingly and seemingly helplessly for scraps to take home. So, we follow quite a number of cats around, an exceeding number, beyond expectation, to be found in Istanbul!

The director obviously has a photographic eye and, right throughout the 80 minutes, there are numerous, numerous, shots of cats, poses, cats framed with the scenery, close-ups, cats always, seeming plaintiff looks, and touch of the catfight when aggressive males get into conflict.

The male cats are left to the second part of the film, less cuddly, of course, than their female counterparts with their maternal behaviour with their kittens.

Obviously, a more intense and intensive review of the film could be done by a cat lover who could alert us to all the nuances, all the traits, all the furry lovableness – but for others, they might feel they have had a catful!

MONSIEUR CHOCOLAT/ CHOCOLAT

France, 2016, 119 minutes, Colour.

Omar Sy, James Thierree, Clotilde Hesme, Olivier Gourmet, Frederic Pierrot, Noemie Lvovsky.

Directed by Roschdy Zem.

In 2011, worldwide audiences enjoyed the French film *The Untouchable* is, the story of an aide to a wealthy disabled man, a crotchety patient who became more humane through his interactions with the nursing aide. The aide was played by French actor, Omar Sy. Since then he has appeared in *Samba* as well as supporting roles in an *X-Men* action film and the *Dan Brown* story, *Inferno*.

His reputation will be more than enhanced by his presence and performance as Monsieur Chocolat.

The film opens in provincial France in 1897, a travelling circus, the acts not particularly good but enjoyable for the small crowds that come from the surrounding towns. One of the stars is Kananga, the Cannibal, played by Sy, whose act is to terrify the audience, especially the children, with ferocious looks and roars from darkest Africa.

Some flashbacks indicate that his family were servants, if not slaves, for the colonial French, the young boy, Rafael, seeing his father serving at meals and having to perform like a dog begging for food to the family's laughter. Rafael escaped to Spain, got jobs, eventually finishing in the circus – and seems to be satisfied.

However, an acrobatic clown, Footit, down on his luck sees Kananga and decides to create a double act which is so successful that an entrepreneur from Paris makes them an offer they cannot refuse. This clown is a sad clown, later revealed to be a lonely gay man, played by James Thierree – who has a very serious demeanour but an exceedingly malleable body for his acrobatics probably part of his heritage as a grandson of Charles Chaplin.

While things go swimmingly in Paris at the turn-of-the-century, society audiences feting the clown duo, Footit and Monsieur Chocolat, and their gaining celebrity status, caricatures even drawn of Rafael by Toulouse-Lautrec, there are elements for destruction. Rafael is a gambler, compulsive, risking all his earnings and possessions, something which ultimately destroys him. While he had an affectionate relationship with the horse-writing acrobat in the provincial circus, he is also a womaniser and betrays her.

The other element of destruction is the fact that all the laughs in the circus are at the expense of the black man. While there are many variations on the act and the performance, it is ultimately the white man kicking the black man that raises all the laughs. When Rafael is arrested for lack of papers (the vengeful action of the wife of the provincial circus owner), he is humiliated by the prison officials literally scrubbing him to get rid of the black. But he does meet a political prisoner from Haiti who eventually makes him more conscious of the even greater humiliation of the circus performance.

While performing for children at a hospital, he encounters one of the nurses and eventually has a relationship with her. But the grateful parent of another sick child is a theatre owner who offers Rafael the possibility, suggested by the Haitian prisoner, that he move beyond his love for *Romeo and Juliet* to perform *Othello*.

The film uses the realism of Rafael's history to move towards the ending, rather downbeat at the time of World War I in the provinces, but the film finally includes some clips from the actual duo to remind audiences of the talent to amuse. Some commentators on the film point out that, while it is a true story, the facts are rather loosely used and that, in fact, Rafael's success came some years earlier than that shown in the film. It is one of those cases where a film is valid even if some of the facts are inaccurate.

A MONSTER CALLS

UK/Spain, 2016, 108 minutes, Colour.

Lewis Mac Dougall, Sigourney Weaver, Felicity Jones, Toby Kebble, voice of Liam Neeson.
Directed by J.A.Bayona.

The tone of the title of this film may put off many an audience who would benefit by seeing it. It sounds like monster film – and it is, only the monster is a different kind of monster, terrifying, yes, but a moralising monster.

The film is based on a novel by Patrick Ness and directed by Spanish J. A. Bayona who directed the tsunami film, *The Impossible*.

The setting is an English town where Conor (Lewis Mac Dougall in a persuasive performance, both sympathetic and abrasive), aged 12, small for his age, lives with his mother (a rather sweet and fey Felicity Jones) who is undergoing a variety of treatments for a terminal illness, most of them not working for her benefit. Conor is very close to his mother, relying on her, especially after his repetitive nightmares, at 12.07 during the night. His father has left the family and has gone to California, marrying again and having another child. Also present in the town is Conor's severe grandmother (Sigourney Weaver), concerned about her daughter's health, disdaining her son-in-law, not really clicking at all with Conor.

Another pressure on Conor is his being severely bullied at school, mocked, punched and kicked by disdainful fellow-students who resent him living in his own world, finally deciding that they would not even see him. There is a kindly teacher of maths who offers to help but Conor is too reserved.

In fact, Conor's father (Toby Kebble) comes for a visit from America, takes his son out, tries to help, inviting him to visit America but saying that the new household is too crowded for him to come to live with him.

And the monster? He truly has the look of the monster, rather gigantic, a huge tree come to life, bark and branches but with intense eyes, often red, with the voice of Liam Neeson who can be both menacing and encouraging. As he appears, he tries to instruct Conor, urging him to be assertive, trying to throw light on how sad he is as well as angry. The method of the monster is to tell three stories with unanticipated moral endings to make Conor think and to tell his story so that he might understand the truth about himself. There is the story of the Prince who resents his grandfather's remarrying, branding his wife is a witch, intending to marry a fine girl but finding her murdered – and a surprise reassessment of who was the villain. In the second story, a greedy apothecary heals people but is denounced by the local parson, the monster wreaking some vengeance on the parson for giving up his beliefs rather than on the apothecary. There is a brief third story about a man who cannot be seen, is

allowed to be seen but still feels alone.

This leads to a dramatic sequence where the monster seems to be encouraging Conor's anger and he has an extraordinary outburst, destructive, in his grandmother's house.

Ultimately, through another nightmare, Conor begins to realise the truth about himself, the pain that he is experiencing, his love for his mother and having to accept her illness and death.

Many parents may well identify with the characters in this film. So will any children who have suffered similar experiences. In this way, *A Monster Calls* is a very challenging film, a family film in the sense that it is about family and suffering.

THE MUMMY

US, 2017, 110 minutes, Colour.

Tom Cruise, Russell Crowe, Annabelle Wallis, Sofia Boutella, Jake Johnson, Courtney B. Vance.

Directed by Alex Kurtzman.

If one is going to do a new version of *The Mummy*, then it might as well be like this. It is Saturday matinee material, reminiscent of the old-style serials with their cliffhangers and rapidly moving on to the next episode, a series of adventures.

It has not been designed for older audiences who may remember previous versions, especially with Boris Karloff way back when, and have put the 30s film on a kind of pedestal, forgetting how creaky it is, and was. This is a film for younger audiences or for those who are getting a bit older but still have fond memories of *Indiana Jones*.

There are quite some variations on the old Mummy stories, initially setting the action in present-day Iraq with the consciousness of American military presence, of strategies, of some of the exploitation of ancient history by some reckless soldiers, despite all the efforts of serious historical excavations.

And, this time, the Mummy is female, Ahmanet, a sinister figure from the past who wanted to be Pharaoh, killed her father whom she loved, killed his wife and their child so that she can ascend to power – with some, locations about Seth, the god of death, and the execution of Ahmanet as well as her imprisonment and entombment.

So, very 21st-century, with Tom Cruise as Nick, perhaps a little over-buoyant, still active despite his 54 years of age, lots of derring-do, escape from Iraq, a plane with flocks crashing into it and disabling the engines, saving the leader of the diggings, Jenny (Annabelle Wallis) with the only parachute before it crashes outside London. In the meantime, there are excavations under buildings in London and the finding of a crusader cemetery from the Middle Ages which, as we have seen, contains the precious stone which is needed to be placed in the deadly knife of Ahmanet to make it an all-powerful weapon.

And, while it is 21st-century, who should be in charge of excavations and research but Henry Jekyll (and, in case, the Robert Louis Stevenson connection is missed, he later

metamorphoses into Mr Hyde, but in the 21st century, Eddie Hyde!). He is played in the British grandee manner and accent by Russell Crowe, sounding for all the world like Jack Thompson in his enunciation and declarative tones – and resembling Jack Thompson in his more portly present incarnation! He does get the chance to go to London East End when speaking as Eddie Hyde.

Not only does Ahmanet (Sofia Boutella) rise from the dead but so do some of the Egyptian guards as well as some of the crusaders, all in the aggressive spirit of the living dead.

One of the troubles for Nick is that Ahmanet has taken more than a shine to him, preserving him from injuries, setting him up to be an incarnation of Seth. Which is all the more complicated because he has a romantic bond with Jenny.

The film is full of CGI, stunts and action, rapidly paced, not requiring the audience to give it too much deeper thought, although it relies on audience response to good versus evil and the defeat of evil whether it be from diabolical outside influence or from inner malice.

This is the first of Universal's new series, Dark Universe, where there will be remakes of all those old Universal horror films from the 1930s and 1940s. Look out for the Bride Frankenstein and The Invisible Man.

MY COUSIN RACHEL

UK, 2017, 106 minutes, Colour.

Rachel Weisz, Sam Claflin, Iain Glenn, Holliday Grainger, Simon Russell Beale.

Directed by Roger Michell.

Daphne du Maurier's novels were very popular in the earlier decades of the 20th century. Several of them were filmed, most notably Hitchcock's version of Rebecca (Oscar-winner as best film of 1940). There was also a version of her smugglers story, Jamaica Inn, later filmed in two television miniseries as well as Frenchman's Creek. She was also the author of the novel which was the basis for Hitchcock's The Birds. But, there was another version of the novel, My Cousin Rachel, 1952, with Olivia de Havilland in the title role and the young Richard Burton playing her cousin. Now, 65 years later, here is another version.

The film takes us back to Cornwall in the 19th century, the kind of location that many audiences enjoy (thinking of versions of Thomas Hardy's novels like Far from the Madding Crowd). The film opens with helicopter shots of fields, jagged cliffs, the beach and a bay. And, the central character, Philip Ashley, wondering about what Rachel has done and her responsibilities. And this is where the action comes back to at the end.

Audiences will enjoy the recreation of this 19th-century world, a country mansion, an estate and farm, the local town, costumes and decor, and attention to detail of life in those times. And, there is also an excursion to Tuscany.

The story is told from the point of view of Philip Ashley, played in a brooding manner by Sam Claflin, about to turn 25, an orphan adopted by his cousin who, for health reasons, went to Italy where he met Rachel and married her. Now he is dead. Philip peruses letters that his cousin Ambrose had written, strong suggestions that Rachel had conspired to kill him.

Angrily, Philip goes to Italy, meets Rachel's advisor, Rainaldi, but fails to meet Rachel.

Suddenly, he discovers that Rachel is in England and is coming to visit, enraging him the more. As might be expected from this kind of melodrama, Rachel is not at all what he thought she was, she is able to control him, charms everyone at the farm, Philip's Godfather and his daughter, and Philip is infatuated. With Rachel Weisz as Rachel, there is no difficulty in appreciating why Philip becomes infatuated.

Of course, the importance for the audience is that we are never sure of what Rachel has done or not done, but how she controls Philip, about his motivation, willingly giving her his mother's jewels, wanting to hand over the whole estate to her.

So, the film is about appearances, innuendo, suspicions, obsessions – which may or may not be justified and which lead to some unforeseen disastrous consequences.

There is a good supporting cast including Iain Glenn as the godfather and Holliday Granger is his daughter he would like Philip to marry. British theatre actor, Simon Russell Beale, appears as the local solicitor. Adaptor-director is Roger Michell (Notting Hill, Changing Lanes).

The appeal is to an older audience, one which relishes revisiting the British past and which is willingly caught up in emotional melodrama.

RISK

US/ Germany, 2017, 92 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Laura Poitras.

Julian Assange has been in the public eye for over a decade with his establishing of WikiLeaks[?] and the diffusion of so much information on his website.

This film presupposes that the audience is well aware of the background of WikiLeaks[?] and takes up the situation for Assange in 2010, his being interviewed by Laura Poitras who has continued to film him over several years with Risk as the culmination of her following his life and career. In the meantime, she was instrumental in filming Edward Snowden in Hong Kong after he left the United States in 2013 (and appears as a character, played by Melissa Leo, in Oliver Stone's film Snowden).

Audiences have had mixed reactions towards Assange and his role with WikiLeaks[?] and mixed reactions towards him as a person. There was an interesting film about him as a teenager, Robert Connolly's Underground: the Julian Assange Story. Celebrated documentary maker, Alex Gibney, made a significant documentary, We Steal Secrets. Then there was the feature film, The Fifth Estate, directed by Bill Condon, with Benedict Cumberbatch playing Assange – not a particularly sympathetic character.

In the early part of this film, he does appear more sympathetic, younger looking than might have been expected. He is fairly articulate, seen on the phone, in contact with the US State Department, discussing Hillary Clinton and the downloading of leaks. He lives comfortably in Norfolk, giving interviews, with his loyal assistant working hard, Sarah Harrison, as well as other staff members.

However, with the charges of a sexual nature brought against him in Sweden, the hostility of the American government and his status in the United Kingdom, the film spends some time showing him and his decision to go to the Ecuadorian embassy in London. He went there in June 2011 – and this film was released five years later with him still being in the embassy.

With Laura Portrais, who says she felt that Assange did not particularly like her, he becomes involved in the situation of Edward Snowden as well as of Bradley Manning and Manning being sentenced to 35 years imprisonment for revealing secrets to the media (with later information that President Obama pardoned Manning who had, in prison, undergone a sex change as well as attempting suicide twice).

There is a gap of three years with the status quo concerning Assange and the embassy, a peculiar interview with a peculiar Lady Gaga, resuming with Hillary Clinton's campaign, WikiLeaks? involvement and the discussions of the Russian connection in revealing secrets about Hillary Clinton's campaign and attitudes towards campaigner Bernie Sanders. Then there is the Trump victory – but with the head of the FBI, James Comey, being interrogated by Senate committee about the Russian connection. After the film was made, the situation became far more complex in real life with the former FBI chief fired by Trump and being interrogated about Trump and the Russians and the campaign.

Not the final word on Julian Assange but an overview and an update for 2017.

ROUGH NIGHT

US, 2017, 101 minutes, Colour.

Scarlett Johansson, Jillian Bell, Zoe Kravitz, Ilana Glazer, Kate Mc Kinnon, Paul W. Downs, Ryan Cooper, Ty Burrell, Demi Moore.

Directed by Lucia Aniello.

Rough Night is one of those raucous American comedies with a difference. Instead of males behaving badly it is females behaving badly.

We are introduced to the central characters as young women, going to college, college life and parties, their friendships, ambitions, bonding. Then we move to 10 years later and, with some of the women, things have changed.

It is a surprise to see Scarlett Johansson with a role as an ordinary character after seeing her as one of The Avengers as well as the range of science-fiction futuristic films in which she has appeared like Lucy, Under the Skin, and her voice in Her. This time she is Jess, with political ambitions, involved in a campaign, looking for funding, wanting to keep her reputation, and engaged to Peter (played by Paul W. Downs, cowriter of this film with his real-life partner, Lucia Aniello).

The other members of the group are Frankie and Blair, who had something of a relationship in the past while one has gone on to marry but is in the middle of an angry divorce while the other still has the touch of the bohemian and is involved all in all kinds of social protests. The audience is very conscious of the presence of Alice, played by Jillian Bell, whose bombastic comedy style needs to be taken in rather smaller doses.

And then, into the scene comes Jess's friend from Australia, Pippa, played with her usual strong comic style by Kate Mc Kinnon. And she has an interesting Australian accent as well as some Australian slang – though there are touches of New Zealandish in her accent and, her new friends mix her up nationally and she gets the nickname Kiwi.

Of course, the expected things happen. Decisions are made about how much to drink when they go out to the clubs. Decisions are made about whether they will snort cocaine – which they do. They have the beach house of a friend – and come across the over-amorous neighbours, played by Ty Burrell and Demi Moore, who are interested in more open relationships (which is rather tested later in connection with their having surveillance cameras).

One of the cautions about the cameras is that arrangements have been made for a stripper to turn up and, in the excitement, Alice bumps into him and he hits his head, bleeds and dies. And so, we are in the territory of Weekend with Bernie of so many decades ago: what to do with the corpse, move the corpse or not, different methods of getting rid of the corpse. One of the ideas is to prop him up in the car to get rid of him. Another is to go down to the beach and send him out to sea – and their not anticipating his tidal return.

Jess keeps in touch with Peter who is at his very, very sedate and genteel stag party, he and his friends sitting round a table doing a rather elitist wine-tasting! But, anxious about Jess's phone calls and their uncertainty, he jumps into a car, pepped up by some drugs, wearing a nappy to avoid pitstops, but gets into trouble on the way to Florida at a service station, with money, and pulled over by the police.

There is a twist about the stripper, not being exactly who the girls thought he was which leads them into all kinds of trouble with some criminals posing as police, interrogating and terrorising them – but with Jess to the rescue.

Happy ending – but, for those who have enjoyed the film, it is well worth waiting until the scene with the final credits, despite its focusing on Alice, where there is an enjoyable revelation of the plot twist.

THE SHACK

US, 2017, 132 minutes, Colour.

Sam Worthington, Octavia Spencer, Tim Mc Graw, Radha Mitchell, Megan Charpentier, Gage Munroe, Amelie Eve, Avraham Aviv Alush, Sumire Matsubara, Alice Braga, Graham Greene.

Directed by Stuart Hazeldine.

An important warning: if an audience is not prepared to spend two hours reflecting on God, imagining God, challenging God about evil and suffering, whether the audience consists of believers or non-believers, then better to stay away. This is definitely a film about God.

The Shack was a religious bestseller and is now brought to the screen in the tradition of the faith-based films. As has been said, there is quite a deal of explicit religious talk and imagery, not necessarily persuasive for every culture because this is quite American and may not

appeal to other sensibilities. However, in the spirit of openness, there is a great deal to commend in *The Shack*.

It has a basically significant narrative, an introduction to the central character, Mack (Sam Worthington) who is treated harshly by his alcoholic father, also an elder in the church. This means that Mack does not have a genial image of God as Father. However, he marries Nan (Radha Mitchell) and they have three children. They attend the local evangelical church, and are encouraged by a friendly neighbour, Will (Tim Mc Graw – also supplies some of the songs for the background).

There is a rather harrowing flashback while Mack is clearing snow from the front of the house, slips and falls on his head and loses consciousness. He remembers the family going on a picnic and, in the middle of a happy event, the youngest daughter, Missy, is abducted. This has an even worse effect on Mack and his anger, resentments, attitude towards God.

This is where the screenplay runs the risk of being too twee but also dares itself to make God images explicit.

Mack finds in his letterbox a typed message from God, signed Papa (one of the twee aspects that might be a bit offputting). Mack is invited to go back to the shack where they previously searched for Missy. Borrowing Will's truck and leaving him stranded, Mack heads off to the mountains, to the wintry shack, taking a gun.

And this is where the film begins its quite significant surprises. Mack is led from the winter into a beautiful summer landscape, flowers and gardens, a lake, a comfortable house. The audience has previously seen Octavia Spencer give the young Mack a slice of pie but here she is, admitting to Mack when he asks that she is I Am. The man who has led Mack is, in fact, Jesus himself and the woman who appears is the Spirit. Interestingly, God is maternal, and African-American? woman, Jesus is played by an Israeli actor and the Spirit is played by Japanese actor.

Later, Mack will be led to a cave to an experience with Wisdom, played by Brazilian actress, colours broker, and a further journey for him to test his capacity for forgiveness, where I Am is played by a Native American Indian, Graham Greene. (So, the Everyman in need of conversion is an American white male – though he is played by an Australian as is Nan, his wife).

As has been mentioned, the challenge of the film is to imagine the Trinity in human form, I Am as creator and sustainer, a jovial and genial Jesus (including walking on water and Mack and Jesus sprinting on water), and a dignified Spirit-figure who is creative in her garden.

But the screenplay also incorporates many of the issues which test those who question cultural in human suffering. Some prefer a more philosophical/theological discussion about the nature of God. Here, it is conversation, in human terms, where God is able to talk about being so preoccupied with pain that vision of hope is lost, that God shares in the grief and pain, and is desperate to be with people in suffering. In an interesting touch, the wound of the nail is seen in the wrist of cab I Am. (God has experienced suffering through Jesus' passion.)

Mack's experience can be seen as a spiritual journey, dark nights, glimpses of God, the holy, and experience of spiritual direction. And, in the vein of South Africa's Truth and

Reconciliation, the message is that violence and cruelty cannot be excused but they can be forgiven.

This is the kind of faith-based film that serves as a confirming of faith rather than a proselytising experience.

SPIDERMAN: HOMECOMING

US, 2017, 133 minutes, Colour.

Tom Holland, Michael Keaton, Robert Downey Jr, Marisa Tomei Jon Favreau, Gwyneth Paltrow, Zendaya, Donald Glover, Jacob Batalon, Laura Harrier, Tony Revelori, Bokeem Woodbine, Tyne Daly. Michael Chernus.

Directed by Jon Watts.

Chirpy!

Not exactly the word that comes to mind to describe a Spiderman movie. But, this is a Spiderman story at its chirpiest!

There was Toby Maguire, creating a contemporary Spiderman but, perhaps, a little too old. Then there was Andrew Garfield, again a contemporary Spiderman but, perhaps, a little too serious and severe. Old, serious and severe do not at all apply to Tom Holland's presence and performance. He is very engaging, credible as a 15-year-old teenager at school, trying to find how best to fulfil his mission as Spiderman (as well is to keep it secret from his friends, the villains – and his Aunt May).

This new Spiderman made an appearance in the climax of 2016 is Captain America: Civil War. He seemed like Spiderman but there was no engaging communication of his personality. This film more than makes up for that. He finds himself, after his collaboration with The Avengers in the previous film, in a kind of internship with Tony Stark, being given his costume, allowed to intervene, but responsible to Tony Stark's servant-collaborator, Happy Hogan (Jon Favreau who, in fact, appeared in the Iron Man films as well is directing the first two by Iron Man films).

Robert Downey reappears as Tony Stark at various times throughout the film, reminiscing about how his father treated him and how he ought to treat Peter Parker but also reinforcing his sardonic tone.

The potential villain is introduced right at the beginning of the film, Michael Keaton as a scrap metal entrepreneur with his own staff, working on material from aliens, but suddenly closed down without explanation by government authorities (embodied by Tyne Daly) but deciding to go on his own resentful and evil way.

However, a lot of the action takes place in school, especially in the anticipation of the Homecoming Dance. In fact, there are a whole lot of high-school-jinx in the vein of those popular 80s film is by John Hughes like The Breakfast Club. And, there is quite a lot of ironic and verbal humour in much of the dialogue.

While this Peter Parker is much younger than has been the case, Aunt May is also much

younger, and played by Marisa Tomei. There is no quoting Peter's uncle about great power requiring great responsibility but a moral from Iron Man himself, that if Peter Parker thinks he is not worthy without his Spiderman costume, then he is not worthy to be Spiderman. This is a motivation that keeps Peter going, reviving him when he is tempted to give up.

The screenplay intermingles the high school material with Spiderman (sometimes actually making mistakes in his heroism) confronting bank robbers which will lead him to a confrontation with Michael Keaton who has invented a huge winged disguise as Vulture.

As always, Peter is always disappearing to go on Spiderman missions, something rather disconcerting for his girlfriend, with whom he is very shy, Liz (Laura Harrier). However, a new character is introduced, Ned (Jacob Batalon), Peter's best friend, who does discover the truth, becomes involved in the adventures, is a computer and science whiz, of course, but a bit on the heavy side. With his character, and some Asian background, with several African-American? characters, with a mixed-race marriage and daughter, quite a lot is made about multi-ethnic background.

Before the final confrontation, there are two quite exciting set-pieces, a rescue after a collapse of the top of the Washington Memorial in Washington and an attack on the Staten Island Ferry, its being split apart but a successful rescue. All this quite pacy.

There is an interesting dramatic twist at the end which gives some more intensity to the final, very elaborate fight and confrontation with Vulture.

And a final urging that it is worth sitting through the credits for the final minute where Captain America, who is seen giving TV morale-boosting sessions throughout the film, appears very amusingly to send us on our way having been well entertained by this Spiderman story.

TRANSFORMERS: THE LAST KNIGHT

US, 2017, 149 minutes, Colour.

Mark Warburg, Anthony Hopkins, Josh Duhamel, Laura Haddock, Stanley Tucci, John Turturro, Glenn Morshower, Gemma Chan, Tony Hale, Maggie Steed, Phoebe Nichols. Voices of: Peter Cullen, Frank Welker, Eric Aadahl, John Goodman, Ken Watanabe, Jim Carter, Steve Buscemi, Omar Sy, Reno Wilson. Directed by Michael Bay.

This is the fifth instalment in Michael Bay's series of Transformer movies. Originating in the 20th century as Hasbro toys, and with films in animation style, the series has now become huge, with mammoth productions of action and effects – and particularly loud.

It can be said that the series is really critic-proof. Box-office dwarfs critical response. And, for more than 20 years, critics have had it in, so to speak, for Michael Bay, almost unanimously condemning his films as mindless, big and bombastic. In fact, they are usually big and bombastic but employ a different mind-set from that of the critics. All that is left to do is really indicate aspects of the films for the fans. Because, it is only the fans who will go to see them.

The writers of this episode must have been watching Game of Thrones very carefully because they come up with the idea that the Transformers actually arrived on Earth from outer space and taken refuge in a cave in ye olde England. Down in the pre-Camelot valleys, King Arthur and his knights are battling against savage Saxons, against overwhelming odds. Merlin (Stanley Tucci doing something of a parody) has indicated to Arthur that there is help at hand but, more than a little drunk, (sozzled is his word), he has a hard time persuading the Transformers to come to Arthur's aid, but they do produce a firebreathing dragon who overwhelmingly wins the day.

The reason that this is not well-known is that it has been kept secret by descendants of Merlin, waiting for the day when a hero will come, or heroine, who will find the Transformers staff and participate in a cosmic battle to save the planet Cyber Tron as well as the humans on Earth destroy the influence of the evil quintessence and her plans to obliterate Earth.

And that time is now.

Actually, Optimists Prime has disappeared from Earth as his Megatron. Optimists Prime is being deluded by Quintessa Cybertron to persuade him to turn on his Earth friends.

A lot of this information is given by Anthony Hopkins, an English lord, with a marvellous castle, who holds most of the secrets but knows that it is time for a chosen one to come to the aid of the Transformers and of humans. The chosen one is Cade Yeager, Mark Wahlberg, strong American hero from the previous films. However, there is need for a descendant of Merlin and she is personified in an Oxford professor, multiple degrees, Vivian, Laura Haddock.

In the meantime, there is a special force in the United States destined to hunt down the Transformers and get rid of them. However, the Transformers who remain on earth seem to be a generally playful lot, providing touches of humorous special effects. If the Transformers have acclimatised with broad American accents and, Anthony Hopkins' servant, the epitome of British upstairs/downstairs.

A lot of the action takes place in Britain, especially an all-stops-out special effects battle including Optimus Prime, Megatron, Quintessa and battling Transformers along with the saviours, Cade and Vivian.

And, before the final credits, it seems that there is, at last, peace on earth, but...

UNA

UK, 2016, 94 minutes, Colour.

Rooney Mara, Ben Mendelsohn, Ruby Stokes, Riz Ahmed, Tobias Menzies, Tara Fitzgerald, Natasha Little.

Directed by Benedict Andrews.

This is a challenging film. Sexual abuse of a minor. The involvement of the minor in a relationship. The vulnerability of a 13-year-old girl and an infatuation with a neighbour. The neighbour taking advantage of the girl but denying that he was a predator. The role of the

courts, prison sentences. And the consequences for the girl as she grows up, the psychological damage, coping or not. And the consequences for the offender.

Quite strong content for a film that runs just over 90 minutes. Much of its strength, especially in the dialogue and the confrontations, comes from the fact that it was an award-winning play, *Blackbird*, by David Harrower who has adapted his play for the screen and has a stage director, Benedict Andrews, making his first film for cinema.

The other great strength of the film is in the casting, with American Rooney Mara as the adult Una, an English girl, and Australian Ben Mendelsohn as Ray, the neighbour. Also significant is the performance and presence of the young Ruby Stokes as Una at 13.

In fact, the film does not seem like a play. It moves backwards and forwards in two time zones, the time of the abuse, as well as the present when Una has tracked down Ray and wants to meet and confront him. There are also a variety of locations, the home, the nightclub, the factory where Ray works, a focus on the interiors of the factory, the vast spaces for production, the narrow spaces for officers and locker rooms, creating quite an atmosphere for the confrontation, Ray's home and his stepdaughter's bedroom.

Other characters are also involved, Una's mother, concerned but ineffectual (Tara Fitzgerald), one of the workers at the factory who becomes involved (Riz Ahmed) and Ray's wife (Natasha Little).

The action in the present takes place over a day, concentrating on Una going to the factory, finding Ray, not having seen him for 17 years (with some flashbacks to her behaviour in the courtroom, the video connection appeal to Ray during the trial).

The confrontation is one of the main points of seeing the film. How does a woman in her late 20s act, remembering the past, the violent reaction of her father against her, not necessarily having dealt well with the affair and the consequences? How does a man who has served his sentence for the offence rebuild his life, change his name, marry?

An important question that is raised is Ray's continued denial that he is a paedophile, that this affair was a single occasion. Another important question is the complexity of Una's past love, the attraction, and whether that can be kindled again.

The film does not spell out answers to these questions. Rather, it gives many clues either way, moments of evidence for the audience, like a jury, to weigh the truth of what Una says and does and whether Ray is, in fact, a paedophile. In this way, the end of the film is similar to *Doubt*, the film where Meryl Streep as the local nun accuses Philip Seymour Hoffman, a priest, of sexual abuse. Doubts on either side raised, leaving the audience to ponder, to reflect and test their own attitudes.

THE VILLAINESS/ AK- NYEO

Korea, 2017, 129 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Byung-gil Jung.

One of the reasons why *The Villainess* will be remembered is that in the first five minutes it

probably holds the record for the highest body count in any film, Kill Bill included (and perhaps some Tarantino envy). And, while not quite in the same league, the finale also has a high body count. That piece of information will indicate to audiences whether they want to see this film or not.

But, there is more to the film and the extraordinarily edited acrobatics of those first five minutes, the continual onslaught of attacking men, dispatched by the female of the title. This is the story about that woman, called the villainess, which is rather hard on her and her reputation. She is not a villainess in the ordinary understanding of the word. She is not a malevolent plotter.

Audiences have to keep their attention highly acute as the screenplay moves from the present, back into the past, relying on different haircuts, some plastic surgery alterations, so that they can understand whether they are watching flashbacks or the continuing narrative.

A young girl, in China, is distraught at the death of her father and wants revenge on his killers. She is taken on by a criminal, cruel but charming towards the young woman, marrying her, making her pregnant, but ensuring that she is a skilled killer.

A secret organisation from Korea takes her over, introducing her to a strange formation program with a number of women who are training to be agents. They have all kinds of skills besides the martial arts, cooking, theatrical training and performance. They also have a member of the supervising team companion to the woman as a project – although the young man allotted to this task falls in love with the woman and is eager to take care of her baby daughter.

The woman is promised freedom after 10 years working for the organisation, supervised by a strong-minded woman as the chief.

When she fails in one of her commissions, actually to shoot her former husband, her place in the organisation begins to unravel, and she becomes the victim of a jealous rival.

As has been said, film goes back and forth, filling in the background gradually, in following the woman, her maternal instincts, her loving union with the agent as her husband, her theatrical performances – which all leads to, as anticipated, a final confrontation, her vindication, though with great sadness and the death of those dear to her, with bloodthirsty consequences.

Korea has built up a reputation for producing this kind of complex action film, very explicit in its action sequences and massacres, but with some psychological story and underpinning.

WILSON

US, 2017, 94 minutes, Colour.

Woody Harrelson, Laura Dern, Judy Greer, Isabella Amara, Cheryl Hines, Margo Martindale, David Warshawsky.

Directed by Craig Johnson.

The best thing about this comedy drama is the performance by Woody Harrelson as Wilson.

He is very much an oddball character in an oddball comedy. In some ways, with all his flaws and foibles, He is something of the 20th century-21st-century Everyman.

As might be expected, we first see him waking up, living alone except for his pet dog, middle-aged, the touch of the scruffy, with no explanation of whether he works or not, or what is his source of income. He doesn't seem to worry about this at all. Perhaps, neither should we.

While Wilson has something of a good heart, he is also very direct in the way that he thinks, feels and, definitely, expresses himself to others. No filters! He has no friends to speak of, pleads with one not to move to St Louis from Minnesota, visits another to rekindle friendship only to find that this man is the embodiment of negativity and bitterness. Wilson will chat to people – as we see him imposing on an IT businessman, trying to sleep or to listen to his Walkman, in a train. And chatting with an IT-addicted woman would like to go on a date, in the diner.

Then we learn more about Wilson, his memories of his mother, his going to see his dying father who passes away without saying a word, something Wilson needs. Then we learn that his wife, Pippi, left him 17 years earlier, problems with drugs, pregnant and saying she would have an abortion.

Which means then that Wilson has been living like this for 17 years. A lonely and isolated life, despite himself.

But the IT lady googles his wife and finds links to her sister with Wilson then tracking her down as a waitress in a restaurant, trying to get her life back in order, something of a waif-like middle-aged woman (Laura Dern) who reveals that she did not have an abortion, had sent him the documents, had received no reply and had the girl adopted.

Having found Pippi, Wilson and is determined to find his daughter, Claire, readily getting information, tracking her down with Pippi, coming to her aid when she is bullied at school, not holding back in revealing who he is and who Pippi is, sharing some happy events with Claire, even taking her to see Pippi's sister – and ill-fated venture which ends with Pippi and Holly fighting each other and charges of abduction for Wilson.

Wilson even glides through his prison sentence, despite some bashings, gradually ingratiating himself with everyone so that when he emerges from prison, and goes to see his neighbour Shelley (Judy Greer) who has minded his dog, there is some hope – though some disappointments in Pippi and some surprises with Claire...

Perhaps it does one some good sharing the life, hopes and disappointments of somebody so different in an oddball way.

REVIEWS AUGUST 2017

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ATOMIC BLONDE

US, 2017, 115 minutes, Colour.

Charlize Theron, James Mc Avoy, John Goodman, Toby Jones, Eddie Marsan, Till Schweiger, Sofia Boutella, Barbara Sukova, James Faulkner,
Directed by David Leitch.

Cold War espionage. The ending of the Cold War. Coming down of the Berlin Wall... It sounds as if we are in John Le Carre territory. But, John Le Carre it ain't!. This is a film based on a graphic novel rather than a novel written graphically. The central characters are of the superhero, super-heroine, villain variety, sharply drawn, tough language, and fighting capacity in the kick-ass (or kick-front) school of combat.

Not that the situation doesn't remind us of a Le Carre novel. It is 1989, Berlin. There are demonstrations in the East, protests, clambering on to the wall, support from the West. November – and by the end of the month the wall was down.

There is a particular crisis because a former Stasi official (Eddie Marsan) is about to defect, has a complete list of agents and counter-agents which all the powers are eager to get their hands on. The other valuable thing is that the agent has memorised the list completely.

In London, the espionage chiefs along with a CIA representative fear the list becoming available, endangering a great number of agents. They summon one of their best agents, Lorraine Broughton. She is played by Charlize Theron. And, with her bleached hair, she is the Atomic Blonde. Blondes can also be blonde bombshells and an atomic blonde bombshell is explosive. After her being Furiosa in Mad Max Fury Road, and after being the arch-villain in The Fate of the Furious, Charlize Theron is at home with tough roles, especially when they ensure that she is a star with graphic novel glamour, poise and sensibilities.

In Berlin she is to rendezvous with the local area chief, David Perceval, played with intensity by James Mc Avoy, also a graphic novel type, infiltrating in East Berlin, skinhead look,

rough and ready, but an exceedingly shrewd operator.

Berlin isn't exactly the city that one would have liked to have visited in November 1989. And this, especially so, if one knew just how many agents and double agents were prowling the streets, ready with weapons, brutal Russians, seductive French, self-confident Americans, and so many Germans themselves.

Actually, the film is shown in flashback, and seeing Lorraine at the end of her mission in Berlin looking very much the worse for wear, immersing herself in a bath of ice cubes, summoned to report to the British authorities for a debriefing, all taped. The preceding action is told in the flashbacks.

Needless to say, there are traitors, double agents, murders in the street, escape in joining the protesters (who all raise umbrellas at crucial moment to stop the snipers shooting). And, of course, there are suspicions all round. What about David Perceval? What about Lorraine herself? What about the authorities in London (James Faulkner and Toby Jones)? What about the CIA emissary (John Goodman)? What about the young contact in the east? What about the watchmaker in the West? And, after all that, it gets even more complicated in the last 10 minutes! And, of course, a twist.

The film was made in Budapest but has enough scenes of Berlin itself that tourists would recognise and be comfortable with. However, depending on one's interest, whether one remembers the fall of the Berlin Wall or younger audiences wanting to know more about it, or whether one just wants action and plenty of kick-ass with Charlize Theron showing she is as good as any male counterpart, the film will be an entertaining, violent, sometimes kinky, immersion in the world of doubledealing espionage.

BABY DRIVER

US, 2017, 112 minutes, Colour.

Ansel Elgort, Jon Bernthal, Jamie Foxx, Jon Hamm, Eliza Gonzalez, Lily James, Kevin Spacey, C J Jones.

Directed by Edgar Wright.

Wondering about the title Baby Driver, and hearing the Simon and Garfunkel reference during the film, it seemed worthwhile to check the lyrics of their song to get a feel for what writer-director, Edgar Wright, was imagining with this film:

They call me Baby Driver
And once upon a pair of wheels
I hit the road and I'm gone
What's my number
I wonder how your engines feel
Ba ba ba ba
Scoot down the road
What's my number
I wonder how your engines feel

Edgar Wright has a solid reputation, especially for his classics Shaun of the Dead and Hot Fuzz, his American graphic novel film, Scott Pilgrim versus the World (not so sure about The

World's End). He hails, from Britain, filming an American story in Atlanta, Georgia.

We are in no doubt about the ability of Baby as a driver, right from the start in his getaway car, manoeuvres and manipulation, rather breathtaking at times, through the streets of the city. In fact, throughout the film, there are more getaway escapades as well as an elaborate chase on foot through the streets, stores, amenities of the city.

So, who is this Baby Driver, a young man, tall, rather baby-faced, somewhat self-effacing, with his earplugs in all the time listening to quite a range of songs. It is explained later that in a childhood accident, with the death of his parents, he has tinnitus, continual ringing in his ears which he drowns out with the music. (In fact, the theme of hearing becomes prominent in the film as Baby's foster parent is deaf, reads lips, and the two communicate with sign language – and the character, Joe, is played by CJ Jones who in real-life has hearing disability.)

Ansel Elgort has been in quite a few films, including the Divergency series as well as the romantic drama about terminal illness, *The Fate in our Stars*. On the strength of this striking and persuasive performance, he should be in strong demand for movies for quite some time. He carries the film and continually commands audience attention and sympathy.

But, whom does he drive for? The answer is generally-suave businessman, heist-controller, played in his familiarly sinister but genteel manner by Kevin Spacey. He has a rogue's gallery of clients, especially the brutal Jamie Foxx as Bats, and Jon Hamm, very strong in films these days after his years in *Mad Men*, and Eliza Gonzalez as his partner, a trigger-happy couple.

The robbery sequences and, especially, the getaways, are violent, exciting, and, for the audience, adrenaline-pumping (and definitely not to be emulated in real life).

Actually, Baby is at the end of his contract with Doc and is hoping for a better life, especially with Debora, a sympathetic waitress in a diner with whom he strikes up a close friendship. She is played by Lily James, far away from both *Downton Abbey* and *Cinderella*.

Edgar Wright certainly knows how to make films. He can frame characters that bring them to more vivid life than usual. His editing and pace provide continual excitement and attention. And the dialogue, often combines humour and wit, and offhand movie references, with the serious matters.

The last part of the film might not be exactly what the audience is expecting, but its heart is in the right place, justices seem to be done, and depending on the box office (which should be huge), we might be seeing more of Baby and Debora.

THE BEGUILLED

US, 2017, 93 minutes, Colour.

Colin Farrell, Nicole Kidman, Kirsten Dunst, Elle Fanning, Oona Lawrence, Angourie Rice, Addison Riecke, Emma Howard.

Directed by Sofia Coppola.

The question the audience might keep asking during this film is who exactly is being beguiled – and by whom? And the question remains at the end of the film as the camera and the audience contemplate teachers and students behind the iron gate at this school for young ladies.

The setting is Virginia, 1864, the Civil War moving towards its end. At the school, definitely for the education of young ladies, in French, needlework, good manners with a touch of religious fervour (they are all presented as Catholics), life goes on with a remnant of students for whom returning home to their towns and families would be too dangerous. There are routines, lessons, working in the garden, music, meals, night prayer.

The school is run by Miss Martha Farnsworth, Nicole Kidman elegant and good-mannered. She is assisted by Edwina, Kirsten Dunst, who has something of a mysterious background. There are five students left, the oldest being Alicia, played with some precocious but ignorant flirtation by Elle Fanning. The other girls are younger (and Jane is played by Australian, Angourie Rice).

For many, the basic plot will be familiar from the 1971 film of the same name, directed by Don Siegel, with Clint Eastwood as the wounded Northern soldier, Geraldine Paige as Ms Farnsworth and Elizabeth Hartman as Edwina.

This time the soldier is played by Colin Farrell, Irish accent and all, explaining his migration, his enlistment, his running away, his leg being severely wounded – and he is found in the woods by the young Amy who has been collecting mushrooms. She brings the soldier to the school and Ms Farnsworth and the community have to decide whether to report the soldier to the Confederate authorities or not. His leg is tended, his wound stitched in close-up, he is washed – and eventually recovers.

And, of course, this is where the beguiling begins. In many ways John McBurney² is beguiled by the women and the girls. And, each according to her age and awareness in such cloistered atmosphere, subconscious urging is rising to consciousness, is beguiled in her own way.

For a while, this seems to be an idyllic situation, John McBurney² working in the garden to beautify the mansion and the grounds – which look very much like an old-style and plantation, filmed in glowing light, moss hanging from the trees – and, with all the women dressed in white, presented often in tableau framing, many audiences may well remember Picnic at Hanging Rock.

But, idylls do not last and the attraction and the tensions boil over with some tragic consequences.

The film is being written and directed by Sofia Coppola, whose films include *The Virgin Suicides* about a group of sisters who cannot face growing up, a modern kind of version of *Marie Antoinette* (both of these with Kirsten Dunst), as well as the famous *Lost in Translation*, the Hollywood story, *Somewhere*, and a film about wealthy and irresponsible young people, *The Bling Ring*. She has brought her own distinctive, often contemplative style, as well as exploring issues of relationships between men and women, and, especially, sexual beguilement.

THE BIG SICK

US, 2017, 120 minutes, Colour.

Kumail Nanjiani, Zoe Kazan, Holly Hunter, Ray Romano.

Directed by Michael Showalter.

There has been a film, something of a classic, called *The Big Chill*. So, there is no reason that there shouldn't be a film called *The Big Sick* – although that is not an immediately attractive title. But, there is no false advertising here, at the core of the film is a significantly big sick.

This is one of those films where a reviewer offers an initially cautionary note. There will be some audiences who are immediately attracted by the central character, Kumail, played by, who co-wrote the script. He is an immigrant, along with his parents and his brother and his brother's wife who have come from Pakistan and settled in Chicago. While they have settled in Chicago, they certainly keep many of their Pakistani customs, closeness of family, meals together, food and tastes from the old country, and, to Kumail's continual discomfort, arranged marriages (where mother announces during meals that some young woman has just "dropped in" – an audition for a potential arrangement).

Some audiences may find that intriguing from the word go and the discovery that Kumail tries to be a stand-up comedian in a comedy club.

But, the reviewer then needs to say that this is a film which will probably grow on the audience, as it allows us to know the characters better, not always admiring Kumail, but getting to know Emily (Zoe Kazan) whom we see first calling out to Kumail during his act, which he interprets as heckling and challenges her on it. But, before you can say Pakistan, they have gone to his apartment, a sexual encounter, relationship.

There are two more developments however. An insensitive breakup on the part of Kumail and a sudden phone call to let him know that Emily is in hospital. In fact, for most of the film, Emily is in hospital, in an induced coma, doctors puzzling over diagnoses, and Kumail having to stand in as an authority for Emily's surgery though they have broken up.

The other central characters in the film are Emily's parents, Beth and Terry, from South Carolina. They are played by Holly Hunter and Ray Romano, Holly Hunter always able to do the acerbic with some forcefulness and Ray Romano, possibly doing a variation on *Everybody Loves Raymond*, but very effectively, a good man, loving his wife and daughter, put upon, and trying to deal with Beth's domination as well as decisions about his daughter's surgery and prognosis.

Part of the drama is that Beth does not like Kumail at all – at all. She is brusque, wishing him away. She knows about the breakup and is very angry about it. Terry is much more sympathetic and appreciates what Kumail is trying to do. They eventually have some heart-to-heart conversations.

So, while Emily is in hospital in the coma, and Kumail is trying to fend off the continual visits of eligible girls who "drop in", there is the story of Kumail and his attempts at stand-up comedy, various sets that he performs, and the group of friends that are continually trying out in the club. Audiences will enjoy the sequence where Kumail reluctantly invites Beth and

Terry to the club and a very WASP member of the audience heckles – and receives the full brunt of Beth's anger and disapproval.

Of course, the drama is the question of Emily's illness, her possible recovery and, if she recovers, what will she think about Kumail because her last memories will be of breaking up with him and her being hurt.

It is not meant to be a spoiler because we read the credits at the beginning of the film but, in fact, the screenplay was written by Kumail and Emily. During the final credits, there are photos of the real characters, including the Pakistani family.

As has been indicated, this is a film which you need to give time to and it will very likely grow on you.

DUNKIRK

UK, 2017, 106 minutes, Colour.

Fionn Whitehead, Mark Rylance, Kenneth Branagh, Tom Hardy, Cillian Murphy, Tom Keoghan, Harry styles, Aneurin Barnard, Tom Glynn- Carney, Jack Lowdon.

Directed by Christopher Nolan.

Yes, writer-director Christopher Nolan immerses his audience in the experience of Dunkirk.

By filming in 70 mm and so much available for IMAX screen format, this is a particularly vivid recounting of that fateful week in 1940 when an invasion of Britain seemed not only possible but imminent. The rescue of the British soldiers stranded on the beach in Dunkirk, across the English Channel, has become part of British history, World War II history, and part of a proud British heritage. It is almost 80 years since these events and younger and many older audiences will be not so familiar with them. Here is an opportunity to experience and learn.

While Christopher Nolan began his career with rather short and small-budget films, he is now best known for his more spectacular films, The Dark Knight series of Batman films, his most tantalising cinema exercise on dreams, Inception, and his exploration of space in the future in interstellar. In these latter films he has experimented with time and shifts in time (and, after all, his second film, Memento, had a trajectory which went from and to beginning).

Here are events with time and intercutting here. We are informed at the beginning of the film that the soldiers waiting on the beach at Dunkirk, the ships on the Mole, the authorities supervising while waiting and becoming more and more desperate, takes place over a week. Then there is a civilian boat leaving Dorset for Dunkirk experiencing the drama of war in the channel, which takes place over a day. And then there are battles in the air, two RAF planes countering the German attack, their bombardments and strafing, which takes place over an hour. This is demanding of the audience to appreciate the events of the week, of the day, of the hour.

The screenplay also uses the device of focusing on four particular characters who symbolise the numerous stranded Armed Forces as well as the civilians who, in the famous flotilla of private boats to the rescue, played such a heroic part.

The central character in the film is a very average and ordinary young British soldier, Tommy (Fionn Whitehead), seen trapped in the streets of Dunkirk, leaflets pouring from the sky, pursued by German guns (no German soldier is ever seen, rather heard with shooting), surviving, jumping over a wall, running towards the beach and finding the thousands there, lined up in files waiting for the boats. By concentrating on Tommy, the audience is able to appreciate the vast numbers, the fears, temptations to run away, devices to survive, like carrying a wounded soldier to a ship but being ousted, finding the hulk of an abandoned craft and a group hiding there, fired at by the Germans for target practice, stranded in the sea and swimming for life.

Kenneth Branagh is the naval commander, standing on the Mole, who represents the high command, concerned about the men, uncertainties about the rescue, thankful for the coming of the flotilla.

Tom Hardy is one of the pilots, in the fragile planes yet with their manoeuvrability, the limits on fuel, the flight tactics of the Germans, the pursuits, communication with authorities and fellow pilot, seeing the downing of planes – and his own decision not to return home but to continue defending the ships and flotilla from attack.

There is a substantial role from Mark Rylance as a veteran seaman whose son has been killed already in aerial warfare, has his younger son on board along with local lad later symbolises the heroism of ordinary citizens, rescuing a shellshocked soldier from an upturned vessel, Cillian Murphy, coping with the rescued man's fears of returning to war and wanting to turn back, some violence on his boat, yet his perseverance in effecting substantial rescues.

The cumulative effect of the film, the vastness of the cinematography, the extraordinarily insistent musical score with its range of instruments, pounding and pace, variations on themes by Edward Elgar, all make the film a substantial experience.

Dunkirk will probably take its place amongst the classic war films – and it is almost 20 years since Saving Private Ryan and the Normandy landings. The American film is a reminder that the British treat matters with a very stiff upper lip, which, though emotional, is not nearly as demonstrative, which means that in many ways Dunkirk seems a rather objective, while emotional, look at the events.

Yes, Churchill's famous speech does come at the end – but, interestingly, is spoken by Tommy, representing the younger generation who are about to go through the Blitz and the Battle of Britain.

A GHOST STORY

US, 2017, 90 minutes, Colour.
Casey Affleck, Rooney Mara.
Directed by David Lowery.

Here is, definitely, a film to test audience responses and loyalties.

A ghost story is usually about spectres and hauntings and there is something of that here,

including a book called *A Haunted House*, falling to the floor and audiences glimpsing some descriptions. But, this is not really that kind of film. And for those expecting it, with some excitement and horror to boot, they will be very disappointed and may well not last the distance (or even the first half hour).

A ghost story can also be a story about a ghost. And, on the surface, this is what that film is.

However, writer-director, David Lowery, seems to have been over-dosing on some of Terence Malik's films, especially *The Tree of Life*, and is more interested in a cosmic exploration of the universe, of history, of time and relativity, of the meaning of life, than in providing any chills.

The basic situation is set up very slowly, a musical composer, Casey Affleck, and his wife, Rooney Mara, packing up and perhaps moving from their house. A clue is given when there is a very long sequence showing Rooney Mara carrying a chest out of the house, along a long path, across the grass, to put it with other stuff from the house. Then, almost immediately, a scene showing the husband dead in front of the car, the windscreen smashed.

The husband is the ghost. One wonders why the decision was made to have him appear in the conventional, somewhat comic, disguise of a sheet (he arises from his hospital gurney) with two holes for eyes. For many it will be too reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan, Casper the friendly ghost as well as the mask for the villain of the *Scream* series. For most of the film this ghostly apparition lurks around the house – seeing a similar spectre with a sheet of floral design in a house opposite, waiting for someone to arrive.

The big test for an audience's patience and attention is the wife coming in, being given a gift of a pie by a friendly neighbour and her beginning to eat it, sit on the floor, and continue to eat it, continue eating, more eating (giving inquisitive audiences time to wonder what kind of pie it is and for how long Rooney Mara had not been eating so that she could devour the pie in this very long single take).

At this stage, audiences will realise that they are being asked to be quiet, calm, reflective, contemplative – and many will not be willing.

Then, suddenly, the ghost observes different people in the house, a Hispanic mother with her children disturbed by of some poltergeist activity when the ghost angrily destroys crockery. Then there is a party with a character sitting at a table, speaking a monologue, speculating on the meaning of life, on the meaning of the universe, on human destiny... Quite a long speech which reassures the remaining audience that this is speculation about the meaning of the cosmos and existence.

The theme of the film is the ghostly presence for the future – with the demolition of the house, the building of a huge plant on the site, and the futuristic glance at a *Cosmopolis* in the vein of *Blade Runner*. But there is a ghostly presence in the past, going back to the site, a pioneer family with a wagon, the remnants of an attack by the Indians.

And back to where the couple started, moving in, his compositions, the piano, ... the differences and the difficulties.

It would seem that this is a kind of cosmic purgatorial experience for the ghost.

GOD'S OWN COUNTRY

UK, 2017, 104 minutes, Colour.

Josh O' Connor, Alec Secareanu, Gemma Jones, Ian Hart.

Directed by Francis Lee.

At the end of this British drama, the audience may well be asking why is this part of Yorkshire, around Keighley, is God's own country. For the Yorkshire family who work there on a cattle and sheep farm, it is often hard going, not as rewarding as they might hope. They might well ask how this is God's own country. On the other hand, for the Romanian migrant who has left a hard and depressing country, this new land might well seem God's own.

This is a farming story. The Saxby family have a spread of land, have a cowshed, sell a bull at an auction, are coming into the lambing season. The work is done by John, Josh O' Connor, who finds it a hard and lonely occupation. At home is his grandmother, Gemma Jones. His father, Ian Hart, has been disabled by a stroke but still makes demands on his son, supervising, criticising, especially when his son goes out at night to town to drink and for casual sexual experiences.

With the lambing season, they decide to hire a casual worker for a week and find the Romanian.

The description thus far in this review is fairly objective, describing what might seem a commonplace scenario. However, the Romanian expat is Gheorghe, Alec Secareanu, whom John initially dislikes, asking whether is Pakistani and, on hearing he is from Romania, calls him a gypsy which Gheorghe resents.

However, the audience has seen the sequence of John in town and his sexual liaison – with a young man at the pub. This means that the dynamic of the film and the relationship focuses on a gay man, his relationship with the casual worker who, it soon emerges, is also gay. What starts as a physical fight, changes into a physical coupling. And this leads to bonding, companionship.

The film takes for granted the sexual orientation of each man, simply presenting it is factual – although the two men do feel a need to conceal the relationship, even from the grandmother and father.

What we see is the relationship transforming each of the two men, the better parts of their personalities emerging. And the work on the farm goes better – until the father has another stroke and is hospitalised.

There is a very moving movements with the grandmother keeping vigil at the hospital, the father returning, even more disabled, limited in speech, but his son responding well to his father, a very caring bath sequence with the father able to say, thank you.

While the Romanian is very sure of himself, his orientation and its consequences, John experiences conflict, makes a gross error of choice, which leads to Gheorge's dismay and departure and the challenging dilemma as to how John will handle the situation, whether he

can cope, whether he is capable of apology, what his hopes are for the rest of his life.

The film does have some explicit moments, but it is a film which presents farm life, two men bonding and in a relationship and asks of its audience understanding and sympathy.

KIKI, LOVE TO LOVE

Spain, 2016, 102 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Paco Leon.

This is a comedy about sex and sexuality. And the various stories in it are to be found along the continuum from prudishness to permissiveness. But, it is a reminder that anything human, any human experience can be the subject of humour otherwise it is taken too seriously, put on false pedestal, while at other times it is taken far less seriously for crass entertainment.

There are five stories in this film and they are intercut. There is a young couple in love but she finds that she is aroused by the experience of being attacked, as she was at a service station. This leads to some serious talk between the couple but also to a farcical re-enactment when the girl breaks her fiancé's nose in a set up attack. There is also a plastic surgeon whose wife has been in a car accident and is particularly bitter and frigid. He is aroused by seeing her sleeping so decides that he will drug her each night for his own satisfaction, she not aware of what has been happening. (They also have a Filipina maid who is wanting breast enhancement surgery and shrewdly uses her observations to bring down the price.). Another couple want to become pregnant and the wife gets advice from the doctor only to find that she is aroused by seeing her husband weeping, especially at the funeral of a friend.

The director of the film, Paco Leon, takes the role of a husband who goes with his wife to a therapist, discusses sexual problems rather frankly, experiments at home but the couple's life is disturbed by a friend who works a sex club – which gives the audience the opportunity to blend prurience with curiosity as they visit the club and see some bizarre behaviour. The solution to the problems comes in the form of the friend and her becoming part of the household.

Sex and pathos are combined in the fifth story, a hearing-impaired young woman who is affected by the texture of fabrics but who also works at a phone exchange for hearing-impaired clients, discussing phone sex with a very ordinary woman at the other end who is busy fixing her face and disturbed by a saucepan exploding on her stove. The young man is studying for exams but is attracted to his interpreter.

With the story told, some kind of conclusion reached, everybody turns up at a local fairground.

It is surprising to find that this is a fairly exact remake of an Australian film, *The Little Death*, by Josh Lawson. In transferring it to Spain, the makers have given it more sunlight and exuberance than the original.

THE KING'S DECISION/ THE KING'S CHOICE

Norway, 2016, 133 minutes, colour.
Jesper Christensen, Anders Baasmo Christiansen, Karl Markovics.
Directed Erik Poppe

This is a film which is specially designed for Norwegian audience, a Scandinavian audience, offering memories of the of the King of Norway in World War II.

The film has been directed by one Norway's most distinguished directors, Erik Poppe (Troubled Waters).

The film gives historical background of the establishing of Norway as a separate kingdom in the 20th century, the choice of the Danish prince who came with his family to establish the royal house which was accepted and has continued to the present.,

With the outbreak of the war, German submarines began to sail in Norwegian waters. The German ambassador to Oslo expected the King to make some kind of agreement with Germany to enable its occupation just as his brother, the King of Denmark, had done for that country.

The action takes place over only a couple of days, the pressure from the Germans, the threats from the Germans and the submarines, the king facing the decision and his advisors, some for allowing the Germans in (with the later rule of Quisling) and a number against so that during the night, the king and the cabinet left Oslo for a secret country location to make the decision. There is a vivid sequence where the train is attacked by air and passengers flee into the woods.

The dilemma for the king was whether to allow the Nazis in and have a possible peaceful occupation during the war or to defy the Germans with consequent attacks, destruction and death of civilians. The king made the decision to defy the Germans.

Jesper Christensen is very effective as the King. His son was initially in favour of Nazi occupation but then supported his father – and eventually succeeded him.

The King's decision in 1940 was a courageous one but has held up over the decades as an example of patriotic commitment in defiance of the Nazi will to conquer Europe.

LADY MACBETH

UK, 2016, 89 minutes, Colour.
Florence Pugh, Cosmo Jarvis, Paul Hilton, Naomi Ackie, Christopher Fairbank, Anton Palmer, Golda Rosheuvel.
Directed by William Oldroyd.

Audiences will immediately think of Shakespeare and then wonder about the connections of this story and its central character, Katherine Lester, and Macbeth's vengeful wife. In fact, this film is based on a Russian short story of the 19th century by Nikolai Leskov, Lady Macbeth of Minsk (filmed in Russia in 1989).

Of course, Lady Macbeth is not a random choice for a title. It might be considered, as T.S.

Elliott considered an “objective correlative”, a kind of archetypal reference to evoke connections in the imagination and emotions, some parallels, not strict, with Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth.

This is very stylised film, set in the remote Northumberland locations of County Durham, a mansion, the outhouses, the surrounding countryside which can be both attractive as well as sinister. There is no musical score but, at the time of deaths, in the middle of the film and that the end, there are electronic reverberations. While the photography is beautiful, the director is at pains to create a great number of tableau with the characters as well as frequently framing Katherine Lester and leaving the audience to contemplate her passionate yet sometimes enigmatic character.

For those who enjoy film history and comparisons, one might say this is a role which, in her past, Isabelle Huppert would have been very much at home in, quiet, interiorly ruminative, often seemingly impassive in her exterior manner and behaviour, yet bursting out sometimes passionately.

At the beginning, Katherine seems a quiet young girl, played by Florence Pugh (not yet 20 at the time of filming). She is seen in bridal white, in church, singing hymns, then, strong-minded, on her wedding night, asked to strip while her husband ignores her and is preoccupied with his own sexuality. Not a promising beginning to the marriage. He is a stern man, called away to a colliery explosion and Katherine is left alone, her hair combed by her maid, Anna, Naomi Ackie, woken each morning, brought breakfast, a quiet routine with Katherine confined to the house, rarely allowed out, sitting with her religious books. Not quite Lady Macbeth at this stage.

Matters change for her when she sees her husband’s workers ganging up sexually on Anna, ridiculing her about size with reference to a sow. Katherine’s demanding that they go back to work but her being attracted to the seeming instigator, Sebastian (Cosmo Jarvis) who then enters Katherine’s room – with some passionate changes in her, surfacing all kinds of whimsical designs, and setting her on a psychopathic path.

This involves her horrible father-in-law who detests her, symbolically her standing next to his upright coffin for a photograph and her disdain in passing by his body lying in state. This also involves her husband and his return and his denunciation of her with dire results.

Once on her path of passion with Sebastian, and ensuing violence, she is tested when a stranger brings a little boy who is her husband’s ward. As they settle into the house, the little boy comfortable with Katherine, it might seem that this story will not have tragic consequences. But, of course it does, Katherine now glibly able to deny all complicity, transfer men blame to others and seeming impassive to their fates.

There is nothing else to do but for the director to frame Katherine again, focus the camera on her, her impassive look, the audience contemplating, reflecting on what might be going on inside her.

This is not a 19th century melodramatic romance but rather what might be called a study in the psyche of a Lady Macbeth.

THE LOST CITY OF Z

US, 2017, 140 minutes, Colour.

Charlie Hunnam, Robert Pattinson, Sienna Miller, Tom Holland, Angus Mc Fadyen, Franco Nero.

Directed by James Gray.

In terms of marketing, *Lost City of Z*, may not be so successful for promoting the film. On the one hand, the title sounds very much like a blockbuster adventure, even fantasy. On the other hand, it is a reference to exploration expeditions to Bolivia and the search for a city lost in the jungles of Amazonia. Which means, it is a rather more serious historical film.

The director is James Gray, much better known for small-scale American stories, with criminals in *Little Odessa*, of relationships in *Two Lovers* or reminiscence about people arriving in America, *The Immigrant*. He has written a screenplay and directed, recreating Ireland and England in the first part of the 20th century, action in Amazonia, the jungle, the rivers, falls, animals – and the continued threat of the spear-throwing inhabitants.

The film opens in Ireland in 1905, the gentry assembled Hunt, helped by the military, especially with the lieutenant, Percy Fawcett, played very seriously by Charlie Hunnam. It is he chases and kills the stag but is unacceptable to society because of his father's disreputable reputation. He is deprived of medals and promotion, returning home to England with strong-minded wife, Nina (Sienna Miller).

It is quite a surprise for Fawcett when he is invited by the Royal Geographical Society to lead an expedition to Amazonia, the area between Brazil and Bolivia, to determine the borders because of rubber barons and their clashes. Fawcett was an excellent cartographer in his study days. The expedition will last at least two years.

The film highlights the distance between England and Bolivia, the liner in the Atlantic, train travel in Bolivia, slow riding by horse, walking. The adventurers are surprised to find a city in the jungle with its own opera company performing (for film buffs, echoes of Hertzog's *Fitzcarraldo*). As they go into the jungle, Fawcett is accompanied by a journalist who becomes his friend, Costin (Robert Pattinson) as well as a military attache, a local Indian guide and various carriers. As expected, things are not easy in the jungle, snakes, piranha in the river, hunger – and the shooting of a boar when they are desperate for provisions. There are also dangerous encounters with the local Indians as well as making friends with them, and hearing of the possibilities of cities covered over by jungle. Fawcett uses the term *Lost City of Z*, which, if found, would contribute to the ethnographic understanding of the world.

Fawcett is welcomed on his return but is eager to go again, giving talks to the Royal Geographical Society, mocked by some of the members about his theories, others being enthused and offering to accompany him. His wife would like to accompany him, stressing her capabilities and those of women, but Fawcett is rather old-fashioned in his expectations of what women can and cannot do. She remains at home over the years and they have three children.

The second expedition achieves some things but, an encounter with a cannibal group, one of their benefactors, Murray (Angus Mc Fadyen) is cowardly, is sent off with provisions after

his capsizing their boat – and, when Fawcett goes again to the Society, Murray is there to denounce him and demand an apology.

World War I intervenes and Fawcett goes to the trenches, quite graphically pictured here, showing heroism and being blinded by chlorine gas and repatriated.

Five years pass, his oldest son Jack (Tom Holland) who had regretted his father's absence and influence on his family has become something of a hunter and proposes that they are going in to Amazonia, raising American finance which is met by British finance. And the Society acknowledges Fawcett's work in awarding him its highest medal.

Fawcett and his son disappear – and the film speculates about their being taken by local Indians who respect them but lead them to their deaths. There is a postscript to say that in the early 20th century, there have been some discoveries of Amazonian cities (and a reminder that Machu Picchu was discovered in the early 20th century in Peru).

MAUDIE

Canada/ Ireland, 2017, 117 minutes, Colour.
Sally Hawkins, Ethan Hawke, Gabrielle Rose.
Directed by Aisling Walsh.

Maudie is a portrait of a painter from Nova Scotia, Maudie Lewis. It is based on a true story.

Some commentators have noted that the screenplay simplifies Maudie Lewis's life, that she had painted early in life, that she had some sales earlier than is shown in the film. She was also a very small woman, suffering severely from rheumatoid arthritis and disfigured spine.

Nevertheless, Sally Hawkins shines as Maudie. A versatile actress, Sally Hawkins made quite an impact in her award-winning performance in Mike Leigh's *Happy Go Lucky*. Despite her illness and her hard and harsh life, Maudie emerges so often as happy-go-lucky.

Suffering severely from her childhood, Maudie is offloaded on her maiden aunt, Ida (Gabrielle Rose) by her brother sells the family house against her knowledge and will. I had it is something of a severe woman who resents having to support Maudie, makes her life extremely restrictive, humiliating her.

An opportunity arises when Maudie goes shopping season is a notice in the store from a local fisherman-fishmonger, Everett Lewis, played quite intensely and somewhat savagely by Ethan Hawke for help in his house. Maudie answers the notice and walks to his house, not an easy interview, but she perseveres and stays and Everett giving some begrudging consent to her presence, as long as she keeps the house clean and. He tells her that the priority in the house is: me, the dog, the chickens, you.

When Maudie finds some paint, she starts to do pictures on the wall of the house, simple flowers, cats, landscapes. Again Everett is rather begrudging, wanting some wall space without pictures. It is when a woman visiting from New York City calls to the house about the delivery of fish and discovers Maudie's paintings, buys one, continues to affirm Maudie and promotes her paintings in the US and through the media, comes different for Maudie.

To Everett's bewilderment, visitors come to the house, buying Maudie's paintings and, especially, the greeting cards, and giving commissions.

There is an emotional development at the end of the film concerning the baby that Maudie had borne when very young and the verdict that it was not healthy. Sad moments for Maudie – but, as the film shows, despite her own illness and disabilities, despite her sufferings, she was a woman of strong spirit and achievement.

PARIS CAN WAIT

US, 2016, 93 minutes, Colour.

Diane Lane, Arnaud Viard, Alec Baldwin.

Directed by Eleanor Coppola.

If you ever wanted to travel through the south of France, from Cannes, through some of the small towns, through Lyon to Paris, then this might be the film to see for the time being. And, if this part of the world is familiar, audiences will probably want to revisit.

This is a very leisurely film. The central character, Anne had intended to fly from the Riviera to Paris but has an ear infection and accepts the offer of a lift from a friend of her husband, both being film producers.

In fact, this film is so leisurely that one of the reviewers was champing at his bit throughout the whole film, urging them to get a move on, stop the delays – and agreed that he would have preferred the film to have them get in the car in Cannes and do an edit cut for their immediate arrival in Paris! But, look what he would have missed.

Diane Lane is always an attractive screen presence and this is her film. In her past, she has appeared in four films directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Paris Can Wait is directed by Coppola's wife, Eleanor, who has made documentaries and accompanied her husband as support and photographer during his 1970s filming of *Apocalypse Now* in the Philippines. The production notes advise that Eleanor Coppola experienced a similar situation and did go for the drive from Cannes to Paris. And, Diane Lane's Anne is a photographer and would have liked to have had photography as a career.

There is a narrative, but, keeping the French tone, it is soufflé-light. And, it is the perennial French/ American theme of French sophistication and sense of superiority over the very uncultured and up-front about it, Americans. The French stance is embodied in Jacques (Arnaud Viard), the rather happy-go-lucky producer, bad driver in his old car, and flirting unashamedly with Anne.

Anne has been married for 22 years to Michael, a busy, very busy, film producer, who has to go to Budapest and then phones to say that he has to go to Morocco where a very talented but impossible director is hugely overbudget. He is played by Alec Baldwin. We see this pressure on Anne right from the beginning as they prepare for the trip and he is continually getting calls. They do love each other but, for Anne, there is a fair amount of exasperation. She does enjoy the trip, is certainly very wise to Jacques's preoccupation with her, and it all makes her think a bit more deeply about her relationship with Michael and also her daughter who is at

college.

On the one hand, there is plenty, plenty of scenery, the countryside, rivers and lakes, as well as the towns and some Roman ruins including the aqueduct. That may be enough for some audiences but, this is also a film about food, French food, beautifully cooked, information about the ingredients, elegantly served – and always in the best hotels and restaurants. With dinners and lunches like this, obviously Paris can wait.

At a midday screening, there are quite a number in the audience, older than they used to be, but really enjoying this reverie in France.

THE SPACE BETWEEN

Australia/Italy, 2016, 105 minutes, Colour.

Flavio Parenti, Maeve Dermody.

Directed by Ruth Borgobello.

This is a film for middle-aged audiences and older who enjoy something of a light and unusual romance film.

The film is an Australian- Italian production, with Australian finance and production support and an Australian star, Maeve Dermody. However, it also has a great deal of Italian finance, an Italian cast led by Flavio Parenti and Italian settings which are very attractive – and could entice audiences to visit north-eastern Italy, and the city of Udine and its surroundings.

The film opens with a quotation from the poet Rilke – suggestions of deeper meanings of love and relationships, and people's place in the universe. The Rilke theme continues with one of the central characters carrying around the poems that Rilke wrote and the screenplay taking the central characters and the audience to a coastal and cliff walk, the locations where he conceived the poems.

This is the story of Marco, Flavio Parenti, who grew up in Udine, training to be a chef, moving to New York City where he had jobs which he liked but, his mother had some strokes and he returned home and has stayed in the town to care for his father. His father is laconic, as his son says, preferring watching television rather than have conversation. He also now has a dreary job at the same factory where his father worked, being retrenched and then re-hired. He has a close friend, Claudio, who runs a bookshop and does some catering which Marco enjoys helping with.

Then tragedy strikes and there is a space between ordinary life and resuming life, living through grief which affects Marco deeply.

He encounters Olivia, Maeve Dermody, who lives in Melbourne but has come back to the home of her ancestors to sort out property matters and visit cousins. In many ways it is a chance encounter but each is attracted to the other, Marco helping Olivia, going on outings, including the Rilke walk, with her.

And here a complication arises which leads to the possibilities of a different kind of space between...

Marco, while concerned about his father, is being headhunted to work in restaurants in Melbourne. He is at first reluctant but agrees to sign a contract and go to Australia.

And, while his falling in love with Olivia, he persuade her to pursue her desires to be a furniture designer rather than the quite successful banker she gives. She wins an internship which would require her to stay in Italy.

This is one of those films where we can't even say spoiler alert – the ending is left for the characters to make decisions, for the audience to observe them, have an emotional response to what they want to do and leaving the cinema trying to predict what might happen.

THE TIME OF THEIR LIVES

UK, 2017, 102 minutes, Colour.

Joan Collins, Pauline Collins, Franco Nero, Ronald Pickup, Joely Richardson.

Directed by Roger Goldby.

The Time of their Lives sounds a particularly jaunty title. And, for much of the film, this is quite accurate. But not quite accurate enough – the screenplay often goes beneath the surface of the time of their lives to some very serious personal themes. Which makes this comedy-drama that much more interesting.

The naming of the stars is certainly most arresting. Joan Collins has been in films for almost 65 years and made this film at the age of 83 (though, probably, her character, Helen, is meant to be only 73 – and she does get away with it). Whether the public knows the real Joan Collins is a good question. What the public does see is Joan Collins, the celebrity, full of glamour, fond of posing, not the least bit shy with people let alone in front of the camera, drawing on her career as a starlet in the 1950s (and this film has a poster of a fictitious film, *Morty and Me*, made in that long ago time, the poster reminding us of how glamorous Joan Collins was in her past), and drawing on her particular “bitchiness” from her character, Alexis, in *Dynasty*. She plays this character here to the hilt – and beyond!

Which means that the name of Pauline Collins evokes quite a different image. At the time of making the film, Pauline Collins was only 76 – but not quite looking it either. She is most famous for her Oscar-nominated performance as Shirley Valentine in 1989. She won a lot of fans with this role and is probably remembered warmly for it.

The other older stars are Franco Nero, one of the heartthrob Italian stars of the 1960s, continuing into the present. The other is Ronald Pickup who audiences will remember from the *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* films. Also in the cast is Joely Richardson, Vanessa Redgrave's daughter (in fact, Vanessa Redgrave is married to Franco Nero though he has no scenes with his stepdaughter).

And the plot? The core of it is a variation on Joan Collins's life and career, an ageing but faded star (that is the fiction part for the real Joan Collins), little-known now and wanting to revive her career, especially by going to the funeral in France of the director of her most famous film. But she has no money and she is somewhat disabled, hip difficulties, a walking stick. (And there is nothing like seeing Joan Collins with a walking stick but, when the plot is

on her side, able to get rid of the stick and walk steadily!).

She is on a jaunt to the seaside with a busload of elderly characters, one of whom is desperate to drive the bus – and does get the opportunity in a hurdy-gurdy kind of way. They have a concentration camp kind of travel director. In the meantime, Priscilla, Pauline Collins, is having a very difficult time with her cranky husband, Frank (Pickup) and the memories of their son who drowned at the age of four men and who would be now 40. Helen notices them bickering at the store. But then Priscilla helps Helen onto the bus with her disability and the door shuts and she is whisked off to the seaside.

Helen tells her story, they have tea together, Helen steals her purse – with Priscilla wanting to go home but then in pursuit, deciding to go with the flow, going into performance to get onto the ferry for France (Helen pretending to faint, Priscilla scurrying on).

The rest of the film has their adventures in France, including Priscilla diving into the water to save a little boy and reprimanding the boy's mother for not paying attention. Frank and their daughter see Priscilla on television and start out for France.

Stranded at night without petrol, they are rescued by a wealthy man, Alberto (Franco Nero,) driving in pyjamas. He is hospitality personified, Priscilla grateful, Helen flirting, to little avail.

The funeral does not go as predicted though there is a plot development which the audience might have suspected at some stage.

So, the two women do have something of the time of their lives – but not quite. What is Helen to do if she does not revitalise her career? What is Priscilla to do, go back home with Frank to a dead marriage, or...? (Audiences have probably been thinking of the plot of Shirley Valentine all the way through and how Priscilla's adventures and predicament are a new version of Shirley's!)

THE TRIP TO SPAIN

UK, 2017, 115 minutes, Colour.

Steve Coogan, Rob Brydon.

Directed by Michael Winterbottom.

Fans of the television series, The Trip, as well as the film version which took audiences with Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon travelling around England and Scotland - and as well, their extended trip to Italy - will probably welcome The Trip to Spain. And they won't be disappointed.

Part of the puzzle always is that the two actors use their real names and there are references to their actual careers, discussions about Coogan as Alan Partridge and, his wanting to talk about his writing success, Oscar-nomination with the film, Philomena, and his recounting the anecdote of his introducing the actual Philomena to Pope Benedict the XVI (which he actually did). There is a fair amount of slinging off at his films and his career in America. Rob Brydon is far more congenial as audiences know from his television appearances and series.

The trouble is that they also create fictitious characters while using their own names. Rob Brydon has a wife here and three children with some cheery domestic scenes and a welcome home after his trip. On the other hand, Steve Coogan has had various liaisons and his contact with two of the women by phone during the trip and has a fictitious son, aged 20, who is to join them at the end of the trip but is delayed because his 19-year-old girlfriend is pregnant. Much slinging off at Coogan as a potential grandfather at 50!

The arrangement is that Coogan wants to travel to Spain in the footsteps of writer, Laurie Lee, 30 years earlier, visiting the same places, similar and alternate experiences. Rob Brydon is commissioned to write reviews of restaurants around Spain. That is the formula of the past – and it continues successfully into the present.

Audiences who enjoy travelogues will certainly like the visit to Spain, to different places, not necessarily all the expected destinations. The travellers have a week, and go to a different restaurant each day, having a leisurely and gourmet time, meeting owners, service staff, cooks, relishing a great number of meals which food film fans might well be envious of.

There is also a lot of Spanish history, associated with the towns, memories of the Spanish Civil War, the massacre of Guernica, comments on Franco and fascism. We go back into the Renaissance with Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, the expulsion of the Jews, the conflict with the Moors and quite a deal on Moorish history and culture in Spain and in Europe prior to the Middle Ages. They visit the tombs of Ferdinand and Isabella as well as a room where Marlon Brando filmed a scene for the 1992 film, Christopher Columbus, performing as Torquemada, the inquisitor.

Yes, for those wondering whether there are impersonations, so enjoyable in the previous films, there are quite a number, some of them very extensive. Probably Roger Moore dominates, with imitations of James Bond and James Bond movies, but Rob Brydon doing an extended imitation of Roger Moore as Coogan explains to visitors the history of the Moors in Spain and their culture, Brydon pretending that Roger Moore identifies with all of this, commenting to his mother and father, claiming all the credit for the Moore family for the Moors – though eventually, Coogan refers to Muslims and Brydon indignantly says his name is Roger Moore not Roger Muslim!

There is Michael Caine again, both of them so accurate. Steve Coogan does John Hurt. Both of them do Mick Jagger. They also do Sean Connery and have a go at Marlon Brando mumbling as Torquemada. There is an amusing scene where Rob Bryden pretends he is on the rack being interrogated and tortured by the Inquisition.

So, all in all, the actors and director Michael Winterbottom keeping to the formula – but, why not? It's what the fans want – and we are already wondering about the destination for the next trip!.

VALERIAN AND THE CITY OF A THOUSAND PLANETS

France, 2017, 137 minutes, Colour.

Dane De Haan, Cara Delevingne, Clive Owen, Rihanna, Ethan Hawke, Herbie Hancock, Kris Wu, Sam Spruell, Rutger Hauer.

Directed by Luc Besson.

Quite a title. This film was based on a series of comics from the 1960s, French comic books, stories of the future and space named after the two central characters Valerian and Laureline.

The writer-director is the Frenchman, Luc Besson, who has made a range of films dating back to the 1980s, a number of successful thrillers like *Subway*, *Point of No Return*, and his classic gangster film, *Leon*. While he made a film about Joan of Arc, *The Messenger* in 1999, his work in more recent years has been to direct and, especially, to produce, a whole range of hard-boiled action films like the *Transporter* series.

But, he is very popular, with his science-fiction film of the 1990s with Bruce Willis, *The Fifth Element*. In fact, this film is enjoying re-release to accompany *Valerian*.

It is difficult to determine just who is the intended audience for *Valerian*. There is plenty to entertain younger audiences but might be a bit too much for a children's audience. On the other hand, the two central characters seem particularly young, Dane De Haan as Valerian (30 in real life but looking much younger) and actress-model, Cara Delevingne.

The film has a certain French sensibility which may be appeal more to the European audience than English-speaking language audience (although the film is in English).

To set the tone: the film introduces space exploration in 1975, widening the screen to show developments by 2020, then going to the future, the development of space stations, settling of the galaxies, and all the time peace agreements between all the races, all represented in handshake encounters, courtesy encounters, races as well as different religions – and, then more improbably but in futuristic fantasy style, a whole range of strange creatures (reminiscent of those found in *Star Wars* galaxies). And finally, there is a speech by the world leader, a cameo by Rutger Hauer, willing peace and goodwill for the future of the universe.

And, for some moments, we see an extraordinarily placid planet, strange hand-drawn characters who resemble humans, their peaceful society, their harvesting pearls from strange transformer creatures, getting energy for their survival – when, suddenly, bombs and explosives start to fall and the creatures hiding in bewilderment, one Princess unable to get into the secure area and who has to take possession of some other body and soul to survive.

Actually, there is no peace in the galaxies. There is a huge floating city, the city of 1000 planets, with military chiefs, commanders – and special government agents, which is where Valerian and Laureline come in, young tough, expert agents, banter between them, his male superiority, more than a touch of romance but her despising his playlist of girlfriends.

They go into action, quite effective, trying to sabotage a meeting where one of the strange creatures is doing deals about pearls with two of the earlier survivors by the peaceful planet in disguise. The point is in getting the transformers who are able to generate the pearls and energy.

Needless to say Valerian and Laureline are very successful – but not all the time. They are contacted by one of the government ministers by hologram and sent on missions. They have interviews with the commander (Clive Owen) who seems just a bit sinister and proves himself so.

Then, something like an intermission, Valerian goes rather sleazy part of town, full of clubbers, and finds himself approached by Jolly the Pimp, played by Ethan Hawke in manic overdrive, and Valerian and the audience spend some time watching an elaborate performance by Rihanna, gymnastics, contortions, dance, transforming into different characters. After this interlude, the action gets going again, Rihanna helping Valerian and Laureline to escape some pursuers.

All this is seen in a variety of sometimes spectacular contexts, special design, always something to delight the eye.

So, by the end of the film, the audience is ready for some action, split-second timing, betrayals of trust, declarations of love, hopes for a happy future.

THE WALL

US, 2017, 88 minutes, Colour.

Aaron Taylor Johnson, John Cena, Laith Nakli.

Directed by Doug Liman.

To describe The Wall as a war film does not quite do it justice. It is, but it is not an action show that many audiences were expecting.

The date is 2007. Information is given that the war in Iraq is winding down, that George Bush had declared victory. An explanation is given that outside companies have been brought in to reconstruct Iraq but that they are set upon and personnel and security killed by insurgents, with the need for the American military to remain present in the country.

The film is of interest with the 2017 perspective on 2007 given the subsequent history of Iraq, conflict in Middle Eastern countries.

The film has a very short running time, 88 minutes. It has two American soldiers as characters and one insurgent sniper who is not seen but whose voice is heard.

The film action takes place over two days, the two Americans with camouflage in scrub in the desert, observing the aftermath of a massacre of security and working personnel, the bodies still lying in the sun, the vehicles abandoned. We know practically nothing about the two Americans – although, the central character, Isaac (Aaron Taylor Johnson) does have some moments in a verbal flashback which has its tragic revelations and consequences.

The two Americans compare notes, one deciding to go out and check what has happened – with dire results.

The Wall of the title has been built of local bricks, part of it has been demolished by gunfire, and the rest is in a fairly dilapidated state, yet providing some shelter for Isaac, though a target for further demolition by the unseen but heard Juba, who fires at the wall making it more difficult for Isaac to shelter.

Isaac is stranded, night and another day, Isaac trying to use his wits to survive, trying to

communicate to headquarters but finding that Juba is on the other end of the line, leading to interactions, discussions, taunts, psychological pressure, and quotations from Edgar Allan Poe.

In watching the film, the audience, uncertain as to how it will eventuate, on side with the stranded American, wondering whether there will be a final charge by the cavalry to rescue him, it is something of an endurance despite its short running time.

The audience will leave the theatre in something of a grim mood, much more conscious in 2017 of the complexities of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the lack of traditional warfare as might be remembered or is in the movies from World War II, questioning the involvement of American overseas troops and yet the continued puzzles of how situations can be bettered.

WAR FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES

US, 2017, 140 minutes, Colour.

Andy Serkis, Woody Harrelson, Steve Zahn, Karin Konoval, Amiah Miller, Toby Kebbel, Gabriel Chavarria, Judy Greer.

Directed by Matt Reeves.

This third film in the recent trilogy of the Planet of the Apes received very strong critical affirmation. It has also done well at the box office. However, it has not pleased and myriad of fans who had been expecting a bellicose version of the war between the apes of the humans. They did not appreciate the amount of focus on the small group of apes led by Caesar, on the small group of humans led by The Colonel, and the limited amount of warfare at the end of the film, helicopter invasion, explosions. And, to cap it all, there is an extraordinary avalanche sequence.

It is amazing to think that the Planet of the Apes has been part of our consciousness since 1967, ever since, at the end of the first film, Charlton Heston came onto the beach and saw the toppled head, in ruins, of the Statue of Liberty. This film had for sequels: Battle for, beneath, escape from, conquest of... as well as television series The franchise was rebooted, as they say, in 2001 by Tim Burton but it did not have the impact of the original.

So, it was rather daring to begin a new trilogy in 2011 with The Rise..., conflict between humans and apes, the education of the leader of the apes, Caesar, and his ability to speak, and his leadership against the exploitative humans. This episode was so successful that Caesar led the apes against the humans in The Dawn... which also featured the rogue ape, Koba, and fierce battles.

In this film, Caesar is still the leader. And he is played by Andy Serkis, expert in this kind of performance after his Gollum in the Lord of the Rings series as well as Peter Jackson's King Kong. Caesar can speak, but communicates with his fellow apes by sounds and sign language. He is roaming the forest with a loyal group, especially Maurice, a sympathetic and emotional ape.

They encounter some humans, are in conflict, but send the survivors back to the ruthless Colonel in the human headquarters. The colonel is played by Woody Harrelson reminding audiences of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and its film version, Apocalypse Now. He is

in charge of a rebel group, in conflict with the apes, confining prisoners to a kind of concentration camp and hard labour without food and water.

During the winter, Caesar and his band wanders the mountains and snow, finding a mute girl and taking her with them, also encountering a comic ape, Bad Ape, who grew up in a zoo but is able to lead the small band to find the human headquarters.

The film sometimes takes its time, especially in the confrontation/interview sequence between Caesar and The colonel, explanations of Caesar's attitude towards the humans, the loss of his son, the battles and the rebellion of Koba, and The Colonel explaining the deterioration of the humans infected with an illness which deprives them of speech and their faculties – which the Colonel exterminates by killing.

Delicacy is not exactly the word one expects in connection with the Planet of the Apes, but there is much human delicacy in the feelings of both apes and humans, highlighted by the variety in the musical score, especially delicate notes from the piano accompaniment.

Caesar is a charismatic leader but is also consumed by his hatred of the humans – which leads us to wonder where the next film in the series could go.

REVIEWS SEPTEMBER 2017

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MADAME
SMALL TOWN KILLERS/ DRAENERNE FRA NIBE
VOYAGE OF TIME: THE IMAX EXPERIENCE
WIND RIVER

47 METERS DOWN

UK, US, Dominican Republic, 2017, 89 minutes, Colour.

Mandy Moore, Claire Holt, Matthew Modine, Chris Johnson, Yanni Gelman, Santiago Segura.

Directed by Johannes Roberts.

47 meters down could be in a shaft, a deep hole, the sea. In this case it is the sea, specifically the ocean off the Mexico coast (although the scenes were filmed in the Dominican Republic, hotels, beaches, the open sea).

Sharks have frequently been the symbols of terror – as well as providing real terror. Even prior to *Jaws*, there were a number of thriller films with shark in the title, *Shark*, *Shark's* treasure... In fact, the attraction to screenwriters to provide shark and comparable stories continues, from pot boiling stories like the *Sharknado* television films to the Blake Lively 2016 fear-fostering *The Shallows*.

One of the main features of this film is that after 20 minutes, two young women go down in a cage and that for the next 55 minutes both the audience and the women spend it completely underwater.

The underwater sequences are effective and it is quite a surprise (for those who remain to read the credits) to discover that it was all done in an underwater studio in Basildon, in England.

The story is pretty straightforward because the main attention is given to the dangers and the peril. Two sisters go for a holiday to Mexico, one, Kate (Claire Holt) the adventurous type, the other, Lisa (Mandy Moore) the older sister, a touch envious of her outgoing sister, and who is experiencing a breakup, from the only man that she was ever attached to. The director has a nice touch, the opening credits underwater, but only in the swimming pool, and a glass of red wine being tipped over and staining the water, foreboding blood.

The rest of the plot is quite simple. The women meet two attractive locals who persuade them to go out to sea and to go diving in a protective cage. The captain of the boat is played by Matthew Modine. Well, the two men go down and all is well. We know that when the two women go down, all will not be well. There are lots of explanations about how much air will be available, how to be restrained in breathing, how to read the warning signals, and a lot of dialogue reassuring everyone that everything will be okay and they will have the time of their lives!

It is not too long before they see sharks circling and are amazed in admiration, but then a shark gobbles up the camera that they drop. Then the chain of the winch holding the cage breaks and down they go, 47 meters.

For the next hour or so, we share the women's terrors, initial panic, an ability to keep calm, some radio contact, but fears that the boat might have left them, sharks, of course, some possible help and, again of course, hopes raised and then dashed, more peril.

The two women take it in turns to be panicky then fearless with radio contact at times and Matthew Modine being reassuring – the warning against coming to the surface too quickly because of the bends as well as possible nitrogen poisoning after plugging in to relief air tanks underwater.

The film plays a dramatic trick at the ending – but it works. And it is all to do with the solution of how the two women are to be rescued.

Needless to say, but still worth saying, that this is not a film for any audience who feels claustrophobic underwater let alone vicariously experiencing some sense of hopelessness and prospective drowning and the ever present sharks.

It certainly is effective of its kind.

ALI'S WEDDING

Australia, 2017, 110 minutes, Colour.

Osama Sami, Don Hany, Helana Sawires, Rodney Afif.

Directed by Jeffrey Walker.

What to say first? That Ali's Wedding is entertaining or that Ali's Wedding is topical? For Australian audiences – especially those who live in Melbourne – it is very entertaining. For Australian audiences everywhere it is very topical.

This is the story, a true story – as the advertising tagline says, 'unfortunately' – of a family who came from Iraq, were ousted at the time of Saddam Hussein, took refuge in Iran but eventually migrated to Australia, arriving in Melbourne and settling with the Muslim community in the inner northern suburbs of the city. In case anyone was wondering about the truth of the story, there are many photos before the final credits of the actual characters on whom the story is based.

At the centre of the story is Ali, played quite engagingly by actor and comedian, Osama Sami, who also collaborated with highly-awarded Australian writer, Andrew Knight, on the screenplay.

The tone is set instantly – an open paddock outside Melbourne, a tractor coming over the hill, Ali in wedding clothes frantically driving the tractor and then the police in pursuit.

In reality, most Australians have very little idea about migrants, refugees, asylum seekers from the Middle East. There have been a number of powerful documentaries about the plight of boat people sent to Manus Island and Nauru and the conditions they have experienced there and the stances of Australian politicians and public opinion.

But, what about day-to-day living in Melbourne? The older generation, in this case father and mother, Don Hany is impressive as the father, leader of those who gather at the local mosque (men in one part, women in the other) who pray, discuss, and put on plays. Values from original countries are preserved. Yet, the importance of multicultural interactions in Australia are highlighted. And, of course, this is especially true of the younger generation – Aussie clothes, Aussie accents and Ocker language.

One of the main themes of the film is actually truth and lies. Ali walks in the shadow of his reputable father and the expectations of his mother, and memories of his older brother who gave his life to save Ali when he stepped on a mine back home. It takes only one small lie and the consequences are enormous. Ali claims that he got into medicine at Melbourne University with a very high mark, better than the proper son of the very proper alternative religious leader at the mosque. But he does give credit to the highest mark obtained by Diane, originally from Lebanon, working in her father's takeaway shop. And Ali is infatuated,

awkwardly visiting the shop to make contact.

So, some adventures at Melbourne University when Ali attends, despite his mark, and gets tangled in lectures and tutorials – rescued from one by his eager mother and her friends who have wedding plans well in hand. Ali is unwilling. He dreams of Diane. While he gets advice from his friends about how to deal with the tea ceremony and the betrothal, he is so eager that he gets it wrong, everyone initially aghast, but the prospective father-in-law delighted that Ali seems so eager. The wedding of the title, therefore, is that between Ali and his betrothed.

Not that a lot of drama does not happen in the meantime, Ali exposed, humiliated, the interesting way in which the community treats him (surprisingly forgiving), but Diane...

And so, we are back at Ali on the tractor and what has happened at the wedding.

Some audiences might feel a bit apprehensive about the broadly drawn characters and dialogue, fearful that this might be something of a putdown. But, the spirit is so exuberant, inviting the broad audience to share in the satiric touches, the spoof, the funny situations, even the cultural customs and the overdoing of them, that most audiences will be satisfyingly entertained and horizons opened towards Muslims just that bit more widely. Of course, getting to know people makes all the difference.

AMERICAN MADE

US, 2017, 115 minutes, Colour.

Tom Cruise, Domhnall Gleeson, Sarah Wright, Caleb Landry Jones, Jesse Plemons.

Directed by Doug Liman.

It sounds more than a bit odd to use the word “rollicking” and the word “depressing” to describe American Made. Why?

The depressing part of the film is that it is all true. This is the 1970s and 1980s, the era of Jimmy Carter giving speeches about things declining in the US, Ronald Reagan coming in to talk optimistically about the 1980s, Nancy Reagan saying “say no to drugs”, but also the period of the Medellin cartels and Pablo Escobar, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the arming by the United States of the Contras and training them in America, Oliver North and the proposal for Iran to aid the Contras... Very depressing. And it makes one wonder what films about activities of the present will feature in films of 30 years time! Given the American history of 2016-17, it is somewhat depressing already!

As regards “rollicking”, this is very much the tone and style of the film, bright and breezy, bright saturated colours for landscapes, tunes of the times, very boisterous hero with boisterous exploits. And he is played by Tom Cruise.

Both Cruise’s Ethan Hunt, in the Mission Impossible series and his performances as Jack Reacher despite the ironies, are pretty serious, very serious missions, impossible or not. But, as Barry Seal, the true-life action hero of these escapades, he can let his hair down, so to speak, let his inhibitions down, and enjoy himself while giving the solid impression that the hero is enjoying himself.

At the end of the 1970s, Barry Seal was a TWA pilot, enjoying turning autopilot off to disturb his co-pilot as well as give the passengers some unexpected and unwelcome turbulence, laughing all the way home. But, on the way home, he is smuggling drugs through various American cities. He is happily married, and glamorous wife (Sarah Wright), two children and his wife pregnant, a home in Baton Rouge.

Then, one day a government agent (hush-hush), calling himself Monty Schaefer (Domhnall Gleeson) turns up with files all about Barry Seal's activities. We have already seen the political situation in Central America, especially the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, Ronald Reagan speeches (as well as some rollicking excerpts from his *Bedtime for Bonzo* and some westerns), so the offer is to secretly photograph hotspots. So successful is he that he is commissioned to transport gun secretly to the Contras in Nicaragua. It is an offer that Barry can't refuse, in fact an offer that he eagerly embraces.

The trouble is that he has been in league with Pablo Escobar, so what eventuates is a combination flights, guns to Nicaragua, drugs from Columbia dropped at various centres along the way home. Schaefer assists him, and another cargo is introduced, Contras from Nicaragua being flown in to a training camp outside the town of Mena, Arkansas, where Barry and his family have not only quickly moved to stay ahead of the law, but which provides open space for the training camp, an enormous amount of equipment care of the government as well as massive, massive amounts of cash coming in, eagerly banked,, being stored all over the place, even buried in the yard because there is so much.

Isn't America great – as Barry often thinks and states.

It is all very well for Monty Schaefer to run this operation but the DEA becomes interested, so does the FBI, the local police, Arkansas government...

So, in order to avoid time in prison, Barry is persuaded to set up Escobar and associates, now in exile from Columbia, with evidence for the American authorities. Whether intended or not (one is inclined to bet on intended), Barry is exposed and becomes a target for the Columbia cartel. Barry narrates all his exploits on a series of tapes, all labelled for discovery by the authorities.

Not exactly a rollicking end to this real-life story, except that the Reagan Administration goes on, as does the Bush administration, Oliver North gets exposed – but American life, American-made, goes on.

A sardonically pacey harking back to an American past which can now be exposed.

ANNABELLE CREATION

US, 2017, 109 minutes, Colour.

Anthony La Paglia, Miranda Otto, Stephanie Sigman, Talitha Bateman, Lulu Wilson, Grace Fulton, Philippa Coulthard, Mark Bramhall.

Directed by David Sandberg.

After the success of the two *Conjuring* films and then the spinoff with the murderous doll, *Annabelle*, commentators have talked about the creation of a *Conjuring Universe*. Now we

have the prequel to *Annabelle* and a further episode taking up the character of the murderous nun in *The Conjuring 2*, with intimations given in this film.

Most of the characters in this film are female. There are a few men, Anthony La Paglia as the doll maker, Sam Chambers, a priest driving a bus for orphans who also blesses a sinister house, police at the end and some adoptive parents. But, there is a great emphasis on the women, especially from Miranda Otto as Esther, the doll maker's wife. And there is a little daughter who very early in the film is killed in a car accident.

Most of the action takes place 12 years later with a bus load of orphans, under the charge of Sister Charlotte (a very sympathetic nun played by Stephanie Sigman), who have been invited to transfer their institution to the Chamber's house, a vast and somewhat Gothic exterior with a myriad of rooms. The two youngest girls at the centre of the drama, Janice (Talith Bateman) and Linda (Lulu Wilson), are two very convincing performers, especially Janice who is taken over by the evil doll who was evilly possessed by the Chambers' young daughter.

Having emphasised the female presence and the feminine sensibility of the film (although written and directed by men), it needs to be said that macho audiences have expressed disappointment at how "tame" the film is. Rather, it could be said that the film is a "slow burn" leaving the expected mayhem for a final climax.

Interestingly, there is quite a Catholic background to *The Conjuring Universe*. The Chambers go to church on Sunday, ask the priest to bless their house when it falls prey to the sinister presence of their daughter who has possessed the doll (and a reasonable explanation given later in the film). The children are Catholic, pray, are guided well by Sister Charlotte – with, interestingly, Sister and Janice sitting back to back but Janice formally making her confession to Sister Charlotte.

On the one hand, for evil possession sceptics, the film could be seen as rather well-written and well-acted hokum. For those who are susceptible, a different horror experience, because of the doll and the little girls.

(For those wondering about the connection between the *Annabelle* films and the *Conjuring* films, the murderous doll, *Annabelle*, finally found her place in the museum run by the Warrens, the famous couple, and TV personalities, who had a career in exorcisms and appear in *The Conjuring* films and came into prominence with the possessed Amityville house in the 1970s.)

THE CIRCLE

US, 2017, 110 minutes, Colour.

Emma Watson, Tom Hanks, Ellar Coltrane, Bill Paxton, Glenn Hedley, Karen Gillan, John Boyega.

Directed by James Ponsoldt.

Well, this is embarrassing. Do you often have that message appear on your computer screen when Word or Mozilla is telling you that it is not responding and they come up with that embarrassment apology and make suggestions about how you could rectify the situation?

Well, this is embarrassing. When this reviewer consulted the IMDb entry on *The Circle* and found such hostility towards the film, its subject, the screenplay, performances, it was a very awkward moment. Principally because the reviewer had liked the film a lot and was being shamed by a vigorous, sometimes vicious, combination of reviewers, bloggers and trolls. Perhaps I should have guessed it because the cinema release in Melbourne was at only six venues in outer suburbs, for one week only, one session per day at 10:15 am.

So, the challenge was to articulate what was so interesting in the film.

It was the subject. *The Circle* is a technology company which is moving so fast that it is gaining members as prolifically as Facebook, Link-in, Twitter..., especially members in the younger age bracket who are eager to be in instant and detailed communication with as many people as possible and as instantly as possible. The aim seems to be to make everything, every thought, every feeling, even every secret, as available as imaginable.

At the centre of the story is Mae, a strong performance by Emma Watson, a young woman doing secretarial work who gets the opportunity to have an interview to work for *The Circle*, assisted by her good friend, Anna (Karen Gillan) who has a significant position in the company. Mae gets the job and is delighted. She goes to the weekly Friday evening gathering of workers and members, enthusiastic young adults, who listen in admiration to the genial and good-humoured self-promotion of the CEO, Eamon Bailey, played, significantly, by Tom Hanks.

Important are characters in the background of Mae's life, especially her parents (Bill Paxton and Glenn Hedley who both died soon after completion of the film) and a kind of boyfriend, Mercer, played by Elliot Coltrane (whom audiences saw growing up, year by year in the twelve years of the making of Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*).

Mae is constantly challenged by exuberant co-workers, wondering why she doesn't participate in all the communal activities of the company. Mae likes to kayak and, one night, to get away from things, she takes a kayak from a locked facility, goes onto San Francisco Bay, gets into trouble and immediately there are searchlights and rescuers. Everybody knows about and has looked at what she has done. The consequence is that Mae is challenged, acknowledging how she felt bad when she was keeping secrets, enthusiastically agreeing to wear a mini-camera all the time so that all the members of *The Circle* can see her every action, share her every thought and feeling, including her contact with her parents, her father suffering severely from MS.

While the audience in the cinema is looking at Mae, brief message after message, Twitter-like, sail across the screen, everybody participating in Mae's life. Mae is so buoyed by all of this even to suggesting that as individuals register for *The Circle*, automatically they are put on the electoral roll – leading to an optimistic sharing of ideas and attitudes, everyone united. She doesn't think of the word 'totalitarian'.

So, the challenge to the film's audience, the screenplay written by Dave Eggers who wrote the original novel, is where we stand on communication, where we stand on privacy, where we stand on invasions of privacy, guilt feelings and shame and shaming, and where social media is taking us and is taking us so rapidly.

Maybe the bloggers felt threatened by the message of this film, a caution on the repercussions of social media, some of them potentially tragic.

This reviewer liked the message and its challenge, the performances, the implications of the themes. It is hoped that there are some out there who will also like *The Circle*.

THE DARK TOWER

US, 2017, 95 minutes, Colour.

Idris Elba, Matthew McConaughey, Tom Taylor, Dennis Haysbert, Claudia Kim, Jackie Earle Haley, Abby Lee, Kathryn Winnick, José Zuniga.

Directed by Nikolaj Arcel.

For more than 40 years, Stephen King has been regaling worldwide audiences with a variety of horror stories in his novels and then in the screen versions of the novel is. They run an enormous range, horror, both apocalyptic and contemporary, and this film combining both.

The film opens with children playing – not for long in a Stephen King story. They are targeted by an evil sorcerer, Walter, and their inner energy, their “shine” is extracted by machines and fired towards a thin high tower that reaches towards the sky – a kind of transcendent presence that might guarantee safety to the world or, because of a variety of portals, many worlds. It seemed to have a similar function to the monolith in Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey.

This is the stuff of nightmares. And, literally it is, young Jake, Tom Taylor, has these dreams continually, spending his time drawing them, stark black and white pictures of the tower, the evil Walter and a blurred figure of a gunslinger. Jake has lost his father tragically in a fire. His mother is concerned about his mental health as is his stepfather who, of course, he dislikes intensely.

Then, the film reveals that this other world, other planet, has its own reality and not just in Jake’s dreams. Just as he is about to be taken to a psychology camp, he escapes the representatives who, of course, are servants of Walter. He is given a clue that a mysterious house of his dreams can be found in Brooklyn and then makes his way there, and is enticed to go through a mysterious portal.

He soon encounters Roland, the gunslinger, whose mission is to destroy Walter, especially after Walter destroys his father. The two protagonists are played by a rather high powered-stars: Idris Elba as Roland, the gunslinger, and eerily mysterious and evil, Matthew McConnaughey as Walter.

While there are a lot of mysterious activities in the other planet, especially with the staff working on the children and extracting their inner “shine”, there is a sinister researcher, Jackie Earle Haley. The trouble is that Water has powers over life and death and can say, in a Matthew McConnaughey², “stop breathing” – and they do.

One of the intriguing aspects of the plot is that there are several portals in New York City and that the central characters can come and go, Jake searching for his mother, Roland needing medical help (but helped by medication, hotdogs and Coca-Cola).

The plot is particularly American with an enormous reliance on guns. With the gunslinger and the guns, the gun is seemingly glorified as the weapon of choice for winning the battle and evil. And, quite a body count. Roland does say that whoever aims with his hand has forgotten his father's face and that aiming should be through the eye and the heart. This is what he teaches Jake – and this will clinch the victory of good over evil.

Idris Elba is certainly an earnest hero. Matthew Mc Connaughey, dressed in black, employing his Texas drawl in a menacing way, is an unexpected devil figure.

Stephen King offers us an inter-connected world and a science fantasy parable of the struggle between good and evil.

EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING

US, 2017, 91 minutes, Colour.

Amandla Stenberg, Nick Robinson, Anika Noni Rose, Ana de la Reguera.

Directed by Stella Meggie.

Everything, Everything is something of a contemporary fairytale. It is set in affluent California where money seems to be no object and so everything is possible.

The film also dramatises inter-racial themes but does not draw attention to them explicitly, leaving the audience to accept the realities.

The film is very much geared to feminine sensibility, director, the original Young Adult novel by Nicola Yoon, as well as most of the central characters. Female audiences, older and younger will be able to identify with the characters, and young male audiences should find Nick Robinson's Olly sympathetic.

The initial voice-over comes from a teenager, 17 turning 18, Madeline, Maddy, played with some charm by Amandla Stenberg. We learn immediately that she is confined to her home and has been since she was a young child, diagnosed with a severe auto immune deficiency. She cannot go out, has lived inside the house, relating to her mother who is also a doctor and cares for her and a visiting nurse who sometimes brings her little daughter. Otherwise Maddy has no communication outside but has a greater yearning, as indicated in the opening credits where, in her imagination, she looks through the glass window and it breaks and she steps through and then floats in a pool.

Some audiences may remember the John Travolta television movie The Boy in the Plastic Bubble. Other moviegoers may recall the plot of a lesser-known farcical comedy, Bubble Boy, with a young Jake Gyllenhaal who has been confined to a plastic bubble in the house, not allowed to go out, cared for with ultra-attention by his mother. It played on comedy. This scenario is much more serious.

One day Maddy notices a family arriving next door, especially the teenage son of the family, Olly, Nick Robinson. He and his sister bring a bunt cake as a neighbourly gift but Maddy's mother rejects it. However, beginning with eye contact and waves, the two begin to communicate, especially when he holds up a page from the window with his mobile phone

number and the communication begins.

While we know that Maddy would like to get out of the house but is apprehensive about her condition, we don't quite know what is going to happen in terms of this teenage attraction and relationship.

We might guess that at some stage Maddy and Olly will meet and that Maddy's mother will not be best pleased. Then, will Maddy go out of the house, risking her health for Olly's sake, testing out how ill she is or not?

As the film goes on, it seems less and less plausible in terms of realistic action, especially in the character of the mother and her motivation and love for her daughter, in Maddy's motivations for decisions and the consequences.

Yes, there have been some teenage stories of romance where the heroine actually dies, so throughout the film we are actually open to whether the love story is one of happiness or one of doom. So, no spoilers in this review.

GIFTED

US, 2017, 101 minutes, Colour.

Chris Evans, McKenna Grace, Lindsay Duncan, Jenny Slate, Octavia Spencer, John M. Jackson, Glenn Plummer, John Finn.

Directed by Marc Webb.

Gifted is a word more frequently used than before, referring to individuals who could be classified under the title, genius. It is particularly used in reference to young children who are emerging as prodigies, be it intellectual, be it with a talent for performance...

This is quite engaging film which focuses on a seven-year-old, Mary (played rather convincingly by McKenna Grace) who is about to go to school, an ordinary school, where she is bored as the teacher asks the children basic sums. When she is asked more complicated addition and multiplication, she adds in the square root which alerts the teacher, Bonnie (Jenny Slate) to wonder where Mary would be best helped.

The thing is that Mary is living with her uncle, Frank (Chris Evans in a very sympathetic role), the brother of Mary's mother, Diane, a mathematical genius who has committed suicide but entrusted her daughter to her brother. He has been a philosophy professor but has given it up and works on boat-mending in Florida, parenting Mary.

In comes an enormous complication in the form of Frank's mother, Evelyn, a very British and determined woman (Lindsay Duncan, a strong stage and screen actress which is evident in a crucial court scene where she is cross-examined and gives strong-minded answers).

Head or heart?

When Evelyn takes Frank to court for custody, the past story emerges, Evelyn herself talented in mathematics, Cambridge-educated, but marrying and coming to the United States and living out her mathematical frustrations in the genius of her daughter. She has intervened

strongly in her daughter's life and relationships. On the other hand, she has been rather dismissive of Frank.

In the court sequences, with powerful cross examinations of both Evelyn and Frank, the audience is challenged to make their own decision about what is best for Mary. Should she have every opportunity to develop intellectually and mathematically? A decision for the head. Should she have more opportunity to act her age, to have a "normal" young girl's experiences and grow into a rounded personality? A decision for the heart.

The judge has to make a decision. The question is raised whether it can be some kind of compromise. And, even if the answer is yes, how is the compromise to work in practice and what is the effect on Mary, especially her emotions.

To reinforce the issue of emotions, Octavia Spencer appears in something of a now-familiar role for her, as a sympathetic neighbour with whom Mary bonds, providing a kind of grandmother and nurturing figure.

This is a film which does appeal more to the heart than the head in asking the audience to respond to Mary, and the dilemmas about her education and her growing up.

GIRLS TRIP

US, 2017, 122 minutes, Colour.

Regina Hall, Queen Latifah, Jade Pinkett Smith, Tiffany Haddish, Larenz Tate, Mike Colter, Kate Walsh, Lara Grice, Mike Epps and, as themselves, Sean 'Diddy' Combs, Common, Faith Evans, Terry McMillan, Morris Chestnut, Ava Du Vernay, Mariah Carey.

Directed by Malcolm D. Lee.

This film was hugely successful in the United States when released. It is very American. And the focus is African-American. It is difficult to say whether it travels well internationally although it was highly promoted.

It is an obvious statement to make: this is a film about women behaving badly. But, the bad behaviour is meant to be not only funny but highly entertaining with the premise that "anything goes". And it does. One of the questions raised by women in the audience is how much this film actually demeans women by presenting them in this light and as the equal of men behaving badly.

The premise is reasonable enough. Four women have a long history of friendship, singing in the 1990s, the Flossy Posse. As time has passed, there has been distance and some hostility between some of the group. When one of them, Ryan (Regina Hall) becomes highly successful, with books saying you can have it all, with television interviews with her husband and their being presented as a wonderful celebrity couple, the group gets together again with a promotion trip to New Orleans.

So far, so ordinary. However, one of the group, Dina (a hyper kinetic and no-holds-barred, Tiffany Haddish) sets off a blustering, boisterous tone. Jada Pinkett as Lisa (one wonders what her husband Will Smith thought of the script) is married, and a mother, more reserved and cautious though the screenplay allows her to throw caution to the winds fairly quickly

and, at moments, she outdoes Dina. Then there is Sasha, played by Queen Latifah, initially a journalist but currently managing a scandal mongering blog, compromising photos of celebrities, which has caused something of a rift between her and Ryan.

And, behind the scenes, Ryan's husband is two-timing her with an ambitious femme fatale – but, in the wings, there is a bass player who has always been devoted to her.

So, it is not so much the plot but how the plot is handled. First of all, it is very much a film for Extroverts Anonymous. Introverts in the audience may well be quickly exhausted by the loudness, the brightness, and the excessiveness of all that is going on. Actually, there is a whole lot of screeching going on. Girls together, out on the town, spiked drinks and hallucinations, donning weakness and causing cat fights, ogling the men...

Now, in recent decades, American comedies especially, have been trying to outdo each other in breaking the boundaries of good taste – and certainly succeeding in breaking more and more boundaries as time goes on. This is especially the case with sex and sexuality. In the past commentators mentioned innuendo. Innuendo is often rare in this film – it is all, one might say, outnuendo, which enables a certain blatancy. It is upfront and frequently in your face. How funny is it? Or is the audience being forced to laugh because this is the in thing and expected? A favourable Melbourne review (four stars out of five) praised its inventive sex talk and joyful vulgarity.

The other aspect of this kind of American film, especially those made in the last decade by producer Judd Apatow, is what might be called the Judd Apatow-syndrome, indulge the audience in all kinds of raucous and crass comedy and, in *Girls Trip*, gross and gross-out sex, bodily function sequences but, by the end, a return to some kind of moral stances, speeches about being honest, sympathetic glances of for-the-moment repentant faces and some resolution to return to, at least, some moral decencies. Except in this one, after all the humble breast-striking, the Flossy Posse women are all joking in bed, smoking and passing pot to one another.

It is something of a surprise to see how many prominent African-American personalities have cameos as themselves, frequently in singing roles, including Common, Sean Diddy Combs, Faith Evans, author Terry McMillan, Morris Chestnut, Mike Epps, Mariah Carey and director, Ava Du Vernay.

When asked by a fellow reviewer to encapsulate in one word the experience of watching *Girls Trip*, the word was “excruciating”. And that is from an introvert.

HAMPSTEAD

UK, 2017, 104 minutes, Colour.

Diane Keaton, Brendan Gleeson, James Norton, Lesley Manville, Simon Callow, Phil Davis. Directed by Joel Hopkins.

There is often a nice expectation about a film when it has a title referring to a particular area of London. Will we see a lot of the area? Who are the people who live there? And will the area lend itself to some romance? Yes, to all the questions.

Hampstead Heath has been the location for quite a number of London-set films. We do see a

lot of the Heath, the open park lands, the houses surrounding and the streets and shops, the view of the London skyline in the distance. A pleasure for the audience to be there.

This is Emily's story. She is an American, she herself referring to English opinion that she is something of a quirky American (still shades of Annie Hall), has married an Englishman, lived in London for years, has a son. But, her husband has died and has left her in quite some financial difficulties.

She is a friend of a number of the women in the area, middle class to upper-class women, used to a comfortable way of life, assuaging their consciences by taking on a number of protests (like the elimination of mobile phone towers in the area) and interested in the pulling down of old hospital buildings and new accommodation development. Emily is part of the group. She also works as a volunteer in a charity shop and friendly with the young man who is distributing leaflets for particular courses like preserving the salmon.

Emily has a son, Philip, played by Grantchester's James Norton. A complication arises when the Hampstead ladies set up an eligible middle-aged bachelor lawyer who could help solve Emily's financial problems – which he is only too eager to do and to form a liaison with Emily.

So, where can this go? The answer is in the form of Brendan Gleeson, something of a bear of a man, initially with a grizzly impression but showing more cuddly signs as the film goes on. He is Donald, who lives in what looks like from the outside a dilapidated shack, an independent life, growing his own vegetables, gruff with outsiders. Actually, Emily notices him when she is looking from her attic with binoculars she is thinking of selling and becomes intrigued by him, sees him being attacked and calls first-aid.

Curiosity gets the better of her and she approaches him. Yes, it is an unlikely romance but, of course, that is where it is going. The couple hit it off, he tells his story of coming from Dublin, escaping his home and family, a relationship with a London woman, her death, his building the shack and living on the Heath – to the disgust of his uppercrust neighbours.

The developers are wanting to pull down an old hospital and are certainly wanting Donald's land. Emily helps him, the young man protesting for the salmon joins her in sprucing up Donald's house, Emily getting a protest group to act for him (which he initially gruffly disavows).

The problem goes to court, presided over by Simon Callow, the developers eager to oust Donald and reclaim the land, he trying to show that he has a claim, relying on a neighbour (Phil Davis) who kindly offered to carry an oven all those years ago but whom Donald criticised and attacked. He becomes linchpin for a solution to the problem.

That is, the problem of the shack. But, the further problem arises whether Emily could live with Donald in the shack or whether she should sell her flat and buy a cottage in the country.

As we are puzzling how this can be resolved and how the film can end, it does rather nicely and romantically. But how, you might ask!

THE HITMAN'S BODYGUARD

US, 2017, 118 minutes, Colour.

Ryan Reynolds, Samuel L. Jackson, Salma Hayek, Elodie Yung, Gary Oldman, Richard E. Grant, Joaquim de Almeida.

Directed by Patrick Hughes.

It would have to be a very strong candidate for the adrenaline-pumping action film of the year. As might be expected from the title, there is a fair amount of violence but most of it is quite tongue-in-cheek – and the tongue-in-cheekiness extends to a lot of ironic humour, deadpan remarks, and the use of popular songs to counterpoint the action.

In fact, the title even sounds tongue-in-cheek. Why would a hitman need a bodyguard?

It takes a little time before there is an answer to this question. The film opens with a rather James Bond-like introduction, cars through London, helicopter over London, a respectful scene at an airport with a sudden assassination. This is the realm of the bodyguard, Michael (Ryan Reynolds). With the assassination of his client happening right in front of him, Michael is demoted, fired and has to go into private enterprise. To keep the humorous flavour, there is an interlude where Michael, looking rather dishevelled – although he usually operates in a suit and tie – has to escort the panicky businessman, Richard E. Grant, from a building from which he has eliminated all the shooters.

There are also some sequences early in the film with the president of Belarus, Gary Oldman at his most sinister and savage (interesting that they chose the president of Belarus who, for a long time, has exercised rather despotic power in this country). The president interrogates a rebel professor and murders his children. We see that later he is on trial at the International Court in the Hague.

Then, at last, the appearance of the hitman. He is played with considerable zest by Samuel L. Jackson, who is being called by Interpol as a witness against the president of Belarus and has to be transported from Manchester to the Hague via Amsterdam.

Incidentally, the variety of European locations, especially the cities, offers many an opportunity for audiences to enjoy the touristic aspects of the cities – and, especially towards the end, the most elaborate chase through the streets and canals of Amsterdam and then through the streets of The Hague. They are very adrenaline-pumping!

Needless to say, the Belarus president has his contacts, thugs roaming England and the Netherlands, and a traitor within Interpol who is revealed almost immediately so that we can see his machinations, the ambush to kill the hitman, continually tracking him throughout the countryside, with lots of shootouts and explosions.

Actually, the film plays like a variation on the odd couple, the hitman, Darius, not worried about rules, regulations, not waiting for Michael to do his planning, consider the logical best, require the wearing of seatbelt... And they have arguments along these lines, working off each other, and Darius obviously enjoying himself, singing at various times, including getting a lift in a van full of singing nuns!

And there is romance. There are quite number of flashbacks explaining Darius and Michael, especially their stories of falling in love. Darius has married Sonia, a more than tough Salma Hayek, who worked in a Mexico City bar, fighting recalcitrant customers – and all of this

shown with Lionel Richie singing romantically in the background. There is a similar treatment of Michael falling in love with the French Interpol officer, Amelia (Elodie Yung).

There is split-second timing at the end, loads of gunmen trying to prevent Michael and Darius getting to the court, the defence counsel telling the judge that the time had passed but, with only a few seconds to spare, Michael and Darius arrive.

Actually the film doesn't end there, there is a whole lot more action including a helicopter and explosions.

One hopes that the writers will think up a nicely complex plot, some funny as well as serious situations and good lines for the sequel. It could be The Bodyguard's Hitman, but, in fact, ironically, this is the climax of the film.

Yes, it has touches of the violent, and Salma Hayek and Samuel L. Jackson exploit what a prim American friend referred to as "cuss language". So, perhaps something of a guilty pleasure.

AN INCONVENIENT SEQUEL: TRUTH TO POWER

US, 2017, 98 minutes, Colour.

Al Gore.

Directed by Bonni Cohen, John Shenk.

Al Gore has made his mark on American society. Serving for six years as vice president to Bill Clinton, he then stood for the presidency, losing in a decision from the Supreme Court of America to George W. Bush.

In not becoming president of the US, Gore was able to devote his time to environmental causes which he was always interested in (with scenes from his presence at international meetings from the 1980s). And he was able to appear in the documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, which won the Oscar for Best Documentary of 2006. His name became commonplace with environmentalists as well as politicians, whether believers in climate change or sceptics. After the film, he set up an institute for environmentalist trainees with candidates from all over the world, able to contribute to the environmental discussions and influence political decisions. A number of scenes show participants and his workshops, listing the variety of countries from which they came.

A decade later, a sequel, with some tones of desperation about what has happened and what has not happened since 2006 – but, some optimism about the increasing consciousness throughout the world, the serious look at disasters in the last 10 years, developments in such countries as India, and the 2015 Paris agreement. (There are many downbeat moments towards the end of the film with Donald Trump's campaign, his election as American president, his anti-environment advisers, his withdrawal from the Paris agreement.)

But, something can and must be done. Learning more of the truth leads to an effective exercise of power as the subtitle suggests.

As might be expected, the visuals are often very impressive. This is particularly true of

disaster sequences, floodwaters in the streets of Miami, the devastation of hurricanes in the Philippines, the contrast between floods, drought, the reality of evaporation and the weakening of soil and its consequences for farming and food producing.

The film ranges around the world as might be expected. Al Gore has many contacts. His visit to India and discussions with the authorities there, their choices concerning coal, their comments about being where the United States was 150 years earlier and the needs of people for energy and electricity, seems to offer something of an impasse, even in Paris. However, the film shows Gore contacting a businessman with an interest in renewables and the making of a deal concerning loans and interest rates with the Indian government – and final view of extensive solar panels in India.

Al Gore is a genial speaker, connects with an audience, is enthusiastic, sometimes impassioned. And he uses power points and video clips to great effect – as does the film.

Which means that the film is something of a visual lecture, an inspirational movie, a challenging documentary.

The environmental movement has developed over the decades but there are still many who are sceptics, have political and/or business interests, or even religious arguments about climate change.

But, for believers as well as sceptics, there is still the enormous human responsibility to control carbon emissions, for recycling, not wasting, and a growing consciousness for the preservation and health of the world – and for those who will inherit it in the future.

KILLING GROUND

Australia, 2016, 88 minutes, Colour.

Aaron Pedersen, Aaron Glenane, Harriet Dyer, Ian Meadows, Mitzie Ruhlmann, Tiarnie Coupland, Maya Stange, Stephen Hunter.

Directed by Damien Power.

Over the decades, Australian film makers have been fascinated by the Australian bush as well as the Australian outback. Sometimes it is a place of wonder, where aboriginal people went walkabout, where city people, escaping from the humdrum ordinary life, could live amongst the trees and bush, the rivers and waterfalls, the beauty of nature. And sometimes, in the thrillers, it is not a comfortable place to be.

There have been two versions of Long Weekend, and, of course, there has been the menace of the films of Wolf Creek and the television series. There are very strange, psychotic, characters out there in the bush, in the outback.

And, Killing Ground, is in the same vein.

It starts in a breezy kind of way, a young couple going camping, to the place where the young man went as a boy. He is a doctor, they chat about anatomy on the way, it is a wonderful chance to get away. We also learn that it is New Year's Eve, and a marriage proposal is in the air. The couple set up their tent, noticing another, rather large tent some distance away on the

sand of the river.

We also see the family who occupied the large tent, mother and father, teenage daughter, young child. The parents go on a walk towards the falls, the daughter staying behind to look at photos on her phone.

We have glimpsed two men at the pub where the couple stop, the woman (and ourselves) startled by the sudden barking of a vicious dog. The two men are German and Chook, hunters, pals who go out into the bush. There is some sinister talk, suggestions of prison sentences, of sexual assault.

Eventually, the audience is able to put these different pieces together, working out the timeline of the events.

Most audiences going to see Killing Ground will know that it is a story of menace, of violence, guns, assault...

Sadly, news stories over the decades indicate that the horror of this scenario is not entirely invented. There have been some sinister murders in the bush and the outback.

As this kind of horror story in the bush goes, it is well made, the audience immersed in the beauty and then the menace of the bush, characters, briefly sketched, but credible enough – and truly ugly, insane killers.

It is surprising to find Aaron Pedersen menacing as one of the killers, supported by Aaron Glenane, also effective.

And the film does raise the issues of how to deal with such situations, notions of courage, bravery, panic, self-protection...

LOGAN LUCKY

US, 2017, 118 minutes, Colour.

Channing Tatum, Adam Driver, Daniel Craig, Riley Keogh, Hilary Swank, Sebastian Stan, Seth Mac Farlane, David Denman, Kathryn Waterston, Dwight Yokam,
Directed by Steven Soderbergh.

Logan Lucky is another American heist film, not surprisingly coming from Stephen Soderbergh, who showed how he could do extraordinarily elaborate casino robberies in Ocea's 11 – and then followed up with Oceans 12 and Oceans 13.

This time we are in the states of West Virginia and North Carolina, getting to know the Logan family which has, so far, not been particularly blessed with luck. Jimmy (Channing Tatum) and Clyde (Adam Driver) have served in Iraq and have come back wounded, Jimmy and his leg and Clyde having an artificial arm. Jimmy works in a North Carolina project where sinkholes are being filled in under a racing car arena. Clyde works in the bar. Then Jimmy is fired.

There are further family complications with Jimmy's ex-wife, Katie Holmes, who has married

a car salesman, Seth MacFarlane², and Jimmy dotes on their young daughter who sings competitively in a local school. What is Jimmy to do?

A robbery, of course, and, most elaborate robbery which, on paper, would seem to be beyond the capacities of those who are participating, not only Jimmy and Clyde, but a prisoner, Bang, who knows how to blow up safe doors, and his rather hillbilly brothers.

And, of course they do it. It is surprising how successful they are, given that there are several glitches during the operation, that an escape from prison by the explosives expert and Clyde has to take place on the afternoon of the robbery with them getting back to prison, safe and sound, in the evening. And, the robbery takes place while there is a race going on above in the arena.

A big part of the enjoyment of this film is the character of the explosives expert – of all people, Daniel Craig, a long way from James Bond, with local accent and articulation, rather casual, even in the face of failure, but calmly using his expertise, in the device of getting out of the prison, and, with the collaboration of fellow prisoners, calmly getting back into prison as if nothing had happened.

Jimmy, of course, is watching his daughter sing – and pleasing her father with her rendition of his favourite song, John Denver's Country Road. This really is a West Virginia film.

Finally, the FBI is called in, in the form of Hilary Swank. She has a shrewd idea of what happened – but all alibis and contingencies are covered.

Nothing particularly startling but enjoyable in the heist kind of way.

MADAME

France, 2017, 91 minutes, Colour.

Toni Collette, Harvey Keitel, Rossy de Palma, Michael Smiley, Tom Hughes.

Directed by Amanda Sthers.

This is a French film with an international cast, a French writer-director who brings a female sensibility to the story and the central characters.

In fact, the real central character of the film is not Toni Collette as Madame, Anne, married to the older Bob (Harvey Keitel), his second marriage, with a stepson as well as three children of her own. The main character is Maria, played by Rossy De Palma who appeared in a number of films by Pedro Almodovar. She is the maid in the Paris household.

In many ways, this could be considered a comedy of manners – and a comedy of quite some bad manners.

Bob has financial problems and is trying to sell off a Last Supper by Caravaggio. The evaluator for the authenticity of the painting is a good friend, David (Michael Smiley). Bob and Anne decide to host a lavish dinner which will also include the buyer of the painting and his wife, and a French tutor who is trying to coach Bob in conversational French. There are 12 to sit down to dinner. However, Steven (Tom Hughes), Bob's oldest son, suddenly turns

up, invites himself to dinner and, horror of horrors, that means thirteen places at table.

Which means that the early part of the drama is how to solve this dread situation. Anne gets the brainwave that Maria should sit down to dinner, fourteen places. So, rather unwillingly, Maria gets dressed, comes down to dinner, is placed safely beside Bob so that he can control her, with Anne critically surveying everything from the head of the table. Maria sits next to David and he is immediately charmed (although told by Steven mischievously that Maria has royalty connections). There is tension at the dinner – relieved, not for Anne, when David persuades Maria to tell a rude joke.

It is not all's well that ends well. David is smitten, keeps contact with Maria, invites her out to the cinema, to meals (with Bob and Anne spying on them with the dilemma of whether to tell David the truth or not, Bob hesitating until the Caravaggio is authenticated). But, for Anne, it is a matter of class, social status, and, despite some gestures of friendship and kindness towards Maria, 26 is a dominating snob.

Rossy De Palma brings dignity to her role as Maria, something of a fish out of water, in no way glamorous, but a woman of feeling, who has her own daughter, and is thrilled by the attentions from David and falling in love.

How can it all end? Because this is a French film there is discussion about (and some dismissiveness concerning) happy American endings. In fact, just before the final credits, Steven, who has overcome his writer's block by writing a novella based on the experience of Maria and David, refers to audiences and whether they want an American happy ending or not.

And the film stops, leaving the audience to ponder the clues and decide for themselves whether there can be a happy ending or not.

SMALL TOWN KILLERS/ DRAEBERNE FRA NIBE

Denmark, 2016, 94 minutes, Colour.

Ulrich Thomsen, Nicolas Bro, Mia Lyhne, Lena Maria Christensen, Marius Dociński, Gwen Taylor.

Directed by Ole Bornedal.

No, this is not a serious Danish look at serial killers out in the countryside in small villages. Rather, it is a black comedy – not without a body count.

Early in the film, the local policeman refers to the two central characters, two private enterprise builders, Edward and Ib (Ulrich Thomson and Nicholas Bro), as Dumb and Dumber. He means the characters played by Jim Carrey and Jeff Daniels in the 1995 comedy. In fact, the policeman could have referred more tellingly to the prequel, Dumb and Dumberer. They certainly are.

Older audiences may enjoy the marital problems of the two builders and their wives. The men are sex-preoccupied, sex on the brain (though brain does seem to be an overstatement in this case). They discuss it, one going to a therapist, the other ogling his wife as she prepares to go salsa dancing in the local church. The wives, on the other hand, have more things on their

minds, the possibility of having children, a more meaningful relationship. And, at the salsa lessons, they are enthralled by the enthusiasm and verve of the instructor (and regret that he is gay).

And the title? First of all, the men decide to divorce their wives but find that this would be hugely expensive, even though they have a whole lot of cash stashed away in the fridge in the basement because they are doing a lot of their work by hand and cash payments rather than contracts. Then, Edward gets the bright (only for the moment as he goes online) to hire a hitman to get rid of the wives. He chooses a Russian. Actually, when the wives discover what has happened and encounter the hitman, they decide to go British, so much more understated and disciplined, and hire Miss Nipplesworthy (it's that kind of comedy), Gwen Taylor, doing something of an audition for a murderous Miss Marple.

Obviously, things are going to get out of hand. The Russian is continually drunk and always drinking, murdering the Afghan taxi driver who curses him. Corpse number 1 to get rid of. And there will be more.

Of course, the men change their mind, trying to persuade the hitman to go back home, trying therapy so that his memories will be erased, dressing up in drag and pretending to be their wives declaring that they now love their husbands and he needn't kill them!

The ending will provide very little surprise – not the facts, of course, but the manner in which it all happens, Miss Nipplesworthy going down as she sings Rule Britannia.

Ulrich Thomsen as Edward generally plays in dramas and comedy is not his forte, even though he does let loose at the end dancing salsa. Nicolas Bro on the other hand, a large actor, is much more at home in comedy – especially when he lets his inner female out, pretending to be his wife, and reminiscing about a first date as a teenager (girl).

In fact, the Danes are not noted for their light comedies – and when the two wives explain to Miss Nipplesworthy that they would like their murder to be Scandinavian, she replies “dull and dark”.

Some amusing moments – but, all concerned may have been trying too hard.

VICTORIA & ABDUL

UK, 2017, 112 minutes, Colour.

Judi Dench, Ali Fazal, Tim Piggott-Smith², Olivia Williams, Michael Gambon, Simon Callow, Eddie Izzard, Fenella Woolgar, Adeel Akhtar, Julian Wadham.

Directed by Stephen Frears.

Lest anyone think or suspect that this picture of Queen Victoria is a throwback to 19th century ra-ra Empire days and glorification of the Victorian era, there is quite a lot of Britons satirising themselves and their past in the early part of this film.

Yes, it is a picture of Queen Victoria. One might say that it is something of a warts and all picture, highlighting how crusty she could be but also how lonely she could be in her record-breaking long reign. And, since she is played once again by Judi Dench, the impact on the

audience is particularly strong. In searching for a word to describe Judi Dench's performance, this reviewer would decide on the word "perfect".

The title is something of a surprise except for those who are experts on the reign of Queen Victoria. The opening of the film says that it is based on real events and then adds "mostly". A look at the rather long Wikipedia entry about Abdul Karim shows that the events in the film and the characterisation seem to be quite strongly true to life.

We know who Queen Victoria is from the many films about her reign. In 1997 we even saw Judi Dench, in an Oscar-nominated performance, as Queen Victoria in Mrs Brown and her strong friendship with the Scotsman, John Brown. In this film, John Brown has been dead for some time and there is an emotional hole in the heart of Queen Victoria. She has little satisfaction from her children, considering her rather profligate oldest son, Bertie (to be Edward VII) as an embarrassment. She has affection for some of the servants but the official members of her household seem to be career servants.

So, who is Abdul (very empathetic Indian actor, Ali Fazal)? He is a rather genial Moslem from Agra, a clerk in a prison, filing names and dates. He has given some opinions about a carpet sent to England for Queen Victoria's Jubilee. He also has the advantage of being tall and so is chosen by British officials to go to London to present a special coin to the Queen. He was to have a tall companion but this man had an accident with an elephant and so a rather shorter man goes instead, Mohammed (a very good comic role for Adeel Akhtar) who finds it very difficult going to England, being there, finding the food and manners barbaric, longing for home, but able to criticise England in British terms, a bloody terrible place.

At this time, Victoria is nearing 70, describing herself as a crusty, greedy old lady, fat but an inordinate love for power. She has servants galore, to dress her, to wait at table for ambassadorial functions (and the banquet scene with all the servants in livery, the cooks in the kitchen, the little boy running up the corridor with announcements, is enough to stir aggressively socialist attitudes in the audience). And there are rituals, especially for the presentation of the medal with strict instructions not to look at the Queen.

Abdul does.

The Queen is interested in him, attracted to him, favours him, having him as an advisor, teaching her Urdu, appointing him her Munshie, religious mentor. And the friendship becomes closer over the years, allowing him to go back to India to bring his wife and mother-in-law, wearing burkhas, allowing him more access to her presence than many of her staff, taking him to Scotland and Balmoral and picnics in the Highlands, for a visit to Florence (and a meeting with Simon Callow as Puccini, truly hamming it up).

The film becomes more and more serious as it progresses, especially with the Royal household becoming more and more antipathetic to Abdul, insulting and racist in their comments and behaviour, conspiring to dishonour him in the Queen's eyes, invoking Bertie (Eddie Izzard) who certainly does not approve of his mother and her seeming insanity.

This makes the drama all the more interesting, offering insights into the work of the Queen as head of state, her royal duties and responsibilities, her decisions, the influence of the Prime Minister (Michael Gambon), the head of the household, Sir Henry Ponsonby (Tim Piggott-Smith).

The film moves to the death of Queen Victoria in 2001, the reaction of Edward VII to Abdul, Abdul and his return to India and his complete loyalty and devotion to the monarch who favoured him.

Given the Muslim ascendancy in today's world as well as fears of and antagonism towards Muslim asylum seekers and refugees, let alone Islamist jihadists, this is a timely entertainment to alert audiences, especially Western audiences, to prejudices and intolerant behaviour.

The film was written by Lee Hall, who also wrote *Billy Elliot*, and directed by Stephen Frears who directed *The Queen* and directed Judi Dench as *Philomena*. It is quite sumptuous to look at. It is often very funny at the expense of upper-class 19th century aristocrats. It is serious in its reflections on the role of the British Empire, especially its presence in India, its exploitation of Indians and the move towards independence.

In all aspects, it is very interesting and enjoyable.

VOYAGE OF TIME: THE IMAX EXPERIENCE

US, 2016, 45 minutes, Colour.

Narrated by Brad Pitt.

Directed by Terence Malick.

This is a 45 minutes IMAX experience that invites its audience to surrender to it. (It should be noted that writer-director, Terence Malick, produced two versions of his *Voyage of Time*. The first is a feature length documentary film narrated by Cate Blanchett. The second is this film, a briefer IMAX experience, narrated by Brad Pitt.)

Audiences will remember the cosmic sequences in the award-winning *The Tree of Life*. In that fiction film, Malick was exploring the human family, love and conflicts, but tracing it back to the history of the evolving world and evolving humans. This is the presupposition here, focusing on a little girl on a building estate, addressing the film as a letter to her, inviting her to wonder about the world in which she finds herself.

Wonder is probably a keyword for this film. (Another of Malick's films is titled, *To the Wonder*.)

It is a powerfully visual experience, especially on the vastness of the IMAX screen. With spectacular special effects, suggestions are made about the void of the universe, the Big Bang, the explosions, an expansion of energy. Contemporary landscapes from such countries as Iceland and Chile provide visual images that suggest these *primaeval* times. Gradually, there is the evolution of basic life forms, the development of these forms, life in plants and then the evolution of live creatures with bodies, and then consciousness.

Particularly striking, literally, is the arrival of the meteor that transforms the world, setting back a lot of the geographical and geological evolution, almost starting again.

Within the short space of the film, the narrative moves to primitive human beings, hunting,

community, again showing developing consciousness. The transition to the contemporary world, the skyscraper modern city, the night views of car lights racing through the city streets comes more quickly than might have been anticipated.

So, on the level of the visuals, the film is something of a cinema poem.

The audience is conscious throughout the film of the orchestral music as well of the religious choral music – and quite a list of credits to particular pieces at the end of the film, ranging from Bach to Arvo Part.

For some audiences, it is the narrative which might cause some difficulties. It is spoken with many pauses, sometimes hushed words, sometimes a reverential and awestruck tone, by Brad Pitt.

This is where many scientists might baulk at this poetic interpretation of evolution, the quick sketching in of aspects of the universe and then the quick move to the planet, Earth. They might also baulk at the generalisations, wanting more precise language and observations. And the danger of this kind of narrative is that it becomes so solemn that it seems more than a touch pretentious. There was something of this difficulty for many audiences for *The Tree of Life* and its cosmic overview and its insertion into the contemporary family story.

Obviously, it would be interesting to make comparisons with the full-length documentary and to discover what has been omitted (almost the length again of this IMAX experience) and to hear the dialogue spoken by Cate Blanchett.

In the meantime, for those who surrender to its images, it is a visual poem that raises so many questions about infinity and finitude, the origins of the universe, how life came to be, what were the first experiences of death, how did consciousness evolve...?

WIND RIVER

US, 2017, 107 minutes, Colour.

Jeremy Renner, Elizabeth Olsen, Julia Jones, Graham Greene, Tantoo Cardinal, Gil Birmingham, Kelsey Asbille, Jon Bernthal.
Directed by Taylor Sheridan.

This is a murder mystery with a difference.

Wind River refers to a Native American settlement in Wyoming. It is winter. There is a great deal of snow in the mountains (actually filmed in Utah). Cory (Jeremy Renner in a more substantial role than usual) is a hunter, seen initially confronting a wolf to save cattle, later hunting mountain lions. While checking the lions, he discovers the body of a dead girl in the snow.

The girl belongs to the community of Wind River, an 18-year-old who was a good friend of Cory's daughter, some years dead in mysterious and tragic circumstances, Cory regretting that he could not save his daughter and now alienated from his grieving wife. His wife also belongs to the community of Wind River. Cory has rights to some time with his son and takes into his Native American grandparents.

Because of the nature of the injuries to the dead girl, her lungs frozen in the snow through which she had run some distance barefoot, there is an autopsy but the doctor able only to give details of death rather than make a murder charge. This is immediately frustrating to the young FBI agent, Jane, Elizabeth Olsen, who has been called in from Las Vegas to supervise the investigation. Originating from Fort Lauderdale, she is young and somewhat out of her depth in the investigation, especially in handling the news and death for the dead girl's parents.

Graham Greene represents the local community police force. Because of the difficulty of the terrain, and travelling through the snow on a ski bike, with the fluctuations in the weather, there are some difficulties in retrieving the body and giving information to the girl's family. The mother grieves by cutting herself. The father grieves stoically. There is also a younger brother who has stayed in the community but is on drugs.

So, there is a murder, the need for a solution. But also challenging material about the nature of the Native American communities in such states as Wyoming, the old traditions, the younger generation breaking through, opportunities for progress, many barriers.

Investigation into the girl's life leads the police and the FBI to a rig which is being closed down for the winter but is staffed by a group of security officers. The girl was having a relationship with one of them.

The film uses a dramatic device of the FBI agent knocking on the door of the security house and the transition made to a flashback which explains and dramatises what actually happened. Resuming the action, there is a confrontation between the security guards and the police with Cory able to intervene – and then take justice into his own hands, wreaking vengeance on the perpetrator according to the manner in which the girl died.

Writer-director Taylor Sheridan was responsible for the screenplay for the strongly dramatic Sicario as well as Hell and High Water. This film is as good, possibly better.

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TOMMY'S HONOUR

AMERICAN ASSASSIN

US, 2017, 111 minutes, Colour.
Dylan O' Brien, Michael Keaton, Sanaa Lathan, Taylor Kitsch, David Suchet.
Directed by Michael Cuesta.

Vince Flynn is a popular writer, novels of espionage and undercover agents – even beyond Jack Reacher at times.

While this novel comes late in the series, it does provide a background story of the young agent, Mitch Rapp, and the reasons for his involvement with the CIA. This is very much a CIA story.

The film is not to be mistaken for the similarly titled American Made, with Tom Cruise as the rather happy-go-lucky rug-here. There is nothing happy-go-lucky about Mitch Rapp at all – at all.

There are some moments right at the beginning, a happy Mitch and his girlfriend at the beach, his proposal and her delighted response, his going to get a drink for them both and a sudden invasion of terrorists, machine-gunning, a massacre. It is no wonder that Mitch devotes all his energies to revenge.

While the book was written in 2010, the screenplay gives more attention to Islamist jihadists and the CIA infiltrating their cells, even to Libya.

CIA chief, Irene Kennedy (Sanaa Lathan) has great faith in Mitch, wanting to capitalise on his single-mindedness, sending him to the expert trainer, Hurley (Michael Keaton in a very tough role). We get a glimpse of intense physical and psychological training, including virtual reality tests.

However, the main focus of this particular story is a rogue student of Hurley's, Ronnie, nicknamed Ghost (Taylor Kitsch moving from hero roles to villain). Capitalising on all the tough skills that he learned from the expert, he becomes involved in smuggling and trading, especially plutonium from the former Soviet Union, with agents of such countries as Iran wanting the plutonium, wanting a bomb. It is up to Hurley and Mitch to thwart the bomb plans.

Actually, the action does move from country to country, making it enjoyable for people who have visited these places: Warsaw, Istanbul, Romania, Rome, Dubai. The Rome scenes are

particularly vivid, an underground venue for assembling the bomb and shootouts, and a threat as well as exact timing for a detonation with a serious American target.

Dylan O' Brien could continue this franchise (after appearing in the Maze Runner series), ultra-serious, unrelenting and deadly (even in the tongue-in-cheek final moments of the film). And there is David Suchet turning up at times as a CIA consultant.

In 2017 this could be Kim Jung Un's favourite film, nuclear weapons, attacks on the US and its interests – and the potential of how easy it is for a single individual to have a bomb and detonate it rather than lots of test flights!

AUSTRALIA DAY

Australia, 2017, 98 minutes, Colour.

Bryan Brown, Shari Sebbens, Sean Keenan, Elias Anton, Kee Chan, Isabelle Cornish, Carolyn Dunphy, Daniel Webber, Miah Madden, Matthew Le Nevez, Simon Alrahi.
Directed by Kriv Stenders.

There is quite a lot going on in Australia Day. More than a lot. In fact, there are three stories in one – as well as the background of January 26 in Brisbane.

While Australia Today has been celebrated throughout the country for a long time, there have been hesitations and protests, especially about January 25 being the last day of freedom for indigenous people on this continent. With only 50 years of history of aboriginal rights since the referendum of 1967, there are still many issues that can surface quite powerfully about Australia Day. Then there is the reality of so many migrants, Chinese from long ago and more prevalent in recent times, the post-war European migrants, the Vietnamese in the 1970s and 1980s, and refugees and migrants from Middle Eastern countries... How do they participate in the ethos of Australia Day?

The screenplay for Australia Day takes up race and ethnic issues as well as offering a continuous background, especially from television coverage of celebrations, sunny and raucous, as well as family and picnics. There is a Chinese story. There is a middle eastern story. There is an indigenous Australian story. Throughout the film we begin to see some connections, tenuous in many ways, between the three stories – with a fine, small but significant, connection in the last few minutes of the film.

There is a lot of running in the film, a lot of chasing. A young aboriginal girl is running from the police. A young man from a middle eastern family is being pursued by white locals. A Chinese woman is escaping from sex slavery. This running and chasing motif extends throughout the whole film giving it a dramatic urgency.

Caught up in the Chinese story is Bryan Brown as a farmer whose land has been repossessed by the bank. He has suffered from drought, the effect on his cattle and their destruction. Often in the background – and then, outside the window of his flat in Brisbane, the Minister for Trade is promoting an agreement with China that is to be signed that afternoon. The Chinese woman hails him down in the street and gets into his car.

This kind of story has been prevalent in Australian films, in the important film The Jammed

about sex slavery, but also a theme in the recent Goldstone as well as in the background of Top of the Lake, China Girl. The girls are truly slaves, prostituted by ruthless owners. Can an ordinary, decent enough Australian deal with this situation? Despite his being played by Bryan Brown, it seems that he can't. But he is a man of conscience and must take a stand and make an effort.

The middle eastern story is about young drug dealer, his dominating mother, his upright father, and the younger brother being tangled with a local girl and being pursued by her brothers, one sadistic, the other with a conscience. This is a revenge story. It is also a possible peace and reconciliation story – not explicitly tied to Australia Day but important in terms of the longer inhabitants of the land since 1788 accepting newcomers who are racially, culturally and religiously different. Some interesting comparisons could be made with the Australian film, Down Under, set in the racial riots in Cronulla.

The indigenous story has its heart-rending aspects. Two young girls have been abandoned by their mother who is a drug addict in the Brisbane streets. The father is brutal and they react violently against him, killing him, taking a car, being pursued by the police – in fact, by an indigenous policewoman (Shari Sebbens) who knows them, their grandmother and the difficult family situation. She is asked to stand down from any enquiries in the search for the girl, April (Miah Madden) but she feels that she must, tracking down where the girl might have gone to find her mother, catching up with her at a desperate moment.

While we might have seen these issues in these stories before, they are worth telling again. There interestingly acted in the film is been directed by Kriv Stenders (the Red Dog films as well as the miniseries, Wake in Fright).

BAD BLOOD

Australia, 2016, 90 minutes, Colour.

Xavier Samuel, Morgan Griffin, Tess Fowler, Rob Macpherson, Elena Carapetis, Patrick Frost.

Directed by David Pulbrook.

Most of us enjoy a thriller now and then. Something a bit like the airport novels that keep us occupied and entertained.

One of the difficulties with this kind of film and for reviewers is that it is often too easy to give away serious aspects of the plot. And that would be fatal as regards Bad Blood. Best not to know anything about it before you see it.

But, it does begin with the murder, an accused murderer, his being acquitted, his coming from the United States to Adelaide, his publishing a book, his being in love – and this all within the first few minutes. But, by the 30 minute mark, there have been quite a number of clues, sinister indications, more than a touch of mystery.

One of things to say is that Adelaide photographs very nicely. The last part of the film takes place in the South Australian countryside, also photographing well.

Of course, one of the challenges of this kind of mystery is to formulate at least one theory, if

not more, to be ready for the solution. This reviewer was perhaps being too smart with two possible theories, and opting for the one that was not correct!

The film is a starring vehicle for Xavier Samuel, becoming more well known for international films from the Twilight series to Anonymous to Love and Friendship, as well as being a substantial presence in homegrown films in Australia. The screenplay gives him quite a lot of scope for performance. Morgan Griffin is the veterinary expert with whom he is in love.

It can be said that there is quite a tradition of Australian films, with touches of horror, that take place in the bush, pleasant places being turned into sinister areas of fright in minutes. And the same here.

The title might be rather an obvious one but worth reflecting on. Whodunnit? Or did hedunnit it – so to speak?

BATTLE OF THE SEXES

US, 2017, 121 minutes, Colour.

Emma Stone, Steve Correll, Andrea Riseborough, Natalie Morales, Sarah Silverman, Bill Pullman, Alan Cumming, Elizabeth Shue, Eric Christian Olson, Jessica Mc Namee, Lewis Pullman, Austin Stowell.

Directed by Jonathan Dayton, Valerie Farris.

This is how a famous tennis match was billed in 1973. It was the initiative of veteran tennis champion, Bobby Riggs, at that stage aged 55, challenging a female player, fully expecting to win – after all, he had issued a challenge to Margaret Court, who had accepted, but lost to Riggs. He had previously challenged US champion, Billie Jean King, who had declined but, after the defeat of Margaret Court, accepted. And the rest, as they always say, is history!

This is a tennis film for enthusiasts of the sport, with some highlights of the Riggs- Court match, and a substantial, well-choreographed presentation of the important features of the King- Riggs match, enabling the audience to see skills and tactics, King wearing out Riggs, making him run all over the court. And she won.

Steve Carrell has something of a luminous presence on screen, is able to do the very serious, but also has a capacity to excel at clowning when required. And this is certainly required in portraying Bobby Riggs, antics on the court, playing with two dogs on a leash, dressing up as Little Bo Peep along with some sheep... He was an inveterate gambler, trying the patience of his wife, Priscilla (Elizabeth Shue), winning a Rolls- Royce as prize for a game and selling it to get the prize money for the tournament, relying on the support of his son (played by Lewis Pullman, Bill Pullman's son). Carrell certainly brings Riggs to life.

The title, however, says much more. This is a film about equality and about equity. In terms of equity, the film opens with Billie Jean King, played with zest and enthusiasm, although with a kind of luminous quality, by Emma Stone, accompanying her manager, Gladys, Sarah Silverman, to the bosses of the American Lawn Tennis Association and defying them about payment to women players. The proposal by the Association was to pay men eight times more than women – alleging that men were far more interesting and athletic to watch.

The women created their own women's tennis tournament, sponsored in the manner of the times by a cigarette brand, Virginia Slims. They were successful, succeeding in drawing Margaret Court (Australian actress Jessica Mc Namee) to play with them. Jack Kramer (Bill Pullman) head of the Association, with a rather smug superior attitude towards women, was to do the commentary on CBS for the Battle of the Sexes but Billie Jean King refused.

However, the title has a touch of the ambiguous because it is also a battle about the sexes, about relationships, about same-sex relationships. The narrative here has Billie Jean King attracted to Marilyn, the tournament hairdresser, Andrea Riseborough, and discovering her orientation. With this theme, the film is very topical in the light of worldwide discussions about same-sex marriage and issues of legislation. (In the background is a gay couple who designed the dresses for the women, characters, including Alan Cumming, able to make comment about the situation in the context of the 1970s.)

And, as we see often in films based on actual characters, information about their continuing lives and photos of the real persons.

BEATRIZ AT DINNER

US, 2017, 82 minutes, Colour.

Salma Hayak, John Lithgow, Connie Britton, Jay Duplass, Amy Landecker, Chloe Sevigny, David Warshofsky, John Early.

Directed by Miguel Arteta.

Beatriz at Dinner is an enigma of the film. It is definitely not an entertainment for those who like QED or its equivalent as they walk out of the cinema.

It opens with a rowing boat on a river, a woman in the boat. She passes a white goat on the bank. And then Beatriz wakes up, a black goat in a cage in her room and a pet dog barking at it. It looks as though this film is going to be a combination of magical realism and practical realism. And it is.

Salma Hayak is Beatriz, who lives alone, has a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe as well as a Buddha statue in front of which she contemplates in her house. She goes to work in a Cancer Centre, relating wonderfully to those there for treatment, an expert in all kinds of alternate medicines. Clearly, Beatriz belongs to a New Age World, especially as the setting is California.

Beatriz also does house calls and is welcomed by Kathy (Connie Britton), less so by her husband Grant (David Warshofsky). She has cared for their daughter, a teenager with cancer. Beatriz has trouble with her car and it won't start as she goes to leave. Her friend cannot get to the house, a mansion, for a couple of hours.

Kathy, always grateful, invite Beatriz to stay for dinner. She has on a kind of uniform but is helped out from Kathy's wardrobe. Then the guests begin to arrive, two couples, involved in the business world, in property development in the US and in Mexico, the women more interested in Beatriz who seems to be just hanging about and is mistaken for the maid by Doug (John Lithgow).

We get some background of the deals and the development – which leads into Beatriz's conversations at dinner. She is not exactly shy and retiring. She certainly offers opinions – feeling that she has known Doug before, something confirmed when, after the meal, she demonstrates her massage skills and feels a link with him.

These are the kinds of screenplay clues that we are meant to be alert to, this one being more obvious than others.

Beatriz is invited to give something of her background, with Kathy supplying, sympathetically, a lot of the detail. She is from Mexico, her parents dead, her being brought up by relatives, having to leave when developers came into the town, took over the land, built a resort which did not flourish, leaving the residents impoverished or having to leave.

Doug is one of those superficially genial businessman, who can turn on the charm, but is ruthless in his dealings, supported by his wife who is more friendly to Beatriz than Doug is. Jay Duplass and Chloe Sevigny are the other couple, she again giving more attention to Beatriz than her husband.

So, the dinner could be seen as a verbal allegory of contemporary US, the exploiters, the exploited, the wealthy preoccupied with wealth, the immigrants and their place in that society. Amongst Doug's opinions are questions of whether Beatriz was an illegal immigrant or not – though he praises her for getting a job and being employed. He also makes remarks about the environment, rather apocalyptic with some of his utterances, wondering whether the environment or even human beings will be around for much longer – an eat, drink and be merry approach to moneymaking and life.

The car is fixed and Beatrice suddenly rushes from the car – and a sequence that will surprise, even alarm. Then another emotional jolt, and then something quite unexpected...

And then, the film continues, Beatriz rowing on the river. No QED, leaving the audience to ponder on what they have seen and heard and how it relates to contemporary American life.

BRIGSBY BEAR

US, 2017, 97 minutes, Colour.

Kyle Mooney, Greg Kinnear, Claire Danes, Mark Hamill, Jane Adams, Matt Walsh, Michaela Watkins, Ryan Simkins, Jorge Lendeborg Jr, Adam Samberg.

Directed by Dave Mc Cary.

A film reviewer should never be lost for words. But while – and after – watching *Brigsby Bear*, what is one to say? Yes, it is best seen without preparation and reading reviews afterwards.

The first thought is to alert audiences looking for a cuddly film for the children and the family, a kind of cuddly Paddington, this is not it. The second thought is that this film is likely to become a favourite cult movie, screened at special timeslots, drawing in an audience who may want to see it again – and again (and they may not be all that dissimilar from hero James and his friends).

In a sense, watching *Brigsby Bear* is something of an emotional and intellectual journey. At the opening, we're watching a television program on a small screen, a very elementary animated series, very limited effects, a couple of human images, but generally *Brigsby* himself, going on a quest and confronting the Sun who turns out to be a villain. The episode we're watching – as is James, about whom in a minute – is from volume 35 on VHS, shelving around James's room piled with VHSs. Who is he? What is he watching? And why is he enjoying it so much, absolutely identifying with characters and situations?

James is a young adult, living with his parents, underground, isolated, with an enclosed observation tower – but when the father goes to work, he has to wear a gas mask. Are we in a post—apocalyptic situation? Well, for James, it is.

It quickly emerges, when the police turn up, James was abducted as a child and shielded by the eccentric abductors, who created the series of *Brigsby Bear* for him and the two are experts, as is James, on all the esoteric, names, characters, instruments, situations to be seen on screen.

Most of the film, in fact, is the story of an innocent abroad. James goes back to his birth parents who underestimate the sheltered, extraordinarily sheltered, life he has led. He himself is rather ingenuous, rather eager to discover new things but hanging on to the reality that *Brigsby's* story is the key part of his life.

He does make some friends, discovers some contemporary mores amongst young people, parties, drugs, sexual behaviour, but in some ways is able to transcend them. And, believe it or not, in his telling the tale of *Brigsby*, the young people become fans. What is James to do but to make his own film about *Brigsby*. Thank goodness for Google where he is able to find all the necessary information about filmmaking, editing, and even tracking down the young woman who had appeared in the television series.

This is a cheerful and optimistic film despite James having his difficulties, his making friends with the acting-aspiring detective, Greg Kinnear, and the serious therapy sessions with Claire Danes.

The creator of the story is Kyle Mooney (a *Saturday Night Live* alumnus, so ready wit offbeat humour) who collaborated with the screenplay and takes the part of James. He makes this character extraordinarily credible, playing it straightforwardly, no mugging or winking to the camera. This makes the film more affecting.

Mark Hamill and Jane Adams play the abductors. Matt Walsh and Michaela Watkins his parents, Ryan Simpkins his sister, Jorge Lendeborg Jr his sympathetic friend and collaborator. And, one of those things one might notice, Kyle Mooney, Matt Walsh and Greg Kinnear are all left-handed!

There is a lot to enjoy about *Brigsby Bear* with all its eccentricity and, especially, James's final cinematic success, and, quite a lot to think about, human nature, the effect of upbringing and emotional abuse, parenting and enabling young people to be themselves and to grow.

LA DANSEUSE/ THE DANCER

France, 2016, 108 minutes, Colour.

Soko (Stephanie Sokoilinski), Gaspard Ulliel, Melanie Thierry, Lily-Rose Depp, François Damiens, Louis-Do de Lencquesaing, Amanda Plummer, Dennis Menochet.

Directed by Stephanie Di Giusto.

The Danseuse/ Dancer of the title is Mary Louise Fuller who came from the American West, out there with her French prospector father, roping the cattle at a rodeo yet with an interest in dance. When her father is killed by men who think he has found gold, as he has boasted, there is nothing left for her to do but return to mother (Amanda Plummer), a staunch member now of the Temperance League, in Brooklyn. It is 1892.

However, this is really a Parisien story. The young Mary Louise does do auditions for dance in New York – although at first she finishes up at a photo studio of suggestive pictures – but has a talent for sketching and designing elaborate dance movements. She auditions, dances. A rather decadent French count befriends her – but she takes his money, leaving a note, and sailing to Paris.

Soko (stage name for dancer, Stephanie Sokolinski) is a very good choice for Mary Louise who changes her name to Loie. She is physically strong, continually exercising, enabling her to perform dance movements which take a toll on her body. Undeterred, she makes an impression at the Folies Bergere and is hired for performance.

Part of the attractiveness of the film is seeing her perform, metres and metres of diaphanous material, her ability to swirl them, athletically moving but aesthetically beautiful, audiences and reviewers likening her performance to flowers.

There are complications in her personal life. She collapses at the Folies Bergere but recovers. Gabrielle (Melanie Thierry) becomes her assistant, friend and confidante, supportive in management. And the count, Gaspard Ulliard, divorces his American wife and returns to Paris, devoted to Loie and she, in complicated ways, devoted to and dependent on him.

But her ambition is to do her dancing at the Paris Opera and, despite the initially snobbish reactions of the director, she is given permission to perform. More and more material, more and more mirrors, more and more lighting, more and more costs.

A further complication in the plot arrives in the form of the young Lily-Rose Depp as Isadora Duncan (whom many audiences may remember far more than Loie especially through documentaries and the feature film which starred Vanessa Redgrave in 1968). Instead of seeing Isadora as a rival, which in her scheming way and ingratiating manner, she is, Loie allows herself to be seduced by Isadora.

There is a physical and emotional toll on Loie, her having to wear dark glasses to protect her eyes, a brace to protect her shoulders, a collapse of Nerves.

Will Loie triumph at the Paris Opera?

2016 saw another very interesting film about theatre in Paris at this time, Monsieur Chocolat, the comedy in mime of a black comedian with a white comedian and the surfacing of racial issues of time.

THE EMOJI MOVIE

US, 2017, 85 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: T.J.Miller, James Corden, Anna Farris, Maya Rudolph, Steven Wright, Jennifer Coolidge, Patrick Stewart, Christina Aguilera, Sophia Vergara, Sean Hayes.

Directed by Tony Leondis.

A 2017 Cyberspace Odyssey.

The first emoji was patented in Japan in 1999 so that in 2001, this kind of Cyberspace Odyssey would not have been possible. But, here it is, the subject of an animated movie for young audiences and the family. Who would've thought? Well, probably, those in the IT industry, always on the alert for developments.

A word of advice for intending audiences. This is a film for youngsters who are completely at home with their smart phones, with all their potential for communication and all the apps. It could be a relaxation for older IT experts, looking at the fun side of their professional work. But, a word of warning, when grandparents take their grandchildren to see these films, it is certainly best if the grandparents are technology alert, otherwise what on earth are they to make of it all...?

There are some human characters in the film, especially at school, where, of course, they are dependent on their phones. One boy is attracted to one of the girls but very shy, both using their phones but he having some doubts and intending to delete all his apps. (Actually, sequences where monstrous black devouring emojis appear and begin their demolishing could be a 21st-century version of animated horror!)

So, into the phone, into the cyberworld. Again who would've thought (well young audiences probably do think this) that there would be such a variety of apps and emojis? In fact, the outline of the story is a romance within the phone, a kind of frog Prince, Gene, a Meh emoji, who seems to be stuck in a two-dimensional unemotional life. As well there is the princess in disguise. They meet and come alive in a dance competition – and Gene is helped by a five-finger emoji, Hi 5. And, presiding over all the emojis with malicious intent is Smiler, an equivalent of a wicked witch, all gushing sinister smiles.

And, of course, the voices help. T.J.Miller is Gene, is the princess, James Corden (British, of course, but very popular as a host on American television) is Hi 5, Anna Farris is the escaping princess (and her name is Jailbreak) and Maya Rudolph is the witch lady. And, a credit to be noticed and for Trivial Pursuit, Sir Patrick Stewart as Poop!

One of the goals of the journey in this film is to arrive in The Cloud and there are all kinds of difficulties with delete, trying to find correct passwords, breaking through the firewall after Access Denied...

Colourful, relying on a basic fairytale outline but absolutely full of emojis of every kind and the implication that no one should be using an emoji that indicates indifference like Meh. Communication ought to be bright and sprightly!

FINAL PORTRAIT

US, 2017, 90 minutes, Colour.

Geoffrey Rush, Armie Hammer, Clemence Poesy, Tony Shalhoub, Sylvie Testud.

Directed by Stanley Tucci.

Final Portrait is a brief film about artist and sculptor, Alberto Giacometti, living and working in Paris in the middle of the 1960s. Much of the film is confined to his studio, his workspace, living quarters, upstairs storage and the workshop for his associate, Diego.

The film was directed by noted American actor, Stanley Tucci, his previous films in direction included *The Big Night*, *Imposters*, *Joe Gould's Secret*. Tucci does not appear in this film but his friend and collaborator, Tony Shalhoub, portrays Giacometti's assistant.

The screenplay is based on a memoir by an American, Jim Lord, who encountered Giacometti in Paris and was persuaded to remain there to pose for a portrait, taking a far longer time than Lord anticipated, but Lord agreeing to remain, fascinated by the work of the artist as well as his continually scrapping the work he had done, beginning afresh, seemingly dissatisfied, but finally

This makes much of the film a two-hander, conversations between Lord and the artist, the sequences where Lord poses, is momentarily distracted, arouses Giacometti's ire...

Geoffrey Rush is obviously enjoying his interpretation of Giacometti, Moody, artistic in every way, a perfectionist always dissatisfied, working on his sketches, on his paintings, his sculptures – with the audience having the opportunity to view many of these as the camera roams around his studio.

Armie Hammer is Jim Lord, a well-to-do American, interested in the artist's work – and later writing about him.

There are some complications in Giacometti's personal life, his relationship with his wife, played by Sylvie Testud, loving her husband but also tempted to other relationships. Giacometti is not only tempted but is in a long-term relationship with a local prostitute, Clemence Poesy, who operates from a local club, is unembarrassed in her relationship with the artist, easily cavorting and canoodling with him at the club, letting him buy her an expensive car...

So, the film itself is also a portrait, a kind of final portrait not only of Jim Lord but of Giacometti himself and his artistic achievements.

FLATLINERS

US, 2017, 110 minutes, Colour.

Ellen Page, Diego Luna, Nina Dobrev, James Norton, Kiersey Clemons, Kiefer Sutherland.

Directed by Niels Arden Oplev.

Flatliners is doing two things. In the first part, it is something of a horror film. In the second part it is a moralising story, something of a cautionary tale. It is also a remake of the popular film of 1990 which featured amongst others, Julia Roberts, Kiefer Sutherland, Kevin Bacon. (A link is Kiefer Sutherland here turning up for a cameo as a disciplinarian supervising

doctor, with white hair and a walking stick!)

This time the story is set in Toronto. The focus is on a group of doctors in training – and, judging by their behaviour, there is something of a risk to our future health unless they really improve their attitudes and standards. Being responsible isn't high on their personal agendas.

The first person we are introduced to is Courtney, played by Ellen Page, driving with her sister, distracted by her mobile phone, and crashing into a truck with the consequent death of her sister drowning in the river. Nine years later, she is part of the group of trainee doctors, more skilled than the rest of the group.

The most responsible of the rest of the group is Ray, Diego Luna, who knows his medicine but is drawn into the plan that Courtney develops, with her studies about afterlife, with her theory that were someone to have their heart stopped for a minute, to flatline, then brain activity could be checked and photographed. She makes demands on Jamie, played by James Norton far away from Grantchester and his rather edifying presence there, this time a too happy-go-lucky medical student. She also persuades her friend, Sophia, Kiersey Clemons, who is finding studies very difficult.

They do the experiment and we share Courtney's after death or near death experience, walking in cosmic lights, rapt. It is easy to see where the plot development will take us, the other two, then their friend Marlo (Nina Dobrev) not only wanting to undergo the same experience but extending the time when the heart is stopped.

Clearly, there will be consequences – and, in fact, a sharpening and alertness of memories, knowledge, self-assertion.

But, some of the experiences are nightmarish. And, each of the subjects has something very worrying in their past, ghosts and hauntings surfacing, strange and unwanted experiences.

Which means then that the group has to face each individual conscience challenge, going back into the past, acknowledging the truth. And the question is: at the point of death is there some kind of what we might call "judgement"? And, in a secular perspective, without any benefit God, how can conscience be healed? Is forgiveness possible? Does each person who acknowledges their guilt have to forgive themselves?

So, these are some of the questions that the audience is left with as they leave the cinema and wonder whether flatlining is possible, wonder about the moral responsibilities of the medical profession, and wonder about personal responsibilities, forgiveness and reconciliation.

THE GLASS CASTLE

US, 2017, 127 minutes, Colour.

Woody Harrelson, Brle? Larson, Naomi Watts, Ella Anderson, Chandler Head, Max Greenfield, Josh Caras, Iain Armitage, Sarah Snook, Brigitte Lundy-Painen?, Robin Bartlett. Directed by Destin Daniel Cretton.

Once again the story of a dysfunctional family. But this family did not live in a big American city, pressures of urban life, personality clashes and abuse. Rather, this is the story of a family

with a West Virginia, hillbilly background, moving from place to place, a great deal of love in the family but the parents having dreams rather than being anchored in reality - and the consequences for their children.

It is based on a true story, the 2005 memoir of writer, Jeanette Walls. After the harrowing experience of watching her story, her childhood and that of her sisters and brother, and of her adult experiences, there are photos of the actual characters before the final credits as well as some video excerpts of the parents in 1989.

If you want to see admirable performances, then *The Glass Castle* should be high on your list. The film is not exactly an entertainment. But it is a challenging look at its characters, their behaviours, their mindsets, and the effect that each has on the other.

Rex Walls comes from tough family living in the hills. Several times he takes his wife and children to visit his family, especially his dominantly stern mother (with the touch of the sinister which gradually emerges). Rex is played by Woody Harrelson, one of his best performances, award-worthy, and building on several decades of his quality acting. Rex is a dreamer, knowledgeable, former air force. Strong skills in engineering, imagining building a house, and always drawing plans, which is environmentally friendly, made of glass. But, the fact is, he is a dreamer rather than an achiever.

While he has four children, the most significant in his life is Jeanette. The film introduces us to her as an adult, remarkably poised, well-dressed, going to an important business dinner with her fiancé, the audience learning that she is a columnist, has written stories and gossip columns.

The structure of the film means that the adult Jeanette and her story is the framework for the narrative but the most dramatic part of the action is in the flashbacks. The audience knows some of this and the results of the childhood experiences. Interest is not where it is going but rather how it is going to get to this adult destination. What has Jeanette experienced, her relationship with her father, with her mother, with her siblings?

As regards the acting, Oscar-winner Brie Larson is very strong as the older Jeanette. The two young actresses who portray her as a child, especially Ella Anderson, are worth noting. While her mother, Rose Mary, an artist, is often taken for granted, sometimes in the background, she is nevertheless a very interesting character and unglamorously played by Naomi Watts.

While Rex is a dreamer, moving his family from place to place, a gambler, a drinker, unreliable, he still has great love for his children and there is intensity in his relationship with his wife. His life is an “if only...”. Particularly powerful is the episode where he goes off drink and suffers cold turkey anguish.

In fact, the children fare particularly well given all the disadvantages. But they do have a devotion to their parents, do have a sense of reliability, especially the young Jeanette, and they develop ways in which they can survive and do.

Audiences will not find this an exhilarating experience but, as they live with the characters, discover secrets. They will be encouraged by human resilience. They will realise that this kind of story, if it is to have any meaning, has to be a healing of memories.

HEAL THE LIVING/ REPARER LES VIVANTS

France, 2016, 13 minutes, Colour.

Tahar Rahim, Emmanuelle Seigner, Anne Dorval, Bouli Lanners, Finnegan Oldfield, Theo Cholbi.

Directed by Katell Quillevere.

Heal the Living might seem a superfluous kind of title – who else can be healed except the living? But the very serious point being made is that the dead can be instrumental in healing the living.

There are two stories in this film connected by a young man, a surfer, who has gone out one early morning with friends to surf, drives back home but is involved in a car accident. The first part of the film is his story, life and death, especially the effect of the news of his sudden death on his parents. As they grieve, the father blames himself for introducing his son to surfing, the mother grieves powerfully as a mother.

The second part of the film focuses on an older woman with heart disease, a woman of culture and music, with two sons, facing the prospect of dying.

One might say that this is a film of “heart spirituality”, that a heart which has enlivened the young man still has the power to enliven the older woman.

It might seem obvious that a heart transplant can heal the living – but, the decision for the transplant and organ donation weighs very heavily on the parents, listening to the urgings of the young doctor and his enthusiasm, the father angry, the mother still grieving, and their finding a way to give consent.

For audiences who have some connection with illness and organ transplants, this may seem quite obvious. On the other hand, many in the audience do not have a direct link with death or have it only rarely. Organ transplants are not at the forefront of their consciousness. This film doesn't pull its punches when visualising the excision of the heart, the physicality of the surgery, the urgency of the transport from hospital to second hospital, by car, by air, the need for haste, for – ice-cooling the the container to carry the organ to be transplanted.

With the shift in age and gender, the second part of the film focuses on Claire, older and having lived a lot her life, and her having the potential for living with the gift of the transplant and its suitability for becoming part of her.

The film shows two facets of contemporary French life, allows us to spend a lot of time with the characters, with families who have problems – and, somewhat to the fore, includes story issues of same-sex relationships.

Heal the Living makes demands on the emotions of the audience, identification with characters, with situations – but also makes demands on intellectual understanding of the reality of organ donation, the repercussions for the body of the dead person, of the responses by close family and their making decisions as well as anonymity and living with a life-giving organ from another person.

I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO

US, 2016, 93 minutes, Colour and black and white.

Voiceover, Samuel L. Jackson.

Directed by Raoul Peck.

This is a very powerful and relevant documentary. While it has a particular American focus, it is illuminating about race attitudes in the 20th century and what has been inherited and how race issues stand at the beginning of the 21st-century.

This is a film about American author, James Baldwin. He is a significant 20th century American literary figure but, from the 1960s on, he had an important role in American consciousness about African- American history.

The title belongs to Baldwin himself. The word “Negro” has passed from common usage, descriptive of African-Americans? but with a derogatory past from the slavery era. In fact, during the filming Baldwin gives an explanation of this usage.

The film was directed by celebrated director, from Haiti, Raoul Peck, whose career has focused, in features and in documentaries, on racial concerns, from a drama about Lumumba to an exploration of the genocide in Rwanda, Sometime in April.

What is done here is to assemble an enormous amount of footage, television and film, of Baldwin himself and to edit it into what might be a political essay as well as a political biography. So, the audience sees as well as he is his voice – and with other quotations read by Samuel L. Jackson.

Baldwin was born in 1924, grew up in New York City but in the 40s moved to Paris where he lived for many years. He was able to develop his literary career, the breadth of personality in a different culture – but was also at times dogged by his sexual orientation (which put him, ironically, on the investigation list by FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover).

Baldwin intended to do a book on three significant African- Americans, their campaigns as well as their deaths: Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Medger Evers. So, there is a lot of material about the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and these men who, in their way, were martyrs to the cause. Baldwin outlines his relationship with each of the men, admiration, friendship, but some tensions in outlook with Malcolm X.

Baldwin appears in quite a number of television interviews. One of the other interesting features of this film is the assembling of clips from a range of movies. Baldwin is rather critical of the presentation of African- Americans in American feature films, even in those of the 1940s and 50s which had some basic sympathies. Examples of this kind of criticism include the Sidney Poitier-Tony? Curtis drama, The Defiant Ones and other films with Sidney Poitier including the 1950s No Way Out as well as Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.

Baldwin is also interested in music with a number of reflections on the Negro tradition and performers like Lena Horne.

There are some caustic comments on the Kennedys, their New England background and what

that meant in their trying to deal with the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s. The film was a nominee for Academy award for best documentary, 2016. It reflects some of the more recent topical history including riots in cities such as Ferguson, Missouri, with the deaths of black men at the hands of white police. There is also a quote from Bobby Kennedy about there being a black president 40 years after the 1960s and the turmoil – and the presidency of Barack Obama.

A mixture of the entertaining and the enthralling, thought and emotion-provoking.

INGRID GOES WEST

US, 2017, 98 minutes, Colour.

Aubrey Plaza, Elizabeth Olsen, O' Shea Jackson Jr, Wyatt Russell, Billy Magnusson, Pom Klementieff, Joseph Breen.

Directed by Matt Spicer.

Are you on Instagram? If so, you will identify immediately with this film? If not, after 97 minutes you may well (or not well) feel that you are actually on it? One wonders whether there is already a support group, Instagrammers Anonymous, for the addicted, whose life seem to depend on it. (And, on public transport, walking up and down the street, there seem to be plenty of candidates.)

Ingrid is a prime candidate. She is played most persuasively by Aubrey Plaza. At first we see her as a morbid young woman, mourning the death of her mother. She is on her phone and looking at a friend's wedding to which she has not been invited – and promptly gatecrashes the party, spraying the bride, being tackled and finishing up in an institution finding affirmation in group work.

Ingrid's life is certainly going west in the sense of going downhill. But, some seeming salvation occurs with her finding a young woman, a star on Instagram, Taylor (a lively performance from Elizabeth Olsen). With \$60,000 in cash that she has inherited from her mother, and finding that Taylor, a photographer, bright media personality, her opinions on contemporary living quoted in magazine articles, lives in Venice, California. So, Ingrid goes West.

If ever there was a film about emotional neediness, Ingrid Goes West is certainly it. Ingrid is extraordinarily needy, low self-image, unable to relate well to people. She tries to imitate Taylor, dyeing her hair and change its style mimicking tailors, going to the restaurants where Taylor is reported to have eaten, then encountering her, awkwardly, in a shop and having the bright idea of stealing her pet dog and responding to the lost dog advertisement by returning the pet. Taylor and her partner, Ezra (Wyatt Russell, son of Kurt and Goldie Hawn) welcome her and they become best friends.

Also in the act is Ingrid's landlord, Dan (O' Shea Jackson Jr, looking and sounding exactly like his father, O' Shea Jackson Sr, whom we all know as Ice Cube). He is pretty needy as well but finds all his fulfilment in Batman, the comics, the films, even trying to write a screenplay, doing re-enactments....

Clearly, this is not an ordinary relationship story. Can it last? Well, given the bad foundation

of the friendship, Ingrid and her deceits, her incessant taking of selfies, of herself and everything to do with Taylor, something has to come undone. The catalyst for this is Taylor's brother, Nick (Billy Magnusson) a smooth-talking rogue who takes an instant dislike to Ingrid, making her intensely jealous.

If this film were to have a subtitle it could be #self. As it is, the film does end, rather unpredictably and not without pain, with Ingrid being given #iamingrid.

IT

US, 2017, 135 minutes, Colour.

Jaeden Lieberher, Jeremy Ray Taylor, Sophia Lillis, Finn Wolfahrd, Chosen Jacobs, Jack Dylan Grazer, Wyatt Oleff, Bill Skarsgaard, Nicholas Hamilton, Owen Teague.

Directed by Andy Muschietti.

Stephen King has been publishing novels for over 40 years, an extraordinary career, considered the doyen of horror writing. He has sold millions of copies and so many of his novels and short stories have been made into television series and films.

It was made into a television series in 1990. There is an intrinsic piece of information in the film, that the murderous clown, Pennywise, and his associates appear every 27 years. So, in 2017, 27 years later, here is It again.

As most frequently with Stephen King, the setting is in his own state of Maine. So many of his stories might be subtitled, Malevolence in Maine. Certainly the case here. And, remembering his other story and film about youngsters, this one could be Stand by It – or, rather, Stand against It!

This version of it has done extraordinarily well on release in the United States, over \$100 million in the first week, and parallel box office in other English-speaking countries.

If it's horror atmosphere you want, then It certainly provides it. While the setting is the American summer, and a lot of the action takes place in the sunny streets of the town, out in the countryside, quite a lot of it is dark, very dark, in sinister drainpipes, in sinister seemingly haunted houses, in dark wells and, literally, a vast underground.

The film is quite long and the early part spends quite a bit of time establishing the characters of the young boys who are at the centre of the action, especially in Bill's younger brother, George, is seen with a paper boat at the opening of the film, following it down the rainy streets where it floats into a drain opening – only for the horrible clown, Pennywise, to appear, to tantalise George and then to devour him.

Bill (Jaeden Lieberher, the boy so effective in *Midnight Special*) and his friends, age 13, are tormented by the 15-year-old bullies of the town, one of them doomed, not a moment too soon, and the ringleader eventually getting his gruesome comeuppance.

The group of boys includes Richie, loudmouth and crude, Eddie, small and pampered health-wise by an overlarge mother, Stan, Jewish and preparing him for his bar mitzvah, Mike, African-American², working for his grandfather in an abattoir, Ben, the large new boy to the

school who is more particularly the subject of bullying. Ben is helped by Beverly (Sophia Lillis in a strong performance), also tormented by the local girls, kind, despite her abusive father, and, emerging as a significant leader of the group.

There are a number of parents, teachers, police – but they tend to be minor characters because all the attention is given to the youngsters.

As Bill gets his friends to investigate where George might have disappeared to, each of the children is confronted by the personification of their fear, especially by that horrifying clown and in room collection of venomous associates. Their fears come to life as malevolently aggressive, building up to a climax in the extraordinary underground set, dead children floating in a tower, sudden apparitions, and a great deal of physical violence.

And, at the end, the credits announce that this has just been chapter 1. We won't have to wait another 27 years for the sequel's release because the setting of this film is 1989 and so the sequel will have to be set in 2017! Just wait a year or two...

(And a word of complaint about the 13-year-olds and their incessant swearing, wearing and wearying – and a challenge to the screenwriter to be more creative with language.)

KINGSMAN: THE GOLDEN CIRCLE

UK, 2017, 141 minutes, Colour.

Taron Egerton, Colin Firth, Mark Strong, Julianne Moore, Channing Tatum, Halle Berry, Jeff Bridges, Edward Holdcroft, Hannah Alstrom, Michael Gambon, Lena Endre, Pedro Pascal, Bruce Greenwood, Emily Watson, Thomas Turgoose, Calvin Demba, Keith Allen.
Directed by Matthew Vaughn.

Kingsman was a popular and box office success right around the world. Based on comic strips, it had a particularly British flavour, enhanced by the writing team of Jane Goldman and Matthew Bourne who had worked in the previous film as well as other action adventures like Kick Ass.

While the film was particularly successful in Britain, it had an appeal in the United States and so this sequel reaches out to the Americans, incorporating them both as villains and as heroes.

There must be a very strong Colin Firth fan club in England and, perhaps, the United States. After all he was George VI in *The King's Speech*. However, despite his strong and gentlemanly presence as Harry in the first film, he was killed off in a rather sensational manner. Screenplay writers have a certain omnipotence so what else but to resurrect him, with a touch of the sensational, but letting him go into final action even more sensationally.

The emerging hero of the first film was a young man from a poor background who was chosen for his personality and skills, personally trained by Harry, and becoming a gentlemanly hero while working at that most elegant of British gentleman's clothes shops, Kingsman. He was played by Taron Egerton, Eggsy.

There is a slam bang opening for this sequel, gentleman Eggsy confronting a rogue former agent, Charlie (Edward Holdcroft), elaborate fights, a spectacular car chase ending up in

Hyde Park and a lake, with an underwater exit, although through the sewer, with everything under the IT control of Mark Strong's Merlin, a welcome return.

But, the American connection. Julianne Moore obviously enjoys herself as the eccentric, folksy and chatty villain, the ruthless Poppy, running a drug empire from the jungles of Cambodia but having all the pop comforts of American "culture", a diner, a movie theatre, streets just like back home. And she makes a mean hamburger – especially with some of her enemies going through the mincer!. The Kingsman team suffers a great blow, everyone, including Michael Gambon, being blown up. But Merlin discovers a link to Kentucky, to a whiskey company, Statesman. And the action transfers to Kentucky. (With disputes about the British and American spellings of whiskey/whisky.)

The members of Statesman all have alcohol names, Channing Tatum being Tequila, Jeff Bridges, the boss, being Champagne, Champ for short, Pedro Pascal being Whiskey and, because she works behind the scenes, Halle Berry is only Ginger. So, a lot of action in Kentucky, especially with Whiskey who is able to confront homophobic as well as anti-British rednecks with his lasso and whip.

But the main discovery, of course, is that Harry got a severe injury to the eye but was rescued – now suffering from amnesia and thinking he is a butterfly expert, no therapy helping until Eggsy has a bright idea and Harry recovers, though initially uncoordinated, joins in all the action, some of it very spectacular in Italy. Poppy has sold drugs around the world but has infected people – so her scheme is to manufacture the antidote and exploit it, even threatening the President of the United States (Bruce Greenwood) and his chief adviser (Emily Watson). But, in a reminder of President Trump, this president is against drugs and rounds up in cages all those infected.

While the action in Italy is spectacular, especially a cable car rolling down the mountainside, the final action is in Cambodia, umbrella weapons as in the old British television series The Avengers as well as modern guns. Who should be Poppy's hostage in Cambodia but actual Elton John – it does get to do a few martial arts moves!

So, plenty of action, well-choreographed, eccentric characters, international and elaborate situations, incessant swearing as in the first film, and happy ending that could lead, of course, to a further sequel.

THE LOVERS

US, 2017, 97 minutes, Colour.

Debra Winger, Tracy Letts, Aidan Gillen, Melora Waters.

Directed by Azazel Jacob.

There have been many films with this title. One of the differences for this film is that the central protagonists are aged 50.

We are quickly introduced to each of them, Michael involved in an emotional argument and clash with someone who may be his wife or girlfriend, Lucy. Then we see Mary, involved with a younger writer, Robert.

And then, the scene shifts to their home and we find that Michael and Mary are married and have been for 25 years. They have an adult son. At home, there seems to be a certain amount of intimacy but also a certain amount of tension. And we see both of them at work, realise that each of them is carrying on an affair, covering the affair by excuses at work, but not confiding in each other.

So, the scene is set for an explanation of relationships. It would have been more accurate to have in the title, instead of “love”, fidelity and infidelity.

What exactly Michael sees in Lucy, a very temperamental ballet instructor might puzzle some audiences. And, the writer is rather full of himself and difficult to see what attracts Mary to him.

The film has a strong cast with playwright Tracy Letts as Michael, Debra Winger making a rare screen appearance these days as Mary, Melora Waters as Lucy and Aidan Gillen as Robert.

Michael and Mary intend to separate but are waiting for their son to come home for a visit and to tell him. He is particularly bitter against his father, seeing him as seriously unfaithful. The young man turns up with his girlfriend and, as always in a film like this, there is a meal sequence with all kinds of tensions. The truth is exposed.

So, Michael and Mary separate, take up with the new respective partners – but the ironic question arises whether the affairs are completely satisfactory now that they become more stable relationships and whether some infidelity, between Michael and Mary on the side, is still necessary for their emotional life. While the characters and plot may resemble a lot of real life, the screenplay takes a rather distanced view of marital love, especially after 25 years (although the son and his fiancée are intending to be together for life), so it is all rather amoral.

THE MIDWIFE/ SAGE FEMME

France, 2017, 105 minutes, Colour.
Catherine Frot, Catherine Deneuve,
Directed by Martin Provost.

It is a pleasure to see two important actresses working together. In 2016 Catherine Frot made a powerful impression as Marguerite, the French equivalent of the off-key singer, Florence Foster Jenkins. Catherine Deneuve, in her early 70s, has been making films, quite prolifically, and receiving top billing since 1964, a French icon.

The title, Sage Femme is the French for Midwife. The emphasis is very female – but there are lines of dialogue in this film to indicate that the name will have to be changed, both in French and English, with men becoming significant in birthing. The son of Catherine Frot's Claire tells his mother that he is stopping his medical studies but that he intends to work as a midwife.

The film opens with quite a number of births scenes, an opportunity to show Claire and her skills, her ability to deal with mothers giving birth, to encourage, to cajole, to sympathise, and

spreading her expertise to the attending nurses. There are other sequences throughout the film enabling us to appreciate Claire's commitment and professionalism. She is also unhappy at the move to great technological change in care for mothers and birth, moving away from the personalised midwife care.

And Catherine Deneuve? She plays an older woman, Beatrice, who wants to get in contact with Claire's father with whom she had a relationship decades earlier. This puts a great strain on Claire who is very serious at the best of times. It means going back into her past, her attitude towards her father, her resentment towards Beatrice, her long held the ring that Beatrice had betrayed her.

The main complication is that Beatrice announces that she has terminal cancer, tumours. Claire is very positive in her outlook on illness and recovery and, at first, it is her sense of medical duty that she gives attention to Beatrice. Which is not always easy because Beatrice is one of those people who can never settle down, is always out on the town, is still smoking despite warnings, fond of a drink, and a propensity for gambling. She switches moods in an incident, upset, then over-gracious.

There is one other complication, apart from Claire's son and his fiancée announcing that she is pregnant. Claire has a garden plot on the outskirts of the city, working with her vegetables, and encounters the son of the manager, Paul (Oliver Gourmet) an international truck driver who befriends Claire, a genial and obliging man, someone who can open up Claire and her capacity for one-to-one affection. There is an exhilarating scene at the end where Claire, Beatrice and Paul go for a country drive in the lorry and Beatrice gets the opportunity to drive.

So, it is a great pleasure to see the two actresses embody these two characters, their interactions, the changing relationship, going back into memories, and the possibilities for some reconciliation and forgiveness. Bringing to birth, so to speak, a new life of relationships.

MOTHER!

US, 2017, 120 minutes, Colour.

Jennifer Lawrence, Javier Bardem, Ed Harris, Michelle Pfeiffer, Domhnal Gleeson, Kristin Wiig.

Directed by Darren Aronofsky.

Reviews in response to Mother! have been quite polarised. Some headings have stated: "love it or loathe it". Definitely!

It is quite a complicated film, something to be expected from its writer-director who over a 20 year period has made such films as Pi, Requiem for a Dream, The Fountain, Black Swan – and, more straightforwardly, The Wrestler. Darren Aronofsky is not afraid to take his audiences into the realms of imagination and fantasy and the complex world of allegory.

If one were to be asked what the film is about, it is easy to say that it is about a husband-and-wife setting up a house, she repairing and restructuring it, he a writer enjoying some seclusion. He invites people to stay. There is a family altercation with his visitors and,

consequently, more and more people come to the house with strange results. But that is not even the half of it!

In looking at the final credits, we see that the cast are not named with personal names but with designations. Jennifer Lawrence is Mother. Javier Bardem is Him. Taking Him as a clue leads us into all kinds of speculations, especially religious. Aronofski has no hesitation in setting up many religious connotations.

Since his previous film was a biblical saga, Noah, religious concepts, the Judeo- Christian tradition has been strong in his consciousness.

The film begins and ends with a spectacular fire, death, the finding of a glass heart in the fire and its being set up as a shrine. It seems as if the world we have been invited into is cyclic. And the beginning and the end are apocalyptic, apocalyptic fire, destruction and potential renewal or cruel recycling and repetition.

Since the husband of the narrative is designated as Him, it is easy to make a God reference. Him is creative, has moments of writer's block, seeks stimulation by sharing other's stories, inviting them into his home. Mother is younger, is loving, wants a child, eventually becomes pregnant. She can be seen as something of an earth mother/Virgin Mary figure, giving birth to a child to great acclaim but to destruction. The Judaeo- Christian references are there and open to interpretation.

One of the main speculations is whether the film is religious or anti-religious, whether it is theist or anti-theist. Him seems good but seems also to be self-absorbed, loving Mother but also cruel to her. His creation is beautiful but spasmodic. And, one might also speculate that the couple played by Ed Harris and Michelle Pfeiffer (Michelle Pfeiffer giving almost a masterclass on haughty malice) are like Adam and Eve with a sudden intrusion into their new hope for Paradise by their two clashing sons, with Cain and Abel results.

In the religious/anti-religious speculations, the film has a great deal to show about cult, cult-figures, fans and fanatics, committed disciples, irrational disciples, the madness of putting people on pedestals and knocking them off.

So, while the above can be considered as a review, it is very much a rumination about a film that is often wildly imaginative, sometimes delirious in its action and visual style, a dream allegory of our world.

MOUNTAIN

Australia, 2017, 74 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Willem Dafoe.

Directed by Jennifer Peedom.

Whether you love mountains or not, spending an hour and a quarter contemplating the beauty and ruggedness of mountains is well worthwhile.

Director Jennifer Peedom has made a number of short films about mountains, including Everest, and then made the very interesting documentary about the scaling of Everest, the

role of the local Sherpas and their being underestimated until they stood their ground for proper recognition and payment, the growing crowds lining up to climb Everest, commercial queues, something to do rather than something to achieve. This documentary was called Sherpa.

While there is an underlying message in this film, communication is mainly visually and aurally.

Quite a number of cinematographers took part in this project, filming all around the world, in the Himalayas, in the Andes, in New Zealand, in Australia... Their material is generally spectacular and a lot of time and effort have gone into the choice of visuals as well as the editing placement for best effect. While the camera sometimes stand still to contemplate a peak, a range, a valley, much of the photography has been done from helicopters with an extraordinary sense of moving in and through and above the mountains.

Particularly spectacular are sequences of volcanoes, eruptions, the vast extent of lava flows.

We see a variety of mountains in a variety of seasons. We also see a number of the climbers, caught in what seem to be extraordinary positions, foothold on the side of a sheer cliff, hundreds of metres high; climbers triumphing through the snow having achieved peaks; climbers swinging, seemingly perilously, out into the vast void.

The particular feature of this project is the musical accompaniment. The score has been composed by Richard Tognetti who conducts the Australian Chamber Orchestra, a symphonic piece that provides background but does not overly intrude.

There is also a spoken commentary, written by Robert McFarlane², which also provides background and does not overly intrude. It is quietly spoken by American actor, William Dafoe, glimpsed in black-and-white in the studio at the opening of the film. It tends to be contemplative of nature, with a great sense of wonder, offering reflections on creation and beauty. There are some moments when we see a Buddhist priest in a small chamber, prayer and incense and mysticism.

The film offers a wonderful opportunity to be immersed in mountains.

THE ONLY LIVING BOY IN NEW YORK

US, 2017, 89 minutes, Colour.

Callum Turner, Jeff Bridges, Kate Beckinsale, Pierce Brosnan, Cynthia Nixon, Kiersy Clemons, Bill Camp, Wallace Shawn, Debbie Mazar, Tate Donovan

Directed by Marc Webb.

Innocent or naive? Quite a significant question that audiences will raise in getting to know this only boy living in New York City. He is 25 but the title is boy. And is he innocent or naive? Certainly awkward, gawky, not knowing the ways of the world but having to learn them. And, in what ways is he living?

There is a lot of voice-over in the film, welcome because it is spoken by Jeff Bridges who plays the next-door neighbour to the boy, tells his story, writes it – substituting for the boy's

own father, listening, counselling, a kind of father confessor as well a psychiatrist.

The boy's actual father is a millionaire in the publishing business, an interesting character study from Pierce Brosnan. The boy's mother is quite neurotic with a charm of her own, played by Cynthia Nixon. Their marriage is brittle and is on the verge of breaking, another woman.

The boy, whose name is Thomas, is played very effectively by Callum Turner (who, it turns out, was born in London). Actually, so was the other main character in the film, Johanna, a book editor, in complicated relationships with the father and the son, played by Kate Beckinsale. The other central character is Mimi, a friend more than girlfriend for Thomas (Kiersey Clemons).

It is surprising, with these complex characters, how much material is on-screen in just under 90 minutes, keeping audience attention, listening to dialogue which is well-written, often quite arresting and thoughtful. (The screenplay was written by Alan Loeb who has done quite a number of genre films as well as 2016's somewhat pretentious *Collateral Beauty* – which means that the screenplay is quite a surprise.)

The voice-over has quite a lot to say about New York City and speculations about the soul of the city, the various trends, the shifting community, the art world, the drug addicts, the changes in neighbourhoods – which would make it interesting for anyone who has spent some time in New York City. One of the key sequences occurs at a Jewish wedding, a most elaborate event, with an unexpected philosophical speech by Bill Camp as Uncle Buster. Not sure whether most of the audience will retain the extensive content of the speech.

There are some surprises in the screenplay and some twists that may or may not have been anticipated which gives something of a different perspective on some of the characters and their behaviour.

The title comes from a song by Paul Simon, sung by Simon and Garfunkel and incorporated into the screenplay towards the end of the film.

PATTI CAKE\$

US, 2017, 109 minutes, Colour.

Danielle Macdonald, Bridget Everett, Siddharth Dhananjay, Mamoudou Athie, Cathy Moriarty.

Directed by Jeremy Jasper.

This is definitely a film for audiences rapt in Rap.

While Rap is an American phenomenon, especially developed by African-Americans², it has spread in more recent years right throughout the world, many indigenous groups drawing on the traditions of Rap to explore ideas and feelings in the lyrics and the rhythms.

Basically, this is a familiar story about young people with musical ambitions, developing their talent, spreading their hopes, experiencing setbacks, working through them to achieve some kind of success. It has been seen as the foundation for many films about singers and

musicians. This time about Rap. The director of the film is obviously an enthusiast because he has contributed to many of the songs throughout the film.

Patti is a young woman living in New Jersey with her mother and grandmother. She is played by Australian actress, Danielle Macdonald, and one might say she is in the tradition of Rebel Wilson. And she loves rap, composing songs, practising, getting a few local gigs. She is joined by a young man who works in a local pharmacy, Indian background, who is enthusiastic as she is, even more so in performance. The other member of the group, by contrast, is a rather laconic African-American, replete with facial rings, who goes under the name of Bastard field, is Bob.

Patti works as a caterer, fairly successful in a restaurant but then going out to cater for various functions – including a dinner for a celebrated rap artist, slipping him the CD that she and her group have made, he proving to be an arrogant snob. She is disheartened and prepared to give up. At home, there is a crisis with her grandmother, with whom she is great friends (Cathy Moriarty) having a stroke and then dying. Her mother (Bridget Everett) as they might say is a tough broad, a big strong woman, a talent for belting out a song, which she does in a local club – but finds her moment at the culmination of the film in joining Patti in song.

The film fills in the background of life in the suburbs of New Jersey, indicating that this is not necessarily the place to build a musical career. However, Patti does get an opportunity to revive her group, apologise to the others for her harsh treatment of them, gets her mother to dye her hair, dresses up, goes to a local club to perform in a competition. The group is on its way...

RIP TIDE

Australia, 2017, 85 minutes, Colour.

Debby Ryan, Genevieve Hegney, Andrew Creer, Naomi Sequeira, Valerie Bader, Aaron Jefferey, Jeremy Lindsay Taylor, Danielle Carter, Marcus Graham.

Directed by Rhiannon Bannenberg.

Rip Tide is a small film combining surfing with fashion.

This is very much a film made by women, featuring women, of particular interest to women. But, the men are quite good characters as well...

The story is not unfamiliar. It opens in New York, the world of high fashion, the focus on Cora (Debby Ryan) an 18-year-old who is dominated by her mother, an ambitious businesswoman, whose hopes are being fulfilled in her daughter and who does not realise how little attention she really gives to her daughter as a person. The stage is set for some kind of eruption, especially when the daughter suggests to the designer how the dress could be improved – he is played by Marcus Graham in a very small cameo, mainly having a hissy fit.

Mother and daughter do in fact come from Australia and have visited in the past. The contact is the mother's sister, Margot, a strong screen presence by Genevieve Hegney. Her husband died the previous year in a surfing accident and Cora and her mother did not make the funeral. Cora decides to buy a ticket fly to Australia – and there are some humorous moments, at least from the Australian point of view, where Cora really doesn't understand

Australian idiom especially when the genial young surfer, Tom (Andrew Creer), asks how she is going and her response is “where?”. Her mentality is completely focused on first-class in everything.

With the help of Margot and with the help of Margot’s mother-in-law, a very sympathetic old girl, Cora adjusts, is encouraged by the ever smiling, ever-twee, Chicka (Naomi Sequeira), and finds that she can surf well, revise memory with the attractive Tom, finds that she might have a possibility of staying back in Australia – and it is all filmed rather glowingly on the New South Wales Illawarra Coast.

Needless to say, there are a few crises, especially when Cora is asked to design dresses for a local celebration, the centenary of women surfers, and she treats one of the local girl models who tears the material to improve the dress exactly as the hissy fit designer in New York treated her. With Chicka’s help, she naturally repents, designs the dresses – and, spoiler alert, it all goes very well!

The other crisis is whether she should return to New York after her mother phones her with news of a new and substantial contract. No spoilers here – everybody will guess has to be a happy ending.

TOMMY’S HONOUR

UK, 2016, 112 minutes, Colour.

Peter Mullan, Jack Lowdon, Ophelia Lovibond, Sam Neill, Peter Fernando.

Directed by Jason Connery.

And who is Tommy? Actually, there are two Tom Morris in this film, the old and the junior. And anyone who knows the history of golf will be able to identify them immediately.

This is very much a golfing film, a film for enthusiasts for the sport and with a knowledge of its history. Non--golf-fans may well feel on the outer as they watch the film, allowing for the fact that there will be details of tournaments, strokes and difficulties, achievements. But they will acknowledge that this film offers significant golf history.

The setting is 19th century Scotland and information is given at the end about the careers of the Morris in as well as a number of photos of the actual characters, a reminder that Tommy Morris Jr is considered the greatest golfer of the 19th century. And his father who lived to the age of 85, was the designer of over 70 golf courses.

So, who were the Morris in and where did they live? Actually at St Andrews – so not far to go for play. The film opens in the 1860s and moves into the 1870s with Tommy Morris national champion at the age of 17 and winning four successive championships before he was 21.

The important theme for the film is that of class in British society in the 19th century. The Morris family were servant class. Old Tom Morris was seen as a servant, working as groundskeeper and caddy for the Lord of the manor. And this was the world into which his children were born. And it is very clear that they were to keep their place, that they were often told that they were not gentlemen, that they could never become members of the golf club at St Andrews, that they were paid to play by the aristocracy who bet on their success.

Tommy Morris Jr was something of a rebel, sometimes defying his father, who was always very proud of him and his achievement, challenging the local aristocrat, demanding more professional payment, but always treated, humiliatingly, as a person.

There is a Scots humane story underlying Tommy's Honour, the dour Scots family life with its churchgoing and Bible reading, a very stern mother, young Tommy attracted by a local servant girl, six years his senior, defending her reputation, marrying her, her pregnancy.

Veteran Scots actor, Peter Mullan, is the older Thomas. Jack Lowdon, young and brash, brings Tommy Morris Jr to vivid life. Ophelia Lovibond is Meg, his wife, also humiliated as a servant but also powerfully defying Tommy's rather puritanical mother. Sam Neill is the local aristocrat.

It is a film for sports lovers and golfers will personally be interested in the history, in the influence of the Morrisises and the development of the contemporary sport. For others, watching the film might be a bit like being a member of the crowds who tag along, moving from hole to hole.

(A bit of Scots history. The film was directed by Jason Connery, actor and director with an Australian mother, Diane Cilento, and a Scots father, Sean Connery.)

WHAT IF IT WORKS

Australia, 2017, 95 minutes, Colour.

Luke Ford, Anna Samson, Brooke Satchwell, Wade Briggs, Karen Fairfax.

Directed by Romi Trower.

There have been many films over the years, especially in recent years, about relationships, romantic relationships, potential healing relationships between people who are physically and/or mentally disabled. We don't always expect to see these stories acted out in the ordinary streets, in the ordinary suburbs of Melbourne. They are acted out here – but, at the end, there is still the question that the title raises, will it work, what if it works?

It takes a few moments to get into the feel of the film We are introduced to Adrian, Ford, a young man in his 30s, driving a fast car, getting into trouble, landing unsuspectingly into a group of drag queens. Who is Adrian? When we see him behave, gloved hands, hands raised in the air, wary of touching anything, fastidious, we realise that he is absolutely obsessive, has a compulsive disorder. Which means that while he is friendly in his way, it is not always easy to like him. Non-compulsiveness will feel very impatient with him. But, as we get to know him, see him in all his foibles, there has to be some sympathy. In fact, he is very intelligent with science and engineering and is able to help people in the art commune, even calling in the aid of the drag queen friends.

He almost runs over a young woman (Anna Samson) who lives just up the street, who walks dogs (which he abhors). When he encounters her on his session with his therapist and she comes to visit, mistaking him for the therapist and pouring out a rather salacious life story, he is upset. He later meets her in the street.

It emerges that she has multiple personalities, explaining to him that she is rather like a block of flats with 10 particular rooms, some of the inhabitants being aware of the others, each able to emerge at various times. She has a reasonable personality, Grace. She has a very progressive personality G. She is also an artist, involved with a fellow artist who, in fact, is rather jealous of her art and exploitative of her as a person. She is unaware that she has an opportunity for an international exhibition, he concealing it from her.

A lot of the film is the interaction between Adrian and Grace, and how a relationship can develop between a fastidious untouching and untouchable man and a reticent woman who will erupt, often unexpectedly, with another self. There is a further complication that Adrian has had a relationship previously with a young woman who also is afflicted, by her self-image and self-doubt.

The film does not take us necessarily very far but invites its audience to contemplate these central characters, to reflect on how they are hampered by the disabilities, to wonder whether therapy will help, to wonder whether the relationship will enable some breakthroughs and some healing.

And at the end, we are left to wonder, of course, what if it works?

REVIEWS NOVEMBER 2017

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BAD MOMS 2

US, 2017, 104 minutes, Colour.

Mila Kunis, Kristin Bell, Kathryn Hahn, Cheryl Hines, Christine Baranski, Susan Sarandon, Justin Hartley, Peter Gallagher, Wanda Sykes, Cade Mansfield Cooksey.
Directed by Jon Lucas, Scott Moore.

A year earlier, *Bad Moms* seems to have touched the funnybone of the wide audience, characters, oddball situations, plenty of vulgar touches, but quite funny in its way. It was obviously popular because, within a year, here is a sequel.

Once again, this one seems to touch the funnybone, the characters, even more oddball situations, and, of course, plenty of vulgar touches. But, again, quite funny in its way and destined to be very popular. It would not be surprising to see the *Bad Moms* in the future – though *Bad Dads* is promised.

The same team of Jon Lucas and Scott Moore (amongst others, the three *Hangover* films) are responsible. In the three moms, they created three quite different characters, Mila Kunis as Amy is in the centre, exasperated at home, divorce, bringing up the children, and fond of a friendly neighbour, Jay Hernandez, who has a daughter. Then there is Kiki, Kristin Bell, a nice, more simple mother, loving her children and her devoted husband, wary of letting her hair down. On the other hand, there is the brash and boisterous Carla, Kathryn Hahn, blunt in manner and language, not afraid of a drink, daring the other mothers to come out of themselves. And they did.

So, what are the filmmakers to do for a sequel? They had a very bright idea: introduce the mothers of the moms. And they employed a very good cast to portray these dominant and intruding (well not all of them) mothers.

Each of the mothers has very a strongly delineated character and we welcome their appearances. To that extent, they steal the show.

And who are they? Even dominating the dominating mothers is Christine Baranski as Amy's mother. She can steal any film or television show in which she appears. She is Ruth who behaves ruthlessly. A formidable presence, dragging along her dominated but genial husband, Peter Gallagher, taking over the house, taking over Christmas – but, we look forward to her humiliation; but, we hope, something of a conversion. On the other hand, there is Cheryl Hines as Kiki's emotionally dominating mother, ultrasweet, insinuating herself into every aspect of her best friend/daughter's life – with an amusing therapist sequence with Wanda Sykes. We look forward to her process of unclinging.

As might be expected, Carla's mother is the opposite, an absent mother, a gambler, often stoned, but making an impression because she is played by Susan Sarandon. We look forward to seeing whether she can settle down.

It is Christmas – and Jesus himself might be well-exasperated at the pressures of all aspects of commercialised Christmas and expectations (though there is scene at Midnight Mass and Kiki's mother does mention that it is Jesus' birth). We share with the mums and moms together in crisis over the five days to Christmas, Ruth organising everyone, the three mothers sharing a drink to escape and entangling with Santa Claus, as well as some Santa Claus strippers, one of whom, Ty (Justin Hartley), a fairly simple soul, who sees into the depths of Carla.

Mess, mayhem, exasperated swearing, jokes about sex and marriage, a bit of female ogling, but somehow or other it comes together much better than we might have anticipated.

THE BELKO EXPERIMENT

US/Colombia, 2017, 88 minutes, Colour.

John J. Gallagher Jr, Tony Goldwyn, Adria Arjona, John C. McGinley?, Melonie Diaz, Owein, Sean Gunn, Brent Sexton, Gregg Henry, Michael Rooker, Rusty Schwimmer.
Directed by Greg Mc Lean.

This is a very grim film.

Centuries ago, in exclusive language times, there was the phrase “Man’s inhumanity to man”. This is very much the theme of the Belko Experiment.

It can be noted first that this is a film directed by Greg McLean?. He is not a foreigner to grim stories and grim treatment. He had notable success with Wolf Creek and its sequel and then a television series. He also made Jungle in Colombia. And this film was also made in that Latin American country. The screenplay was written by James Gunn, writer and director of Guardians of the Galaxy films.

Belko is an international company with a high-rise office building out in the middle of almost-nowhere in Colombia. It has a monolithic look and, soon into the film, metal shutters rise to cover all the windows and encase it in a kind of armour. Security is very high, even questioning some of the executives as they arrive for work one morning. There are about 60 people who work in the building, a company which helps place American workers in Latin American firms.

The day starts conventionally enough, people arriving, the genial man at the security desk, some rivalries in work, touch of romance, a leering co-worker, the CEO and his spacious office.

This film runs for 90 minutes and almost immediately a voice comes over the intercom setting the agenda for the day, the windows all being closed and shuttered. It has echoes of such films as Battle Royale, the Japanese film where schoolchildren were pitted against each other, sent out into the wilderness to survive and to survive by killing others. In fact, this was one of the key premises of the very popular Hunger Games series, the transferring of gladiatorial combat to the death into a future society.

An intercom voice announces that half the population of the building must be killed by the other half.

At first, people think it is a prank, and take little notice. But, in fact, Belko has inserted tabs into the back of the neck of each employee, allegedly for insurance security in a land of abductions. However, the powers that be can trigger those tabs, explosives, ‘n will – and they do.

As might be expected, there is mayhem within the group, and the question of who will take charge. There is the CEO, played by Tony Goldwyn, a family man who becomes more and

more bent on survival and control. There is the leering man, played by John C. McGinley, pragmatic and cruel. On the other hand there is Mike, John J. Gallagher Jr, clearly one of the good guys, romantically involved with a fellow worker, who uses his brains as well as his goodwill to help others.

The body count is very high – that is the point of the story. And, there are gory moments and the audience beginning to feel desperate with the rising horror and cruelty.

There are some heroic people, especially the security guard who refuses the key to the weapons room. Most of the workers are Americans but there are some locals, men and women – but, ultimately, when the mysterious voice announces that there is to be only one survivor, and tabs start being pushed, the death is indiscriminate, except for a buildup to a confrontation between the CEO and Mike.

The audience presumes that the company is conducting a “social sciences” experiment, with the mysterious voice and the range of cameras observing the gladiatorial behaviour.

While something of this is revealed at the end, there are some more confronting images, along Big Brother lines, which means that the whole perspective of the film is deeply pessimistic.

Efficiently filmed, striking as well as horrifying, and, to repeat, deeply pessimistic about human nature.

BLADE RUNNER 2049

US, 2017, 163 minutes, Colour.

Ryan Gosling, Harrison Ford, Robin Wright, Ana de Armas, Dave Bautista, Mark Arnold, Wood Harris, Sylvia Hoeks, Edward James Olmos, Jarrod Leto, Hiam Abbas, Sean Young. Directed by Dennis Villeneuve.

Although not immediately so popular in its time, Ridley Scott’s version of the Philip K. Dick story, Blade Runner (1982), it has become an increasingly popular cult science fiction film, dramatising Dick’s vision of a possible future.

It is a very brave director who would take on a sequel. Dennis Villeneuve has proven his talent as a director with his Oscar-nominated Incendies, as well as Prisoners, Sicario and Arrival. He seems eminently qualified to take up the challenge and critics were generally in favour of his work. However, many of the bloggers were not so enthusiastic. In fact, box office has been disappointing.

Villeneuve would have been criticised if his sequel was much the same as the original. However, he has been more than criticised because many say that it is not sufficiently like the original. They find it too slow, too reflective...

While there is action, it is a very long film. And the screenplay offers a lot of reflection about human nature, humanity, robotics, the replicants, their place in society, authorities and authoritarianism, commercial control, ruthlessness... Plenty to think about during the duration of the film.

In 2049, the replicants are superior to the old models, many of whom are being sought and destroyed. And, in the background, there is a rebel group waiting for revolution.

The new replicant is K, Ryan Gosling. When sent on a mission to destroy an old replicant, he uncovers some secrets which may or may not involve himself, his origins. There is a story of a replicant actually giving birth and the mystery of who the child was and where the child is.

This sets K on a mission, not quite authorised by his control, Madam (Robin Wright). K lives in the city, very reminiscent of the visuals of the original film) and has a holographic companion, Joi, Ana de Armas. He also becomes entangled with a woman of the street, Mackenzie Davis, which leads to some bizarre explorations of intimacy and sexuality, but also to the revolution.

The film explains how entrepreneur, Wallace (Jared Leto) has taken over replicant business from the old Tyrell manufacturing company. His assistant, Luv (Sylvia Hoek) is reminiscent of the old-style tough replicants, a loyal assistant but a propensity for violence and martial arts skills. Clearly, there will be a buildup to a confrontation.

But K goes out into the polluted area to find the hero of the past, Deckard. So, here is Harrison Ford again, appearing at the middle of the film, but immediately taking command with his strong presence and personality. The mansion in which he lives is intriguing, grand but decaying, the gambling palace, memories of the 20th century (including holograms of Elvis, Marilyn Monroe and Frank Sinatra).

This means that Deckard and K go on their mission, to find the mysterious child, to understand what happened, to a buildup to battles between Deckard, K and Luv.

There is enough material here to lead to a sequel – and one might hope that those who appreciated this film will be offer enough support for the making of the sequel.

BRAD'S STATUS

US, 2017, 104 minutes, Colour.

Ben Stiller, Austin Abrams, Jenna Fisher, Michael Sheen, Jemaine Clement, Luke Wilson, Shazi Raja, Luisa Lee, Mike White, Xavier Grobet.

Directed by Mike White.

There is a lot going for this film. It is definitely a film about “men’s business”, which is not to say that women will not be very interested.

It is specifically geared towards middle-aged men. However, younger men will be interested to see what might be in the future for them. Older men might appreciate looking back at how they have handled their middle-age.

Brad is played by Ben Stiller, approaching 50, his 17-year-old son about to go to college. He

lives in Sacramento, is head of a non-profit organisation which gives advice to charities. His wife is very contented with her life, her love for her husband, love for and pride for her son, and has a satisfying job working for the government.

But Brad is full of discontent – not only do we see him in his restless state, his voice-over frequently tells us and describes why this is the case. He feels that his life has eluded him.

As we see him restless during the night, unable to sleep, preoccupied about finances and position, wondering when his wife's parents will die soon and bequeath them some money (and her appropriate response to his nocturnal meanderings and suggestions is a justified "shut up").

Actually, his son Troy, a calmly sincere performance by Austin Abrams, is ready to go to college, quietly eager, skilled at music performance and composition. He does not share his father's neuroticism. Off they fly to the East Coast, for interviews at Harvard and Tufts. The tone is set by Brad's tantrum at the airport trying to get an upgrade and trying all kinds of manoeuvres, unsuccessfully.

Most of the problem is in his comparing himself with four friends from the past, with whom he went to Tufts during college. Their lives visualised on screen, at least as Brad imagines them. There is tycoon Willie (Jemaine Clement), wealthy, retired at 40, living a life of luxury on Maui. There is Jason (Luke Wilson), a successful businessman, with a family, and his own luxury Playing. And there is Craig (Michael Sheen), advisor to politicians, a television celebrity along with his wife. There is Nick (Mike White who wrote the screenplay and directed), an increasingly successful Hollywood director who is able to marry his producer partner, Xavier. This is the success that irks Brad, continually pressing him to wallow in his self-destructive misery.

Brad follows Troy to his interviews, boasting to any parent willing or unwilling to listen, finds that there has been a mistake with the date which doesn't seem to faze Truly at all but sends Brad into a funding frenzy calling his friends to pull some strings, even though he has not seen them for years (and discovers that he is not been invited to their various functions).

We know that Brad is going to have to learn some lessons but we don't know how. One interesting episode occurs when Troy joins up with some fellow students and they go out for a drink, Brad discovering that one of them is very earnest, social justice minded, interested in hearing his ideas on non-profit organisations. He makes a huge faux pas in answering one of her questions by saying that the best advice he can give is to make money!

After Troy's interviews, he meets up with Craig for dinner at a fashionable restaurant – and, of course, is placed at the table next to the exit to the kitchen then moved when Craig arrives and the waitress is all attention and upgrades them to a classier table.

So, what is Brad to do? He is helped by his son who worries that his father is having a nervous breakdown. He is also helped by listening to musicians playing Dvorak's humoresque.

The screenplay is intelligent, witty, often stimulating even as we are exasperated with Brad's self-pity. And the ending is sufficiently open-ended to offer us great pleasure in speculating what might happen to Brad and to Troy.

THE FOREIGNER

US/UK/China, 2017, 114 minutes, Colour.

Jackie Chan, Pierce Brosnan, Orla Brady, Lia Williams, Charlie Murphy, Rufus Jones, Dermot Crowley, Michael Mc Elhatton, Ray Feely.

Directed by Martin Campbell.

The Foreigner is a fairly generic title. It depends on which country you are in and who is coming into the country. In this particular case it is both the UK and Northern Ireland and the person coming in (although he has lived there for 30 years) is Chinese. In fact, The Novel on Which This Film Is Based, by Stephen Leather, is called The Chinaman.

And, The Chinaman is Jackie Chan. The screenplay indicates that he is age 61, as he was when the film was made. But that does not mean that he has lost all his agility. While he might not have the martial arts movements of years gone by, he can still put up a fairly good fight – and his past training, as we find out, is in surveillance tactics, tracking tactics, trapping tactics.

When we look at the cast list, we see it is Jackie Chan versus Pierce Brosnan.

We find out the situation at the opening of the film, Jackie Chan's Mr Quan picking up his daughter from a London school and a sudden explosion, an IRA bomb. This means that we are back in the stories of the 20th century, updated for the 21st-century. Mr Quan's daughter is killed. What he quietly grieves, he becomes intent on righting the wrongs, on unmasking the killers, on wreaking justice.

This means that he has to confront the UK government, the UK police – who, while momentarily sympathetic, see him as a nuisance and something of a crank. So, off he goes to Belfast, to confront a deputy minister there, Pierce Brosnan, who also tends to dismiss him, declaring that he does not know who detonated the bombs.

What is a grieving father, an outsider, foreigner, to do?

This is where the plot becomes explosive, literally. Mr Quan is an expert at using fairly ordinary materials to create bombs and sets off a few, to the deputy minister's detriment and fear. This is especially the case when he retreats to his country house and there is a huge explosion. The minister has quite a number of aides, more along the thuggish lines and diplomats, but have no chance against Mr Kwon and his fighting abilities.

There is also diplomacy. The minister sent his nephew secretly to make deals with the London police, has contact with government minister.

It all builds up to a confrontation when there is a second bomb explosion of a London Bridge, a bus being destroyed with many deaths. And there are a number of twists involving old IRA stalwarts, betrayals, twisting of information.

Clearly, there is going to be a confrontation between Mr Quan and the IRA cell. And, this

does happen, Mr Quan being very shrewd as well as being very active – and, really, able to solve all the problems single-handed.

This is a kind of story that Jack Higgins used to write many decades ago, the IRA, the British, individuals who have courage and a knack for solving problems with brawn and brains. director Martin Campbell has directed two James Bond films, one with Pierce Brosnan, as well as some significant television series, including Edge of Darkness.

A contemporary entertainment in the old vein.

FRITZ LANG

Germany, 2016, 104 minutes, Colour.

Heino Ferch, Thomas Thieme, Samuel Finzi, Johanna Gastdorf, Lisa Friederich.

Directed by Gerdian Maugg.

Fritz Lang is considered one of the 20th century's foremost film directors. His films in Germany include Metropolis and M. His films in the United States ranged over many genres, especially dark thrillers and some westerns. He died in 1976 in Hollywood, aged 85.

Lang's life was also interesting. A Jewish mother who converted to Catholicism. Pioneer in writing and directing films during the 1920s, some silent classics. Goebbels approved of him and in 1933 offered him a leading role in the German film industry. Lang decided to leave Germany and moved to the United States. His wife and collaborator, Thea von Harbou, divorced him and remained in Germany, writing for the Nazi regime. It is said that he was very difficult to work with.

While the title of this film is Fritz Lang, it is a fiction, based on facts but doing speculative interpretations of his character and of his filmmaking.

One of the significant features of the film is that it is filmed in black and white, framed in the traditional box form of the silent era so that the filmmakers are able to incorporate a great deal of actual footage of Berlin and Düsseldorf around 1930, providing an authentic background to the action. This enables them to incorporate footage from some of Lang's films, especially Metropolis and Woman on the Moon. By the end of the film, it is also in able to incorporate footage from Lang's first sound film, M, which is the particular subject of this film.

Lang had focused on issues of German mythology as well as on futuristic interpretations of humans and machines. He was wary of silent films but realised he had to move with the times. He was intrigued by some newspaper headlines of a serial killer in the city of Düsseldorf. This film explores his fascination with the crimes and the criminal, going to Düsseldorf, making contact with the police chief and getting permission to go to the crime scenes and eventually interview the killer who has confessed to his wife and is apprehended. (He was executed soon after the release of Lang's film, M.)

Lang seems to have a morbid interest in the crime and the criminal, going to locations, walking the streets, imagining the state of mind of the killer, the vicious attacks on women, the screenplay seeming to suggest that psychologically he sometimes identifies with the

killer. The audience has seen him in relationship to his wife, his sexual activity, flashbacks to his first wife, Lisa, who nursed him after injuries in World War I but who killed herself after discovering his relationship with writer Thea von Harbou. In a film within a film, this episode is dramatised by different actors. Lang was not a particularly nice man at all.

Lang was a genius in his area, reminding the audience that a genius does not necessarily have to be a nice or a good person.

By the end of the film, Lang and Thea von Harbou have prepared a screenplay to meet producers demands, there are glimpses of the filming of it, actors, sets, action. Peter Lorre was the star of the film and, at the end, there are very significant, even graphic, sequences from the original Incorporated here.

An intriguing film in terms of its content, the portrait of an artist, his genius and flaws, personal relationships and obsessions, and his strengths as a filmmaker. And, in its black and white photography, incorporating of documentary footage and films, it is also intriguing in its visual style.

GEOSTORM

US, 2017, 109 minutes, Colour.

Gerard Butler, Jim Sturgess, Abbie Cornish, Alexandra Maria Lara, Daniel Wu, Eugenio Derbez, Andy Garcia, Ed Harris, Robert Sheehan, Richard Schiff, Mare Winningham, Zazie Beetz.

Directed by Dean Devlin.

There is always an audience for a disaster movie. Ever since such films as *The Poseidon Adventure* in the 1970s brought widescreen misadventures, on ships, at airports, on flights, in towering *Infernos*, rollercoasters, audiences have relished the opportunities for identification with characters in perilous situations.

The star of this film is Gerard Butler who previously had appeared in *Olympus has Fallen* and *London has Fallen*. He has always save the day, even saving the American president in peril. Perhaps the writers of this film have had more than an eye on the *Has Fallen* franchise because once again there is an American president and this film might have been called 'Earth has Fallen'.

This is the future although the sequences on Earth look fairly familiar.

17 nations have combined to create an extraordinary space station, *Dutch Boy*, which will be able to control any crisis on Earth, especially those caused by climate change. The person behind the whole project is Jake Lawson (Gerard Butler, who might have been the better choice to portray Jack Reacher!). But, he is one of those individualistic heroes and falls foul of the Washington bureaucracy who sack him. The new man in charge is Jake's younger brother, Max (Jim Sturgess), more the bookish and bureaucratic type. He is in a relationship with a Secret Service agent (Abbie Cornish proving that any female officer is more than the equivalent of a male officer).

Things begin to go wrong. An isolated village in Afghanistan is frozen. A lot of Hong Kong

is destroyed by rising temperatures and ensuing fire. For the record, other cities which we see being destroyed include Tokyo, Moscow and Red Square, the freezing of the beachfront in Rio, a tsunami overwhelming Dubai, storms in Mumbai... For audiences with a penchant for seeing cities destroyed, Geostorm should be high on the list.

Needless to say, who has to go back to rectify everything on Dutch Boy but Jake, with Max supervising him. While Geostorm is something of a Space Odyssey of the 21st century, it is not any HAL computer that is the villain. The villain is an ambitious human – and our options are the US president, Andy Garcia, or the Secretary of State, Ed Harris.

And there is a mercenary agent on Dutch Boy and some rogue activity in the space station. Which means that Jake has a lot to do, discovering the virus that is infecting files, unmasking the villain on the space station, checking with Max as to who is the villain on Earth – with the culmination at a Florida Democratic Presidential Election rally.

If you want to see an enormous space station exploding, here it is.

But, with the new head of the space station, Alexandra Maria Lara, Jake is able to save the day.

It might be much as you would expect, though probably more spectacularly so, plenty of special effects and action, entertaining in its way.

GOOD TIME

US, 2017, 101 minutes, Colour.

Robert Pattinson, Benny Safdi, Talia Webster, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Barkhad Abdi, Peter Verby, Rose Gregorio, Eric Paykert.
Directed by Benny Safdi, Josh Safdi.

The title of the film is Good Time, it might be described as Hard Going.

This is the New York streets and many commentators have remembered Martin Scorsese's 1974 film Mean Streets, the characters who lived there, young characters, difficult pasts, uncertain futures.

The film opens by the audience introducing us to one of two brothers, Nick (played by the co-director, Benny Safdie). He is rather slow-witted, is in a session with a sympathetic therapist who is showing him cards, making him do word association games but with comparatively little success except the revelation that he had thrown a pan at his grandmother. Before anything further can happen, his brother, Connie (a very effective and different Robert Pattinson) intrudes into the office, making demands on the therapist, taking his brother to exclamations of "shame" from the therapist.

Connie is desperate to help his brother. But why he would choose to get guns and masks and the both of them go into a bank for robbery, handing over a note, writing directions and then writing back, demanding even more money and making their escape but seemingly unaware that there would be a dye in the money bag that would cause the car to crash and their being

covered with red paint. Connie has to hide the money, get rid of the paint but his plan is thwarted when police come after them and Nick runs away, only to be arrested, taken to a police station, put in a cell.

What is Connie to do? Disguise himself and his hair? Certainly. Recover some of the money? Go to a bail bondsman and make very impatient demands on him to try to organise Nick's immediate release. He also goes to his girlfriend, Corey (Jennifer Jason Leigh) and wants to use her credit card to get the extra \$10,000 for the bail. Her mother has shrewdly stopped the card.

Connie then attempts to recover Nick but ends up, mistakenly, with a drug dealer, Ray. This leads to a dramatic flashback on Ray's part, falling foul a taxi driver and leaping from the car, injuring himself. Then a connection with the drug dealer and a young girl, Connie then trying to hide what remains of the money in a theme park.

Again, in these mean streets, with characters so very limited in mental ability, things go badly again, he and the dealer bashing the security guard, disguising themselves in his coat and, taking his car, going to his apartment to arrange for the sale of some drugs.

These characters are ill-fated. Police chases, falls from buildings, inept attempts at rescue... A final close-up of Connie. What future? But some hope with Nick as the therapist introduces him to group work, some men and women who are introduced to a psychological game, asking, if they identify with the theme presented to them, they cross the floor. This activates their minds, even Nick's so that...

HAPPY DEATH DAY

US, 2017, 94 minutes, Colour.

Jessica Rothe, Israel Broussard, Ruby Modine, Rachel Matthews, Charles Aitken.

Directed by Christopher Landon.

How many times can the director kill off the leading lady? There was hullabaloo in 1960 when Janet Leigh was killed off so early in Hitchcock's Psycho. In Happy Death Day, I think the heroine mentions she has been killed 16 times. 16 times you may ask – but, fairly soon into the film movie buffs will be thinking Groundhog Day. Hence the at-least 16 times.

In fairness to the writer and the director and their “borrowing” the main idea behind Groundhog Day, they do make amusing references to it at the end, the noble boyfriend telling the many-times surviving heroine about the original film. She has never heard of it. He tries Bill Murray. Never heard of him. He tries Ghostbusters. Never heard of it. Shame on her!!!

For the first 10 minutes or more, many audiences hearts will sink. Those were very fond of fraternity and sorority raucous comedies will feel they are unfamiliar ground, so why not another one! And our heroine, Tree (short for Teresa), Jessica Rothe, is one of those presumptuously arrogant, knock-everyone-out-of-the-way-types, immediately dislikeable. How are we going to survive the film? Well, mainly by her not surviving her particular Groundhog Day murders but her waking up every morning, her birthday in fact, her death day in greater fact!

Actually, the film does improve as it goes on. And the filmmakers do employ some ingenuity in highlighting what happens to Tree, waking up in a strange fraternity room with Carter (an agreeable Israel Broussard), his friend arriving with a lewd comment, her fears, racing away, literally knocking people out of her way, encountering a would-be boyfriend, and then the comments by the other women at the sorority. And a cupcake with one candle on it from her roommate, Lori, which first time round she throws into the garbage. Tree is that kind of person.

The whole point of Groundhog Day is the fact that the person re-living the day and has the opportunity to learn, to alter (at least for the rest of the day), and for Tree to work out who might be killing her. Actually, it is somebody in a mask – but, unlike the mask in Halloween and in the Scream movies, this is a cheerful mask, for supporters of a football team, chubby, bucktoothed. But, by the end of the film, it is sinister nonetheless.

On one of the days, Carter does his best and, unbeknownst to himself, Tree takes quite a shine to him. On some of her days, her injuries take her to hospital where she discovers that a maniac killer is present under police guard.

There are some twists as the scenario goes on, Tree testing out potential suspects, the encounter with the killer, and, just when you thought it was all over, the real killer appears!

Interestingly, the screenwriter gives Tree quite a lengthy speech, spoken to Carter, about realising how selfish she is, not supporting her father because of her grief for her dead mother, rude to everyone about her, as she says: not a nice person. So, there you have a horror film with a highly explicit moral which you can't disagree with!

HOME AGAIN

US, 2017, 97 minutes, Colour.

Reese Witherspoon, Michael Sheen, Nat Wolff, Candice Bergen, Pico Alexander, Jon Rudnitsky, Lake Bell, Eden Grace Redfield, Lola Flanery.

Directed by Hallie Meyers-Shyer².

This is a variation on the popular American romantic comedy. Actually, rather later in the film, the clue is given about the central character, Alice, Reese Witherspoon, and the three young men who live in her guesthouse and are wanting to make a film. As they go to see a producer, they actually say that one of them has a brain, and the second a heart, and the third, the nerve. Fans of The Wizard of Oz will know the reference instantly.

But, Alice, is not on an easy yellow brick road. As the film opens, she is looking resignedly in her bathroom mirror. It is her 40th birthday. It turns out that she has separated from her music industry husband, Michael Sheen, has two daughters, one of whom tends to be depressed, the other not. The audience is given a resume of her very successful film director father, his films, his many marriages, the house that he built in LA to which Alice and the children are now returning.

The three young men, Harry (Pico Alexander), the producer who thinks he is God's gift to everyone (the nerve); Teddy (Nat Wolff), the earnest actor (the heart); and screenwriter

George (Jon Rudnitsky) who is the brain but really has the most heart.

They cannot pay for their hotel room but a chance encounter with Alice at her 40th birthday party, drinks and dancing, leads to them going home with her, her mother (Candice Bergen) turning up the next morning, being charmed by their flattery because she was the star of her husband's films, she invites them to stay.

There is a caustic interlude when Alice goes for an interview for a job in room decoration but finds her prospective employer, Lake Bell, presumptuously arrogant – they later have a rather public falling out at a restaurant.

Harry wants to charm Alice but stands her up. She is rescued by George. Teddy's action will be when Alice's husband, Austin, decides to come to Los Angeles to see what is happening and they have a punch-up.

The three men, all in their mid-20s, are a hit with the two daughters, especially George since the older girl is preparing a little play for presentation at the school – an event which provides something of a climax for the film.

In the meantime, the three go to discuss their prospective film with a typical Hollywood producer who wants to amplify the modest script, sex it up et cetera – and, as you would expect them to, they walk out on him. George meanwhile has been commissioned to write a TV script and Teddy has an audition.

A happy outcome with the school play and what better than to see Alice and the girls, her mother, her former husband and the three men all sitting around the table and enjoying one another's company.

THE LIMEHOUSE GOLEM

UK, 2016, 109 minutes, Colour.

Bill Nighy, Olivia Cooke, Douglas Booth, Sam Reid, Daniel Mays, Maria Valverde.

Directed by Juan Carlos Medina.

This is an impressive period drama. London, 1880. But using the word drama does not indicate the range of the film: the city of London, Dickensian London, Limehouse and the area, poverty and vice, the music calls, a serial killer anticipating Jack the Ripper, Scotland Yard and police investigations and detection. The film is based on a book by London and Dickens expert, Peter Ackroyd, *Dan Leto and the Limehouse Golem* (1994).

The film is also well-crafted, atmospheric set design and locations, the colour photography design with the suggestions of darkness. And arresting performances with Bill Nighy as the Scotland Yard detective, Olivia Cooke, whose performance impresses throughout the film but even more so in the last quarter of an hour, is the toast of the music halls and Douglas Booth, based on the title character of Ackroyd's book, *Dan Leto and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), is the star and (real-life) entrepreneur of the music hall.

There have been gruesome murders in the area and, with clues painted on walls, the press has

nicknamed the killer The Limehouse Golem, drawing on the Jewish legend of the diabolical killer. The dead include a family who ran a local shop. At the opening, Lizzie Cree (Olivia Cooke) is accused of poisoning her husband. The local constabulary investigate, including an earnest policeman, Daniel Mays. When Scotland Yard is called in, an inspector, who can be the scapegoat if the investigation fails, is Inspector Kildare. He is played effectively in a kind of mournful, withdrawn but earnest fashion by Bill Nighy.

Investigations lead to the British Library and a group of men who read there, including Karl Marx and novelist, George Gissing. They provide the four suspects for the murders – and, as Inspector Kildare interviews them, the film visualises each of them committing one of the murders, building up for the audience the detail of what happened to each of the victims and the involvement of the killer.

In the meantime, Lizzie Cree is arrested and imprisoned. Inspector Kildare becomes intrigued, then quietly infatuated by, listening to her sad life story, visualised in flashbacks, with her as harshly treated little girl, going to the music hall, being a given job assisting, stepping in to perform and charming the audience while feeling exhilarated. She has married the journalist John Cree who is one of the suspects as the Limehouse Golem.

Inspector Kildare becomes rather desperate, building up a portrait of the killer, aided by the writing in one of the books from the British Library, a distinctive writing style, asking each of the suspects to write in that manner.

And, there is quite a twist at the end, quite unforeseen, and a tragic re-enactment of the case in the theatre presided over by Dan.

The screenplay, by Jane Goldman (X- Men, Kingsman), keeps the audience very much involved, takes them back to live in a strange and even sordid past, and providing a profile of murderous madness.

LOVING VINCENT

Poland/UK, 2017, 94 minutes, Colour.

Douglas Booth, Jerome Flynn, Robert Gulaczyk, Chris O' Dowd, Saoirse Ronan, John Sessions, Aidan Turner, Eleanor Tomlinson, Helen Mc Crory,
Directed by Dorota Kobiela, Hugh Welchman.

Vincent van Gogh is considered the father of Modern Art. He is well beloved not only in the art world but by the public. While he had minimal sales of his paintings during his short life, 37 years, his paintings are now sold for millions of dollars. It could be said that everybody is loving Vincent.

However, the title of this film comes from the end of his letter to the wife of his brother, Theo: "... Your loving Vincent", highlighting his care for his brother and for his sister-in-law.

Over the years there have been quite a number of films about van Gogh, feature films and documentaries. During the 1950s, Kirk Douglas portrayed him in *Lust for Life*. Later Robert Altman directed Tim Roth in *Vincent and Theo*. In the 1980s, Australian director, Paul Cox,

made a film with the screenplay compiled from van Gogh's letters, spoken by John Hurt, with a simple title, Vincent.

This present film is being promoted as the first oil-painted animation film, incorporating the work of 125 artists. It is quite a project – and it is quite impressive. The director, Dorota Kobiela, studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

As the credits open, there are swirls of paint, a variety of colours, myriad shapes – all in the recognisable van Gogh style. This continues throughout the film, each sequence painted as if it were a van Gogh. This is a continual reminder throughout the film of the work of the artist, his vision, his colours, his response to nature in the south of France, the flowers, the sky. The screenplay incorporates many of his paintings – and there were 800 over comparatively few years – so that the audience is continually conscious of the work of the artist, affected by its impact.

Yet, the film is a narrative. And there are quite a number of characters from the painter himself to his brother, to a young man, Armin, searching for Theo to give him his brother's last letter, the postman, the doctor who took in Van Gogh, his daughter, his housekeeper, the proprietor at the local inn...

For those not familiar with van Gogh's portraits, it is something of a revelation during the final credits where the painted portraits are juxtaposed with the photos of the cast who portray the particular characters, remarkable likenesses. The cast includes Chris O 'Dowd, Douglas Booth, Aidan Turner, Helen Mc Crory, Saoirse Ronan and Robert Gulaczyk as the artist himself.

It should also be noted that the film is a Polish production with cast from Poland and from the United Kingdom.

In some ways, the film serves as crime detection, focus on the mental state of van Gogh, the episode of his cutting off of his ear, his joy in painting, his reliance on his brother to provide him with art materials, the suddenness of his death, taunting by local youth, the possession of a gun, his work with the local doctor who was also an art enthusiast, the admiration by his daughter, his wound, self-inflicted, the strange angle of the shot, his lingering before his death.

This means that Loving Vincent provides an overview of Van Gogh's life, the years of his painting in France, the background of his family, the mental disturbance that plagued him, his premature death. But the film also takes us into the artistic world of van Gogh, his sensitivity, his sensibilities and his creativity.

During the final credits, Don Mac Lean's Starry, Starry night is played – and never seemed more poignant.

THE MOUNTAIN BETWEEN US

US, 2017, 112 minutes, Colour.

Idris Elba, Kate Winslet, Beau Bridges, Dermot Mulroney, Linda Sorenson.

Directed by Hany Abu- Assad.

For a great deal of this film, Kate Winslet, as Alex a photojournalist, has a brace on her leg and limps, finding it difficult to walk, moving very slowly. Idris Elba as Ben, a surgeon, suddenly find his leg caught in an animal trap in the woods. This could be taken as rather symbolic of the whole film and its dynamic, much of the movement by plodding, the effect of lameness.

The intentions of the film are very worthy and it is directed by celebrated Palestinian director, Hany Abu- Assad whose films, *Paradise Now*, *Omar* and *The Idol* have been quite striking. The lead actors have a strong screen presence and work well together, even when they are clashing. It is interesting to see Idris Elba in such a sympathetic role, not an action star.

The film opens at an airport in Idaho during January, all flights being cancelled because of an oncoming storm. Ben has to get to New York to conduct surgery, Alex to go to her wedding. On an impulse, she hires the pilot of a small plane (Beau Bridges) and they set out, initially calm, she taking photographs, the pilot telling stories about his action in Vietnam, and his big Labrador on the plane as company.

They crash, confined at first to the shell of the plane, which, of course, confines the action a great deal, slowing it down. The question is raised whether they should stay at the crash site to be found or to move on, Ben first going to survey from a height what the landscape is like, high snowy mountains (filmed in British Columbia standing in for the American Rockies), deep valleys. Fortunately, Ben being a doctor is able to attend to Alex as well as to the dog, especially after a cougar attacks and is shot with a flare (providing food for some days, snow always being available for water).

Alex is very strong minded and can't stay in the one spot. Ben eventually follows, with their wisely trying to descend and reach the tree line. As has been said, they have to plod, as does the dynamic of the film, even though they are moving towards safety. There are caves, and firewood available for warmth, the dog hunting, the danger of ice pools.

While initially the two fight, each of them mellows in terms of dependence and of being able to survive. Ultimately, this raises a situation not just of dependence but of sexual dependence and emotion.

While the film does show the relationship rather romantically, despite difficulties, it does spend some time more soberly in the aftermath of the journey, reflecting on how both Alex and Ben have been affected by the situation, wondering whether the relationship was just something unreal on the mountain or whether there was something more.

To that extent, the latter part of the film is rather romanticised and some of the dialogue leads to a touch of cynicism about romance. But, the film's heart (and there are discussions about whether the heart is the source of emotion or just a muscle) is in the right place.

PROFESSOR MARSTON AND HIS WONDER WOMEN

US, 2017, 109 minutes, Colour.

Luke Evans, Rebecca Hall, Bella Heathcote, Connie Britton, J J Feild, Chris Conroy, Oliver Platt.

Directed by Angela Robinson.

What we find in this film is probably not what we were expecting to find. William Marston has the reputation for creating the celebrated comic strip of the 1940s, Wonder Woman. While it was a success, a lot more was happening behind the scenes.

The film opens with an American Board entrusted with supervision of children's education interviewing Marston, wanting to ban the comic strip. As he explains what he intended with Wonder Woman, the interview is regularly interspersed with quite lengthy flashbacks to Marston's life, his academic career, his personal life, the women, irregularities, one might say, in his relationships and the consequences for his career.

The first flashback takes us to 1928, to a classroom, to Professor Marston explaining a theory that he considers significant for understanding human behaviour: DISC – which means Dominance, Inducement, Submission, Compliance. And the film's screenplay gives him ample opportunity to explain and illustrate these characteristics of behaviour. With him in the classroom is his wife, Elizabeth, who serves as his assistant because, with the prejudices of that era, she is not recognised with her professional qualifications.

It seems that the Marstons are looking for a volunteer, a young student who can serve as an assistant but whose behaviour they can observe to understand whether the DISC theory is valid. The lie detector was emerging at this time and the Marstons were able to contribute to a mechanism for recognising heart pace for truth and lies.

The student they choose is Olive, the niece of prominent feminist and birth control promoter, Margaret Sanger.

Luke Evans plays William Marston and Rebecca Hall is quite striking as his dominant and opinionated wife, Elizabeth. It is interesting to note that British actors have been chosen to portray the couple while Bella Heathcote, from Australia, plays Olive.

While Olive is confronted by Elizabeth to forbid any sexual activity, it soon emerges that Olive is attracted to both – which, with some difficulties, and a pregnancy, leads to a long-lived ménage à trois. Oliver's fiancée denounces them, the university authorities fire the Marstons. Olive keeps house, Elizabeth getting a job as a secretary, Marston wanting to prove his theories, sketching, which leads to the creation of Wonder Woman.

What is interesting is how much of Marston's private life as well as the illustration of DISC, one might notice specially dominance and submission, episodes of inducement (sex and violence) leading to compliance. There is quite some attention to Wonder Woman's background in ancient Greece, with the Amazons, the island of Lesbos, and the emerging of Steve Trevor into her world and her transition to the 20th century.

Those familiar with Wonder Woman, from the comics, the television films with Lynda Carter and the very successful superhero movie with Gal Gadot, will appreciate.

Marston was unconventional, to say the least. But it is interesting to note that his psychology studies and the emphasis on sexuality coincided with the early years of Kinsey and Masters and Johnson.

Not exactly what we might have been expecting at the beginning of the film, something of a jolt and challenge as we watch the private lives of the characters, but also interesting as providing the background of Wonder Woman. It can be noted that the Marston family did not endorse this film and DC Comics distanced themselves.

THE SNOWMAN

UK/US, 2017, 119 minutes, Colour.

Michael Fassbender, Rebecca Ferguson, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Michael Yates, J.K. Simmons, Val Kilmer, David Dencik, Toby Jones, Genevieve O' Reilly, James D' Arcy, Adrian Dunbar, Chloe Sevigny, Jakob Oftebro.

Directed by Tomas Alfredson.

Have you read Jo Nesbo's novels? With his interestingly often-depressed police detective, Harry Hole? This reviewer has read a number of them including The Snowman.

Unfortunately, this film version may not encourage readers to pursue Nesbo novels. For those who enjoy crime fiction, this would be a great pity.

Harry Hole (played by Michael Fassbender) comes from Norway, a lot of the action takes place in the capital, Oslo, as well as in the countryside as far out towards the fjords and is Bergen. Actually, one of the best features, is the photography of Norway in winter, snow and ice, a chill atmosphere.

In fact, the chill atmosphere applies to the whole film, the characters rather colder than might be expected, the serial killer's murders gruesomely cold, and the climax of literally cold.

All this is a pity because there is great potential. There is an intriguing prologue concerning a young boy being tested by the local policeman on his knowledge of Norwegian history at the end of the war, his mother having an affair with the policeman, pursuing him by car and then skidding onto the ice and drowning, a snowman outside the house. The snowman serves as a motif during the series of killings.

The director himself, Tomas Alfredson, has gone on record that he is not satisfied with the film, with difficulties in production, in timing, in rectifying situations. Alfredson has a good cinema record including the John Le Carre adaptation, Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy.

The plot is very convoluted and there are significant flashbacks to 9 years earlier, deaths in Bergen, the gruesome killing of the police inspector, Val Kilmer, and interviews with a husband whose wife has been killed. Meanwhile, in the present, a mother disappears and her husband is suspect. Then there is a warning that another woman has been killed – but she is still alive, and then killed. Some of this is sorted out but not always clearly, a complex motivation for the murders, of women who have children by different fathers, have been involved in abortions, victims of a righteous moralist with his own personal agenda and mother issues.

There is what seems to be an interesting subplot concerning a suspicious doctor, David Dencik, (who had been in Bergen nine years earlier) and a smug politician, J.K. Simmons, announcing that Oslo has won the Winter Games, harassing the new detective on the case, Rebecca Ferguson, but, after the death of the doctor, there is no more of the politician and his

story. That would have been interesting.

And all the time, Harry Hole is investigating, travelling, interviewing. There is also the complication of his former girlfriend, played by Charlotte Gainsbourg and her son who sees Harry as something of a father-figure. In the meantime, a respectable surgeon, has taken up with Charlotte Gainsbourg but not succeeding so well with the son.

The new partner also has a tendency to go out on her own, not always informing Harry, which leads to some rather grim conclusions.

More deaths. More mystery. More snowman. And a climax out in the snow, in a secluded hut – and the revelation of the killer whom we might not have suspected. But, whether there were enough clues, whether there was enough in the screenplay to keep audience attention and focus, it is a rather confusing murder mystery and detection drama.

SONG TO SONG

US, 2017, 130 minutes, Colour.

Michael Fassbender, Ryan Gosling, Rooney Mara, Natalie Portman, Cate Blanchet, Holly Hunter, Berenice Marlohe, Linda Emond, Tom Sturridge, Iggy Pop, Patti Smith, John Lydon. Directed by Terrence Malick.

Fragments, jigsaw pieces, snippets...

Jigsaw pieces mean that there can be a whole and coherent picture. Fragments, not – diverse, disparate, a partial picture. Snippets offer quick glimpses that come and go, may be connected, unconnected, disconnected.

Song to Song. Songs, Austin, Texas, music scene, producers, musicians, the enormous range in the music credits list, but how much noted and noticed over 130 minutes? The great range of singers playing themselves, Patti Smith, different bands. Chants, hymns and St Francis Peace Prayer.

Reality, fantasy, surreality.

Rooney Mara, soft voice-over, “am I walking in a dream?”. Is she waking in a dream? “I drift.” Michael Fassbender, macho, romantic, playful, exploitative, love or lust? Contrasting Ryan Gosling, younger, playful, more love than lust?

Scripted, improvised, director in control.

Snippets can mean narrative, contributing to a story: beginning, middle, end, but not necessarily in that order. In the end is the beginning.

Threesome, love, joy, play. Fidelity forever. Human nature – suggesting not, rather, betrayal.

Suddenly, Natalie Portman, luminous, love, fidelity, hopes. That’s Holly Hunter as her mother.

Mexico, peasants, music, the contrast with the American metropolis, affluence, ordinariness, academic auditoria, concert arenas. Performance, backstage, Val Kilmer and wild hair.

Who is that from Paris? The lesbian relationship. Rooney Mara, did she, could she?

130 minutes of handheld camera, motion, variety of angles, framing, editing cuts (three editors in the final credits), speed, cause and effect, juxtapositions – to what purpose?

And Cate Blanchett? Divorce, children, Ryan Gosling? Connections? Children, playing, parents, ageing and dying.

Clips from old movies. Scenes of cosmic beauty (this is, after all, Terrence Malick), days of heaven.

Is this Malick's visual poem, thematic dream, extended visual installation?

And the reviewer in the audience watching, listening, experiencing, much to appreciate, much to endure, but how much to comprehend? And does it matter? For a lover of story, yes!

SUBURBICON

US, 2017, 104 minutes, Colour.

Matt Damon, Julianne Moore, Noah Jupe, Gary Basaraba.

Directed by George Clooney.

Suburbicon is not a word we regularly use. As can be seen, it is made up of the word suburb and icon. At the opening of the film, Suburbicon, is presented as an ideal. As the film progresses, the irony progresses.

This is definitely a Coen Brothers' screenplay. Apparently, it was written in the 80s and not filmed then but brought out again for their friend, George Clooney, with his writing partner, Grant Heslow, to write and direct. But the bizarre Coen Brothers' touches are forever present, the irony, the satire, the critique of society.

The film opens like an advertising catalogue. Suburbicon, is a post-war development, parallel to Levittown, a town created by William Levitt who was an idealist for the American middle class about also racist. Everything is nice at the end of the 1950s. Everybody wears proper clothes. Everybody has proper manners. Families are ideal. The colour photography is bright, optimistic.

We are introduced to the Lodge family. The father is the respectable Gardner Lodge, Matt Damon, serious, a good job, a proper suit... His wife, Rose (Julianne Moore) has been injured in an accident and, as they all sit on the porch, she has to be carried inside to her room. Also present is her sister, Margaret (two Julianne Moores for the price of one), all smiles and charm. The son is Nicky (Noah Jupe) a very respectful little boy.

The racism surfaces when an African-American family move in next door, the proper citizens going to a meeting, decrying the local board, uttering all kinds of prejudices,

mockery and bigotry. This will lead to citizens camping outside the house, violent demonstrations, attack on the house, destruction and terrorising. In a key scene where the mother goes to the supermarket, the manager callously ups the prices on her.

But the main action of the film is with the Lodge family, a home invasion, everybody tied up and chloroformed, and Rose dying. The police start an investigation – but the audience has seen the thugs. It doesn't take long for the penny to drop for the audience that the Lodge family is all respectable veneer. Rose's death has been orchestrated.

The plotting for Rose's death could have been done far more meticulously. Money loans had been sought from Mafia connections and registered in their account books, extra insurance taken on Rose's death. The film brightens up when the insurance inspector, Oscar Isaac, turns up and confronts Margaret who handles the situation badly, then George returning - and the plight of the family moving towards mayhem, death, disposal of bodies, thugs blackmailing, murders and the house, even the nice uncle contacted by Nicky coming to the rescue but meeting his fate as well.

All this is happening while the anti-black riots are getting more loud and violent on the street outside. Finally, Gardner confronts his son – and, as he talks, the audience is wishing that he would eat the jam sandwich prepared for Nicky by Margaret and drink the milk. For some justice to be done!

The themes have been explored in such films as Pleasantville and David Lynch's Blue Velvet. This is an ironic take on 1950s suburbia, George Clooney, with his contemporary social concerns, indicating that the roots of present injustice were grounded in that period despite its respectability.

THE TEACHER

Slovakia/ Czech Republic, 2016, 103 minutes, Colour.

Zuzana Maurery.

Directed by Jan Hřebejk.

The Teacher might be called something of a sly film. It begins nicely enough but then begins to steer us in different directions, then in rather drastic directions and finishes up with an ironic ending. A film from Slovakia taking us back to the Communist era in the then Czechoslovakia.

This is the 1980s. The Communist Party is very strong in the local village and the new teacher is the president of the local party. Zuzana comes to the school, meets the children, meets the parents – all much as we might expect. The only trouble is, she has quite different expectations, not only of the children but, even especially, of the parents.

Zuzana Maurery is a strong presence as the teacher, able to turn on extraordinary front and charm, able to turn on extraordinary bullying in the classroom, able to turn on some seductive persuasiveness with the male parents.

While she might publicly subscribe to Communist principles, they certainly do not influence

her personal life. She is as materialistic as you could imagine, not satisfied with the ordinary things that a Communist should be satisfied with.

At first, what she asks of different parents might seem reasonable enough, something of the equivalent of an apple for the teacher. The trouble is, she has no limits. She wants everything. And she wants everything done for her.

And, she has that knack of a controversial public figure of being able to divide people's opinions. There is a growing number of parents who are against her, especially as they realise how she is treating their children, favouring some, harsh on others, manipulating the child so that the parents will do all the favours for her.

There is something of a rebellion as parents meet to discuss the teacher but, again, she is able to divide opinion, exerting charm and sometimes a little sexual seductiveness. Meanwhile there are plots behind her back.

Which means then that the themes of the film are fairly serious, the portrait of the teacher in herself, in her role as president of the Communist party, as a manipulator...

Then the Berlin Wall comes down, the Soviet empire collapses and, without revealing too much of the ending, it is fair to say that the teacher is able to find her feet again, adapting to the new ideological situations.

The film received an award from SIGNIS (World Catholic Association for Communication) at the 2017 Hong Kong International Film Festival.

THIS BEAUTIFUL FANTASTIC

UK, 2016, 100 minutes, Colour.

Jessica Brown Findlay, Andrew Scott, Tom Wilkinson, Jeremy Irvine, Anna Chancellor, Eileen Davies.

Directed by Simon Aboud.

This is the kind of film that could be described as "nice". It is also rather twee and very sweet.

It is also very British, rather low-key in its presentation of its characters and even their crises.

This is the story of Bella Brown (Jessica Brown Findlay). Telling the story is Alfie, played by Tom Wilkinson. We see Bella's origins, her being abandoned as a baby, an eccentric biker finding her beside the water with ducks, her going to an orphanage with the nuns, but eventually her growing up, renting a house, wanting to be a writer, working in the local library, rather reserved.

She clearly irritates her neighbour, Alfie. He has told her story so far - she is not a friend. In fact, he is very critical of the way that she has left the rather large garden of her home in some rack and ruin.

Alfie has a cook, an Irishman named Vernon (Andrew Scott) who has two young daughters.

But Alfie is dismissive of Vernon who goes next door to stay with Bella. He also supports her when the landlord arrives, giving her a one-month deadline to clear up the garden or she is out. Bella is not a gardener. She does try to do some work, even with Vernon who suffers from hay fever trying to help.

As might be expected, Alfie begins to relent, even reaching a deal with Bella that he will help working in the garden as long as Vernon still provides him with some meals – which Vernon does through a servery slide which he can slam shut at will.

Not all of Bella's time is spent in the garden. She works at the local library which is administrated by rather bookish and prim librarian, Anna Chancellor. And there is a young man, Billy (Jeremy Irvine) who turns up for research, is noisy when he shouldn't be, eats in the library when he shouldn't, but there is a mutual attraction.

Alfie also has a book about gardening – which was written by his late wife. Bella reads it and that helps the bond between the two.

So, beautifying the garden within the month offers only limited dramatics for the film. Bella is supposed to go out with Billy but she sees him in town with another woman and retreats to her room in an emotional tantrum. In fact, there is an easy, over-easy solution about her seeing Billy and there is a nice reconciliation.

A touch of sadness, Bella finishing her book and reading it to Vernon's girls, and, as has been said, nice, twee and sweet.

THOR: RAGNAROK

US, 2017, 130 minutes, Colour.

Chris Hemsworth, Tom Hiddleston, Cate Blanchett, Idris Elba, Jeff Goldblum, Tessa Thompson, Karl Urban, Mark Ruffalo, Anthony Hopkins, Benedict Cumberbatch, Taiki Waititi, Clancy Brown, Ray Stevenson, Zachary Levi, Luke Hemsworth, Sam Neill, Matt Damon.

Directed by Taiki Waititi.

Chris Hemsworth made quite an impact as the original Thor. This is the second sequel and Thor has appeared in two Avengers movies and is about to appear on the third. Quite a lasting impression.

Hemsworth has never taken himself too seriously nor does Thor. There is always a place for irony and for a joke. And now, with New Zealand director Taiki Waititi, who charmed audiences with Boy and Hunt for the Wilderpeople and joked with them in What We Do in the Night, there is plenty more irony and there are plenty more jokes.

Gone is the Viking Asgard but there are still memories of Loki and his betrayals at and the downfall of Odin. Tom Hiddleston as Loki and Anthony Hopkins made such an impression as Odin that they are back again, Loki having his moments of heroism but always the trickster lurking. There is a great deal of action and it takes place among the various planets and strange communities, especially one presided over by Jeff Goldblum in a very campy manner. Crowds pack into a huge amphitheatre for gladiatorial combats where his main

warrior is actually Hulk, Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo) imprisoned in the form of the Hulk for two years, finally coming up against Thor, with Banner re-emerging, Thor victorious. Also present is an alcoholic young Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson) a mercenary who has captured for but who might be persuaded to join forces to retake Asgard.

And Ragnarok indicates an apocalypse for Asgard.

We have had a glimpse of Odin living in exile and then disappearing from his two sons (though Anthony Hopkins getting a chance for more footage to inspire Thor in his battles). And the battles?

The main villain of the piece is the hitherto unknown daughter of Odin, Hela. She wears black. Has black hair, black eye make-up, a black headpiece of horns – which indicate that her heart is deeply black as well. And, she is played by Cate Blanchett.

So, plenty of plot. Plenty of battles. Plenty of intriguing characters. Plenty of superhero activity – though Thor receives plenty of body blows as well as losing an eye, in the tradition of his father. On the heroic side there is Karl Urban as a warrior who becomes the instrument of Hela's malice but, we guess, will have a change of heart. There is also Idris Elba, the Asgard warrior leading the remnant of scarred to safety.

And, for the fun of it, there is an early re-enactment of the betrayal of Loki which has Sam Neill acting the part of Odin, Luke Hemsworth, Chris Hemsworth's older brother, as Thor and, uncredited and pretty unrecognisable, Matt Damon as Loki.

Perhaps overseas audiences might not get the joke but Australian audiences and New Zealand audiences will delight in the character of Korg, a giant creature made of rocks, not quite the full quarry, but with very funny dialogue, a very strong New Zealand accent and delivery, very amusing, and played by the director himself, Taika Waititi. Actually this version of Thor is fairly Antipodean with both Thor and Hela originally coming from Melbourne, with a touch of Sam Neill, another Hemsworth, and Karl Urban and the director coming from New Zealand. And the film was made on the Gold Coast.

Perhaps some of the purists may think this is a bit too flippant, but most fans will enjoy it – and, creator Stan Lee, having a cameo in all his films, signals his imprimatur with a very amusing one here.

THREE SUMMERS

Australia, 2017, 104 minutes, Colour.

Robert Sheehan, Rebecca Breeds, John Waters, Michael Caton, Magda Szubanski, Deborah Mailman, Jacqueline Mc Kenzie, Kelton Pell, Peter Rowsthorn, Amay Jain.

Directed by Ben Elton.

Why Three Summers? They refer to a country town Festival in Western Australia, a Westival, celebrated annually with a good crowd coming to enjoy a range of music, performances, workshops, camping and the sheer pleasure of an Australian outing.

The film was written and directed by British playwright and screenwriter, Ben Elton – who

has been an Australian citizen for many years. He is based in Western Australia and obviously has an affection for the state. But he has also absorbed a great deal of the Australian spirit, Australian history and, especially, Australian social concerns. He can be both comical and critical.

The film creates the atmosphere of the town, the stream of cars arriving, the various locations for parking, camping, the buildings and halls for performance, the pub – and even the hall for sessions for Alcoholics Anonymous.

And, we get to meet the characters one year, share their experiences and then find them all arriving again for the second year, variations on their experiences, and then find them all arriving again for the third year. Three summers.

The audience is introduced to the Westival by the radio host, Queenie, Magda Szubanski at her enthusiastic best, folksy comments, spirit-rousing, introducing guests and acts, a pleasing chorus to all the events.

Amongst the arrivals are a father and daughter (John Waters and Rebecca Breeds) who are part of a band called the Warrikans (WA larrikins, as you might expect). John Waters gets the opportunity to sing and play the guitar. Rebecca Breeds, as Keevy, is a lively screen presence, singing, dancing, and meeting up with an unusual Irishman, Roland (Robert Sheehan) whose profession is dog-washing but who plays the theremin. While they might play romantic leads, their interactions are not nearly as romantic as one might like, quite some conflict, especially concerning Roland's enthusiasm for Keevy and her talent to have an audition at the Conservatoire and the consequent misunderstandings.

Deborah Mailman is there as Pam, who runs the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

Kelton Pell is Jack, leader of an aboriginal troupe of dancers, with one of the young men in tow having an ankle bracelet and being a sullen and silent refugee from youth detention. The group have an opportunity to do an emu dance, Jack having the opportunity to make jokes about Terra Nullius and the invasion as well as serious points about the aboriginal community and traditions.

There is also an Afghan band allowed to come to the Westival out of detention, their presence organised by a quiet young refugee who is being fostered by a local family.

There are also two couples who come every year, go through a parking ritual with cones, sit in the same place, say the same things, have the same meals, drink the same wine and congratulate themselves on a great break.

This review has kept Michael Caton as Harry till last though he is one of the most important characters. He was a child migrant from the UK, had a harsh upbringing, but has absorbed many of the local prejudices, intolerant of aborigines, harsh on refugees, proud to be an Australian... He criticises the aborigines for strutting around like emus covered in paint while he and his troupe are British Morris Dancers with very quaint costumes and straw hats covered in flowers!

One of his final sequences is the most seriously telling scenes on the whole film, relying on Michael Caton's impact on Australian audiences from *The Castle* and *Last Cab from Darwin*,

voicing Ben Elton's challenge to contemporary Australia and any bigotry against multiculturalism and the forming, continually, of the Australian story.

Ben Elton knows how to write comedy, some parody, some satire – and has a very good cast to communicate it. Both enjoyment and challenge.

TOM OF FINLAND

Finland, 2017, 110 minutes, Colour.

Pekka Strang, Lauri Tilkkanen, Seumas F. Sargent, Jakob Oftebro, Jessica Grabowsky, Taiso Oksanen.

Directed by Dome Karukoski.

And who is Tom of Finland? Probably best to ask this question and to do a bit of homework before deciding to see this portrait of an artist. It is also the Finish nomination for Oscar consideration.

There are three approaches to viewing this film.

First, it is the portrait of a significant Finish artist, Touko Laaksonen (1920-1991). We first see him in action during World War II, the Finnish army supporting the Russians. After the war, he has a job as a commercial artist in an advertising company. He begins to do more personal sketches and, later sends them to the United States where they are accepted and he becomes famous and something of a celebrity.

Secondly, the film can be seen as a social study of homosexuality during the 20th century. Tom of Finland was a gay man, in the closet in a very strict Finland, living part of his life in a gay underground, finally finding some freedom of movement and expression in the United States.

Thirdly, the film can be seen as the controversial work of a gay artist, his drawings, their content, style, popularity in the gay community, there becoming icons. The film also raises the issue of the art, its expressions and influence and the emergence of AIDS in the 1980s.

Touko Laaksonen played by Pekka Strang, first seen as a soldier in his 20s, then moving through the decades and, with effective make up, the same actor portraying the artist in his 50s and 60s. He is not a man who is easy to warm to, personally. He has suffered trauma during the war, even to the killing of a Russian parachutist which had quite an effect on him and is shown in the film. He has bad experiences from the police during a visit to Berlin. He also experiences police raids on homosexuals in parks and in bars and in private homes. There is a certain coldness and detachment about his personality.

He lives with his sister, also a commercial artist, and when she takes in a 21, he is infatuated but keeps undercover, not wanting to live separately with the boarder who is a professional dancer.

As regards the criminalisation of homosexuality and homosexual behaviour, the film shows much of social homophobia, expressions of hate, the sometimes vicious police raids and interrogations. It can be seen how the decriminalisation of homosexuality had a more positive

effect in society and for individuals. (There is an amusing sequence when Tom of Finland goes to California and is present in the gay community when the police suddenly rush in – not to arrest the men as he presumes but searching for a thief who robbed a bank down the street!)

Many of us may have seen Tom of Finland sketches as illustrations but not recognised them as the work of a single artist what their original intent was. While he could not publish them in Finland, American magazines on Physical Culture put them on the cover and then they were adopted by the gay community. He sketched over 3000 drawings. They are of men, caricature sketches in the sense that they are huge chested, thin waisted, large buttocked, with prominent sexual organs and sexual behaviour. Tom had a penchant for uniforms, military (even the Nazi uniforms, but not Nazism), police, leather and bikie. They were widely circulated from the 1970s and used in all kinds of illustration, in advertising.

The question is raised for Tom when AIDS emerges and his sketches are criticised, singled out as promoting sexual permissiveness which leads to AIDS. He acknowledged this but then turned his attention to the sketches campaigning against behaviour which led to AIDS.

The film offers quite a deal to think about, the portrait of the artist, the social context in which lived, his work and the issues of pornography, but it does provide a look at transitions in the 20th century, which have had social consequences for greater freedoms in the 21st century.

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ANNA KARENINA: VRONSKY'S STORY

Russia, 2017, 138 minutes, Colour.
Elizaveta Boyaskaya, Max Meetvev, Kiril Grabenshchikov, Viatliy Kishchenko.
Directed by Karen Shakhnazarov.

Devotees of Leo Tolstoy's great novel, *Anna Karenina*, will probably have a high opinion of her, seeing her as a tragic figure. Her husband, Karenin, seems a gloomy and oppressive figure. And, readers will probably blame the career soldier, Vronsky, for all that happened to Anna.

There have been many films over the decades of Tolstoy's novel. Those who have portrayed her include Greta Garbo in the 1930s, Vivien Leigh, especially, in the 1940s, Jacqueline Bissett in the 1980s, Sophie Marceau in the 1990s and, more latterly, Keira Knightley. This reviewer saw Vivien Leigh in 1948, probably too young to view the film but it made a lasting impression, no sequence more vivid in cinema than Vivien Leigh on the train line and the bearing down of the train at the end of that film.

So, Vronsky's story?

The events in this film take place 30 years after Vronsky's affair with Anna. He has continued as a soldier. He is now in Manchuria with the Russian troops advancing on China but being repelled by the Japanese. Vronsky is wounded while playing cards and is in the caravan with the nurses and doctors and the wounded. They have set up a post – and there is a wonderful long continuous unedited sequence as the doctor moves through all the aspects of the post, a cumulative effect as if the audience was walking round and surveying everything with him.

And the doctor is Sergei Karenin, Anna's son. We are told something of his life, his hatred for his mother, brought up by his father, university studies, marriage, failed, and now a surgeon with the troops. In recognising Vronsky whom he had known as a little boy, he is curious about Vronsky's perspective and memories.

So, while the film is quite spectacular in setting up the sequences in Manchuria, the detail of the medical post, the final attack of the Japanese on the fleeing Russian troops, it also has quite a number of flashbacks meaning that we see the well-known story once again. But, from the title, it is Vronsky's perspective and he doesn't seem such a bad man. It is Anna, manipulative yet subservient with her husband, but will fall, ambitious and, finally, obsessive and mentally disturbed. This is not a reinforcement of favourable attitudes towards Anna.

While we see a lot of the familiar sequences, Vronsky seems something of a ladies' man but becomes infatuated with Anna, beginning the affair, her telling her husband, her dilemma of leaving her husband and her son, her being despised by St Petersburg society (her display of emotion when Vronsky falls in an elaborate steeplechase race as well as her standing defiant to society disapproval of the theatre).

The film has the couple go on a tour of Europe for a year, their return, and her desire to see her son, the encounters with her husband, but her growing edginess, suspicions of Vronsky, which have no foundation.

Interestingly, the suicide scene is left to our imagination or memories – although, earlier, Vronsky had gone to the railway station to identify Anna's body.

On the one hand the film is quite spectacular, in the 1904 Manchurian sequences as well as the steeplechase, the theatre and a magnificent ball. On the other hand, there are a great many close-ups, intense close-ups of the characters.

This film adds to the repertoire of Anna Karenina films – and there will be undoubtedly more.

BAD GENIUS

Thailand, 2017, 130 minutes, Colour.
Chutimon Chuengcharoensukying, Eisaya Hosuwan.
Directed by Nattawut Poonpiriya.

Not exactly an enticing title. On the other hand, there is the curiosity factor: who is the genius? And how bad?

The curiosity factor might even be raised higher when it is revealed at the beginning of the film that the genius is a girl in her early teens. We see her at the age of 12 and follow her throughout her school years.

The film is cheating, youngsters and exams. (And it is very depressing to realise that most of these students lack the moral fibre that would actually give them pause or notice any challenge to their consciences on cheating.)

The other curiosity item is that this is a film from Thailand – but, local interest, some of the sequences were filmed in Sydney.

Lynn is a mathematical genius. When her father tries to enrol her in a better school, she does all the financial calculations in her head (and they are listed on the screen for our slower benefit!). She is offered a scholarship, a special grant for meals... She is a winner. Over the years at school, she befriends a perennially smiling and agreeable friend, Grace. Grace is not too good at studies, does get help from Lynn but relies on her in an exam, cheating. Grace has a boyfriend at school, Pat, who fancies himself as a matinee idol, and comes from a very wealthy family. Because his parents think that Grace is a good influence, they suggest that they will finance her going to Boston where they want him to be educated. Pat has even less academic prowess than Grace.

In the Gospels, specifically in St Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the shrewd steward who is dismissed by his owners but before leaving employ, he contacts all the debtors and connives with them to alter their contracts and lessen their debt. Jesus remarks how amazing this is to

observe. And that is what happens here. We watch amazed at the audacity. Lynn devises a way to communicate in the exam room with fellow students, who would become clients and pay substantial money, what the options are in a multiple-choice test. She has four melodies and taps these on her own desk as the others listen and fill in their answers.

She becomes even more ambitious with even more clients in a scheme for an international exam, held all around the world at the same hour in each country. The realisation is that with Sydney four hours ahead of Bangkok, if she and a friend who is forced to collaborate with her do the exam in Australia and find a way of communicating the results, the huge squad (many of them sitting on bikes waiting the answers before they take off for the exam centres) will all get top marks.

There is some tension in the Sydney sequences in how she and her friend deal with the exams, getting out during the breaks, getting their mobile phones, remembering the answers, getting them to Thailand where they are eagerly awaited. Things don't go quite as well as planned which makes this part of the film even more interesting.

There is a moral dilemma presented at the end. Will she confess, will she take responsibility, is all this worth it?

BETTER WATCH OUT

Australia/US, 2016, 89 minutes, Colour.

Olivia De Jonge, Levi Miller, Ed Oxenbould, Alex Mikic, Dacre Montgomery, Patrick Warburton, Virginia Madsen.

Directed by Chris Peckover.

You'd better watch out
You'd better not cry
You'd better not pout
I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is coming to town.

Yes, this is a Christmas film but it is best to note only the first line of the lyrics because Santa Claus is definitely not coming to town here.

This is a film which will appeal almost solely to horror fans. Others can just merely note this review. And, for horror fans, a warning to give this film 10 minutes, at least, because it focuses on two 12 year olds having puberty -like conversations which may seem something of a turnoff. Then there is a twist. But, this also might sound like familiar material, an intruder in the house. But, give the film another 10 minutes and there is more than a twist!

The film was the work of an American director and an American writer. However, apart from some street scenes, an American Street with Christmas decorations and snow, the film was actually made in Sydney. And, apart from Patrick Warburton and Virginia Madsen who have cameos at the beginning and end of the film as the central character's parents, the five key roles are played by Australians, honing their American accents.

At the centre is the rather shy, sometimes awkward, Luke. He is played very effectively by Levi Miller who was Peter in Pan and then made this film before he appeared in Red Dog, True Blue as well as Jasper Jones. His performance in this film will be a substantial contribution to his CV. His best friend, Garrett, is played by Ed Oxenbould who was central to the fine children's film, Paper Planes, but knows how to do an American accent from his roles in Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible Day, No Good, Very Bad Day and In M. Night Shyamalan's eerie film, The Visit.

Co-starring in The Visit was Olivia De Jonge who plays Luke's babysitter, Ashley. She has a boyfriend, Ricky, Alex Mikics, who turns up during the night while she is babysitting as well as Jeremy, Dacre Montgomery (Stranger Things) who also comes to visit.

It is Christmas so there are lots of American Street decorations, many Santa Claus figures who appear momentarily menacing and Carol singers at the door with their repertoire.

It is what happens indoors (as well as a grim scene in the backyard) that is what will intrigue audiences. Unless the audience is skilled in pre-guessing outcomes, they will be rather surprised at all that happens inside, getting more gruesome as the film goes on, some uncontrolled psychopathic behaviour which becomes more and more unpredictable.

In fact, we see a portrait here of an ultra-psychopathic psychopath.

Probably best not to say anything more about the plot. It can be said that the performances of the young actors are better than one might expect. The plot is eerie and should make something of a hit with all but the most jaded horror fans.

BORG McENROE

Sweden, 2017, 107 minutes, Colour.

Sverrir Gudnason, Shia La Boeuf, Stellan Skarsgaard, Tuva Novotny, Leo Borg, Marcus Mossberg, Jackson Gann, Scott Arthur, Ian Blackman, Robert Emms.

Directed by Janus Metz.

An interesting film for tennis fans as well of those who like psychological portraits – especially when there is some rivalry.

Some reflections on the topic before the review of the film. The public tend to take for granted that sports champions are celebrities. Professional journalists and paparazzi supply sometimes avid readers and viewers with behaviour that can be exemplary as well as behaviour that elicits some reactions of shock-horror. But, how much attention is given to the life of the celebrity, the constancy of practice in exercising their expertise, the toll that this takes on body and soul, on the human spirit, on emotions, and on human relationships.

And the question arises, how much is the media to blame for the pressures on the celebrities? And how much is the public to blame for the pressures on the media to supply continuous coverage? Bjorn Borg was called an iceberg in his time, showing little, if any, public emotion. By contrast, McEnroe? was highly emotional in public, often objectionably so, even eliciting boos from the Wimbledon audience in 1980, his first attempt at winning the championship.

And, can people change? What about John McEnroe? And, speculatively, in 10 years will we be seeing a feature film about Nick Kyrgios?

As regards the film itself... It is a Scandinavian production, with more emphasis, naturally, on Borg than on Mc Enroe. Personnel, finance, post-production facilities all came from contributions from Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. The director, Janus Metz, was born in Denmark and moved to work in South Africa, a documentary filmmaker, now with his first feature film.

Bjorn Borg was Swedish and Swedish actor, Sverrir Gunadson, quite a remarkable lookalike, portrays the intensity of Scandinavian introversion, a methodical life, even obsessively detailed and repetitious. There are scenes showing him as an eager youngster hitting the tennis ball against garage doors at home. There are scenes showing him as a rather temperamental teenager, rather McEnroe-like[?] at times, catching the eager eye of former tennis champion, Lennart Bergelin (a fine Stellan Skarsgaard this time speaking in Swedish) , who takes him in hand, is pressurised to let him play in the Davis Cup at the age of 15, confronts him about his tantrums and instils in him the resolution not to show any external feelings and to play one point at a time. Borg certainly fulfils this as he wins so many grand slam championships in the 1970s. By 1980, he had won Wimbledon four times in succession.

If you remember the result of that match, you will enjoy seeing how it is played out. If you don't remember the result of that match, there will be a lot of dramatic tension in the progress of the sets and at one stage, of the record set points played.

As with the recent Battle of the Sexes, matches between Bobby Riggs and Margaret Court and, especially, Billie Jean King, the play is meticulously reconstructed and dramatically edited.

But the film does give attention to John Mc Enroe, something of a child whiz at arithmetic in his head when he was young, a chess player – but a telling scene where his mother is cutting his hair and comments on the 96 that he gained four and exam: “what about the other for?”. And there is quite some pressure at all times from his father. Which doesn't necessarily explain his emotions, his extraversion, his tantrums and the bad impression that he made at press conferences (which did sometimes tend to ask you more about his behaviour than his tennis).

He is well portrayed by Shia La Beouf, an actor who has, in real life (or, according to the media and paparazzi) exhibited behaviour like that of an angry sports brat. Some might say it is not a stretch for this performance but he does do it particularly well. And this is the case during that fateful 1980 match on Wimbledon centre court. He did control himself that day and eventually won, and deserved, the applause of those watching.

The film mentions at the end that Borg and McEnroe[?] became friends, Borg becoming godfather to one of Mc Enroe's children.

You might not expect to enjoy a feature film on tennis – but this one is worth seeking out.

THE BUTTERFLY TREE

Australia, 2017, 98 minutes, Colour.

Melissa George, Ewen Leslie, Ed Oxenbould, Sophie Lowe.

Directed by Priscilla Cameron.

This is a drama set in a Queensland town, some filming at Mount Tambourine. While it is a Queensland story, it could be universal. The focus is on three central characters.

And the title? Finn, the teenager of the film, is a serious collector of butterflies and other insects, cataloguing them, mounting them, photographing them. There is a tree on the grounds of the house owned by his father which also has a tree, full of butterflies. He is played by Ed Oxenbould.

Visually, the film wants to communicate to the audience that Evelyn, a middle-aged woman who has come to settle in the town, is, symbolically, a butterfly. During the opening credits, we see her dancing, her costume elaborate, wings like a giant butterfly. In fact, she is a burlesque performer, with a partial striptease, and dancing on rollerskates. There will be later allusions to her as a butterfly throughout the film. She is played by Melissa George.

The third central character is Al, the widower who is Finn's father. He teaches at a local campus and is involved with one of the students, Sophie Lowe, to the disapproval of the authorities. He is played by Ewen Leslie.

Evelyn, the attractive butterfly, encounters Al by chance, his wanting to buy a display case that she has in a garage sale so that he can give it to Finn. The two are attracted, his coming back to get his wallet which he lost at her shop and greenhouse, promising to return. In the meantime, Finn encounters her, buying some flowers to commemorate his dead mother, and her offering him a job. He experiences an intense adolescent infatuation.

All does not go smoothly because Al wants to break off with the student, experiencing something a breakdown when she confronts him and he weeps. There is tension between himself and his son, his son holding the memory of his mother sacred and resenting his father's affairs.

And, as we expect, there will be tension between father and son because of Evelyn.

There is a further complication with Evelyn, the reason she has come to the town, why she is not dancing, a problem with health.

But, the butterflies prevail and the audience will leave the cinema more cheered than depressed.

DADDY'S HOME TWO

US, 2017, 100 minutes, Colour.

Will Ferrell, Mark Wahlberg, Mel Gibson, John Lithgow, Linda Cardellini, Alessandra Ambrosio, Owen Vaccaro, Didi Costine.

Directed by Sean Anders.

The lesson that reviewers need to learn is that they should not always sit at a preview with other reviewers, often solemnly po-faced during comedies. It might be better to sit in with a crowd of younger people who love the slapstick, are not afraid to laugh out loud, who offer a rollicking response to a film. Certainly the case with Daddy's Home Two.

Hollywood has the habit of making several films on similar themes at the same time, so

At the end of 2016, equal time for family films... Bad Moms and Daddy's Home.

Popular with audiences and commercial success. So

At the end of 2017, equal time for family films... Bad Moms 2 and Daddy's Home Two'

But, both sequels have a lot in common. Both of them have a Christmas setting and announce at various times how many days it is before Christmas. And, thankfully, both have an acknowledgement that Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Christ, midnight mass and carols with the Moms, a crib tableau with the dads, though some mayhem ensues...

But the great brainwave for the success of Bad Moms 2 was to introduce the grandmothers, some Bad Grandmoms. For Daddy's Home Two we are introduced to the grandfathers. Since we already know the father's, Will Ferrell and Mark Wahlberg, we might guess that one is going to be roly-poly sweet and the other is not, definitely not. And they are played by John Lithgow enjoying himself immensely as a sweetness and light kind grandfather and by Mel Gibson who obviously relishes Kurt by name and curt by nature.

The situation in the first film was that the two fathers, completely unlike, Will Ferrell a kindly and gawky Brad, while Mark Wahlberg is rough and tough, Dusty. The film's film was based on the premise of divorced families and the custody of the children, the two families in question, some of the children shared. The idea is that the families should actually work together, some co-parenting, all celebrating Christmas together. This sequel takes this for granted and that Brad and Dusty are firmly committed to it.

Don, John Lithgow, endorses his son more than 100%, lots of affectionate talk and embraces and kisses, lots of patter of the warm and cuddly type. Kurt has not been around for years, was an ineffectual parent, an astronaut, away from home, a womaniser, and severe and mocking with Mel Gibson's glowering look.

What happens is to be expected – though there is lots of slapstick comedy, lots of pratfalls, ridiculous situations which led to a lot of laughter from the audience.

How are they all going to manage? Brad's wife is loving? His stepchildren love him too? Dusty has a rather serious, glamorous wife, who is continually noting down details in her book for her writing. She has a rather sullen daughter. How are they going to manage?

Kurt not only has a bright idea, going away for Christmas, but instantly books an AirB&B on his phone. It takes five hours to get there by car and Kurt learns something of purgatory as he listens to Don and Brad going on and on and on so cheerfully.

Settling in, setting up the decorations – a sure sign for all kinds of things to go wrong. And, of course, they do. There is also a rivalry which results in Brad not only cutting down a Christmas tree but the tree which contains cell-phone connections. There is the fore-mentioned crib and quite a lot of snowballs.

There is a touch of pathos because Don has come by himself, saying that his wife has been held back by family illness. Rusty tweaks what has happened and when Don volunteers to entertain at an improv cafe, with Brad urging him on, Don has an emotional collapse.

So, with things turning out badly, on Christmas Day they set out for home only to be caught in bumper-to-bumper traffic by an avalanche. Fortunately, there is cinema complex nearby and all the motorists go there is something to eat and drink and a movie. The film that family actually goes into see is an action thriller with Liam Neeson, called Missile Tow, Neeson being heard but not seen.

Actually, that could be quite a good title for a thriller at Christmas! Missile Tow.

We all know it's going to end well – but, with Kurt being as he is, it is rather restrained (except for his giving his son a big long kiss!).

And so, in 2018, where will the Bad Moms go? Where can Daddy's Home Three go?

DETROIT

US, 2017, 143 minutes, Colour.

John Boyega, Will Poulter, Algee Smith, Jacob Latimore, Jason Mitchell, Hannah Murray, Jack Reynor, Kaitlyn Dever, Ben O' Toole, John Krasinski, Anthony Mackie.

Directed by Kathryn Bigelow.

Blunt title. Very blunt and direct filmmaking.

For many decades, Kathryn Bigelow has made films which have been very tough, and early vampire film, police dramas. However, she came to prominence as the first female director to win an Oscar as director for The Hurt Locker (2008). Her subsequent film was the search for Osama bin Laden,

Journalist Mark Boal wrote the screenplays for the latter films and has written this screenplay.

This is quite a long film. It is set in 1967, in the aftermath of the strength of the Civil Rights Movement with Martin Luther King and Selma as well as his Washington speech. It is also the year in which Robert Kennedy was assassinated as well as Martin Luther King. The opening sets the tone, the police raid (both black and white) on a Detroit speakeasy, moving the guests out, lining them up, but the locals resenting and reacting, setting off days of riots and looting, the local police in action as well as state troopers and, ultimately, the National Guard. There is an appeal by the Governor of Michigan, George Mc Govern, who is to be the Democratic candidate, defeated by Richard Nixon, in 1968.

The central part of the film is most effective. The audience has been introduced to a young

group of black singers, about to go on stage when the theatre has to be evacuated because of the riots. Ultimately, they were to become the Motown group, The Dramatics. The main singer, Larry (Algee Smith) and his teenage friend, Fred (Jacob Latimore), escape through the barricades but decide not to go home. They go to a local motel, The Algiers. The film focuses for a long time on what happens at The Algiers.

Those in the motel are fairly young, mainly black, two young white girls from Ohio who are prostitutes, a veteran from the Vietnam war (Anthony Mackie). The police, troops, Guard all set up in the street, aware that there might be snipers. In the meantime, a very earnest and upright young black man (John Boyega) is a security guard but offers the National Guard cups of coffee. Which means, when the crisis occurs, he goes into The Algiers along with the troops to observe and to search the premises.

Small things can lead to huge crises. This is the case here, one of the young men firing a starting pistol out into the street where it is assumed a sniper is firing. The consequences of this act are dire, resulting in three deaths, and the rest of the residents being lined up for hours, bashed, treated brutally and humiliatingly, the two girls blamed for being with black men, the Vietnam veteran assumed to be a pimp. The police use the bluff of taking individuals into a room with the others presuming that they are being tortured and shot. In one case, the young policeman takes it all very literally, not a bluff, and shoots a victim.

The film presents the local police, especially three of them, as young, arrogant, racist, bigoted. The audience has already seen the leader, Krauss, (Will Poulter) shooting a fleeing looter in the back and being interviewed by his superior officer. Krauss does not hold back but, when one victim is shot, he has to alter the scenario.

The final part of the film is the court proceedings in 1969. After the physically disturbing sequence in The Algiers, the court proceedings are to some extent low key – except for the audience indignation at how the defence counsel (John Krasinski) interrogates the black witnesses, asking about their criminal records, implying that they are to blame. And the indignation continues with the jury's verdict of not guilty – with the John Boyega character having been arrested, interrogated, implicated in the violence even though he was innocent.

John Boyega and Will Poulter are British and Jack Reynor grew up in Ireland.

Detroit is released on the 50th anniversary of the riots. With so many deaths in recent years, police killing black men, Detroit, to that extent, is in no way dated.

GOODBYE, CHRISTOPHER ROBIN

UK, 2017, 107 minutes, Colour.

Domhnall Gleeson, Margot Robbie, Kelly Macdonald, Will Tilston, Alex Lawther, Stephen Campbell Moore, Richard McCabe, Geraldine Somerville.

Directed by Simon Curtis.

Enjoyment of this film does not depend on whether the audience has a familiarity with the Winnie the Pooh stories or has even read them. It is said that Winnie the Pooh is the most beloved of bears (well, Paddington might be a little envious).

This is very British story and is directed by Simon Curtis, a television director whose films include the Marilyn Monroe's story, *My Week with Marilyn* and the German art story, *Woman in Gold*. It opens in 1916, playwright and author, A.A.Milne experiencing war in the trenches, the bombardment, the many deaths and his suffering from shellshock. On his return, he is against war, but finds it very hard to settle back to ordinary life, writing for the theatre, his relationship with his wife, Daphne. Milne is played by Irish actor Dominique all Gleeson and Daphne by Australian actor, Margot Robbie.

One of the solutions that Milne needs to recover from the war is to move to the country, Daphne rather unwilling, with their young son, Christopher Robin whom they nickname Billy. Most of the action of the film takes place when Billy is eight years old.

Billy is very cautious about disturbing his father and his writing. His father and his mother have instilled this in him. He goes for walks in the woods, has a lot of animal toys, has a strong imagination. This has been fostered by his alternate mother-figure, his Scots and nanny, Nue (Kelly Macdonald in a very sympathetic performance). At one time, they visit the zoo in London where there is a huge grizzly bear called Winnipeg, which is where nickname Winnie comes from.

At one stage, while his mother is in London, Billy goes for a walk with his father, sharing three very happy days, bonding between father and son, delight in the woods, delight in his toys, delight in animals. Billy would like his father to write a story for him. His father does. Winnie the Pooh.

The impact is immediate, books literally flying off-the-shelf. The public as well as the media can't get enough of Christopher Robin and so the eight-year-old is subjected to innumerable interviews, autograph signings, being in the public eye, international celebrity in the United States. His father is not against it. Daphne is at pains to promote and exploit the success of the stories.

Billy is rather excited when, to get out of the limelight, his sent to boarding school. However, he is mocked there. He is bullied.

The film has started with a prologue in a melancholy tone, 1941, the telegram coming to his parents – the audience not knowing the content until the end of the film.

When Billy returns from the war, he wants to live very quietly, marries, has a family, owns a bookstore in the south-west of England, never taking any money from the royalties from Winnie the Pooh books.

This might be described as a British heritage film, re-creating the period, highlighting a writer, telling the story of a little boy, reminding audiences of the power of imagination and story.

IN THIS CORNER OF THE WORLD

Japan, 2016, 130 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Sunao Katabuchi.

World audiences have become used to animated Japanese films from the Ghibli Studios, *Ponyo*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Arietty*.... The audiences have appreciated their animation style, the creation of characters and their simplicity, the backgrounds, the local stories, many serious and reflecting on Japanese history, especially of war.

The film has all these qualities but comes from a different studio. However, it is an invitation for world audiences as well as Japanese audiences to go back into the past, to appreciate different times, different difficulties and how characters coped.

The film opens in the 1930s, focusing on the little girl, Suzu. We see her family, her siblings, the life and style in rural Japanese villages around Hiroshima in the decade before the war. Suzu is quite imaginative, a great capacity for drawing and bringing stories to life.

The screenplay offers many dates which makes the film something of a diary, something of a chronicle. Some years are skipped over quite rapidly, Suzu growing up during the late 1930s, then into the 1940s and her reaching the age of 19.

Audiences will be expecting explicit references to the war and Japanese involvement but this does not immediately happen. So much of Japanese life and international events do not impinge very strongly on people in local villages. What is important for Suzu as a young woman is that she marry. We see an arranged marriage, negotiations, finding a husband, the wife meeting the husband and the grandmother urging her with the symbol of the umbrella and the bride saying that she was willing to open her umbrella for her husband... Human feelings and love come later.

Suzu's mother-in-law is quite hard on her. While Suzu is a loving wife, she also become something of a servant on the household, being relied on to clean, to mend and sew, to find ways of making meals where food was so scarce. She has a variety of recipes, gathers herbs from the countryside. The family survives. However, her husband goes to war.

The people in the village and the audience become much more conscious of the war, looking at the naval base of the ships in Hiroshima Bay. Then the planes begin to fly over, exploding in a variety of colours over the screen. Then there are the bombardments, the family seeking safety in dugout shelters.

We know that the atomic bomb is coming. Suzu wants to go back to her home in Hiroshima from her husband's village but has lost her hand in a bomb blast, the hand with which she drew. The bombardment also kills her companion, a little girl. Which means that she is not in Hiroshima when the bomb was dropped. And the audience does not see it. Rather, there are vibrations, the vast cloud, and the repercussions for the people of the city as well as of the neighbours.

Then the war is over, the Emperor surrenders, the Americans arrive, offering chocolate, and the Japanese have to adapt to defeat, the prospects of a different life and the rest of the 20th century. That, of course, is something that the audience for this film supplies in retrospect.

The film is bright in colour, gentle in its storytelling, a different perspective on Japan in the 1930s and 1940s.

JIGSAW

US, 2017, 92 minutes, Colour.

Matt Passmore, Tobin Bell, Callum Keith Rennie, Hannah Emily Anderson, Cle Bennett, Laura Vandervoort, Paul Braunstein, Mandela Van Peebles, Brittany Allen, Josiah Black. Directed by Michael Spierig, Peter Spierig.

This is Jigsaw/John Kramer resuscitated – as well as a sequel to the very popular series during the two thousands.

Credit where credit is due. The Saw series was the brainchild of Australians, Lee Whannell as writer and James Wan as director. They collaborated in various capacities in the films that followed and are now involved as Executive Producers. And, as directors, brothers working together are, Michael and Peter Spierig who made the strong vampire film, *Daybreakers*, the excellent science fiction time mystery, *Predestination*, and the forthcoming chiller, *Winchester*, with Helen Mirren. Australian-based.

Can they do it all again? Answer: yes. Is it any different from the former films? And some: yes and no. Is it better than the former films? Answer: probably depends on your hunger for gory sequences.

These questions are relevant only to the fans of horror films, merely points of review reference for others who wouldn't be seen dead - or alive - watching a Saw film.

In fact, the makers of this Saw contribution, while definitely repeating the formula of the previous films: Jigsaw choosing his victims, their all being guilty of crime and having gone unpunished, transported into a torture chamber which leads to other torture chambers and their survival depending on their capacity for confessing. (Given a theological frame of mind, it did occur during the screening of Jigsaw that there was a great emphasis on sin, responsibility, sense of guilt, self-excuses, the call to repentance, the torture chambers as being 21st-century version of Purgatorio and Inferno.)

The torture sequences are very similar to those in the previous films – which led commentators over a decade ago to designate films like this as torture-porn. There is certainly a point there.

But what makes this film more sittable through is that there are a lot of sequences outside the torture rooms, even some more humane elements. There are references to war service in Iraq. There are nice family glimpses. There are police shown in some detail pursuing their investigations. There are autopsy sequences (and they are definitely very grim and grisly), a mysterious and rather imperious doctor assistant and a very genial medical examiner for the autopsies.

Another factor is that the screenplay has the victims of torture lying about their responsibilities, with some flashbacks, but with some final revelations, that indicate characters more guilty than we would have expected, diminishing our sympathy for what they have undergone.

There is a visit to a bondage centre which resembles Jigsaw's torture chamber. There are records again with his voice and his blood under the fingernails of some victims. But he has

been dead and buried for 10 years. How can this be?

There is certainly a twist at the end, possibly a twist too far, audiences trying to find some credibility as regards time sequences and the ability of the torturer to do all his work within a 24 hours day. On the plus side, Tobin Bell repeats his presence as Jigsaw/John Kramer and, while he continues to torture, he is given some very moralising lines, even some momentary human touches.

However, human touches are not the staple of this series.

JUNGLE

Australia, 2017, 115 minutes, Colour.

Daniel Radcliffe, Thomas Kretschmann, Alex Russell, Joel Jackson, Lily Sullivan, John Bluthal, Jacek Koman, Angie Milliken.

Directed by Greg Mc Lean.

Jungle is definitely not a misleading title. Most of the action takes place in the Bolivian jungle – though filmed in Colombia and around Mount Tambourine, Queensland.

This is the story of Yossi Ghinsberg, an Israeli man who left his home and family in Israel to find himself, working in Alaska, in New York, in Bolivia and invited to join an expedition into the jungle, to experience nature, to find tribes, perhaps gold in the rivers, and to find himself. In so many ways, he does. But it is a matter of survival in the jungle. And the final credits indicate that after these experiences, he moved back to Bolivia, into the jungle to contribute to ecology and prosperity, where he still is.

Interesting that Daniel Radcliffe plays Yossi Ghinsberg. In the years after Harry Potter, Daniel Radcliffe has chosen quite a wide range of roles, recently an undercover FBI agent in Imperium, Igor in Victor Frankenstein, the corpse in Swiss Army Man. Compared with the other main characters in this film, his companions in the trek into the jungle, Thomas Kretschmann as Karl, the ambiguous adventurer who leads them, Alex Russell as Kevin, the American photographer, Joel Jackson as Marcus, the Swiss teacher, he is definitely pint-sized. (Alex Russell and Joel Jackson Australian actors.) However, as ever, he has a strength of presence that persuades the audience of his character's credibility.

The film has been directed by Greg Mc Lean, still best known for the two Wolf Creek films as well as the television series, for his crocodile film, Rogue, and the intense intra-offices gladiatorial survival film, The Belko Experiment. He knows how to draw intensity from his characters, from desperate situations which, in this case, are particularly visceral, a kind of intense physicality in threatening and survival situations which are reminiscent of films like Deliverance.

As the group trek into the jungle, the audience is drawn into sharing the journey with them, a strong identification of curiosity, of fear, challenge, of discovery. There is exhilaration in the beauty of the photography, mountains and jungle, close-ups as the group machetes its way, as well as beautiful aerial vistas.

The second half of the film takes place after Karl and Marcus trek through the jungle instead

of continuing downriver on a raft which is what Kevin and Yossi do. If the audience ever wanted to know what it was like to raft through rapids, this may be as close as it will ever get! But, after the raft disaster, Yossi has to make his way through the jungle, surviving, becoming emaciated, having hallucinations, consoled by flashbacks, yet determined to continue, almost for three weeks before being found.

There is a religious dimension, Yossi's Jewish background and the gift of a text from his uncle which reminds him of the divine as he survives.

In many ways, this film is not for the fainthearted who quail at the presentation of physical pain and suffering. The audience has to be prepared to share this demanding journey through the jungle.

JUSTICE LEAGUE

US, 2017, 121 minutes, Colour.

Ben Affleck, Gal Gadot, Ezra Miller, Jason Momoa, Henry Cavill, Robin Wright, Connie Neilson, Amy Adams, Amber Heard, Diane Lane, Kiersey Clemons, Billy Crudup, JK Simmons, Ciaran Hinds, Jeremy Irons, Jesse Eisenberg, Michael Mc Elhatton, Joe Morton. Directed by Zack Snyder, Joss Whedon.

Not exactly from time immemorial, but for some considerable time, there has been some rivalry between DC Comics and the Marvel Comics. In an ideal world, this ought not be so competitive, the fans able to appreciate both and the range of films made with their particular Superheroes and the linking of their Superheroes as Avengers or as the Justice League.

The main difficulty in writing a review of Justice League is that the reviewer is on the side of the Marvel Universe. From the 70s into the 90s, the Superman and Batman films were very well done, as was Christopher Nolan's Batman series. The 2017 Wonder Woman was also very good. But, with Man of Steel, Suicide Squad... And their being outshone by, for example, Thor, the choice is for Marvel.

In checking on the bloggers for Justice League, one finds that there is extraordinarily passionate support! The fans consider it wonderful entertainment from start to finish.

What follows is just one reviewer's opinion. There is a brief opening sequence, caught on phone camera, where children are interviewing Superman. Unfortunately, after Batman versus Superman, Superman is no longer with us, he is dead and buried. (Which is not necessarily going to stop screenwriters for DC Comics!).

Then there is a scene with Batman confronting a monster alien. Then there is Wonder Woman, from her base in London, using her gold lasso and an ability to avoid bullets to thwart sabotage on four city blocks. Bruce Wayne does a trek to the remote north to have a challenging conversation with Arthur Curry, Aquaman. Then there is Barry Allen, visiting his father in prison, being urged to get a real job. And, in a secret laboratory, there is Victor Stone, victim of his father's experiment.

Which means then that we have the introductions to the Justice League: Ben Affleck as Batman, Gal Gadot as Wonder Woman, Jason Momoa as Aquaman, Ezra Miller as The Flash.

Flash/Barry Allen and Ray Fisher as Cyborg/Victor Stone. And the reason for Bruce Wayne getting them together is that there are three mysterious boxes of energy, referred to in the documents of Lex Luthor, and the arrival of Steppenwolf (voiced by Ciaran Hinds) who intends to destroy the world. (The audience is given something of a preview of what might happen in a sequence with an enormous squad of Amazon women converging on Steppenwolf.)

The rest of the film seems mainly fights and explosions. There is an important interlude, this review not wanting to spoil the plot but most fans will know this anyway, where Lois Lane and Martha Kent (Amy Adams and Diane Lane again) are mourning the death of Superman. However, Bruce Wayne, always aided by the surveillance and offbeat remarks of his butler, Alfred (Jeremy Irons) has the idea that the energy can resuscitate Superman. And, even with a photo of Kevin Costner as Clark Kent's foster father, the energy does its job, although there is a certain innate hostility in Superman until it is mellowed by meeting Lois again. And, of course, it is Henry Cavill as the resuscitated Superman.

And so, more fights and explosions, victory through the variety of skills of the Superheroes and audiences being advised to sit through the very long credits to see where the series might be leading. Actually, with the revelation of a sinister character returning to the series, the reviewer left the cinema more hopefully.

THE KILLING OF A SACRED DEER

US, 2017, 121 minutes, Colour.

Colin Farrell, Nicole Kidman, Barry Keoghan, Alicia Silverstone, Raffey Cassidy, Sunny Suljic, Bill Camp.

Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos.

Greek director, Yorgos Lanthimos, has become something of a celebrity in recent years. He made *Dogtooth*, 2010, and *Lobster*, 2015. Critics were impressed by his rather offbeat approach to storytelling, touches of the bizarre, and rather different perspectives on human nature. With this present film, made in the United States and in Ireland, he won the screenplay award at Cannes, 2017.

As with dogs and lobsters, he has animal connotations in his title. Thoughtful publicists and reviewers have let audiences know that the references to Greek mythology. King Agamemnon, on his way to fight the Trojans, suffered failing wins. Rather vengeful gods, it would seem, demanded that he sacrifice Iphigeneia. Just as he was supposed to kill her, she was transformed into a sacred deer. The ritual went ahead.

Sacred deer: victim, sacrificial, a motive for revenge?

Lanthimos tells his story in linear narrative but, what happens along the way means that there are dramatic gaps in the narrative, unexpected twists and turns, keeping the audience on its mental toes, so to speak.

In *Cincinnati*, Colin Farrell, who appeared in *Lobster*, is a surgeon, Steven Murphy (and with his own Irish accent), the opening image being of open cut surgery, the camera gazing, as we do, at intestines. Steven has a good reputation although some have died during surgery he

performed – including the father of a rather enigmatic teenager, Martin (Barry Keegan) who keeps appearing at Steven's office, or in a diner, or in walks, with Steven giving him the gift of a watch. So, we are immediately on the alert and questioning the relationship between Steven and Martin.

At home, Steven's wife, Anna (Nicole Kidman) is strong-minded but often a touch of the lenient with her two children, teenage Kim (Raffey Cassidy) and younger son, Bobby (Sunny Suljic).

Then it becomes rather mysterious, perhaps psychosomatic, perhaps psychological, with Bobby unable to stand, going to the hospital, having tests, Steven sitting in on group analysis of what is wrong with his son. Kim, who has something of a relationship with Martin, riding on his motorbike, at one stage being sexually provocative, suddenly collapses and cannot stand.

So begins a period of greater anxiety for father and mother, for the children disabled in hospital, for their returning home. There are further complications with Steven's anaesthetist, Matthew, also a family friend (Bill Camp) and Anna trying to get information from files and paying up sexually.

Ultimately, the film turns to touches of horror and violence, the pressure on Steven, his bizarre Agamemnon moments and the question of sacrificing a member of his family, which means that Martin is something of a vengeful God (although Steven has brutal moments with him as well). In the Iliad, Agamemnon is able to sail to Troy and for the Greeks ultimately to defeat the Trojans. No such triumphant outcomes here... just some survival.

Strange, even alienating, to watch – but it offers so much to reflect on.

JUST TO BE SURE/ OTEZ-MOI D'UN DOUTE

France, 2017, 100 minutes, Colour.

François Damiens, Cecile De France, Guy Marchand, Andre Wilms, Alice de Lencquesaing, Esteban.

Directed by Carine Tardieu.

This light drama has been highly touted as very popular at the French box office. While it is a pleasant entertainment, it is a comparatively ordinary film. (Some French reviewers have referred to it as "hilarious" which might indicate the French sense of humour is very different from other senses of humour!)

Not that there is not plenty to enjoy. The title is provocative – and refers to themes of paternity which are explored in several different ways throughout the film.

The central character is Erman (François Damiens), a working man in his mid-40s, an expert in bomb disposal and active along the Brittany coast, finding remainders from World War II. He leads a squad who generally have to detonate the bombs they discover but also risk dangers, especially from mines in farming fields. Erman is a widower, fond memories of his wife, devoted to his father, an ageing man who loves going out on his boat and needs medical clearances to continue to do so. Erman also has a daughter, Juliet, aged 22, pregnant and

declaring she does not know who the father is.

First paternity problem.

There are quite some complications when Erman and his daughter go to the doctor to check on whether they are carrying a disease which has carried off family members in the previous generation. And so, the main paternity problem. It would seem that Erman's sailing father is not actually his father. What to do? Try to find out the truth? Let it be? He even asks the rather awkward young man, Didier (Esteban) whom his daughter has persuaded him to take on for a job - which he does not do well.

There is an amusing sequence when he goes to a private detective – a rather older woman with an acerbic tongue. But she does the job and for the rest of the film, we can rather enjoy Erman's searching out his actual father, their encounters, the bond between them.

Another part of the plot is the fact of Erman being upset when a driver hits a boar on the road during the night. She is Anna, a doctor, who is able to put the boar down. Later, Erman sees her in the town, is very much attracted, invites her to dinner. But then there is a further paternity complication – which the trailer unfortunately reveals but which will not be revealed here.

So, paternal complications, the role of the two fathers, the discovery of Juliet's baby's father (not too difficult), the possibility of a romance between Erman and Anna, the birth of the baby...

On the whole, the film has a rather gentle sense of humour, rather than hilarious, and there are some serious moments as well as, towards the end and the birth of the baby, some farcical moments.

And so, the meaning of the title, just being sure who is who – and how.

LUCKY

US, 2017, 88 minutes, Colour.

Harry Dean Stanton, David Lynch, Ron Livingston, Ed Begley Jr, Tom Skerritt, Beth Grant, James Darren, Barry Shabaka Henley, Yvonne Huff, Hugo Armstrong.

Directed by John Carroll Lynch.

It is not everyone who has the opportunity to make a film of their epitaph. But, this is the case with Harry Dean Stanton, his last film, drawing on aspects of his own life, something of an epitaph portrait.

It is also an elegy for Harry Dean Stanton, his career, his way of life, his screen images – and, before he walks along the desert road the end of the film, he actually does look straight into the camera and, rather gently, smiles.

While there are narrative aspects of the screenplay, the film is more of a character portrait, perhaps too slow for those who have action compulsions, but rewarding for those who are able to stay quietly with Lucky and the inevitability of his moving towards death. The tagline

for the film is “the spiritual journey of an atheist”. While this is basically true, Lucky is not a rabid atheist but, rather, a Texan humanist.

Harry Dean Stanton has appeared in a number of films over many decades, something of a figurehead for many independent films, including those of David Lynch. However, he is best known for his lead role in the 1984 Wim Wenders film, *Paris, Texas*. Interesting to note that in the final song in the film (and there are a number of songs whose lyrics contemplate death, life, darkness...), *The Moonshine Man*, there is mention of Stanton by name and also a reference to Paris, Texas.

The location of this film doesn't seem to be all that far from Paris, Texas. It is a small town in the south-west, and in the desert (with opportunities for some fine desert scenery). Lucky, his nickname because of his job in the Navy during World War II, lives alone, never married, in a modern enough house. We see him get up in the morning, turn on the radio, light a cigarette (he is most definitely a smoker, defending it though sacked from a restaurant job for lighting up while working there). He does exercises, gets dressed, walks/shuffles to a diner for breakfast where he is friendly with the manager and the assistant, chatting, being quiet, doing word puzzles and reflecting on the meaning of “realism”. He later declares his belief in ‘truth’ as a thing.

He wanders around the town, buy some milk for his fridge (the only thing there) and is friendly with the shopkeeper who later invites him to the fiesta, many Hispanics in the town, for her son's 10th birthday. In the background, frequently there is *The Red River Valley* on a harmonica.

At night he goes to the bar, drinks, talks to friends, is quiet, listens to the barkeeper (Hugo Armstrong) who has a long sequence of explaining the mechanism of *Deal No Deal* which Lucky doesn't think much of. The proprietor is Elaine, Beth Grant, who has some raucous stories of her own but who is very fond of her long-time partner, Paulie, star of the past, James Darren, and, especially, his friend, Howard, who is lamenting the loss of his pet tortoise, President Roosevelt. He is played by David Lynch, making a tribute to Stanton by appearing in the film, and has a very fine speech about loneliness and his devotion to his tortoise.

There is a bitter moment when an insurance salesman, Bob (Ron Livingston), is putting pressure on Howard and is attacked with Lucky's disapproval. But, there are moments of redemption, with Bob later visiting the town, getting Lucky's cold and silent treatment but taking the initiative, breaking through, telling some stories about himself and his daughter with Lucky responding well. A Marine veteran (Tom Skerritt), stops for a drink and shares a poignantly reminiscing chat with Lucky about their war service, in Asia, in the Philippines. Happiness and regrets.

But, Lucky has a blackout and fall, goes to the doctor, Ed Begley Jr, gets advice but realises he has to prepare for death, which, for him, is simply a void, the end of everything.

Speaking of redemption, there is a wonderful sequence when Lucky goes to the fiesta, is welcomed by the mother and her son, the woman introducing him to her mother who does not speak much English. A Mariachi band plays and, suddenly and unexpectedly, Lucky breaks into a plaintive song in Spanish, a beautiful moment revealing the humanity of Lucky.

It is not surprising to find that Lucky won the Ecumenical Award at the 2017 Locarno Film Festival.

THE MAN WHO INVENTED CHRISTMAS

2017, 104 minutes, Colour.

Dan Stevens, Christopher Plummer, Jonathan Pryce, Simon Callow, Miriam Margolyes, Ian McNeice, Morfydd Clark, Donald Sumpter, Bill Paterson, Miles Jupp, Annette Badland, Justin Edwards, Anna Murphy.

Directed by Bharat Nalluri.

One might have thought that Jesus himself might have been considered the “inventor” of Christmas – or, at least, Matthew or Luke in their Gospels. But, no, the man of the title is Charles Dickens, so well-known for his novel, *A Christmas Carol*.

This is an entertaining imagination about Dickens and his crisis in 1843, his failure with three books including *Martin Chuzzlewit* and his book on his American tour (with which the film opens, an extrovert extravaganza from his audience and his wishing he could get home!). Dickens has a block, is in debt, his fear that if he doesn’t produce another book or, if it fails, he will never write again.

Dan Stevens (*Downton Abbey* and his reminding us of his role as the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*) is a sometimes frantic Dickens, caught up in his own world and imagination, angry with others, including his wife, resentful of his father and his extravagance, living in his imagination as he gathers names, images, family connections to produce *A Christmas Carol*.

Just as there are ghosts and fantasy in the novel itself, this film uses the same technique. Central to it all is Scrooge himself (and there are a couple of scenes in the trailer which are, unfortunately, not in the film, scenes where Dickens is trying to work out the name Scrooge as well as what he will call his story). Scrooge is played by Christopher Plummer, relishing the role, denouncing humbug, misanthropic, pessimistic, quick with the putdown of Dickens himself (the author – allegedly!). The ghost of Scrooge enables Dickens to focus on a story, the character of Scrooge and his heartlessness toward Bob Cratchit and, especially, the ailing Tiny Tim. Actually, by the end, Scrooge is able to challenge Dickens who then discovers his own Scrooginess, redeeming Scrooge himself.

We see how Dickens loves collecting names, relishing Marley, for instance. There is a nice touch at the end when he hears the name Copperfield. In fact, the presentation of his father in this film is very much like Mr Micawber.

Dickens has a put-upon wife, several children, a manager of his household and a maid. They all have a lot to put up with. And then his father turns up, Dickens having bought his parents a house in Devon. His father, well played by Jonathan Pryce, really has no conception of money and imposes on his son, his wife always patient. Dickens finds him exceedingly exasperating but, as he has a flashback about his father’s imprisonment, Dickens himself going to a blacking factory (with echoes of *Oliver Twist*), being bullied, he finally remembers that a bequest from his father is that everyone should play a part in lightening others’ loads.

Dickens’ sister and her family arrive from Manchester for a visit – and their little son is ill

and has a crutch. Which means that various characters that Dickens encounters become part of his fantasy, his sister's family becoming the Cratchits, his good friend and confidante, John Forster (a likeable Justin Edwards), becomes the ghost of Christmas present and his lawyer becomes the ghost of Jacob Marley. Dickens goes into this world quite frequently and, happily, with "God bless us everyone", there is Christmas cheer all round as the book is finally published on time, John Leach (played by Simon Callow who has played Dickens on screen and on stage) finishing the sketches, Thackeray, seen as a rival to Dickens, giving the book a very warm review.

In the note at the end of the film remind us that one of the great effects of the novel was an increase in philanthropy, in people giving to those in need.

MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

US, 2017, 114 minutes, Colour.

Kenneth Branagh, Daisy Ridley, Leslie Odom Jr, Penelope Cruz, Josh Gad, Johnny Depp, Michelle Pfeiffer, Judi Dench, William Dafoe, Olivia Coleman, Derek Jacobi, Manuel Garcia Rulfo, Lucy Bointon, Adam Garcia, Richard Clifford, Miranda Raison.
Directed by Kenneth Branagh.

There are two ways for audiences to respond to watching Murder on the Orient Express. It will depend on whether the audience has read the book or seen film versions.

For those not in the know, the film will be quite a spectacular whodunnit. For those in the know, the intriguing aspect will be watching the journey, the crime, the interviews, the solving of the case – and, instead of whodunnit, 'howdunnit'!

In the film and television audience imagination, older audiences will see Albert Finney in the 1974 version. At the end of this film, there is mention that there has been a murder on the Nile and Poirot is off to Egypt, in Death on the Nile, Poirot was Peter Ustinov, who appeared in several further Poirot films. The actor who most embodies Poirot, with television producers aiming to film all the novels with David Suchet, is David Suchet. Which means that for many, Poirot is bald, small, fastidious, immaculately dressed, immaculately spoken – and with a small moustache.

Kenneth Branagh goes to an entirely different style, not only head hair but, what a moustache!

Kenneth Branagh has directed the film as well. He has a very fine cast with Johnny Depp rather sinister and sleazy as the victim. Depending on the amount of time they have on screen, the strength of their screen presence, other members of the cast may make strong impressions or not enough. Probably the person with the most impact is Michelle Pfeiffer as the rather brassy American. But, audiences will have to be satisfied with the rather more diminished sequences with such luminaries as Judi Dench, Penelope Cruz, Derek Jacobi, Willem Dafoe, although Daisy Ridley (so strong in Style Wars: The Force Awakens) certainly makes an impression.

To give a bit of flavour, there is an episode in Jerusalem in 1934, accusations of theft near the Wailing Wall, with the accused a rabbi, a priest, an email. It is all staged to give audiences an

impression of the skills of Poirot – who has interrupted his fastidious breakfast, two eggs the same size, he measuring them for satisfaction... Or not.

Ferry to Istanbul and then the Orient Express, with some magnificent scenery in snowclad mountains, at train level, aerial photography, even an avalanche trapping the train on top of a wooden bridge.

And, there, a murder. Everyone has an alibi and each, in turn, has an opportunity for an interview with Poirot to explain their case.

Which gives the opportunity for the audience to enjoy the cast and their cameos.

As with most Agatha Christie stories, the detective gathers all the people concerned into a room, explains the situation and unmasks the killer. When you are in the middle of the mountains, why confine people to a room, even to the luxurious dining room of the train?. Rather, the weather having cleared, everybody sits at the opening of the train tunnel, Poirot facing them all and offering his detective disquisition on what happened.

Agatha Christie has many ingenious plots and this one has a high reputation in being ingenious.

ONLY THE BRAVE

US, 2017, 134 minutes, Colour.

Josh Brolin, Jennifer Connolly, Miles Teller, Jeff Bridges, James Badge Dale, Taylor Kitsch, Andi Mac Dowell, Alex Russell.

Directed by Joseph Kosinski.

This is a fine film about firefighters, especially in Arizona. It is based on a true story and serves as a tribute to the firefighters. And, if an audience does not know the background of the story, it is well advised that they do not research it at all before seeing the film and so lessening its impact.

The Western states of the United States are frequently subject to huge forest fires. Professional firefighters as well as volunteers have to be ready at short notice to go into action. One of the great values of this film is how well and seriously it presents these themes. It highlights the professionalism needed by the firefighters, their dedication and commitment, the rigours of training which is very military-like, the need for following orders, the strong camaraderie in collaboration, the ever present dangers as well as the sometimes of long absences from home and family.

For other countries, like Australia, which experience fires in the summer seasons, this is a film well worth seeing. Visually, it certainly brings home the reality of the fires, their extent, the rapidity of movement given the winds, the intensity of the flames. Audiences will see how physically demanding the work is, hard work, with mental concentration – as well as the strategies that have to be developed by the leaders and supervisors to combat the fires. In this film, there are many fire sequences, realistic, and editing with the performers so that the experience of the fires is particularly real.

The film has a very good cast and is well written, based on a long article written in 2014 for GQ by Sean Flynn.

The film depends on the presence and performance of Josh Brolin as Eric, the superintendent of the group in Prescott, Arizona. He embodies very well the kind of sturdy solidity and responsibility that the firefighter leader must have. He is completely believable in the role. Jennifer Connolly is his strong-minded wife, Amanda, a horse-whisperer who is supportive of her husband but is beginning to change her mind about the need for having a family.

It is interesting to see Jeff Bridges, in the familiar kind of role as the older mentor, but with short back and sides and wearing glasses. He is a senior role model – although, towards the end of the film, he does have a moment to branch out at a celebration in a bar, singing *Riders in the Sky*. Andi Mac Dowell has some moments as his wife.

A team of good actors take the role of the special squad on which the film focuses. They are volunteers but want to be recognised and certified as an official group for their district. One of the episode shows their work in being observed for certification – and Eric using his crew with the observer, standing his ground in the decision about tactics. They are accepted and there are great celebrations, and T-shirts, to hail of the occasion.

It is Miles Teller (*Whiplash*) who has second billing. He plays Brendan Mc Donough who, it is noted at the end, served as a special adviser for the film. Actually, when he first appears, he is a heroin addict, something of a loner and a loser, has got a girl pregnant in a one-night stand, has been picked up the public by the police and jailed. He is ousted from his home by his mother. On probation, he does go to Eric and applies for a job with the firefighters, is interviewed strongly, is tested in a long-distance run and is finally accepted.

He clashes with one of the men who fancies himself a ladies' man, Mac (Taylor Kitsch) but they develop a friendship, Brendan taking Mac in when he breaks up with his girlfriend, Mac fitting out the house for Brendan's baby after her mother relents, supporting him after he is bitten by a snake. James Badge Dale is also strong as the captain of the group.

The action of the film builds up to a final fire, the historical fire in 2013 when the town of Yarnell stands in the pathway of the fire and the Granite Mountain Hotshots have to defend homes and stop the fire.

This is a solid film, interesting and entertaining, strong characterisations, significant action sequences, and showing how in reality, rather than in sloganeering, it is fighters like this who can make America great.

THE ORNITHOLOGIST/ O ORNITOLOGO

Portugal, 2016, 117 minutes, Colour.

Paul Hamy, Joao Pedro Rodriguez, Han Wen, Chan Suan and, Juliane Elting.

Directed by Joao Pedro Rodriguez.

While initially an audience might believe they are coming to see a nice film about a bird watcher, and there are some pleasant scenes of Fernando (Paul Hamy) on the river, his binoculars, looking at some beautiful birds, nesting, eggs..., it might be prudent to advise that

this is not a straightforward narrative film. It is something of an allegory, it has touches of the mystical, and, for many audiences, maybe quite too mysterious.

There is an opening quotation from Saint Anthony of Lisbon, better known to us all as Saint Anthony of Padua, originally a Portuguese man named Fernando who became a Franciscan, and who has devout legends about him as being the patron of things which are lost as well as the story of his preaching to the birds. The opening quotation has references to nature, echoes of the spirituality of St Francis of Assisi, as well as a sense of spirits in the forests.

Something of this needs to be kept in mind. The director, Joao Pedro Rodriguez, has made a short film about celebrating the feast of Saint Anthony. And it can be noted that, by the end of the film, the director himself appears as an actor, taking over from Paul Hamy as the ornithologist, and this time called Anthony rather than Fernando as he and another character walk, like pilgrims, into the actual city of Padua.

Another note which will help audiences understand the approach of Rodriguez is that he is a gay man and there are some significant gay perspectives throughout the film.

When Fernando is caught in the rapids and his kayak is split, he lies in the water but has not drowned. Now begin some of the mysteries. He is rescued by two young Chinese women, who say that they are on their way to Compostella, walking the Camino. They are rather off-track, in forests in the north of Portugal where it meets Spain. While they are nervous, and say their prayers, and feed Fernando, they then tie him up, roped upright in his underwear resembling the image of Jesus on the cross.

But there are more encounters in Fernando's Odyssey, most significantly a mute and deaf young man who writes his name on the sand, Jesus. Some audiences may balk at what follows but there is a sexual interlude between Fernando and the young man, (perhaps a gay suggestion of the intimacy between St Anthony and Jesus himself), but there are some violent consequences with Jesus' side pierced by a knife and blood flowing out.

In the forests there are some strange men, masks and elaborate costumes, shouting and dancing – preparing for a fiesta and one of them, Thomas, turns out to be the twin brother of Jesus. He also has a knife wound in his side (and it was Thomas who wanted to put his finger in Jesus' side – as Fernando puts his finger in Thomas's side).

Keeping the mythical tone, Fernando is accosted by three bare-breasted Amazons who actually speak to him in Latin. They let him go.

Birds are present throughout the film, images, bird sounds – and, significantly in a tableau at the end, there is a white dove (which some audiences researching the Catholic symbolism missed), the Holy Spirit in the forest. The quote from Saint Anthony at the opening of the film did indicate that there were spirits in the forest.

And, finally, Thomas and the now Anthony walking into Padua – and the Chinese girls passing by, waving from the other side of the road.

Plenty to puzzle over for those who wish to pursue the allegory.

SCHOOL LIFE

Ireland, 2016, 99 minutes, Colour.
John and Amanda Leyden,
Directed by Neasa Ni Chianain, David Rane.

There is great deal of human interest in this documentary which has won a number of awards citing it has a pleasant experience about education.

Interestingly, the original title was the Latin, *In Loco Parentis* – in place of the parents.

The setting is Headfort School in an 18th-century estate and mention in County Meath, the last boarding school in Ireland for primary students. The student group is quite select, many of them having ambitions to get into prestigious schools in Ireland or, especially, Harrow and Eton in the United Kingdom.

While there is a great deal of emphasis on the students and some of them do become central to the story and action, especially the awkwardly dyslexic Ted, the silent Eliza, we recognise the students by their faces and behaviour rather than by their names.

However, the central focus is on two veteran teachers, John and Amanda Leyden. The film opens in their home, having a quiet breakfast smoke and conversation. They have been at the school many years – and John later tells a student that they were married in 1972, which puts him at the school for almost 45 years, married for almost 45 years. They have dedicated their life to the school. The current principal, Dermot Dix, was also a student there.

The number of students is comparatively small as is the number of staff. These are glimpsed, sometimes in conversation, sometimes with the children, but the principal focus is on the work of the Leydens. In appearance, John looks something of a rebel, very casually dressed, long hair askew, a touch of the cynical and the critical in his dealing with the students, yet very concerned about them. Amanda looks something of a dowdy grandmother. But they are deeply concerned about the students, do their best to form them in their studies and as persons. At home, the couple have conversations about the students, discussing their concerns and what they might do.

Amanda is principally concerned with literature. We see her in the library recommending books. We see her in the classroom. We also see her directing some scenes from *Hamlet*, intriguing to see the primary school students and their rehearsals, the extensive make up, the nervousness, the performance, especially of Ted as the ghost and of *Hamlet*. Amanda shares their anxiety as well as their exhilaration.

On the other hand, while John teaches maths and Latin, he is also interested (more interested?) in music. He is an old-time rock ‘n’ roller and there are various posters and indications of his fondness for David Bowie and Jimi Hendrix. He encourages the children to sing whatever they can and whatever they like. He is also interested in the instruments, he himself playing the piano. Some play the guitar. And there is a young girl, Florie, who arrives in the school, having been a model but with some low self-esteem, who plays the drums. Ultimately, there is a performance for the parents at which the students excel.

There are some staff meetings, interesting to hear the principal and his assessment of the

students and the ethos of the school.

At the end of the year, some of the students are overjoyed they get into their preferred schools. And there is a ceremony in local awards with the untalkative Eliza winning several awards and beginning to talk – and talk and talk.

There is no voice-over for this documentary. Rather, the audience is introduced to John and Amanda, seeing the range of students at meetings, out in the grounds, in classes, in discussions, music practice, theatre, cricket.

The director and the editor have chosen particular scenes, seemingly at random, to build up the kind of piecemeal jigsaw rather than any set piece.

By the end of the film, the audience has experienced a perspective on education of primary school children. The film will, of course, be of particular interest to teachers and parents if their children are in primary school.

SHOT CALLER

US, 2017, 121 minutes, Colour.

Nikolaj Coster- Waldau, John Bernthal, Omari Hardwick, Lake Bell, Holt Mc Callany, Benjamin Bratt, Jeffrey Donovan, Evan Jones, Max Greenfield, Emory Cohen.

Directed by Ric Roman Waugh.

This is a little heard of film, which is a pity. It is not a film that everyone would enjoy but for those who like serious and strong dramas with moral issues and emotional issues, this can be recommended.

The film has been written and directed by Ric Roman Waugh, better known for his work in stunts since the 1980s.

The film opens and closes with letters, the opening with a letter from a criminal in jail to his son, the ending with a letter from the son to his father, in jail.

The structure of the film is such that it seems to start, in terms of the narrative, at point B. A man who has been behind bars for ten years is released just as there is a hanging in the corridor. He looks tough, especially with a handlebar moustache, lines in his face. He is picked up by other criminals, taken to accommodation, goes to a club where there is a drive-by shooting and he makes contact with a rather baby-faced veteran from Afghanistan with discussion about stolen arms.

When the screenplay unexpectedly takes us back to point A, it is quite a surprise. How could the man that we have just seen leaving prison be the rather dapper stockbroker, with wife and young son, dining at a fashionable restaurant and discussing business, be the same man who leaves jail ten years later?

Nikolaj Coster- Waldau is most persuasive in the central role, shading the character of the stockbroker in his good days and as a prisoner in his bad days.

The continued flashbacks from the continuing point B, take quite a while to show the details of what happened in point A, car accident, court case, imprisonment.

Where the film is very interesting, psychologically speaking, is in the experience of the man in jail – real name Jacob, nickname “Money” because of his being a stockbroker. The screenplay raises the questions about how one survives in jail, the pressures of gangs, racial segregation, emotional blackmail. And the question whether a prisoner under such pressures has the exercise of free will or not. To that extent, the film shows the steps in the gradual downfall of Jacob leading to fights in the courtyard, murders, connections with arms dealing outside the prison, corrupt guards.

There is some emotion during the sequences with the visit of Jacob’s wife (Lake Bell), her sadness, her being mystified by the changes in her husband, and her surname growing up during his teen years.

All this is leading to point C, what will happen to Jacob as he leaves prison, the talk of an arms deal and his taking control. His liaison is Shotgun (Jon Bernthal) whom he had known in prison but is now making the connections for handing over of the weapons to a Mexican cartel.

In the meantime, we have been introduced to some of the police in Los Angeles, especially Omari Hardwick seen in a raid and wounded immediately in action when confronting a suburban paedophile. He is also Jacob’s supervisor during his probation. It emerges that the police have a leak within the rogue group and we wonder how Jacob is going to handle the situation. At times, this is not a pretty picture. The scenes of the sale and the raid are well executed and we are still puzzling over Jacob’s motivation and his subsequent behaviour.

There are explanations, some coming right at the end, which means that the audience is involved throughout the film with Jacob and his character, the changes, the motivations, some dismay at his behaviour, some hopes for change in behaviour, but the audience puzzling and reflecting right up to the end of the film.

THE STAR

US, 2017, 86 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Stephen Yuen, Keegan- Michael Key, Aidy Bryant, Gina Rodriguez, Zachary Levi, Christopher Plummer, Ving Rhames, Gabriel Iglesias, Kelly Clarkson, Anthony Anderson, Kris Kristofferson, Kristin Chenoweth, Mariah Carey, Oprah Winfrey, Tracy Morgan.

Directed by Timothy Reckart.

Teachers and parents have been asking about this film. They want to know whether it would be helpful in classes about the religious meaning of Christmas, whether it will be helpful for families to see the film in preparation for Christmas.

This is an animation film, sponsored by Sony, with a great deal of the animation work done in Canada. The animation decision indicates that this will not be a “realistic “presentation of the familiar stories from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

(One might add that some bloggers have taken a very serious stance, objecting that this means of communication is not fit for gospel stories, is irreverent, could demean the stories. They forget that there has been a long tradition of cribs, different imagination of humans and animals in cribs, and Christmas legends like The Small One with Bing Crosby's 1947 recording available on Youtube.)

It is important to note that this is a film designed for the youngest of audiences. It is definitely geared to "littlies" and the parents who accompany them and who are eager for their children to learn, as befits their age, something about Christmas – rather than the tinsel and commercialism, the over-emphasis on Santa Claus and children knowing more about him, the North pole, his reindeers than about Jesus.)

The filmmakers agree that they have taken liberties with imagining and embellishing the story, wanting to add some tones of humour to delight the children's audience, some slapstick and pratfalls to have them laughing (which the littlies do), and a touch of drama with Mary and Joseph hurrying to Bethlehem, a sinister King Herod manipulating the wise men and a brutal soldier and two fierce dogs in pursuit of Mary and Joseph.

So, while Mary and Joseph and Herod are significant characters, the point about this telling of the story is that it is from the point of view of the animals and their being the central characters as well. Actually, the humans can't hear them talk, only the familiar animal sounds. But, the audience hears them and they have a range of voices from a number of American actors and comedians including Oprah Winfrey, Tracy Morgan, Mariah Carey as the camels and Christopher Plummer as Herod.

The central character is a donkey called Bo. He and an old donkey (voiced by Kris Kristofferson) are mill donkeys, going in circles all their lives, Bo eager to escape but not really knowing how. He is well voiced by Korean-American actor, Steven Yuen. Bo has a cheeky dove friend, prone to wisecracks (Keegan Michael Key). They want to be in the king's entourage.

Bo and Dave want to help Mary, who has been kind to Bo, and they hurry along the road to Bethlehem where they meet a lost sheep, Ruth (Aidy Bryant). Lots of comedy here, verbal and physical.

While the pursuing soldier might be frightening, the littlies might find the two snarling dogs (one fierce, the other rather dumb) fiercer – though they do have a crib conversion!

The key elements of Mary and Joseph, annunciation, betrothal, visit from Elizabeth and Zachary, inns and stables are all there – though, for some tastes the expected very American accents of Gina Rodriguez and Zachary Levi sound too modern, Mary prone to say 'OK' a lot. While Herod is evil, we see all the elements of Matthew 2 – though not the killing of the Innocents, the fierce soldier in pursuit being enough.

The film opens '9 months BC'! The light of the annunciation vision goes up into the sky to shine for the Magi and all, people and animals alike.

It is not a film for older children, unless they are tolerant of films for those younger than they are, nor a film designed for adults. The older children will identify more with The Nativity Story of 2006.

But, this is a nice little film for little audiences, part of initial steps to learning the Gospel stories.

SWEET VIRGINIA

US/Canada, 2017, 93 minutes, Colour.

Jon Bernthal, Christopher Abbott, Imogen Poots, Rosemarie De Witt, Odessa Young.

Directed by Jamie M. Dagg.

Sweet is not exactly the word that comes to mind throughout this film. The title, in fact, refers to a motel in a remote Alaskan town (although the film takes full advantage of beautiful mountain scenery, photographed in the town of Hope, Canada). And, as regards Virginia, the central character plays an old rodeo rider, now injured and retired to Alaska, who had some success, as we see in flashbacks, in Roanoke, Virginia.

This is a film about moral decline in a small American town. It is something in the vein of the popular film noir of the 1940s, much of the action taking place in dark surroundings.

The film opens quite strikingly with a man arriving at a diner to join his two friends and a card game. Normal enough, phone calls to wives, everything quiet. A stranger then arrives, even though the diner is closed, and demands a meal. He identifies the manager of the diner. He does go out, but returns with deadly results.

As the film proceeds, we see his connection to quite a number of other people in the town. There are secrets and lies, there are fidelities and infidelities, there is ordinariness, there is malice, there is love and there is hate.

The rodeo rider, Sam, played by Jon Bernthal, now manages a motel where the stranger is staying and begins a friendship with him. This is in contrast with another resident of the motel subject of complaint about noise who is a violent man and bashes Sam.

It emerges that the stranger, Elwood (Christopher Abbott in a truly sinister role, psychopathic, heartless, yet sentimental in phoning his mother) is a hitman employed for the initial violence in the film. We are also introduced to two of the wives of the men dead in the diner, Imogen Poots as a young woman in an unhappy marriage, Rosemarie de Witt also in an unhappy but longer marriage, in a relationship with Sam.

It will emerge that Sam is to be the hero of the film even though he limps with his bad leg, is getting older, loses out in fights. But, he is sincere in his relationship with the widow, which comes to a head when masked robbers invade her home.

There are sympathetic characters at the motel, the older manager and a young woman for whom Sam is the father-figure, (Australian Odessa Young).

While some audiences may find the film more than a touch dour and prefer not to enter into this kind of moral decline, those who want an interesting drama with well-delineated characters, will find it interesting and different in its way.

TULIP FEVER

UK, 2017, 107 minutes, Colour,

Alica Vikander, Christoph Waltz, Dane de Haan, Holliday Granger, Jack O'Connell, Judi Dench, Tom Hollander, Zack Galifiniakis.

Directed by Justin Chadwick.

One of the difficulties of reviewing is the eventual comparing notes with other reviews. And, it is sometimes surprising when a reviewer finds that a film that he has very much liked and enjoyed is the object of so much derision and condemnation. Reviewers and IMDb bloggers seem to be unanimous in their dislike of Tulip Fever. What a pity!

The screenplay has excellent credentials, a collaboration between the author of the original novel, Deborah Moggach and celebrated playwright and screenwriter, Tom Stoppard. So many amateur bloggers have dismissed his writing as uninspired! The performances are interesting but those who did not like the film consider the central characters as so unlikable. Being likeable is not the essential for audience entertainment – Macbeth and his wife were not the most likeable of characters!

So, after these observations, what can a reviewer say about Tulip Fever and why it seemed such an interesting entertainment.

The setting is Amsterdam in 1634 – and a postscript set eight years later. If ever there was a film which spent a lot of attention on settings, costumes and decor, a recreation of the city, the canals, the markets, mansions, convents and churches, then this is a strong contender. And the frequent scenes of Amsterdam are totally atmospheric, a great number of extras, all in the dress of the period (remember Rembrandt), all busy, scurrying through the streets, the side of the canals, the fish markets, the door-to-door sales, crowded gatherings for trade in tulips, and the convent where the tulips are grown. The audience is immersed in the atmosphere. (And the score is by Danny Elfman.)

The cast is strong. We are introduced to the central character, Sophia (Alicia Vikander), along with her siblings at an orphanage Judi Dench as the abbess. For the children to go abroad for a new life, Sophia has to enter an arranged marriage with a local merchant, Cornelis (Christoph Waltz). His great desire is to have an heir and the couple make frequent strenuous attempts but fail.

When the merchant has the idea that the couple should have a portrait painted, an inexpensive young painter, Johan (Dane de Haan) is employed. Actually, there is a lot of detail in how posing (with the subjects and substitutes) is done, details of paint mixing and sketching. It is not difficult to predict what will happen – and does, although the details of the romance and its consequences become quite complicated.

In fact, everything is narrated by Maria (Holliday Grainger), the maid of the house, an astute observer of characters and situations who is in love with the local fishmonger, Will (Jack O'Connell).

And the tulip fever? A kind of 17th-century Dutch dot.com frenzy with the buying and selling and exploitation of tulips – with the abbess quite a business manager in the cultivation and

sale of tulips. And financial collapse.

Actually, there are quite a lot of complications and Tom Stoppard is able to suggest a lot of psychological dimensions in telling lines of dialogue, audiences needing to be alert.

Difficulties? The characters are in difficult situations and struggle with them and so audiences are not able to identify entirely with them. And the trouble with Dane de Haan is that he looks so young (as he did in *Valerian*) although, in fact, he is older than Alilcia Vikander. But Judi Dench is always interesting. Holliday Grainger and Jack O'Connell? do get our sympathy, Christoph Waltz is a master at a blend of the harsh and ironic, and Tom Hollander has a good cameo as a doctor who in later centuries would be immediately disbarred.

It is hoped that audiences venturing into see *Tulip Fever* will also find it interesting and entertaining.

WONDER

US, 2017, 113 minutes, Colour.

Julia Roberts, Jacob Tremblay, Owen Wilson, Mandy Patinkin, Noah Jupe, Daveed Diggs, Navji Jeter, Bryce Gheiser.

Directed by Steve Chbosky.

Wonder is an appealing example of the feel-good film. Yes, it is highly emotional and often wears its heart on its sleeve. However, it is a film which believes in the basic goodness of human nature.

Before going into see this film, everybody will know that is about a young boy who has facial deformities, craniofacial difficulties, a very difficult birth, 27 operations for plastic surgery enabling him to both hear and to see well. As Auggie remarks, "it took 27 operations of plastic surgery to make me look this good!".

Strong praise is deserved by the actor, Jacob Tremblay. He made such an impression in the film, *Room*, playing Oscar-winning Brie Larsen's small son, that many thought he deserved an Oscar nomination himself. As Auggie here, he is completely believable and compelling. And he is aged 10.

It was a very smart move to cast Julia Roberts as Auggie's mother. Ever popular, but not so frequently on screen in recent years, she is both strong and loving as Auggie's mother, Isabel, who experienced the hardships of his difficult birth, has given up any hopes of a career and completing her thesis or developing her drawing skills, completely devoting herself to her son, even to homeschooling. Julia Roberts' fans will respond warmly to this film.

And, it was a very smart move, and a surprising one, to cast Owen Wilson, usually in comic roles, as Nate, Auggie's ever-supportive father. Owen Wilson fits very well into this role. Very strong support is given by Izabella Vidovic as Via, Auggie's older sister who had wanted a little brother when she was four but has had to accept always being in the background as the attention is given to her little brother. In fact, she goes to high school, suffers the unexpected spurning by her best friend but then is encouraged by a fellow student

rehearsing for performance of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, she does get the benefit of her innate goodness and self-sacrifice.

Auggie goes to school. The students stare. They don't sit with him in the dining area. They are puzzled, some insulting, and, especially, Julian (Bryce Gheiser) who is one of those deputed to be kind to Auggie is guilty of some cruel bullying (and when the principal takes him to task in front of his parents, his mother is the most disagreeable character in the whole film making us realise that while everybody has goodness in them, there are some exceptions!). One of the other students, Jack (Noah Jupe, Matt Damon's son in *Suburbicon*,) has some friendly moments, some bad moments, but an apology and a strong friendship.

Without a doubt, we will the audience who might have felt like staring at Auggie when we first saw him on screen, will almost imperceptibly go beyond the appearances, almost forgetting them, as we understand and appreciate the reality of Auggie as a person.

While the film ends in affirmation and newly – why not? They can be enough tragedy and pain in life so we can rejoice in and with those who rejoice.