

FILM REVIEWS 2021

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ALL MY LIFE

US, 2020, 91 minutes, Colour.

Jessica Rothe, Harry Shum Jr, Ever Carradine, Mariel Scott, Molly Hagan, Keala Settle, Jay Pharaoh.

Directed by Marc Meyers.

All my life obviously means the totality of life. But the phrase is one of commitment, one of self-giving and receiving in love. And, this is especially true, when life is challenged, especially by terminal illness.

And that is perfectly true of this drama.

We are introduced to Jenn (Jessica Rothe who appeared in the Happy Death Day 2 U thrillers), an engaging young woman, studying, many friends. We also see Sol, a pleasant and busy young man (played by Harry Shum Jr, Asian-American?, who appeared in Glee and looks as if he ought to have been in Crazy Rich Asians – and he was!). By chance, the two meet at a bar, are immediately attracted, are on a jogging date the next day, he introducing her to the joys of creative cooking, she finding that he is more important to her than she had imagined.

This is a film marked by sweetness. And, as it goes on, there is even more sweetness. Jenn and Sol have a great number of friends who are all nice and behave sweetly. They support the young couple who move in together, she continuing her studies, he working with digital marketing but enthusiastic and creative with his cooking, finally getting a job as a chef and becoming a great success.

What more could there be except the preparation for the wedding ceremony?

As we anticipated, illness. While this is sad, Sol going to hospital, diagnoses, experimental treatment, his depression, her continued support, there is more sweetness. The friends band together to prepare a happy event wedding, donating money, money-raising in the restaurant, fundraising events, the manager of the hall donating, the designer of the wedding dress donating, the perfect wedding – and so it is.

Even in the ultimate sadness, the film is upbeat, Sol and his legacy (Jenn reading him her eulogy, his filming a funny video her to look at after his death). And, to encourage us all, Jenn reflects on the meaning of life, love and commitment.

Probably too sweet for many an audience, but probably engagingly sweet for many more. And, a bit of a change, in fact, to see a young couple so lovingly committed with a wedding ceremony as one of the most significant events of their lives.

AVA

US, 2020, 96 minutes, Colour.

Jessica Chastain, John Malkovich, Colin Farrell, Common, Geena Davis, Jess Weixler, Ioan Gruffud, Diana Silvers, Joan Chen.

Directed by Tate Taylor.

Ava is an espionage thriller. It shows the last days of an assassin. She is played with vigour by Jessica Chastain. The director is Tate Taylor (who worked with Jessica Chastain in an entirely different mode in the Oscar-winning The Help).

The audience is introduced to Ava as a chauffeur in Paris, picking up a businessman (Ioan Gruffud) at an airport, leading him on, then confronting him, killing him. It emerges that she

has a control, played by John Malkovich. However, there is surveillance on her during the initial operation and she is sent to Saudi Arabia to assassinate a German general. This involves glamour, infiltration of a social, wrong information being given about her, the assassination attempt and it going awry, the guards pursuing her.

Jessica Chastain shows that she can be vehicle of met any mail agent in terms of infiltration and defence and attack skills.

In talking with her control, they both realise that authorities are wanting to terminate her. It emerges that the authority wanting this is played by Colin Farrell, with his daughter doing the surveillance.

There is quite a different tone when Ava returns to her city of Boston after eight years, wanting to reconcile with her family, especially her strong-mind mother, played by Geena Davis. There are also emotional complications with her younger sister, Jess Weixler, and restoring the breakdown of her former relationship with her boyfriend, Common whom she abandoned, problems with alcohol and drugs, and join the military eight years earlier. Have no idea of her secret career.

She is pursued in Boston but turns the tables on her pursuer. There is conflict between the two authorities with her controller's death, and her being more on the alert, paying tickets for her family to disappear from Boston.

She is still being pursued in the streets at the end of the film, leaving the audience to speculate whether she will be eliminated or whether she will turn the tables on her pursuer.

BRAZEN HUSSIES

Australia, 2020, 93 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Catherine Dwyer.

The colloquial phrase in the title of this important documentary may not have been heard from the screen but it would have been very clearly a phrase that would have come to mind/and voice of so many of the men, especially in the 1950s (and some women) who are seen in the pubs, not hesitant in interviews to talk about women and their place in society or, better, in the home. Those were the days when Margaret would have been referred to as Mrs Gough Whitlam and the public bars were public for men, women excluded.

This is the kind of documentary that can be described as “consciousness-raising”. But the “raising” is only part of the exercise – “consciousness-challenging” is the important factor. And, even though this is a historical documentary, the consciousness-challenge is still a powerful challenge.

The audience is introduced to the theme of the place of women in society, women's equality, women's liberation movements, with some disturbingly embarrassing images of the men and their relegation of women in a men's society. And that is before discussion of equal pay, domestic violence.

However, the action of the film is focused on the decade from the mid-1960s to the mid-

1970s, the emergence of women's liberation. (At the same time of cinema release, there was the British comedy/drama, *Misbehaviour*, focusing on the Miss World competition in London, 1970, its agenda, its focus on the male gaze, demonstrations and protest.)

While there is a great deal of footage from the news of the times, from television programs, from of significant events, the filmmakers have called on a significant number of significant, very significant, women who were young at the time, involved in the issues, demonstrating, creating political agenda. They are the talking heads of the film, interviewed in 2019. But, there is a great deal of footage of them when they were young, a record of what they were like in those days, what they said, what they did – and their opportunity to look back and comment on those days and what they had achieved.

One of the most significant of the talking heads, a great deal of screen time given to her interview, is Elizabeth Reid, chosen by Gough Whitlam to be the official advisor on women's issues from 1973 to 1975. Her role was groundbreaking. She interviewed people, offered advice, created agenda, held a national meeting of women in 1975 which became the target of politicians and an unsympathetic media. Whitlam was ready to let her go but she resigned, September 1975 (and, two months later, the Dismissal).

Another speaker featured throughout the film is activist Ann Summers. But, there are many women not so well-known to the public who make quite an impression with their interviews, their seriousness and intensity, always matched by the film showing them in speech and action those 50 years ago. There were chainings to the bars in pubs, chains outside public offices, the experience of the moratoriums about Vietnam, University student gatherings, action by trade union women, the range of publications, the creation of alternate lifestyles communities, the issue of lesbianism, the hostile public and media and labelling.

Of interest, and the observations about underlying attitudes, of misogyny in so many leaders from the left, of an assumption about aboriginal women that their issues could be simply included in the issues of white women, and a growing awareness that there was inherent racism under the surface.

In just over 90 minutes, this film includes an enormous amount of material, powerful visuals, stirring and stimulating words, and the realisation that while this is a picture of half a century ago in Australia, with the prevalence of domestic violence in the country, with the lack of opportunity for women to rise in the world of business and politics, with ongoing issues of equal pay, there is still so much room today for progress and consciousness-raising, consciousness-challenging.

A CALL TO SPY

US, 2019, 123 minutes, Colour.

Sarah Megan Thomas, Stana Katic, Radhika Apte, Linus Roache, Rossif Sutherland.

Directed by Lydia Dean Pilcher.

While this film makes quite a strong impact, it is a surprise to find such a film about World War II released 75 years after the end of the war. It is also a surprise to find that, while it is a British story, it is an American production, the writer and star, Sarah Megan Thomas, American, and the director, Lydia Dean Pilcher, also American. And filming took place in the

United States. However, it must be said that the British atmosphere is credible as is the atmosphere of wartime France, the countryside, the city of Lyon.

In many ways, this film is a throwback to the 1950s, the many war tributes made at that time, the way that Britain dealt with the war by filming many of the stories, the heroics as well as the challenges of the resistance and torture. In 1950, Anna Neagle portrayed the agent, Odette, and in 1957 Virginia McKenna played Violette Szabo, a resistance fighter in *Carve Her Name with Pride*.

The film reminds us of the role of Churchill in the war, his response to the fall of France and the experience of the rescue from Dunkirk. He was concerned with the Resistance and was interested in planting agents throughout France. The story focuses on a special department, Special Operations Executive. The role of the department was to recruit spies but with an emphasis on engaging women, training them, sending them into enemy territory. The head of the executive is played by Linus Roache (one of the few actual British actors present in the film) and his assistant, Vera, is played by Stana Katic.

The main focus of the film is an agent, Virginia Hill, played by the film's screenwriter, Sarah Megan Thomas. She is an American who has travelled widely, lived in Europe, has many languages and has been trying to become part of the diplomatic service. She is hampered, however, by having an artificial leg, an amputation after an accident. However, she attracts Vera's attention who interviews her and sends her on a rigorous training program. The other agent focused on is a woman of Indian background, Noor, Radhika Apte, who is involved in radio and signals work, very skilful with codes. She also agrees to be an agent, taking her equipment into France for transmissions.

Much of the action takes place in France. Virginia has a codename, establishes contacts, especially with the local doctor, activates local groups, becomes involved in serious sabotage, goes onto the hit list by the Nazi authorities. She manages to survive for two years. Noor, eventually going into France, has to move from place to place so that she is not discovered with her radio contact. The film focuses on some local characters, an elderly woman who is willing to offer hospitality secretly, a doctor with whom Virginia becomes very friendly.

One of the characters is a local priest who gives thundering sermons against the Nazis – but Virginia is suspicious about his authenticity. The priest is also connected with Klaus Barbie, well-known over the years and seen in many war films, the butcher of Lyon. He is seen in action here.

While, ultimately, the mission was successful, the British Executive also noted the wide range of mistakes that were made, lives lost.

So, making quite an impact 75 years after the war, this is both a memoir and a tribute, especially to the women agents, their mission, their lives, experience of torture, executions.

THE CROODS: A NEW AGE

US, 2020, 95 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Nicolas Cage, Catherine Keener, Ryan Reynolds, Emma Stone, Peter Dinklage, Leslie Mann, Cloris Leachman, Clark Duke, Kelly Marie Tran.

Directed by Joel Crawford.

In 2013, the original *The Croods* was a critical and entertainment success. It took its audience back into the capstone Age, the primitive family, their survival, success against any obstacle. (And there were memories of *The Flintstones*)

Seven years later comes this sequel. For those who admired the first film critically, this sequel is something of a disappointment. However, for the intended audience, children and families, the return of the eccentric characters, an immersion once again into the prehistoric age, adventures and obstacles, new enemies and battles, mean that it has been very popular with the target audience.

The film connects with the original by introducing young Guy once again, going on a quest, sent by his parents, to find a new Tomorrow. Eventually, he encounters the Croods, the gruff father, Grug, his wife, Ugga, voiced by Nicolas cage and Catherine Keener). The harsh granny is present once again, full of screeching, having difficulties with her hair... (Cloris Lechmere). However, guy (Ryan Reynolds) is smitten by the families daughter, Eep (Emma stone) quite a raucous young woman as well. There is also a baby as well as a rather obtuse younger brother, (Clark Duke). Gravy is not eager for deep to fall in love with Guy – especially see he is them planning to move away from the family. The family is everything – as can be seen when they defend themselves against a potential predator and when they all roll into a bundle for the night’s sleep.

However, the screenplay has the meeting a much more up-to-date family, the Vitamins (Peter Dingle age and Leslie Mann). They are a parody of contemporary sophisticates. They looked after Guy in the past and they have a daughter who was friends with Guy and whom they hope will marry him. Hence the potential for a lot of conflict as well as a lot of patronising of the cave family. There are all kinds of discoveries including Windows which offer an alternative to a television screen, saunas, all kinds of different food.

However, this peaceful life is interrupted by an attack of the enemies, a tribe of vicious monkeys – leading to all kinds of conflict, reconciliation within the family is, ultimate victory. And happy ending romance, of course, with drug changing his attitudes and Mr betterment learning a bit of humility.

All very colourful, full of action, eccentric characters, funny dialogue – especially popular for family audiences.

DROMMABYAGGERNE/ DREAMBUILDERS

Denmark, 2020, 81 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Robyn Dempsey, Emma Jenkins, Luke Griffin, Tom Hale, Karen Ardif, Brendan Mc Donald.

Directed by Kim Hagen Jensen.

A question for a reviewer. Here is a fantasy film for a very young audience, a young audience of girls, who will never read the review. There is a hope that parents/grandparents might read the review and find it helpful. So, how to review it?

The point of view of the reviewer is rather important: whether the reviewer has children or not (grandchildren or not). Will they be able to gauge how children at the various stages of their life will actually respond to the film, draw on their own experiences, draw on their own limited experiences and their discovery of the movies/television programs/streaming?

So, one solution is for the reviewer to ask questions and to speculate on answers.

The story of Dreambuilders, Minna and her father and her mother's departure, Helene and Jenny and her father's departure, broken families, families joining together, difficulties, clashes, memories of parents... In fact, this is rather a tough world and so it is for the children in this film. Bonding to parents, wary of alternate parents – and the clash between two little girls, one our heroine who starts to become mean, the other obnoxiousness personified! How will little girls and the audience identify with Nina and Jenny and their stressful situations?

And what about the dreams? And the enjoyable fantasy of Minna discovering another life in her dreams, her meeting the various gnomish, elvish characters who create the stages of the scenarios for the dreams, are busy=busy with their work, a bit fearful of their demanding boss and his visits. Will the audience be happy to identify with Minna and the life in her dreams, creating them, seeing her father's dream and his eating sardines for his birthday, and waking up to find has a taste for sardines!

And what about Jenny in the dreams? Are the girls and the audience identifying with Jenny and her imperious demands and taking over? Are they identifying with Minna, her life with her father disturbed, Jenny and her mother encamping in the house? And, Jenny's instant dislike to Minna's hamster (who is actually named Viggo Mortensen, the young audience would have to be strong film buffs to get this reference!). Will they enjoy all the activities that Minna gets up to to try to influence Jenny, to get her to love Viggo, to persuade her to buy the dowdy pullover that she wears, to cope with Jenny's bearable change of attitude after she wakes up?

And what about the final peril, the fact that all the discarded sets and props from the dreams stages fall into a chasm of rubbish, that Jenny falls into it, is in coma in her bedroom, that Minna will have to change attitudes and try to rescue Jenny?

Well, of course, happy endings and resolutions – and 80 minutes of animation from Denmark, with a range of voices from Irish actors, has gone by. And here is a possible review!

DREAMLAND

US, 2019, 98 minutes, Colour.

Finn Cole, Margot Robbie, Travis Fimmel, Kerry Condon, Darby Camp, Stephen Dinh, voice-over: Lola Kirke.

Directed by Miles Joris-Peyrafitte.

In the US in the 1930s, during the aftermath of the collapse of Wall Street finance and the pervasive Depression, a dreamland would have been in the imaginations of many Americans. That is the setting for this drama. The particular setting is in the Dakotas, certainly a depressed area, dry and barren, subject to tornadoes (and one of the biggest we are likely to

see on screen). Settlers were invited to go out to cultivate the land but found only the dry. They built, set up towns, struggled for survival, the next generation dreaming of getting out of there, of what could be.

A lot of this information is conveyed to us by a voice-over, the adult voice of the little girl, Phoebe (Darby Camp) recalling these events 20 years later. And, she says, she is perpetuating the story, the legend of her older stepbrother, Eugene.

At the time of the action, Eugene is a young adult, at home with his mother and sister and his stepfather, who works with the local police. Eugene has a friend Joe, who looks Native American, but who is soon to move away from the Dakotas for a better life in California. Eugene really has nothing much to look forward to – but has this long desire to find the father who walked out on them when he was little, failed in his work, a drinker, gone to Mexico where he has discovered religion, sending one postcard to Eugene and not heard of again.

But, that is not this story. This is a story about bank robbers in 1935, the era of that Americans will remember and moviegoers will know as the era of Bonnie and Clyde. In fact, this story becomes a variation on Bonnie and Clyde.

This time the Bonnie character is called Alison. And she is played by Margot Robbie. Her reputation has gone before her, robbing banks, shootouts, innocent bystanders killed including a little girl. She is on the run, a \$10,000 bounty on her head, something which activates Eugene's father as well as the local authorities. They are searching for Alison.

In fact, Alison has taken refuge in the outback barn on Eugene's family property. Alison has a plausible explanation of what has happened to her, she can sweet talk Eugene. She is wounded. He is able to remove the bullet from her leg, bandage her, keep quiet about her presence, bring her food, take her for a swim in the local dam. He has never met anyone like Alison before. No surprise that he becomes infatuated. Eugene is prepared to do anything for Alison – and he does.

As we expect, Alison and Eugene will go on the run, pursued by his father, Phoebe sneaking away in the car.

But, key to the characters of Alison and Eugene, there is quite a telling sequence where the couple stay the night in a hotel, Alison going into the shower, the camera not filming her but focusing on Eugene outside the shower as she challenges him, telling him that he has to make personal decisions, take responsibility, whether he will go into the shower or not. The sequence is quite reticent but effective.

While there have been flashbacks to the original bank robbery that Alison was involved in, the revelation that she had partner, a franker showing of the truth, there is a visual reminder at the end of what the bank robberies were really like, whatever the intentions of the robbers.

In many ways, this is a modest film, a small focus on the Depression and ordinary people who became outlaws.

(Interesting that two of the central roles are played by Australians, Margot Robbie and Travis Fimmell)

END OF THE CENTURY/ FIN DE SIGLO

Spain, 2019, 84 minutes, Colour.
Juan Barberini, Ramon Pujol, Mia Maestro.
Directed by Lucio Castro.

The end of the century, months in 1999, is one of the settings of the action (plus contemplation) of this drama about two men and their relationship. In fact, this film seems to be about what was, what is, and what might have been.

The setting is Barcelona, a poet from New York, Ocho (Juan Barberini), visiting and after 20 years. The first long minutes of this short feature, have him arriving, settling into an Airbnb, wandering the city, gazing, photographing, going to the beach, reading, having a swim. While this is a rather poetic introductory portrait of Ocho, a number of viewers, becoming more impatient, have left the cinema at this stage. But, they have missed the relationship, the portrait of the two men, Ocho and his imagination.

The question arises, how much of this narrative is real and how much is in Ocho's imagination. The encounter with the man at the beach, Javi (Ramon Pujol), the sexual encounter in his room, discussions, each man explaining what has happened to him during the last 20 years, leads to real or imaginative flashbacks as to their meeting 20 years earlier, their drinking, touring the city, going to art galleries. Have they really known each other before?

Then there is a dramatisation of their staying together over the 20 years, Ocho as a teacher, Javi and his media work, the relationship with the little daughter. Images of a rather idyllic life.

This is a film with a very strong gay sensibility, in its portrait of the men, their sensitivities, their lives.

THE FURNACE

Australia, 2020, 116 minutes, Colour.
Ahmad Malek, David Wenham, Baykali Ganambarr, Jay Ryan, Samson Coulter, Erik Thomson, Mansoor Noor, Trevor Jamieson.
Directed by Roderick Mac Kay.

As we watch The Furnace, many of us in the audience will realise that we are in a world, in a story of Australian history, with which we are not particularly familiar. Which means that the film makes a considerable contribution to the widening of our horizons and our awareness of Australian history.

The time is 1897. The place is Western Australia – and beyond Kalgoorlie. There are gold mines, especially at Mount Magnet. There are avid miners. There is the local constabulary, ready on horseback, to maintain order and to right wrongs. Mines are robbed. Thieves travel across the desert to a remote homestead, home to Chinese who have a special furnace to melt the gold and reshape it without the Royal seal.

There are wandering aborigines, stories told about massacres, about pursuits, about tribes to disappearing into the vast land.

But, it is also the world of the cameleers, men who have come from Afghanistan, India, Muslims, Sikhs, who transport the loads through the desert with that strangest of imports, the camel. In fact, the central character of this story is a young Afghan, Hanif (played by an Egyptian actor, Ahmad Malek), far away from home, conscious of his father's expectations of him, working with fellow cameleers, but but in many ways, lonely, thinking about his returning home. He does have regular work. He does have a working companion. And he has good friend, Woorak (Baykali Ganambarr who made such an impression in *The Nightingale*), a young aboriginal – who bonds with him even more strongly when they are confronted by two white men wanting water, who threaten them, fire, and the shooter is killed by a spear.

That is the setting. However, the main part of the story is a journey, Hanif encountering a white man, Mal, who is part of the gang who have stolen gold from Mount Magnet. Mal is played by David Wenham, always a striking screen presence, very much so here, sometimes laid-back and cautious, other times ambitious to get the gold to the Chinese furnace, sometimes haunted by death, who appears in his imaginings. His companions on the robbery have all been killed. Hanif agrees to go with him and their journey is quite a trek. A wary friendship grows up between the two, Mal having been wounded and needing care, Hanif mystified but wondering if the gold will help him return home.

And, in the meantime, the constabulary is out, and demanding Sgt in charge (Jay Ryan), his son one of the troopers. Eventually they track down the thieves and arrive at the Chinese house and furnace.

The action does not go as might have been expected, making demands on Mal, making demands on Hanif, who wonders where his future will lie, here in Australia, in the towns, with the other cameleers, or, perhaps, returning to Woorak and the aboriginal tribe.

This is a first-time feature written and directed by Roderick Mac Kay. The settings and scenery are particularly distinctive, often beautiful, often treacherous. There are reminders of stories from the American West. However, the film is distinctively Australian, in characters, language, issues.

THE HIGH NOTE

US, 2020, 113 minutes, Colour.

Dakota Johnson, Tracee Ellis Ross, Kelvin Harrison Jr, Bill Pullman, Zoe Chao, Ice Cube, June Diane Raphael, Eddie Izzard.

Directed by Nisha Ganatra.

This is a drama about the American music industry. It is not the rock 'n' roll industry, nor the hard rock industry, but, rather, the popular ballad singers who have been popular over the decades even as their style has changed.

Response to the drama may depend on which character the audience identifies with. There are two and, while their lives were intertwined, they belonged to two different generations.

The younger is Maggie, played by Dakota Johnson. She is personal assistant to a celebrated singer, working for three years, at continued beck and call, at all hours, matters trivial or serious. But, she has a DJ father who loves music and she herself has ambitions to be a producer.

The older is Grace Davis, a veteran singer in her 40s, extraordinarily popular over the decades, recording, touring and performing. She has an assured manner but questions have to be raised as to what she is to do in this next phase of her life. Maggie is her assistant.

The audiences who identify with Grace, will be interested in career issues, age and change, the popularity of the star and her response to her public, the pressures from her producers, her celebrity and its consequent isolation from the real world and relationships. Her long-time producer, Jack (Ice Cube) wants her to become a resident artist in Las Vegas, thus ensuring her a long-term future. Maggie, whom Jack does not appreciate, is certainly against the Las Vegas option, wanting Grace to venture out into new material, new recording.

Grace is actually quite an imperious and dominating figure, drawing attention, not only from the fans who flock to her but from us in the audience. She is played powerfully, with a strong singing voice, by Tracee Ellis Ross (who, for interest sake, is the daughter of Diana Ross).

In the meantime, those following Maggie's story, see her attracted by a singing artist, David (Kelvin Harrison Jr) who is content to sing in stores and play in small bands. Maggie decides she wants to produce his album, persuading him, somewhat reluctantly on his part, to go to recording studios. They also fall in love. When she does get a situation where she can promote him, it falls through, Maggie resigning, Grace unimpressed.

We know that there is going to be happy resolution but it takes its time, Maggie going back to stay with her father (Bill Pullman), David wanting nothing to do with her, Grace eventually coming to make peace (though not apologising).

And then comes one of the greatest coincidences in contemporary films! No spoilers here, but it helps the final happy resolution to come about more easily than we might have anticipated.

Quite a number of striking songs, two storylines entwined, for American music lovers and those interested in a great deal of detail about how the industry works and its effect on its stars.

HOW TO BE A GOOD WIFE/ LA BONNE EPOUSE

France, 2020, 109 minutes, Colour.

Juliet Binoche, Yolande Moreau, Noemie Lvovsky, Eduard Baer, François Berleand.

Directed by Martin Provost.

It isn't always easy to be on the wavelength of the sense of humour of a particular culture. There is something about French culture and humour that is different from the rest of the world. And this may be the case with this ironically titled comedy-drama about what it was like to be a good wife in the past.

Actually, the past is not so long ago, just over 50 years for this scenario. The setting is a

country town in the mountains of Alsace, remote from the revolutionary movements that were taking place, for instance, with the students at the Sorbonne in Paris, threatening the government of war hero, General Charles de Gaulle. The particular setting is a country town with a school for young ladies, 15 girls in their mid-teens, boarding in a dormitory, going to classes to learn the pillars of being a good wife, which are a recipe for being subservient to husband, overlooking all his weaknesses, being forgiving, totally at his disposal. They have classes on etiquette, on the precision of ironing husband's shirts, and the practicalities of home and domestic life.

Younger audiences may be shocked at this portrait (heightened, we hope) which seems so alien and antiquated, at least to contemporary western ways. But, of course, that is the point.

There are three members of staff for the school. Juliette Binoche portrays Paulette, whose husband, Robert, founded the school (and who supervises but with an ogling eye). Paulette is very prim, proper, believes in what she is teaching. Then there is the husband's sister, Gilberte (Yolande Moreau), getting older, fussy, awkward. And, there is a strange nun (no explanation of where she comes from or her religious order), Marie-Therese (Noemie Lvovsky), who was in the resistance during the war and has absorbed that kind of discipline. Prim but oddball goings-on.

Of course, there are the usual problems, especially from the 60s, sexual awakening, sexual orientation, permissiveness and the pill...

However, this is a film, of course, about Housewife Liberation. Paulette, on the death of her husband, discovers a new way of life with the banker whom she knew decades earlier. Life is not as prim as she believed. Then the school wins the competition (with a parody television show about the school and its success) and it is off to Paris as a prize.

But, the busload of girls and teachers is on its way to a Paris where the students are in revolt. Roadblocks and police. But this leads to a musical number and some odd choreography where Paulette leads the girls along the road to Paris, proclaiming their liberation.

While we agree in principle, the story and treatment is a matter of taste!

AU NOM DE LA TERRE/IN THE NAME OF THE LAND

France, 2019, 103 minutes, Colour.

Guillaume Canet, Veerle Baetens, Anthony Bajon, Rufus, Samir Guesmi, Yona Kerven.

Directed by Edouard Bergeon.

A solemn title, sounding like a legal document. And, in a sense this moving drama does offer a legal challenge to the state, the situation of farmers and those who work the land, who work in the name of the land – and are destroyed by it.

This is a very personal film from documentary-maker, Edouard Bergeon. It is his memoir about his own father and his own life as his father's son. At the end, the gravestone for the central character, Pierre Jarjeau, transforms into the actual headstone of the director's father. And, consolidating this and our response to the story and the characters, some video glimpses of his actual father.

The action opens in 1979, an enthusiastic opening when the young Pierre (Guillaume Canet who has charmed audiences with some devil-may-care performances, now very serious as the farmer working his land and then overwhelmed by it) returns from a stint in the American West, in Wyoming, ready to take over his father's farm. He is also about to get married to Claire (Belgian actress, Veerle Baetens excellently supportive). His father, played by character actor, Rufus, is a stern man, not readily conceding his property to his son. Financial deals are done, the father and his wife moving into a small house, leaving the property to Pierre and his wife.

In some ways this presents something of an idyll of French farming, zest and enthusiasm, full of hope.

Then there is a transition to the 1996. The farm is in full swing, a great deal of machinery, crops, hay bales, and a building devoted to the cultivation of goat kids. But, the situation is precarious, financially. Where are many scenes of actual work on the farm, in the vein of the director's documentary skills and detail, there is a growing sense of uneasiness. Pierre and Claire have been married for 17 years, Pierre is getting older, balding. The couple have a son, Tom, and a daughter cool, Emma. There is also a handyman who helps on the farm.

The film does show a number of domestic scenes, the family devoted to each other, Christmas gifts, especially a power bike for Tom who is a keen rider. Meals, happiness in each other's presence. And this, despite the continued criticism of Pierre's father who turns up now and again to help with the work but always has something negative to say.

Pierre, always an enthusiast despite financial difficulties which Claire, as a professional accountant, has to keep track of. Visits to the bank, requests for loans, restructuring of plans, and the setting up of a new building to house thousands of chickens in season to be followed by the goats.

Life was not meant to be easy, nor is it on the farm, potential for the new equipment to malfunction, the danger of fire, the continued heavy demands with the chickens, the goats, the ploughing and harvesting of the fields. It takes its toll.

The latter part of the film is quite grim, Pierre and some physical collapse, some mental collapse, all in the name of the land and his determination to keep working, that work is the only solution.

Sadly, this is not the only solution in a final quote at the end of the film indicates that every two days a French farmer commit suicide.

While the action takes place in the latter part of the 20th century, and is portrayed vividly on screen, the farm life, the family life, the town life, given the first two decades of the 21st century, there is still a great challenge for agricultural life in France and appreciation of its toll on those who work there.

JINGLE JANGLE: A CHRISTMAS STORY

US, 2020, 122 minutes, Colour.

Forest Whitaker, Keegan-Michael Key, Hugh Bonneville, Anika Nonni Rose, Madalen Mills, Phylicia Rashad, Ricky Martin, Lisa Davina Philip, Justin Cornwall, Sharon Rose, Kieron L. Dyer.
Directed by David E. Talbert.

This is an unusual Christmas story, written and directed by Broadway producer and film director, David E. Talbert. It is the story of an equivalent Santa Claus, Jeronicus Jangle, who lives in a make-believe town, filmed in England, American in its African- American characters, but English and atmosphere.

Forest Whitaker plays an inventor, a wiz at maths, equations which visualise on screen. He makes gifts, and is commissioned especially by a wealthy landowner, played by Hugh Bonneville. His main invention is special robot, Buddy 3000. However, his assistant, Gustafson, steals the robot and goes off on his, very successful.

Jeronicus Jangle falls on hard times, his shop turning into a pawn shop, his wife dead, his little daughter now grown-up advised by him to go far away. In the meantime, Gustafson, Keegan- Michael Key, is prosperous and comes to town for a demonstration of Buddy 3000.

But, salvation comes in the form of Journey, Jeronicus' granddaughter (Madalen Mills in a vigorous song and dance alter performance). She befriends the rather nerdy young boy who helps her.

This leads to a confrontation, Gustafson's failure, the children trying to rescue Buddy, Jeronicus and Journey trying to work out equations to get them out of a giant fan blocking a tunnel where they find themselves.

Actually, the film was a musical comedy, with quite a light lot of musical numbers, vigorous choreography, a lot of gymnastics – reminiscent of the songs and dances in The Greatest Showman.

In some ways, there is so much going on, it is like an over-rich Christmas cake. On the other hand, there are quite a lot of things to entertain the younger audiences.

KAJILLIONAIRE

US, 2020, 104 minutes, Colour.
Evan Rachel Wood, Richard Jenkins, Debra Winger, Gina Rodriguez.
Directed by Miranda July.

Kajillionaire is not your everyday word, not your everyday amount of money. Most of us might be well satisfied with a billion or so!

This is a school story of scam artists. Actually, this family is not so much artist as opportunist. They have been at this for over a quarter of a century – very little to show for it except an addiction to continuing on with scams, no matter what.

It is the father of the family, Robert (the always reliable Richard Jenkins) who actually uses the word. However, this family is way below kajillionaire status, in fact, way below millions.

The mother is a hard case, Theresa (an unrecognisable Debra Winger – and a reminder that *An Officer and a Gentleman* is almost 40 years Old Dolio). But, the centre of attention for the film is their daughter who is burdened with the name Old Dolio. Old Dolio later explains how she acquired this name – a scam that went wrong, an old man, Old Dolio, who is dying and seemed to about to leave his money to the family. But didn't. Which means then that the daughter's name denotes a negative experience. Evan Rachel Wood gives a striking performance.

And negative experiences are what she has experienced throughout her whole life, now aged 26. We first see the family at a bus stop, outside a post office, when Old Dolio suddenly does some acrobatics, enters the post office, has a key, opens a box but moves her arm around to adjacent boxes seeking what she might steal. As it turns out, not very satisfactory. Then Old Dolio is told to go to get a refund on a ticket for a massage. This episode reveals how sensitive Old Dolio is, unwilling to have a massage, dreading the masseuse touching her.

And this is life for the family, bedding down in an adjacent area to a bubbles' factory, scooping up the overflow bubbles each evening before they settle down. And they owe \$1500 to the landlord, always stooping as they pass the open fence where he could be observing them. Old Dolio comes up with a scam, their flying to New York (with Robert so terrified of turbulence that he chatters, uncontrolled, to neighbours, especially Puerto Rico and woman, Melanie (Gina Rodriguez) to whom he explains everything. The scam is for the parents to take away all the luggage, Old Dolio to report the loss of luggage the company – only to find that it might take six weeks for the cheque to come through (in fact comes through fairly quickly).

So far, so drab life, so far some ironic comic touches. But it is Melanie who changes everything, especially when the mother speaks to her affectionately, something she has never done with Old Dolio. Which leads to something of a breaking point for Old Dolio, always seen in formless drab clothes, somewhat robotic in her action and speech. But she realises that her parents have done nothing for her – reinforced when she goes in place of another mother, to a parent training session and sees a baby calling on its mother's chest and breast. It stirs her.

Actually, some redemption is possible for Old Dolio, especially with Melanie taking up her cause, making a list of what has been absent in Old Dolio's life, taking her home, speaking affectionately, making pancakes.

In fact, there seems to be a reconciliation. The parents buy a range of birthday presents for their daughter, up to 18th birthday. They invite her to a meal in a top restaurant. They see her home. But, you might guess what they are up to.

There is some kind of resolution for Old Dolio. Melanie does facilitate some change of awareness – with Old Dolio realising that she has no affection for anyone and discovers affection for Melanie. And that is it – we might have to imagine the sequel.

The screenplay was written and directed by Miranda July (short story writer, performance artist, her films *Me and You* and *Everyone We Know, The Future*). Idiosyncratic to say the least.

MANK

US, 2020, 131 minutes, Black-and-white.

Gary Oldman, Amanda Seyfried, Lily Collins, Tom Pelphrey, Arliss Howard, Tuppence Middleton, Monica Gossman, Joseph Cross, Sam Troughton, Toby Leonard Moore, Tom Burke, Charles Dance, Ferdinand Kingsley, Jamie McShane?

Directed by David Fincher.

The title, Mank, will not make an immediate impression on the potential audience. Which means that a review needs some kind of preliminaries.

Probably the first thing that should be said is that it is very much a specialist film. It presupposes its specialisation rather than explaining it to an unfamiliar audience.

For an audience very familiar with Orson Welles' classic, Citizen Kane, it is a must. It presupposes that audiences know Orson Welles, making this film classic in his early to mid-20s, his collaboration (?) with the writer, Herman Mankiewicz, the Mank of the title. It also presupposes that audiences know something about media empire baron of the first half of the 20th century, William Randolph Hearst. And that he is the target of Citizen Kane.

And the film also presupposes that audiences are interested in the Hollywood of the 1930s, the studio heads and their ruthless administration, their reliance on talented producers, the list of prominent writers who contributed to the films, rivalries and disappointments, the casts. And, a section of the film also highlights political antipathies in California, 1934, after Franklin D Roosevelt became President and Hollywood opposition to the New Deal.

Of course, it may be worth the risk for somebody unfamiliar to venture into Mank, find it interesting and be prepared to do some follow-up study.

Having said this, this reviewer enjoyed Mank very much.

It is filmed in black and white, reminiscent of the visual styles of Citizen Kane, has something of a circular structure, action in the present, flashbacks to the past (all indicated on screen as they are on a screenplay page), a mosaic building up the portrait of Mank, his process of writing the screenplay for Citizen Kane, the pressures, his alcoholism, and an increasing conflict with Orson Welles. (Over the decades there has been an attempt to rehabilitate Mank and play down Orson Welles' contribution – however, Mank was well aware, and expresses it in the film, that the writer contributes a screenplay which is then worked on by producer and director; he would not have been expecting his turned-in screenplay to be the actual finished product.)

Gary Oldman plays Mank most persuasively. The film fills in his past as a journalist, his role in contributing to movies, his acquaintance with Hearst (played by Charles Dancye), his friendship with Hearst's wife, actress Marion Davies (played by Amanda Seyfried), his antipathy towards Louis B Mayer (Arliss Howard), a strained relationship with his wife (Tuppence Middleton), a growing reliance on his secretary (Lily Collins), pressure from the celebrated producer, John Housman (Sam Troughton), a good friendship with his younger brother (and much more successful writer and director from the 30s to the 60s), Joe Mankiewicz (Tom Pelphrey).

As indicated, this is a top cast. While Orson Welles appears in only a few sequences, he is well embodied by Tom Burke (who would be ideal for a full-length film on Welles). It is rather singular that key characters in this very American story are played by British actors: Oldman,, Burke, Troughton, Collins, Middleton.

While a lot of the action takes place in the studios, significant sequences take place in Hearst's elaborate mansion, San Simeone, dinners and guests, dramatic talk, political conversation – at which, ultimately, Mank disgraces himself and is ousted.

So, this is a recreation of Hollywood history, the Hollywood personalities in the studios of the 30s, the pre-production of *Citizen Kane*, a portrait of Mank, talented but alcoholic with something of a death-wish, with personal drama. Ultimately, after his clash with Welles, *Citizen Kane* received many Oscar nominations, winning for Best Screenplay, Mank's scene at the end of the film shows him accepting his award – without Orson Welles.

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

US, 2020, 94 minutes, Colour.

Viola Davis, Chadwick Boseman, Colman Domingo, Glynn Turman, Michael Potts, Jeremy Shamos, Jonny Coyne, Taylour Paige, Dusan Brown.

Directed by George C Wolfe.

Before his death in 2005, African- American playwright, August Wilson, had written 10 plays covering the history and drama of African- Americans in American society. His drama, *Fences*, was filmed in 2016, featuring an Oscar-winning performance by Viola Davis, who is the star of this film, acting with Denzel Washington who is the producer of *Ma Rainey* and has ambitions to film all of August Wilson's plays.

The setting is 1927. The central character is Ma Rainey, singer of the blues in the South for 30 years, touring the clubs, popular amongst her peers, singing with her band. The opening sequences create this atmosphere, Ma Rainey, heavily made up, perspiration, bulky, but singing her heart out and responding to the appreciative crowds. She is accompanied by her band – although one of them, a young man, Levee, does his own riffs, spotlight on him, which Ma commands immediately off him. He is played by Chadwick Boseman in his last film before his untimely death, age 43, of cancer.

(Boseman made an impression in many films but portrayed three significant Americans, lawyer Marshall Thurgood in *Marshall*, baseball Jackie Robinson in *42*, singer James Brown in *Get On Up*. And, of course, he is best known as Black Panther.)

The screenplay keeps the structure of the play after these club openings, confining the action to a day in Chicago, the band arriving at The Rhythm record Studio, settling in, waiting for Ma who eventually turns up, imperious and demanding, especially after a small car accident in the street which her producer solves by paying off the police.

The screenplay relies heavily on the dialogue – while the subject is music, the treatment is very much in words.

If one were to speculate on the meaning of the phrase “brooking no opposition”, Ma Rainey

exemplifies it par excellence. Her wish, her whim, her command, and that is definitely that. She does some recordings, eventually, making considerable fuss about her nephew introducing one of the songs despite his stammer and repeated attempts. A young girl, her friend, pretty but vapid, accompanies her.

However, the film is also about the members of the band, especially Levee, a young man with a horn, ambitious, writing songs, trying to do deals with the white agents, vain with buying his yellow shoes, an eye for the girls, especially Ma's young friend. The other members of the band have been around for some time, Cutler (Colman Domingo) is the genial leader, wise with his dealings with the men and with Ma. Then there is Toledo (Glynn Turman) and old pianist who has experienced life but likes to read and ruminate about life's meaning. There is also Slow Drag, who tends to keep in the background.

The owner of the record studio is a white man, exploiting the black singer and her band. Her manager is also white, six years successfully managing but living in the stress of obeying her every whim. But, the final drama concerns Levee who has been prominent, pushing himself forward, trying to do a deal with the manager about his songs, being paid off, tense, finally erupting violently.

The final sequence is highly ironic and needs to be seen – what happens to Levee's songs and how the studio manager exploits him as well.

THE MIDNIGHT SKY

US, 2020, 118 minutes, Colour.

George Clooney, Felicity Jones, David Oyelowo, Kyle Chandler, Demian Bichir, Tiffany Boone, Caolinn Spingall.

Directed by George Clooney.

A drama of futuristic science-fiction, a setting of 2049, the information that there has been "an event" which has been apocalyptic, destroying Earth, destroying the population.

But, this is also futuristic science-fiction in space. In recent years, space stories have become very popular with the wide audience, films like Gravity, The Martian, Ad Astra. The Midnight Sky takes its place amongst these films. And, there is a particular connection. George Clooney was one of the stars of Gravity. He is the star here and has directed the film.

However, there is a remnant of life on Earth, an isolated station somewhere in the Arctic. At the opening, we see helicopters taking away the population leaving only the grizzled commander, Augustine, George Clooney. He carries on alone, meagre meals and the empty dining room, kills for his health, sick in his bathroom, nightly transfusions. He has vast equipment, contact with craft in space, but gradually seeing that all of them are out of contact, destroyed, except for one, Aether, but there are difficulties in actual communication. He sees his mission as warning them not to return to the destroyed Earth.

George Clooney, not as young as he used to be, not nearly, is bearded and grey, shuffling around the station, an old codger on what seems to be his last legs. The question arises, will he be able to sustain an almost 2 hour running time. Part of the solution is that he finds a little girl, Iris, who has been left behind (Caolinn Spingall). She is very young. She doesn't speak.

She shadows him and there is a growing bond between them, a grandfatherly bond. We see the routines of the station. At one stage, the to go out on an expedition, surveying the countryside covered in ice, packs of fierce animals, staying in a tent, finding an old shed but its flooding during the night, perils of the ice breaking, the shed sinking, having to trek back to the centre.

But, intercut with all of this is the story of Aether and its crew. The screenplay uses the device of showing an astronaut, Sully, Felicity Jones, on a beautiful sunny, mountainous, fertile moon of Jupiter, fearing that she has been left behind but is only a nightmare. She shares the work of flying the craft back to Earth with the Captain, Adewole, David Oyelowo, and a young astronaut, Maya (Tiffany Boone), and two veterans played by Kyle Chandler and Demian Bichir. We follow their story, interrupted by rather long episodes back in the Arctic, as they fly their machine, are caught in space ice floes and collisions at enormous speeds, going out to repair their craft and the radar, finally getting through to the Arctic and discovering the reality on Earth and what they are to do in terms of landing or returning to the Jupiter moon.

For those who enjoy films in space, there is a lot to interest as well as dialogue about life and death, life and meaning to ponder on. For those who are not so attracted to space stories, this particular version will seem rather ponderous.

A NIGHT AT THE LOUVRE: LEONARDO DA VINCI

France, 2020, 90 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Pierre- Hubert Martin.

Some of us have had the privilege of visiting the Louvre in Paris. And most people know it is the home of da Vinci's Mona Lisa. So, an invitation to spend a night at the Louvre is most welcome.

However, a word of caution is needed. Not exactly caution, but a clarification. This is not, as some might expect, a tour of the Louvre, moving from gallery to gallery, moving from painting to painting, absorbing the atmosphere of this enormous Art Museum.

Rather, this film is something of a Master Class. We are invited not only to look but also to listen, to the information provided by the guides, listening to a lesson, and then seeing how it is being illustrated. This is a Masterclass on the life, work and career, achievement of Leonardo da Vinci. A great number of sketches, artworks, diaries and notes have been gathered for building up this portrait of the artist.

Which means then that we learn the progress of da Vinci's life, born in Florence, sent as an apprentice to an art school, artist, Andrea del Verrocchio as mentor, his ability with sketching, his introduction to painting, touches of sculpture. But we soon appreciate that da Vinci was not just an artist. He was also a scientist and mathematician. He was intrigued by mathematics. He was intrigued by geometry. His intellectual curiosity was not just in observation but in invention.

Light, shade, relief, energy and glow, tangible physical space, chiaroscuro, optics.

However, our guides insist that, for da Vinci, painting was the most important of arts and activities. It combined all his interests – and the value of this Master Class is that these theories are applied to several of da Vinci's paintings, paintings of the Madonna to The Last Supper in the Dominican refectory in Milan.

This is also the kind of Master Class where the audience is tempted to take notes, reminders of the artist's interests, his observations, his achievements. At one stage, the lecturers tell us that da Vinci wanted to "depict the imperceptible". Eventually, moving from the special space devoted to the collection of items for the da Vinci exhibition, the guides and the camera, and we, travel up the staircases, through the galleries to see Mona Lisa enthroned. She is the theme of the last 15 minutes of the film, serving as a way of summarising the insights into the artist and his method and work, a close examination of the painting, its history, attempts at preservation, cleaning, but also suggestions on how he does depict the imperceptible.

Another quotation from our guides: for da Vinci "painting is a divine science that re-creates the world".

NOMADLAND

US, 2020, 108 minutes, Colour.

Frances Mc Dormand, David Strathairn, Linda May, Swanky, Bob Wells, Derek Enders.
Directed by Chloe Zhao.

For an American audience, this is an opportunity to look at the people of the United States, the part-time workers who wander the land in their vans, as well as a look in detail at the very land itself. And, for non-American audiences, it is the same but it is also quite an eye-opener as it treks through the American nomadland in the various seasons of the year.

It is very surprising to find that the film has been directed by Chloe Zao, born in Beijing. She has clearly absorbed the American experience, has written a screenplay, adapting it from a book by Jessica Bruder, has produced the film, directed it and, making it very effective in its impact on the audience, edited the film. It is a tribute to her intelligence and empathy as well as to her cinematic skills and storytelling.

She is also aided immeasurably by the presence of Frances Mc Dormand (who took on the project and acts as one of the producers). Frances Mc Dormand has a distinctive screen presence and has had it for over 30 years – with two Oscars, *Fargo* and *Three Billboards Outside Epping, Missouri*, and many awards and nominations to her credit). As she has grown older, not concerned in the least about how she appears, she has embodied women who have had hard experiences and survived. And that is certainly the case with her character here, Fern, a widow who has seen her husband die of cancer, has lived in the town of Empire, Nevada, which in 2011 has had its gypsum factory fail, the town collapse and be deserted.

She has gone on the road, in her van, which she has made comfortable in its interiors so that she can spend her life there. She has a home, she says, though not a house! She joins a vast community of nomads who have a calendar where they can find part-time work at the various seasons of the year. We first see Fern at work in the huge packaging plant run by Amazon. Later she will work on the land, at an odd theme park with a huge dinosaur statue, in diners,

cooking and washing up. But it is her choice, and she relishes this way of life, its being reinforced by a visit to her sister and family, to a short stay at the home of a friend whose family welcomes her.

By and large, the locations are in the American Midwest and south-west, scenes of the barren Dakotas, the derelict town in Nevada, nomad communities in Arizona – with an excursion to some mountains and to the coast. It is a distinctive American tour.

We are with Fern all the way – and, the director focuses more than frequently on Frances McDormand's face, the range of expressions, the intensity, the peace, the actress almost giving a performance with her face alone.

But, most significant, there are the nomads themselves. In a way, the screenplay is a series of vignettes, the range of people that Fern encounters at work, on the road, at garage sales, bartering, especially with her love of rocks, and a special friend, David, played by David Strathairn. The audience will surely be impressed by Fern's conversations with several of the nomads – in a sense they are showstoppers.

There is Linda May who works at the factory, getting older, chatty, making friends with Fern, making the sharing of the nomads so credible. There is Bob Wells who has started a community in Arizona where all the nomads can come, stay, share, tell their stories, be listened to and heard by Bob. There is young Derek who asks Fern for a cigarette, later encounters him on the road, tells Fern his story, wanting to communicate with his girlfriend and Fern reciting Shakespeare, "Can I compare thee to summer's day..." (Fern had been a part-time teacher).

But, most memorable, is Swanky, 75, diagnosed with terminal cancer, talking frankly and amiably with Fern, reminiscing about the travelling adventures of her past, of the vast cliff with swallow nests and the swarms of swallows, going on her way for more adventures until she dies, sending Fern a video of the cliff and the swallows. And Bob Wells leading a memorial celebration of Swanky as her friends all put a stone on a cairn in her honour.

And the discovery that Linda May, Bob Wells, Derek, Swanky are all nomads themselves and that this is the only screen appearance.

At the time of writing, the Oscars have not been nominated. Surely Nomadland will be nominated in several categories – and, it would be an appropriate ending for 2020 and US turmoil for Nomadland to win Best Picture, an important and profound portrait.

ONLY THE ANIMALS/SEULS LES BETES

France, 2019, 117 minutes, Colour.

Denis Menochet, Laue Calamy, Damien Bonnard, Nadia Tereszkiewicz, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi, Guy Roger 'Bibisse' N' Drin.

Directed by Dominik Moll.

Quite an enigmatic title! Applying to the characters? Applying to human behaviour?

Whatever the meaning of the title, this is a murder mystery thriller with more than one twist.

In fact, while the main settings are in France, there is a prologue set in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. A young man carrying a goat on his shoulders, going along a corridor, requesting to see a character called Papa Sanou. And then, suddenly, we are in France for more than an hour's running time – and forgetting all about Ivory Coast.

The film is structured in three sections, each named after a woman. The first is Alice, the wife of a farmer, Michel, working in insurance, unfaithful to her husband, especially with a neighbour, Joseph, who suffers mental illness problems. So far, so ordinary. However, there is news of the disappearance of a woman and a fear that she is murdered. Each of the characters introduced in this section have some connection to the woman, some serious, some tenuous.

And then there is quite a change of attention. The second section is Marion. She is a young woman who works in a diner and is attracted to one of the customers, a mixture of charm and seduction, and they begin an intense sexual relationship. In fact, the older woman is Evelyne, who, we know, will be murdered. And so the puzzle increases. What has Marion to do with Evelyne's death? Direct? Indirect?

For the third section, Armandine, we are suddenly back in Ivory Coast, remembering the opening, wondering how on earth this is all connected with Evelyne, her death, and the other characters we have met.

Actually, this part of the plot is quite intriguing, an introduction to African scamming by computer, setting up false accounts, setting up false identities, entangling unwitting middle-aged men, setting up infatuations and – of course, getting as much money out of them as they can. The central character here is Armand, who has envied celebrities who have made money with the help of Papa Sanou, believing that there is some kind of supernatural power behind their activity.

The bad temptation for a reviewer stage is to indulge in some spoilers – but, it is best to advise audiences to go and see the film, be surprised at the connections and twists, and the discovery of the unexpected murderer.

This reviewer, however, has some difficulties with the last 10 minutes of the film – it is probably too much. It might have ended 10 minutes earlier with a freeze frame, enigmatic, leaving the audience to puzzle over what has happened and what will happen. However, the option is made, to go for full explanations, which is satisfying for those who really want to know what does happen. More than might have been expected! And, to cap it all off, with the various ins and outs, the final two minutes offer another unanticipated twist to the plot!

ONWARD

US, 2020, 105 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Tom Holland, Chris Pratt, Julia Louis Dreyfus, Octavia Spencer, Mel Rodriguez, Tracy Ullman, John Ratzenberg.

Directed by Dan Scanlon.

What was that we just saw? Flying unicorns and a magic world? A contemporary high school

– but with elves?

Pixar Studios once again offer us an inspirational fable, something they are good at. The opening reminds us that, once upon a time, there was magic and simplicity but that, over the centuries, the human race has become at the beck and call of modernising, the increasing prevalence of mod cons, human dependence on them. Even if, the continue to be elves.

This is the story of two brothers. One of them, Ian, is about to turn 16, what one might call a complete nerd. He is genially voiced by Tom Holland. Things are not always easy at home. Father has died and Ian always regrets not having got to know him. Meanwhile, his mother does her martial arts exercises to continue being an Elvish warrior, voiced by Julia Louis Dreyfus. But there is continued trouble at home, of the awkward, mess-making kind, with Ian's older brother, Barley, awkward but sometimes ingenious, and something of a whiz at magic spells. He is voiced, comically, by Chris Pratt.

We see Ian at school, making his list of moves to be self-assertive, messing up the driving test on the highway, almost communicating with fellow students – but Barley turns up in his wreck of a car, Guinevere. But, all is not lost. Their father has left a gift for Ian 16th birthday, a giant magic wand – and what better to do than to cast a spell to revive him? Actually, the spell gets interrupted and only half of their father turns up, the bottom half, awkwardly trying to balance, giddy, decked with an artificial top, but still giddy.

So, the story begins a quest, to find a jewel out in the mountains that could be placed on the wand in order to complete the spell. Various comic adventures as they go on their journey in Guinevere. They have tried to get the help of the Manticore (Octavia Spencer) who eventually works with their mother.

The climax is not quite what we expected. In the end, they find the beginning, back at the high school who turns into a Dragon. So, the frantic desperation of Barley as he tries to complete the spell for their father's return, in watching, mother and Manticore doing their warrior thing with the Dragon!

So, we are left with a nice feeling, Ian receiving an embrace from his father, he and Barley reconciled, and Ian telling the tale to young students at school.

So, onward and upward!

THE PROM

US, 2020, 130 minutes, Colour.

Meryl Streep, James Gordon, Nicole Kidman, Kerry Washington, Keegan- Michael Key, Andrew Rannells, Ariana De Bose, Jo Ellen Pellman, Tracy Ullman, Kevin Chamberlin, Mary Kay Place, Logan Riley.
Directed by Ryan Murphy.

The Prom is an exuberantly lively show. Plenty of song and dance. Plenty of comedy. And plenty of social issues. It is based on a Broadway musical.

It is the theme of The Prom that catches audience attention. It is sexual orientation, issues of

equality, tolerance moving to respect. The central issue is that at a school in a small Indiana town, preparations for the Prom are in process but one of the students wants to attend with her girlfriend as partner. The principal of the school has given the go-ahead. However, the President of the PTA and some of the other mothers are in high dudgeon (highest dudgeon) in disapproval, demanding that the prom not go on.

The girl at the centre, Emma, is played by Jo Ellen Pellman, a vivacious screen presence, strong-minded, and a talent for both singing and dancing. She has been kicked out of her home by her parents and lives with her sympathetic grandmother, Mary Kay Place. The principal of the school, Tom (Keegan-Michael Key) is sympathetic. Kerry Washington plays the outspoken mother, Mrs Greene, unaware that it is her daughter, Alyssa (Ariana de Bose) who is the object of Emma's affection.

The action switches to Broadway, the opening night of a play, Eleanor, about President Roosevelt and his wife. The stars on the red carpet are in full swing, preening, avid for publicity, egos in action, narcissistic self-awareness. And this is enhanced because the stars are played by Meryl Streep, Dede, the musical comedy star for decades, and James Corden, Barry, also ambitious.

After the small town conflict, the drama will be far more spectacular. The stars make demands on a harassed agent, Kevin Chamberlin, available to their every whim. The show goes on. The entourage gathers to read the reviews – disaster. The inconsolable duo meet with a chorus girl who has been stuck in the chorus for decades, Angie, Nicole Kidman. And there is the friendly barman, successful on television, hoping for his Broadway breakthrough, Trent, (Andrew Rannells). What can they do for rehabilitation? They look for a worthy cause – and Angie discovers the situation in Indiana.

There have already been songs and dances and this continues throughout the film, attractive songs and lyrics which illustrate character and situation, recitative, enthusiastic, with flashbacks to the showbiz lives, and enthusiastic comedy. It is extraordinary to see Meryl Streep, at 70, still so vigorous, always so different from other performances, singing, dancing, indulging her character's egotism. James Corden provides a balance, gay man, alienated from his family, wanting affection, ambitious for his career. Nicole Kidman gets her singing and dancing and empathy opportunities in the middle of the film.

The group gatecrash the school and PTA meeting, have all kinds of plans to help Emma, prepare for the prom – only for some administrative swindle leaving Emma high and dry. Even more help from the showbiz group. But Emma makes strong moves to help herself.

Interestingly, one of the highlights of the show is a song and dance episode in a shopping mall, involving the students from the school who have been condemnatory of Emma. It is Trent who sings a lively song, Love Thy Neighbour, which could have been at home in any religious revival meeting, emphasising that the main command of the gospel, that Jesus said, above all, Love Thy Neighbour. Of course, this gives the moral point of the story a Christian and religious imperative.

The film has been directed by Ryan Murphy who has had a highlight career, especially with television series, Glee, Pose, Hollywood (and explicit advocacy of sexual orientation understanding).

Not a spoiler, but needless to say, a happy ending for all concerned.

PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN

US, 2020, 113 minutes, Colour.

Carey Mulligan, Bo Burnham, Clancy Brown, Jennifer Coolidge, Laverne Cox, Alison Brie, Adam Brody, Christopher Mintz-Plasse, Connie Britton, Molly Shannon, Max Greenfield, Chris Lowell.

Directed by Emerald Fennell.

The title sounds enthusiastic – even promising. But, we quickly learn that the title is quite ironic. And we have to ask to whom the title refers, Cassie (a surprisingly spirited – yet at times subdued) Carey Mulligan or does it refer to her dead friend and fellow-student, Nina? Or both?

The posters for the film urging everyone to see it, declare that it is a must-see film from 2020, that contributes to the #Me Too campaign. And, it does, but certainly not in the ways that we might have been anticipating.

Cassie was promising when she was young. She was a medical student, as was Nina. However, at Nina's death, she dropped out, living at home with her rather bewildered parents (Clancy Brown and Jennifer Coolidge), mother desperately hoping that you will meet some nice man... She works at a small diner, supported amicably by the owner, Laverne Cox, but rather listless.

Then we discover that she has an alternate life, out on the prowl at nightclubs, various seductive techniques to entice eager men to take her home, initially letting them take advantage of her – and then!!!

So, what makes Cassie tick? She broods on the memory of Nina, Nina's brutal rape by a frat group with other students urging them on, not defending Nina at all. Vengeance makes Cassie tick.

However, her vindictiveness meets something of a challenge when she encounters a student-friend from the past who admires her. He is now a paediatric doctor, Ryan, played by Bo Burnham. He is attracted. He is respectful. He even goes to dinner at home with Cassie's parents. Will this break the cycle?

What is preoccupying Cassie is that one of the students involved in the rape has now returned to the US and is planning to marry. She sets up a lunch date with another former student, Madison (Alison Brie) challenge her about the past and ultimately receiving a video of the vicious occasion.

This ignites the vengeance again – and the rest of the film is the fulfilment of Cassie's plan and vengeful aims. Not exactly as we might have expected, some ugly reminders of the Broom-mentality, complicit in its sexism, thoughtless and ruthless in its exploitation and violence. And, some malicious delight on the part of the audience at the final expose. But, we leave the

cinema pondering on Cassie, the promising young woman, mission accomplished, but at what cost?

The film was written and directed by British actress (Camilla Parker Bowles in *The Crown*), Emerald Fennell who wrote a number of episodes of *Killing Eve*.

THE PERSONAL HISTORY OF DAVID COPPERFIELD

UK, 2019, 118 minutes, Colour.

Dev Patel, Tilda Swinton, Peter Capaldi, Hugh Laurie, Aneurin Barnard, Ben Whishaw, Benedict Wong, Bronagh Gallagher, Daisy May Cooper, Jairaj Visani, Boyd, Gwendolyn Christie, Rosalind Eleazer, Morfydd Clark, Nikki Amuka- Bird.

Directed by Armando Iannucci.

Charles Dickens was a man of the theatre, loved performances. He was also a man of media, not only publishing his books but serializing them, happy to have avid readers looking forward to the next episodes... Which would mean that he probably has enjoyed many of the stage versions, film versions, television versions, miniseries of his popular and classic books. Which also means that, at least in principle, he would enjoy this *Personal History of David Copperfield*. It actually begins in a theatre, David himself coming to the stage and beginning to tell his story.

I can imagine that Dickens would have had long and vigorous discussions with writer-director, Armando Iannucci whose credits range from early Alan Partridge television to his political satire *The Thick of It* and the film, *The Loop*, writing the US comic series, *Veep*, quite a range!). The two would discuss what episodes have been included. What episodes have been omitted. The treatment of particular characters, the different emphases, the highlights of *David Copperfield*'s personal history, the low lights. (And certainly, there are both.).

One of the interesting discussions he might have had with Iannucci is about the casting. Acting is acting – and, in theory, any actor should be able to take on any role. Sometimes this might seem incongruous. Sometimes this might seem anachronistic. (And lately, appropriately and inappropriately, it might be politically incorrect.) But, it is all acting – a female Hamlet, an African Henry VI... And, this is certainly what happens here in this version. Dev Patel (striking in *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Exotic Marigold Hotel*, *Lion*) has an Indian background as do the two little boys who play David. Throughout the film, as with the students at Mrs Steerforth's school, with Mr Wickfield and his daughter, Agnes, a variety of British character actors with a variety of ethnic backgrounds take on the roles.

I think Dickens would have been delighted with the recreation of his 19th century, the upturned houseboat on the beach at Yarmouth, the hardships at the bottle factory of Mr Murdstone, the hovels and houses in the streets where Mr Micawber and his family end up, the strange school where David meets Steerforth and is introduced to the cringing Uriah Heep, the mansion where Betsy Trotwood lives, shooing away the donkeys trespassing on the property, dealing with her eccentric cousin, Mr Dick and his head filled with the troubles from Charles I's head as he ascended the guillotine.

This gives the opportunity to indicate the range of the cast: Peter Capaldi as Micawber, Hugh Laurie as Mr Dick, Tilda Swinton has Betsy Trotwood, Ben Whishaw as Uriah Heep, Aneurin Barnard as Steerforth, Benedict Wong as Mr Wickfield. And there are a whole lot of other wonderful character actors including Daisy May Cooper as Peggotty.

For audiences who are fastidious about the pristine quality of the novels, probably any version is anathema. Those who can easily acknowledge that David Copperfield in every other medium is an interpretation, authentically Dickensian or not, may find this interpretation worthy of consideration.

Here is a visual synopsis of Dickens' novel, often sumptuously presented, most interestingly well acted by an eccentric cast, David Copperfield in 118 minutes.

THE SECRET GARDEN

UK, 2019, 101 minutes, Colour.

Dixie Egerickx, Amir Wilson, Evan Hayhurst, Colin Firth, Julie Walters, Jemma Powell, Maeve Dermody, Isis Davis..

Directed by Marc Munden.

The Secret Garden, based on a very popular novel over the last hundred years, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, has been filmed many times, the cinema, television series. In fact, it was filmed in 1919, five years before the death of the author.

Which means that an adult audience looking at this new version, will probably have a favourite or favourites from the past. This reviewer came early to The Secret Garden, in 1949, with the black and white version starring Margaret O'Brien and Dean Stockwell, the magic being that when Mary opens the door of the garden, the film bursts into technicolour. Never to be forgotten! Other audiences may remember the 1993 version with Maggie Smith.

The difficulty with having a favourite is that a new version, especially one the audience does not quite approve of because it is not like their favourite, is that there is quite some condemnation. And, for this version, this is particularly the case if one looks at the vast number of negative comments on the Internet movie database. Which is a pity. Obviously people have their choices, but it is sad if it excludes others.

The initial action takes place in India. However, this version moves to the time of Partition, the atmosphere of unrest in 1947 India, British children having to return home to England, an austere and post-war England. Mary suffers some severe shocks. She has been brought up to be superior, arrogant in a colonialist kind of way, expecting to have servants to look after her, to dress her... And she is brought to a decaying mansion, presided over by her uncle, Colin Firth in a rather Rochester vein, who is brooding over the death of his wife. The household is presided over by the dressed in black, severe Mrs Medlock, Julie Walters, who brooks no nonsense.

Mary is confined to her own quarters, forbidden to wander the house on pain of being sent away to school. Of course, she does, finding a room where her mother and her twin sister, met when they were in England, a room for mementos, dresses... But, she also discovers her cousin, Colin, a bedridden hypochondriac, also with a touch of the arrogant.

On the brighter and friendlier side, there is a young woman who is deputed to supervise Mary in daily practical matters, Martha (Isis Davis) who has a young brother, Dickon (Amir Wilson) whom Mary encounters poaching in the fields, whom she befriends. He is to help her in her mission, to bring her cousin, Colin, out of his confinement, out into the air – and, especially, to experience the sun, the beauty of the rather vast magic garden on the property.

This is quite a robust version of the story. Mary is always a strong character, but with Dixie Egerickx's performance, she is very strong and vigorous, quite a commanding figure. Dickon is very sympathetic with his involvement. And, Colin begins to mellow.

Obviously, Mary will be found out by Mrs Medlock. But not by her uncle. His brooding builds up to quite some melodrama, his being unwilling to be reminded of his wife and her illness, some flashbacks for him about his wife's death which took place peacefully in the magic garden, flashbacks for Mary and memories of her mother's illness and her not understanding it and feeling hurt.

What better to bring the drama to a conclusion than the uncle setting fire to the mansion, rushing to his son's room to rescue him, being saved by Mary – and happy reconciliation between father and son, the son getting out of his wheelchair, walking to his father.

As has been said, this is a rather strong version of *The Secret Garden*. And, of course, there will be many other versions.

SUPERINTELLIGENCE

US, 2020, 106 minutes, Colour.

Melissa Mc Carthy, James Corden, Bobby Cannavale, Brian Tyree Henry, Sam Richardson, Ben Falcone, Michael Beach, Jean Smart, Rachel Ticotin, Karan Soni, Ken Griffey Jr, voices of: Octavia Spencer, William Daniels.

Directed by Ben Falcone.

It is definitely a risk for a film to have a title which could be considered ironically, critics turning the title back on the film itself. *Downhill* is a prime example of the wrong title, enabling critics to say that was where the film was headed.

This comedy is not a superintelligent film. However, it is slight comedy amusing in its way, an agreeable enough pastime. And, it is a star vehicle for Melissa McCarthy[?]. While she is bubbling in her usual way, she portrays a much more sympathetic character than usual. And, she appears with her husband, Ben Falcone, who also directed the film.

And the Superintelligence? This is a kind of IT apocalyptic comedy!

Melissa Mc Carthy is Carol, skilled, but devoting herself to charitable causes. She has broken with her boyfriend, George, a literature Professor, played pleasantly by Bobby Cannavale. She has a good friend, Dennis (Brian Tyree Henry) who gives her advice to apply for jobs. There is a parody of this kind of interview as she meets to supercilious executives who inconsequentially meet her and get her to sit on an enormous beanbag with bouncing and awkward consequences.

Then, at home, she hears a voice. And the voices are coming through her electrical appliances in the house, all of them. The voice is Superintelligence who seem to have taken control of the IT world, infiltrated systems, including defence systems, and who may be intent on destroying the world. But, before that, Superintelligence wants to learn a bit more about human nature. And its choice is Carol. (And to make it easier for her, Superintelligence takes on the voice and sometimes the appearance of comedian and television host, James Corden to, for Dennis, Octavia Spencer!.)

The comedy is in Carol's interaction with Superintelligence, urging her to go to see George again, some happy times with him – although he is on his way to lecture in Ireland for a year. Should she warn him about the end of the world? To stay with her...

Meantime, world authorities, including the President of the United States (Jean Smart) are meeting to deal with the crisis and to combat Superintelligence.

Is the world going to end with a bang – or a whimper? Or will Carol save the day. Your guess!

A mixture of the genial and the apocalyptic.

LES TRADUCTEURS/ THE TRANSLATORS

France, 2019, 105 minutes, Colour.

Lambert Wilson, Olga Kurylenko, Riccardo Scarmaccio, Sidse Babette Knudson, Eduardo Noriega, Alex Lawther, Ana Maria Sturm, Frederic Chau, Maria Leite, Manolis Mavromatakis, Sarah Girardeau, Patrick Bauchau.

Directed by Regis Roinsard.

The Translators is not exactly a title that would suggest a thriller, let alone a murder thriller and mystery. But, there we are.

We are introduced to the world of books and publishing by an opening sequence at a book fair, the publisher, Lambert Wilson, promising publication of the third of a trilogy, Dedalus, with 10 translations to be released simultaneously. The author is very popular, but anonymous.

Then, as befits a murder mystery, we are introduced to ten translators arriving from all over Europe to begin their translation work in Paris. There is a rather glamorous Russian, Olga Kurylenko, a rather smug and presumptions Italian, Riccardo Scarmaccio, a rather quiet and laid-back Spaniard, Eduardo Noriega, a wife and mother from Denmark, Sidse Babette Knudson, also Chinese living in Paris, a German, a rather brash young Portuguese woman, a cynical Greek. And, the representative from England, looks as if he is still at high school, Alex Lawther. They are all assembled at a mansion outside Paris, confined to something like a bunker for two months, to translate 10 pages a day. Accommodation is comfortable and they all seem to get on reasonably well.

But...

There is certainly something strange afoot. The first 10 pages are released on the Internet and the publisher, receives a ransom demand. How could the pages be released when everybody is confined to the bunker? What effect does it have on the translators?

Just as we think of Agatha Christie, and she is explicitly mentioned in the screenplay, the structure of the film begins to play tricks with the audience. The publisher is seen cross-examining one of the translators but we have no idea which one. Then we see the publisher in prison. How did he get there? Then flashbacks of the publisher's visit to the old author living on the French coast (Patrick Bauchau). They discuss publishing rights – with the threat that the author might consider going to a rival company. And then... And then...

And, as we keep thinking Agatha Christie, there is an extraordinary flashback episode concerning the publisher, his travel on the Paris Metro, the manuscript of the novel in his briefcase, the briefcase being stolen, exchanged, copies made of the manuscript – and a mouse let loose in the train to cover any suspicion of what has happened!

The events do have quite some effect on the translators, sad and deadly for one of them who commits suicide.

The mastermind behind the extortion theme will probably not be one that most people would guess. And there is further ingenuity about the identity of the author of the novel as well as some vengeance for a malicious act on the part of the publisher.

Intriguing? The only response is: go and see *The Translators*.

THE WAR WITH GRANDPA

US, 2020, 98 minutes, Colour.

Robert De Niro, Uma Thurman, Rob Riggle, Oakes Fegley, Laura Marano, Cheech Marin, Jane Seymour, Christopher Walken.

Directed by Tim Hill.

The title is exact. If you want to see strategies and tactics for the war within the home, grandpa being invited by his daughter to live with them after the death of his wife, 12-year-old Peter's room being allotted to him and Peter relegated to the attic, leading to a declaration of war, then this is your kind of film. The comedy is rather raucous. And it consists of a mounting series of Gotcha events and moments, increasingly practical mayhem inside the house and out, not without quite some physical consequences, dangers to life and limb, and a climax which absolutely destroys the elaborate birthday party of Peter's younger sister.

Filming was done in 2017 but there were production difficulties and the collapse of the Weinstein Empire so that it was not released until 2020. It proved to be something of a financial saviour for cinemas as it was released during the covert-19 period, even toppling *Tenet* from the top of the box office for several weeks, audiences prepared to come out, hoping for an entertaining time (rather than the sometimes overwhelming demands of *Tenet*).

Some audiences will get a laugh out of the tactics used by both Peter and grandpa, Peter egged on by his friends at school, grandpa relying on some old friends and a sympathetic older cashier at the supermarket. Other audiences might not find it so funny, probably

irritated by those cheeky and self-assertive American youngsters that populate these kind of film. And, with the increasing skirmishes leading into battles, the whole thing is full of mean-mindedness. There is something of a homily given by Peter to grandpa at the end, so that they realise the futility and the consequences of war, but we are invited to indulge in the warfare before the homily!

Actually, the cast is very strong. Here is Robert De Niro, definitely not in the vein of Martin Scorsese film is, rather in the atmosphere of Meet the Focus series. Commentators have observed over the years that De Niro does not seem to have much of a sense of humour in himself, but, at nearly 75 with nothing to lose, he plays along with the scenario – and, in an extended insertion into the final credits (which all the audience who hurry out of the cinema as soon as a credit word appears on the screen will miss), there are outtakes, and the whole cast fooling around, singing and dancing, including De Niro.

Irma Thurman plays the mother, caring for her father, strict on her teenage daughter who is always finding an opportunity to sneak away with her boyfriend, mother angry but grandpa reminding her of what she did when she was a girl and how his anxiety made him waste two years of life and his affection for her. After some martial arts attack on the boyfriend (reminding us of her role in Kill Bill), she reconciles with her daughter. The other daughter, is a precocious little girl, affectionate to grandpa unable to help him with all his IT issues even to enabling him to fly a drone. Rob Riggle, usually an upfront comedian, plays a more gently subservient role as the father.

Oaks Fegley is Peter – who initiated the war, who does love grandpa, but indulges the mean mindedness.

And, grandpa's friends include Jane Seymour as the supermarket checkout, Christopher Walken, enjoying himself, and a rather leery Cheech Marin.

Direction is by Tim Hill who has written an extensive number of SpongeBob [?](#) SquarePants television series.

If you tend to be introverted, it is perhaps wise to get this rather extrovert and raucous must amiss.

WILD THINGS

Australia, 2020, 90 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Sally Ingleton.

Wild Things is an energetic documentary focusing on environmental issues, especially in Australia. It has a strong subtitle: A year on the frontline of environmental activism.

2020 and coronavirus caused something of a hiatus in widespread environmental campaigns throughout the world as Well Is in Australia. With diminished air travel, you are vehicles on roads because of lockdown, there was cleaner air in the environment. But, governments were preoccupied with the pandemic, the health issues as well as the economic consequences.

This documentary has footage from 2018-2019. It has a strong point of view, shows the

protests and campaigns of environmental enthusiasts, does include some moments of counter-protest, like the families of loggers in Tasmania attacking the environmentalists, and a Parliamentary moment with the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, especially in his condemnation of the teenage protesters at the end of 2019, urging them back to school and less activism in the schools.

However, this is strongly counterbalanced by the young people themselves and a lot of the footage shows them, aged about 14, from Castlemaine and Victoria, conscious of global warming, the threats for the future, encouraged by Greta Thunberg, the campaigner from Sweden, to make demonstrations, first of all in their own town, then moving to Melbourne, swelling numbers, enthusiastic young people articulating the issues clearly, campaigning outside the office of Bill Shorten, later meeting with him in Canberra. One of the messages of Wild Things would be that there is a growing consciousness in younger people, taking responsibility for their future, about to find their place in the adult world and its crises.

There is a lot of footage from key areas in Australia – along with some footage from demonstrations from the past, especially with Bob Brown and others in the Franklin River in Tasmania, the Tarkine forest in Tasmania, other rainforests in Tasmania and in northern New South Wales.

Of course, a great deal of attention is given to coalmining, some glimpses back into the development of mines by settlers in the 19th century, the prevalence of coal and, of course, the developments in the Galilee Basin of Queensland, the plans of Adani. There are details of the various protest camps, interviews with those staffing them, sequences of scuffles with the police, huge trucks driving through the protest...

There are some authoritative talking heads including Bob Brown, but a focus on a GP, Dr Lisa Searle and her partner, present in the Tasmanian forests, climbing the trees for occupation (and for some lights and decoration).

One of the difficulties with this kind enthusiastic documentary is that it can be seen as preaching to the converted. The glimpse of the unconverted, logging protesters, parliamentarians, indicates they are not even close to conversion. However, for audiences who do have concern about the environment but have not become involved, there are enough images, stirring speeches, to give make them consider environmental issues more seriously.

THE WITCHES

US, 2020, 104 minutes, Colour.

Anne Hathaway, Octavia Spencer, Stanley Tucci, voices of: Chris Rock, Kristin Chenoweth. Directed by Robert Zemeckis.

So many audiences have read the books of Roald Dahl and have enjoyed the film and stage versions. Think Matilda! Wonka and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory! There has also been James and the Giant Peach. And, of course, The Witches, especially the film of the 1990s, starring Anjelica Huston as The Grand High Witch.

For many now adult audiences, that is their version of The Witches. And, so many audiences have made it their own over the last three decades. A remake? Always a challenge.

For one thing, the action has been transferred to the United States, to the state of Alabama, and the central characters are African-American², bringing in significant race issues underlying the action.

We are introduced gradually to the themes of witches. A little boy, Raymond, loses his parents in a car accident. Distraught, is entrusted to his loving but no-nonsense grandma (the always-sympathetic Octavia Spencer). One day, Raymond sees a sinister woman in the local store. It is time for grandma to explain witches to him, especially her encounter as a little girl when her close friend was transformed into a chicken! Not sure about Chris Rock's voiceover as the adult Raymond.

Actually, the witches are assembling for local activity at a hotel convention – where grandma and Raymond are staying. So begins the Witches action.

Roald Dahl's books and films are for the young audience, drawing them in, upsetting or scaring them, children defying villains. Non-Roald² Dahl readers will be observers more than involved with the witches and their evil. For many, the image of the Grand High Witch is Anjelica Houston. This time she is Anne Hathaway. While she does her Anjelica Huston thing, rather a scenery-chewing performance, she is rather pretty and glamorous (especially compared to all the other witches were there to do her bidding), our wishing her to be a bit more credibly sinister.

Then, the special effects come into their own with the flair of director, Robert Zemeckis, the witches poisoned by their potions in the pea soup, there you really rising, flying, exploding. And, the Grand High Witch intends to turn all children into mice – which she does, especially Raymond, a rather toffee large English boy who has snobby parents who disdain him as he continually eats, and Raymond's pet mouse Daisy who turns out to have been transformed earlier by the witches.

Lots of shenanigans, grandma doing her best with the children now turned into mice, building up to a confrontation with the Grand High Witch, especially at the mercy of her pet cat as she turns into a monstrous mouse herself!

This review is written from the point of view of an observer rather than a member of the young audience – many of whom will be scared by the action and the special effects but this reviewer was reassured (perhaps!) by a six year old at the session, that she liked it.

WONDER WOMAN 1984

US, 2020, 151 minutes, Colour.

Gal Gadot, Chris Pine, Kristin Wiig, Pedro Pascal, Robin Wright, Connie Neilson, Lily Aspell.

Directed by Patty Jenkins.

If you get the chance to see the small independent movie of 2017, Professor Marston and the Wonder Women, the story of the creation of the superhero and the eccentric creator, his psychology, private life, publicity and motivations, it provides an interesting introduction to Patty Jenkins' Wonder Woman and the sequel, Wonder Woman 1984.

Wonder Woman looks back into origins, back into the culture of the Amazons, the warrior women, their independence, their wisdom – and the mission of Diana to go into the future to right wrongs. And her meeting with Steve Trevor, sharing action, and his death.

This is all presupposed here, of course, although there is a fine prologue back with the Amazons, the young Diana in an “Iron Woman” competition, physical, exercise, gymnastics, every sport talent, spectacularly photographed, but teaching her a lesson about not cutting corners, being honest, always promoting the truth.

And then she is in 1984, a glamorous and sophisticated woman of the 20th century world, living alone, working in archaeology in Washington. Gal Gadot made a great impression in the first film and continues to make it, a striking presence.

The audience is introduced to a television personality who encourages people to pursue what they want and get it. This is the moment to make a comment about this character who preoccupied this reviewer throughout the film – he looks like a young Donald Trump, sounds like Trump on television, buzzwords and cliches, has built an empire financially but has failed in his business, indulges in fraud and eliminating opposition, wants to be all-powerful and finds the means, confronting authorities and doing takeovers everywhere, including challenging the President of the United States! Did the filmmakers actually intend to make this parallel? Anyway, Pedro Pascal makes a convincing villain in a kind of Trump mode. Max Lord.

Lord’s philosophy of selfishness and self-centredness is shown wreaking chaos in a mall, including a robbery in a jewellery store – which evokes Diana’s response and she goes into action as Wonder Woman, enthusing us all with her action skills.

Then, there is a drama and no action or fights for about an hour’s running time. This gives us the opportunity to get to know Diana, meet a mousey fellow worker at the Smithsonian, Barbara Minerva, played by Kristin Wiig. And then, the connection with Max Lord, who makes a huge donation (from funds he does not have) and purloins one of the antiquities which has the power to grant people’s wishes. He, of course, has no limit to his wishes and pursues them fully. However, Barbara wishes, after she gets to know and like Diana, to be like her. Diana has some wishful thinking about Steve coming back again.

Wishes are fulfilled. Steve (Chris Pine genial as before) comes back, is in awe of the 1980s, gets a chance to fly a plane (in the middle of a huge fireworks display), rekindle his love for Diana, help her in her combating tanks and photos on the highways and deserts of Egypt.

Barbara’s wish is fulfilled. No longer mousey, she is popular, gaining strength and confidence, style. She supports Lord and makes another wish, to be an ‘apex predator’, Cheetah.

Which puts us on the way then to some final confrontations. Wonder Woman and her exploits in the Egyptian desert. Confrontations with the envious Barbara/Cheetah and fights with her. Building up to an atmosphere of world chaos, the American President handing matters over to Lord, his ability to destroy the world – but a final confrontation with Wonder Woman. And the question: is his final decision Trump -like?

The release of Wonder Woman 1984 was held up by coronavirus – its action will do something to satisfy those who spent 2020 longing for superhero action.

YOUR NAME ENGRAVED HEREIN

Taiwan, 2020, 118 minutes, Colour.
Edward Chen.
Directed by Patrick Liu.

This film comes from Taiwan. It broke box office records there and has received favourable reviews from other countries. It also screened on Netflix.

It has been noted that Taiwan has legislated in favour of same-sex marriage, giving a context for this film. There have also been comparisons with Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name* (even a comparison in tone with the two titles).

However, most of the action of the film takes place in 1987, with the repeal of martial law and of steady democracy. The action takes place in the school, a Catholic school, in fact, with a chaplain who is available to the students but who also coaches sport and in music (he originally comes from Montréal). The focus is on a student in the liberal arts, Jia- Han (Edward Chen) quiet, popular with other students. But, these students pick on a rather precocious fellow-student, nicknamed Birdy, labelling him as homosexual and exhibiting quite some homophobia in teasing and bullying. Jia- Han is attracted to Birdy.

This is Jia- Han's story, his concealing his orientation, yet supporting Birdy, seen at home with his parents, a stern father, a loving mother who hopes her son will find a girlfriend. At the same time, the school is introducing female students – though with some rigorous disciplinary guidelines.

The framework of this earlier part of the film is Jia- Han, with some injuries to his face, going to see Fr. Oliver to talk about his situation, to seek advice. The priest presumes that the trouble concerns relationship with girls and only gradually is Jia- Han able to reveal something of his own emotions. The priest offers traditional guidance. There is some discussion about gospel texts, especially the significance of love overcoming all else. The continued discussion recurs throughout the film.

Jia- Han and Birdy visit the capital, enjoy the train ride together, with touches of intimacy. However, this is all a challenge to Birdy who goes out with some of the girls, suggests that Jia- Han get a girlfriend, leading to clash when Birdy crashes Jia- Han's motor scooter, when Jia- Han assists Birdy in a long and intimate shower sequence. But, it leads to clashes and fights.

The last 15 minutes or so of the film are a kind of epilogue, taking place in the present, the older Jia- Han visiting Canada (with a long interlude at Niagara Falls which also appears during the final credits), going to the cemetery to Fr. Oliver's grave, finding out what happened to him after he left Taiwan. And, he also encounters Birdy, as well as talking with Birdy's ex-wife. There is tender reminiscence about the past, the two walking together – and the audience speculating what will happen to these two 50 year old men given the pain and anguish as well as love of the past.

The film offers a sympathetic portrait of Jia- Han, his struggles in the 1980s with himself, his sexual orientation, what it leads to in pain and disappointment – but, the film also shows that he survives. And survives into a much more tolerant world.

FEBRUARY 2021

CROODS, The, A NEW AGE

DRAGON RIDER

DREAMBUILDERS

DREAMLAND

HOW TO BE A GOOD WIFE

IN THE NAME OF THE LAND

KAJILLIONAIRE

MIDNIGHT SKY, The

MONSTER HUNTER

NOMADLAND

PIECES OF A WOMAN

PROM, The

PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN

SUPERINTELLIGENCE

TRANSLATORS, The

WAR AGAINST GRANDPA, The

DEATH TO 2020

US, 2020, 70 minutes, Colour.

Samuel L. Jackson, Hugh Grant, Lisa Kudrow, Kumail Nanjiani, Tracy Ullman, Samson Kayo, Leslie Jones, Diane Morgan, Cristin Milioti, Joe Keery, Angelo Irving, narrated by Laurence Fishburne. Directed by Al Campbell, Alice Mathias.

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

While the title sounds universal, and there are some sequences from other countries in the world, including the bushfires in Australia, the explosion in Beirut, protests around the world, glimpses of Wuhan, the assassination of the Iranian general, this is a film very much for an English-speaking audience, focusing principally on the United States, giving attention to the United Kingdom.

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

In 70 minutes, a team of writers have been able to assemble key sequences from 2020, highlighting each month in which they occurred, edited well and with punch, so that there is an overview of what the year was like, especially in the United States.

While the whole film has been narrated by Laurence Fishburne, it opens with Samuel L. Jackson as a New York journalist, Dash Bracket! He makes sardonic and ironic comments, especially about race, throughout the film. On the other hand, Hugh Grant is disguised as an eccentric British historian, Tennyson Foss, delivering all kinds of opinions, prejudices, irritations in the inimitable Hugh Grant fashion.

And, there are a number of guest cameos throughout the film, Samson Kayo as a put-upon scientist explaining the covert situation while his words are accompanied by incongruous images; Leslie Jones as a tough-minded African-American commentator, few holds barred; and Lisa Kudrow sends up all those Trump White House spokespersons with her press conferences and denials. Two fictitious characters, Jim and Eric, played by British comedian Diane Morgan, and Kathy Flowers, played by American comedian, Cristin Miliotti, provide a kind of dumb chorus – Morgan as Gemma Nettick in England, very limited in her knowledge and expression, even mistaking the American election on television as a game show, and Cristin Miliotti as Kathy Flowers all gush, innate prejudice, believing every conspiracy theory. Joe Keery appears as the young man exploiting it all on social media.

American comedian, with Asian background, Kumail Nanjiani plays a wealthy media tycoon with all the bland commentary that goes with it. And Tracy Ullman excels impersonating her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, with some very funny commentary about the world (and her response to *The Crown*). Boris Johnson is a continued target of the film.

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

But, the film is very telling about President Trump in 2020, his poor response to the coronavirus, his own personal tantrums, campaigning for the election, his demonstration outside the church in Washington, his getting covert-19, and, of course, his bad reaction to the election results.

This film should have an important place in every archive as a reminder, in mockumentary style, of course, of what 2020 was like, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom

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HIS HOUSE

UK, 2020, 93 minutes, Colour.
Sope Dirisu, Wunmi Mosaku, Matt Smith.
Directed by Remi Weekes.

This is a British drama about refugees from South Sudan, the dangers, the turmoil, the boats, the crowding, the waves, people in the water, drownings.

The focus is on a couple who arrive, experience the death of a daughter, safe but in detention in the United Kingdom. Their cases reviewed. There is a jury deciding on all on their freedom, going to London, a flat for their own, but with strict conditions about maintaining it. The husband is eager to become part of UK society, singing football songs at the pub, get his wife to use cutlery... However, she dresses in traditional clothes, each with her hands, on the floor.

However, there are complications, not so much as regards migrants and migration itself but as regards African traditions, sense of solidarity, issues of deaths, spirits, hauntings. The husband, especially, is tormented by apparitions, sounds, voices and creatures in the wall, the presence of a witch. He spends a lot of his energy combating these apparitions. His wife, on the other hand, becoming more alienated, as an experience where she is back in Sudan, reliving her past, in the presence of women to whom she relates.

The situation becomes dire and the husband decides that they should move out of the house, going to see the panel, complaining of rats. However, there is a final confrontation with the witch, the wife eventually slitting his throat and freeing the couple.

They accept the house. They are seen standing – but a number of other refugees in the background.

MARCH 2021

ABOUT ENDLESSNESS
ANOTHER ROUND
BLACKBIRD
BOSS LEVEL
DAYS OF THE BAGNOLD SUMMER
FIRESTARTER
GRIZZLIES, The
LITTLE THINGS, The
LONG STORY SHORT
LOVE, WEDDINGS AND OTHER DISASTERS
MALCOLM AND MARIE
MAX RICHER'S SLEEP
MINARI
NEWS OF THE WORLD
PAINTER AND THE THIEF
PIXIE
THEN CAME YOU
WILD MOUNTAIN THYME
WRONG TURN
ZAPPA

FRENCH FILM FESTIVAL SELECTION

BOITE NOIR/ BLACK BOX
CINQUIEME SET/ FINAL SET
POLICE/ NIGHT SHIFT
SOUS LE CIEL D'ALICE/ SKIES OF LEBANON

ABOUT ENDLESSNESS

Sweden, 2020, 76 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Roy Andersson.

For those not familiar with the films of Swedish director, Roy Andersson, a filmmaker from the 1960s to the present, a warning is needed. A prospective audience needs some kind of preparation for the experience of an Andersson film, especially when the word 'endlessness' is in its title.

Andersson is a cinema essayist. He is also a cinema philosopher. And he is a visual artist. And, expected narrative is not his forte. Which means that this is a special type of cinematic experience, an acceptance that the director is wanting to elicit a questioning response, a willingness to be challenged, and no expectations that one can put QED at the end of the film!

With that in mind, it is worth looking at the career of Roy Andersson, a director who has enjoyed Film Festival and critical acclaim (For Endlessness he won Best Director in Venice, 2020), with titles such as Songs from the Second Floor and, his film prior to Endlessness, A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence. So, here we are, reflecting on existence once again.

Andersson is Swedish, his first film made in 1967. He incorporates over half a century of Swedish culture into his films. And his settings are the city, a range of views of the city itself, looking over it from a hilltop park, then going into its streets, a variety of ordinary locations, shop windows, restaurants, homes, shops, the church... And, while his emphasis is on the visual, always in the background, sometimes very softly, a classical music accompaniment and a great deal of choral music.

So, Andersson has intellectual themes, visual illustrations, dramatic moments, asking for an emotional response which leads us back to our intellectual understanding and our philosophy.

And, audiences will notice that each episode is contained in a single frame, from a fixed camera, any action taking place within this fixed frame – except for one sequence where an embracing couple (who are seen in the clouds as the film opens) float over the ruins of the city of Cologne and the camera, almost imperceptibly, moves its way left across the screen.

Which means that coming into the film is something like entering an art gallery, requiring an audience to know something about what they are coming to see. Because it is cinema, the audience is moved on from frame to frame (or, if available, push the Pause button). The film is something of a gallery installation. There is the instant impact, the time available for contemplation, ultimately the cumulative effect of the images.

So, the question of endlessness. Never-ending, infinite... The timeless, endless existence of the universe. An infinite God? And there is a whole lot of waiting going on right throughout the film.

There is a sequence when a young student sits at home reading about thermonuclear dynamics, his sister playing with her hair, not exactly interested. He speculates that everything is part of continuing energy, the endless energy, changing its shape as it moves

along – and that we are all part of this continuing energy, part of its endlessness. Good or bad? Just continued existence? We might have an end as individuals, we do. But the energy is endless.

There are, in fact, some narrative moments, an old man coming up steps and telling us about a school acquaintance who passes by without comment, the old man having heard him in the past – and this repeated later when the old man talks to his wife about the experience happening again.

But, the most significant narrative element starts with a Way of the Cross, a middle-aged man bearing a huge cross, coming up a city hill between buildings, the crowd yelling that he be crucified, bystanders gaping or yelling insults, a small group with whips hitting and kicking the man as he falls and gets up again. So, the introduction of a character resembling Jesus, a Christ-figure.

Then he wakes up. It has been a nightmare (a recurring nightmare) and he has a sense of nails through his hands. Some frames later, he goes to visit a psychiatrist, revealing his religious experiences, his sense of the loss of faith. And, the narrative continues when we see him vested in a church sacristy, preparing hosts and wine for communion, communicants seen kneeling through the sacristy door into the church, his drinking the wine, swigging it, unsteady on his feet, going out to distribute communion. And, later in the film, he bangs on the door of the psychiatrist, the rather starchy and immovable receptionist announcing that they are closing, the psychiatrist not helpful, saying he can't miss a bus, their ousting the man, locking the door, and his still crying out asking what he must do as he has lost his faith.

So, an explicit theme, and the audience responding depending on their own religious and church experiences, whether Andersson is pro-faith, objectively looking at what faith might be, against faith in the contemporary world.

There is a grim execution scene, soldiers tying a prisoner to a post, his pleading and begging for his life...

And, unexpectedly, three Nazis in a bunker, collapsed and demoralised – and Hitler coming in, their attempts to Sig Heil, Hitler's being ineffectual and walking out. Was Hitler a threat to our endlessness?

We have moved from image to image, such as a portly man reading his newspaper in a restaurant, sniffing and tasting the offered wine, but the waiter absentmindedly continuing to pour the wine as it overflows; a girl coming out of a shop to water and spray a plant, a young man passing and gazing; fussy grandmother trying to photograph the baby held up by the father and many more.

Throughout the film, each frame is introduced by a voice saying "I saw man...", "I saw a woman...". Finally, the voice says that they saw a man driving a car along an empty road, flat countryside, trouble with the car engine, his getting out, looking in in, no one in sight, little prospect of someone passing by, little hope of help... And the film fades to black.

The running time the film is actually only an hour and a quarter – and one could spend at least that amount of time just beginning to explore the themes, Roy Andersson's style, his provocations...

ANOTHER ROUND/ DRUK

Denmark, 2020, 117 minutes, Colour.

Thomas Bo Larsen, Magnus Millang, Lars Ranthe, Maria Bonnevie.

Directed by Thomas Vinterberg.

One might call this a sobering film. It focuses on a group of middle-aged men, an experiment with alcohol, the consequences for them in their own lives, in their relationships and profession, a final challenge which is sobering – or not. (And that Danish title needs only an ‘n’ inserted for drunk! In fact, the word is more active, meaning ‘drinking’.)

This is a Danish film which will have resonances in countries around the world, especially those with alcohol problems (with the screenplay here making comment on their prevalence in Denmark), and especially with a male audience. The director, Thomas Vinterberg, has been making striking and significant films for over two decades, beginning in the 1990s with the philosophy of pure filmmaking, *Dogme* (*Festen*), but then moving into more complex filmmaking, in Danish (*The Hunt*, with the star of this film, Mads Mikkelsen) as well as in English (*Dear Wendy*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*).

There is quite a raucous opening, but this time amongst the high school students, a competitive race, runners having to down a bottle of beer at each stage, points deducted for any vomiting, and the other students cheering, leering, a celebration.

Then we see some of those students in class, bored to tears by their history teacher, Martin (Mads Mikkelsen), who seems to be somewhat depressed, being summoned to a meeting of students and parents to improve his methods. At home, he sees his sons lounging about, and seems sometimes remote from his wife who has nursing night shifts. He relies on his friends at the school, Thomas who is a sports trainer (and some engaging moments with his little charges, especially Specs, who has some champion moments), Nikolai, psychologist, married with three children, including a recent baby, and Peter, music teacher and choirmaster.

Nikolai comes up with information about a theory from a Swedish psychologist that as human beings we are 0.05 under the expected limit for alcohol in our bodies. Then, a somewhat mad (juvenile?) decision, to check whether the theory is correct or not. On the one hand, a lot of binge drinking, hidden drinking, but only during the daytime, nothing at night. On the other hand, each of them comes more alive than they have been for years, Martin beginning to enthuse his class and relate well with them.

So, the tantalising drama for the audience is whether they will prove the theory or not (most of us thinking that it is nonsense and the experiment, which they begin to write up, foredoomed). Also tantalising is the portrait of each of them as they experience the effect of more and more alcohol, finding occasions and excuses, and the consequences in school and out of school, and Martin and Nikolai and their relationship with their wives.

Some tragedy, some joy, and we leave the cinema wondering how it is going to turn out, especially for Martin who has grown more desperate.

BLACKBIRD

US/Canada, 2019, 97 minutes, Colour.

Susan Sarandon, Kate Winslet, Mia Wasikowska, Sam Neill, Rainn Wilson, Lindsay Duncan, Anson Boon, Bex Taylor- Klaus.

Directed by Roger Michel.

In many countries around the world, and in various states in Australia, legislation has been introduced, and sometimes passed, concerning assisted suicide. This is a very human drama about assisted suicide.

Opinions are divided about the morality, the ethics of assisted suicide. There are ongoing discussions, legal submissions, protests... In its way, Blackbird will contribute to the discussion and should be seen by those on each side of the debate. In many ways, it is easy to discuss moral issues in principle, discussions by reason. On the other hand, the reality concerns people, those dying, those assisting, who have lives which are highly emotional. And that is the value of a story like this, which at various times does present arguments against, the moral issues are both principled and personalised.

Blackbird is an English-language adaptation by its author, Danish Christian Torpe, of his original, directed in Denmark by celebrated film-maker Bille August, 2014, Silent Heart.

The film invites the audience to share a weekend with Lily and Paul, Paul a doctor, Lily suffering from an increasing illness with symptoms which sound like motor-neuron disease. Lily and her husband, along with her daughters and best friend, have planned how the assisted suicide will take place. And they are to have a weekend celebration of life before it.

Susan Sarandon is Lily and gives, and this is compliment, a very strong Susan Sarandon -like performance. After 50 years top lining films, she is still a force to be reckoned with. On the other hand, Sam Neill plays Paul, a rather quiet, supportive performance.

Much of the dramatics are provided by the two daughters. The older, Jennifer, is played by Kate Winslet, wearing glasses and almost unrecognisable at first. She is married, her genial husband Michael (a different kind of role for comedian Rainn Wilson) and her son, Jonathan (Anson Boon), a rather quiet teenager, arriving with her. There is quite a contrast with the younger daughter, Anna (Mia Wasikowska), an emotionally unstable woman who is accompanied by her partner, Chris (Bex Taylor- Klaus). The other member of the party is Lily's lifelong friend, Liz (Lindsay Duncan). And that is the cast – most of the action taking place within the family house with excursions along the beach.

As audience, we are drawn in by the characters themselves, generally strong personalities, genial and friendly at first, meals, charades, happy spirit of reunion. However, there is soon a clash between Jennifer and Anna, Jennifer a controller, Anna, possibly bipolar, a suicide attempt and time in an institution. An even stronger tension arises when Jennifer questions the friendship between Liz and Paul. And, even Lily herself is shocked at Anna's initial recriminations against her.

And a lot of this occurs in the context of the creation of a Christmas celebration, Michael and Jonathan going out to find a Christmas tree, Paul cooking a full Christmas dinner, Lily with very personalised gift for everyone.

There are differing opinions given about the assisted suicide, the daughters wanting more time with their mother, but Lily, very strong in her declarations about her wish to die, not to live in a continually deteriorating physical condition, to leave the world at the time of her choice and reasons.

As said, this is a case study about assisted suicide, a story with a perspective, that those for and those against should experience as a fuller background for their ethical stance.

BOSS LEVEL

US, 2021, 100 minutes, Colour.

Frank Grillo, Mel Gibson, Naomi Watts, Annabelle Wallis, Michelle Yeoh, Ken Jeong, Selina Lo, Will Sasso, Rob Gronkowski.

Directed by Joe Carnahan.

Very easy to make recommendations/non-recommendations for this one. Strictly for Gamers – and for those with a Gaming sensibility. For audiences lacking this sensibility, they will be knocked out almost immediately!

We certainly know where we sit for this action adventure. For a long time, it plays like a computer game, our hero, Roy (a tough Frank Grillo, actually in his mid-50s but gym or special effects perfect, waking up, a woman in the bed (later revealed as a dental assistant!)), A sword-wielder, a helicopter outside the window, machine gun fire, Roy leaping four stories onto a bus, and much, much more... So, this is a computer game.

And then it happens all over again (a touch of the spoiler: the scenario is repeated 250 times for Roy, and quite a lot of times for the audience).

Then, at last some explanation, which we are probably needing. It is clear to the audience that this is a variation on Groundhog Day. Ultimately, the scientific name will be given, The Osiris Spindle – which might well have been a much better title for the film, rousing curiosity.

The audience doesn't quite know what all the explanation until the end – fair enough. It involves Mel Gibson, bearded and grizzled, as a retired Colonel, power-hungry, seemingly no financial impediment, employing a scientist to create a machine for world-domination. The scientist is played by Naomi Watts (one might ask watts Naomi doing in this kind of actioner!). We do find fairly quickly that she is Roy's wife and they have a son whom Roy has neglected.

With this kind of background, off we go groundhogging yet again and again, Roy being disposed of by the various pursuers (although at one stage he does trap them and incinerate them all), action adventures throughout the city, then an action lull where he goes into a diner, where Chef Jake (Ken Jeong) is jokingly behind the counter. As Roy learns more and more, and is continually threatened by a sword champion, Selina Lo, he sees Michelle Yeoh sitting at a table and persuades her to train him in swordsmanship, an increasing number of groundhogging episodes confronting the champion until...

And, Roy does meet his son, bonding with him, bringing some more emotion and touches of tenderness into the story.

Lots of actions in computer games, lots of deadly characters, lots of killings, competitiveness, and here it is all in a narrative running for 100 minutes.

DAYS OF THE BAGNOLD SUMMER

UK, 2019, 86 minutes, Colour.

Monica Dolan, Earl Cave, Rob Brydon, Tamsin Grieg, Alice Lowe, Elliot Speller Gillett.

Directed by Simon Bird.

Daniel Bagnold, aged 15, was not expecting to spend his summer holiday at home in the suburbs with his divorced mother, Sue. He was all ready to go to Florida to join his father who had left the family several years earlier and is now married, living in America, expecting a child with his young wife. Bags packed. Phone call. Don't come at this time...

So, this turns out to be a variation on family drama, taking place in the suburbs. It is the story of Daniel. It is the story of Sue. A great deal of the impact of the film, in its low-key way, comes from performances by Monica Dolan (The Dig, and one of Alan Bennett's dramatic television monologues, Talking Heads). She seems the perfect embodiment of the middle-aged woman, her husband having left her, still puzzling about that, trying to communicate with her 15-year-old son who is moody, to say the least, holding down a librarian's job, some happy supportive chats with her sister.

And Daniel is played by Earl Cave (who looks very much like a younger version of his father, Nick Cave). He is lanky, lounges about, long hair, listening to rock music, and frustrated with his mother and his not being able to go to the United States (idealising without realising the truth the importance of his father in his life).

The behaviour of mother and son limits the action of the film which is rather episodic. Sue takes Earl to the mall to buy the shoes, they eat ice creams, at home Earl continues to frustrate his mother. Sue on the other hand encounters another teacher from school, Doug, Rob Brydon, who invites her out on a date. A lot of excitement there but is there any future in it...? Then there is a mother of one of Earl's friends who is into new age, massage, psychological advice. (She is played by Tamsin Grieg who also appears in one of Alan Bennett's Talking Heads.)

There is an amusing little subplot where Earl finds an advertisement asking for a singer for a band which operates from a garage – and, when he turns up, they are all 10 year olds!

This summer holiday is a film that will appeal more to the adult audience, the parent audience, who can resonate with what Sue has experienced and is going through, especially towards the end when she and Earl go to a restaurant to celebrate her birthday and Earl is very gallant to protect her when he sees Doug on a date, repeating the routine he used with Sue. Probably safe to say that an audience of Earl's peers might be curious about seeing Earl and what is up to but not enough to sit through the whole film!

Probably ideal for those morning screenings at a local cinema followed by a nice morning tea

or lunch.

FIRESTARTER

Australia, 2020, 96 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Wayne Blair, Nel Minchin.

Firestarter was awarded best documentary film prize at the 2020 Australian Academy Awards. It is a documentary that should be seen. And it is been directed by celebrated actor-director, Wayne Blair, along with Nel Minchin, producer and director.

This is the story of the Bangarra Dance Company. We learn immediately that Bangarra means making fire, so the title of this documentary.

From Wikipedia:

Bangarra Dance Theatre was founded in October 1989 by Carole J. Johnson, an African-American? modern dancer and founder of the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA), Rob Bryant, a Gumbaynggirr man and graduate of NAISDA, and Cheryl Stone, a South African-born student at NAISDA.

Johnson toured Australia in 1972 with American choreographer Eleo Pomare and his company, and remained in Australia. In 1975 Johnson became the founding director of the Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Scheme, now known as the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA).

Johnson had a three-part plan for Aboriginal dance in Australia, including establishing a school to give academic qualifications and train dancers as members of a student and graduate performing company that would also teach. It would further provide a path for the dancers to other dance-related jobs, including choreography, tour management, and all front and back of house skills. Thirdly, a vital part was to maintain authentic cultural continuity, friendships, and close ties to traditional communities. Johnson mentored Stone, who studied alongside the dancers. She planned the formation of Bangarra and in 1989, became the founding Artistic Director of Bangarra Dance Theatre.

Stephen Page became the Artistic Director in 1991, supported by two of his brothers, David, a talented musician and composer, and younger brother, Russell, an extraordinarily talented dancer. The film offers a great deal of David Page's music and some extensive footage of Russell and his dancing.

Stephen Page is the strong presence in the film, going back over the decades of the company, the initial vision that he shared with his brothers and the variety of people who joined him in the enterprise and have stayed with the company over the years. The film takes us back into the history of the Page family, the difficulties with their father, presence and absence, stern, the influence of their mother. And there were 12 children. They lived in Mount Gravatt in Brisbane, went to the local schools, grew up in the atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s. There is an entertaining interlude where David, very young, but a talented singer, appeared in television contests, winning them, getting a contract with Decca Records, and appearing with Paul Hogan on his television show. They also got involved in local dancing.

Quite a number of women joined the company and are interviewed throughout the film. They reminisce about the beginnings, and there are images of many of them and their dance

performances throughout the 90s.

And the performances are the significant aspect of the film, the making fire, the fire starting.

However, there is sadness in the narrative which is acknowledged, Russell and his difficulties, substance taking, moods, and, after his enormous success, his hanging himself, Stephen expressing the hope that it was some kind of accident. And then, David so lively in his collaboration with Stephen, so many compositions, also dying, the cause of death not revealed by the family. It was at this time that Stephen Page and the company received a Helpmann award – which he dedicated to his brothers. Russell Page's son is one of the talking heads of the film and gives insights into his father. David was gay and, in 2008, Stephen directed him in a one-man show about his life, a drag act, his being gay.

Stephen Page's son, Hunter, also appears with comment – and he also appeared in the production, *Spear*.

One of the great features of the film is the succession of excerpts from the prolific repertoire of the company from the early 1990s. With the aboriginal themes, Stephen Page has provided a dance overview of indigenous culture, traditions, history, rituals, symbolism... Which is seen in the variety of titles of the performances, *Ochres*, *Fire*, *Skin*, *Boomerang*, *Corroboree*, *Walkabout*, *Bush*, *Bennelong* (with favourable comments heard from Graeme Murphy, one of Australia's great choreographers). The film also shows the tours by the company including overseas (and a photo opportunity with Prince Charles!).

In 2005, Stephen Page directed a feature film, *Spear*, featuring his son and other company dancers along with actor, Aaron Pedersen. It is filled with the same dance interpretations of history and culture – but has the added beauty and aura of location photography.

After the death of David Page, Stephen was particularly upset, drove his company hard, but needed time away to come to terms with what it happened – and is able then to hand over the management of the company to his successor, Frances Rings, choreographer and dancer.

The Bangarra Dance Company is a major contribution to Australia's consciousness of its aboriginal heritage and traditions. In the film ends with a 2019 photo of the company, Stephen in front, a tribute to achievement.

THE GRIZZLIES

Canada, 2018, 102 minutes, Colour.

Ben Schnetzer, Tantoo Cardinal, Will Sasso, Boo-Boo Stewart, Emerald Mc Donald, Anna Lambe.

Directed by Miranda de Pencier.

No, not a nature documentary about bears in the American or Canadian woods. The Grizzlies is the title of a sports team, an unlikely group, underdogs, going into competition, finding themselves. Sounds like a sports film formula – and, in some ways it is, but there is much more to it, and there is much more edge.

The setting is in northern Canada, an isolated community. And the majority of the inhabitants

are Inuit. With 20th century in 21st-century changes, the youngsters in the community have very little to look forward to, not interested in education, have some loyalty to their parents and the traditions, with many of the older generations warning them against the white man's world. There is a school, many of them don't go – although, during the initial credits, there are many black and white photographs of education in the area, the missionaries, the sisters, the discipline...

The film opens rather lyrically, a young man walking through the snow clad mountains – and then killing himself. The words on screen telling us that this area has the highest youth suicide rate in the country. So, quite a sombre setting – and this issue of youth suicide recurs during the film and is strikingly dramatic in the final 25 minutes.

And, the young people just sit around, drinking, drugs, idle.

And, into the situation comes a very earnest and enthusiastic young man, graduated as a teacher, appointed here, but practically no preparation for such a cultural change, bringing his white Canadian baggage to the situations, to the encounters, destined for failure. His played by the genial Ben Schnetzer (Death and life of John Donovan, Pride,). It looks as though it is going to be one of those stories of a white saviour coming in to redeem the locals and bring them to some kind of celebration. And, in a way it is. However, much of the dialogue targets him, especially from the veteran school principal (veteran actress Tantoo Cardinal), and, in his disappointment and self-blame taught the end, he has to be reminded that he has urged the young people to go forward, no matter what, and that this issue is not just about him.

The first part of the film is rather depressing, showing the harsh situations for adults and youngsters. While rice has an idea to introduce lacrosse, he needs the support of some of the young people themselves. His most devoted student, rather silent, heavy build and self-conscious, Miranda (Emerald Mc Donald) has a talent for organisation, and comes out of herself to start organising and advising. In a sense, she is the moral and optimistic core of the whole drama. The young people follow the lead of one of their peers, are interested, get the hang of lacrosse, get enthusiastic, play.

The crisis comes when Russ applies for the team to go into the national competition in Toronto. The principal disagrees. The town Council, with an annual grant from a mining company, think that giving the team money is a waste and wrong emphasis. Russ is impetuous, pushy and arrogant (the principles words to him), but he has to begin to learn some of the local customs, language, listen as well as talk to parents and grandparents.

It is not a spoiler to say that they do get to Toronto – but with not quite the results they might have anticipated, but achieving some sense of pride and camaraderie.

It is that kind of inspirational sports film – but, given the social conditions and the prevalence of youth suicide, it is an inspiration with challenging edge.

THE LITTLE THINGS

US, 2021, 127 minutes, Colour.

Denzel Washington, Rami Malek, Jared Leto, Chris Bauer, Michael Hyatt, Terry Kinney, Natalie Morales, Isabel Arraiza, Glenn Morshower, Lee Garlington.

Directed by John Lee Hancock.

The Little Things refers, of course, to attention to detail. However, the choice of the word little, has overtones of a certain daintiness in detail. Not exactly the case here.

Over the last decade and more, audiences have become accustomed to see Denzel Washington as an action hero, in the West, in the gangster world, in police enforcement. This is police enforcement.

We know we are in sure hands when we see the reliable Denzel as Joe Deacon, serving in the Californian country community, going to Los Angeles to pick up evidence for a case. Actually, as you might expect, he has a history in Los Angeles, a top detective, but disappointed in a case, considering it failure, his resignation, divorce, moving out of the city. But, he still has instincts.

He meets friends in LA, does some revisiting of old haunts, making his base a seedy flophouse but is somewhat intrigued by a rather dapper young detective, suit and tie, giving press conferences concerning murders of women, the prospect of a serial killer. The young detective, Jimmy Baxter, has Rai Malek moving on from award-success with Freddie Mercury and a Bond villain. It seems unlikely at first, given the different styles of the two men, the older loner (and a visit to his ex-wife for a moment), the younger with wife and children, a family man. And so begins a practical apprenticeship.

Joe Deacon is shrewd, works behind the scenes, investigates where most would not think to search. Then, as soon as we see him, there is the potential villain, Albert Sparma, Jared Leto, penetrating eyes, suspicious, sinister...

Which means that a lot of the action of the film is cat and mouse work, Sparma being shrewd and manipulative. Eventually, of course, wild and confrontation.

However, there are some unexpected revelations at the end of the film, more about Joe Deacon and his past career, his work, his collaboration with the authorities in LA after a fatal shooting the understanding his motivations for his actions. His treatment of the younger man, tricked by Sparma, having to confront him, leading to a shooting which devastates him. Joe Deacon wants to help him, rehabilitate him.

So, while there is a great deal of action for action fans, there is an underlying human drama, played with seasoned experience by Denzel Washington and some ingenuous naivete by Rami Malek.

LONG STORY SHORT

Australia, 2021, 90 minutes, Colour.

Rafe Spall, Zahra Newman, Noni Hazlehurst, Ronnie Chieng, Dana Kaplan, Josh Lawson.

Directed by Josh Lawson.

Long Story Short sounds a touch enigmatic. However, it is actually a witty summary of how this entertaining moral fable works. It is a fantasy, a what if...? kind of story.

And, it explicitly notes its debt to Groundhog Day. In fact, this is something of a Groundhog Decade. Our hero, Teddy, wakes up each morning not to find that he is reliving the same day but rather a whole year has gone by – with a complication that he does not remember anything of the year that has passed but everybody else does and takes it for granted.

A moral fable. What if one had the opportunity to look into the future, to see what happens or, as a strong caution, to see what might have happened. How would we change our lives?

There was a film of the 1950s with Debbie Reynolds, *It Started with a Kiss*. And that is what happens here – vistas of Sydney Harbour, the bridge, the Opera house, the atmosphere of New Year's Eve, and Teddy rushing to see his girlfriend, kissing her at the midnight moment – only to find that it is someone else wearing a similar dress and colour! The screenplay doesn't waste much time and soon the couple are in love, engaged. Zahra Newman plays Leanne, a genial and sympathetic woman with whom anyone could fall in love.

Teddy goes to talk to his father in his grave at Waverley Cemetery and there he meets a strange older woman, played with dignity by Noni Hazlehurst, who challenges him about his forever delaying matters, always talking about 'later', being preoccupied with work and putting things on the long finger. Then, before you can say long story short, Leanne and Teddy get married. Needless to say, even on the wedding night, Teddy becomes preoccupied with his work.

Then, when he wakes up the next morning, his Groundhog Decade has begun. The audience is tantalised, along with Teddy, about what has happened in the previous year, of which he knows nothing! He does get filled in by Leanne and his close friend Sam (Ronnie Chieng). What could happen over a decade in a marriage? Yes, fondness and love, busyness and work, pregnancy, the birth of a child (and Teddy having to learn whether it was a boy or a girl and dislikes the name, Tallulah), distance, Leanne upset, leaving, possibilities of other relationships, even divorce. With Teddy all the while bewildered because it is still for him, the morning after the wedding night and he still loves Leanne.

There is a mysterious tin with a rattle, a gift from the strange woman at the cemetery, to be opened only after 10 years.

The question is, will 10 years, even in long story short form, be enough for Teddy to realise what he believes in, his love for Leanne, his love for Tallulah?

The film was written and directed by Josh Lawson, national and international actor, who wrote the comedy, *The Little Death*, and appears here in a significant cameo role as a psychologist with Leanne – and whom Teddy definitely dislikes.

The light touch but serious implications in this moral fable.

LOVE, WEDDINGS AND OTHER DISASTERS

US, 2020, 96 minutes, Colour.

Diane Keaton, Jeremy Irons, Maggie Grace, Diego Boneta, Andrew Bachelor, Dennis Dugan, Jesse Mc Cartney, Veronica Ferres, Elle King, Andy Goldenberg.

Directed by Dennis Dugan.

Unless the screenplay is the story of the Titanic or something similar, filmmakers should be wary about including the word disaster in the film title. Critics will be sure to take it up and use it against the film. Which they have with this one. There are quite a lot of disasters, slapstick, pratfalls, literal knockabout, and a spectacular opening of skydiving and the divers landing in the middle of an outdoor wedding, with the leading lady, Jessie, the skydiver who dropped her nervous boyfriend, television anchor, from the sky into a pool, earning the nickname The Wedding Crasher, instantly on social media. Perhaps The Wedding Crasher could have been the title for this film.

Whether you enjoy the film will very much depend on your sense of humour. Best to have a very broad, undemanding sense of humour. The screenplay sounds like Dennis Dugan (director of a number of Adam Sandler comedies and appearing in them), director, writer, co-producer, appearing as a reality show television compere, invited his colleagues to a meeting where they put forth a whole range of possible situations and some corny dialogue – and then he decided that that would be enough, that all will be included, a whole conglomeration, so to speak. And, it plays at that level.

Dugan himself to scenes, sending up comperes wine glass, in hand, of trashy reality shows – this one called Couple Crash with bizarre couples (Rabbi and Muslim, dwarf and tall woman...) Chained together, audience voting as to who was the most successful – prizemoney \$1 million!

Jessie is the central character of the film, beginning a career in wedding planning. She is played by Maggie Grace, the most attractive character in the film. She encounters a rather supercilious planner, Lawrence, played by Jeremy Irons, a widower, promised a blind date (turns out to be literal, Diane Keaton playing vision impaired, a bit like Annie Hall in her 70s). Jessie also is attracted to a band player, Mack (Diego Bonita) who is being stood up by his close friend, breaking up the band. Thankfully, throughout the film, there is a street singer playing her guitar, ready to take up the challenge of the wedding reception.

And then, there is Captain Richie (Andrew Bachelor playing as if he were auditioning, successfully, to be one of the Wayan brothers), with his boat-bus, tours of Boston, attracted to a young woman with a slipper tattoo on her neck, his desperate going on a Cinderella quest!

One question arises: what are Diane Keaton and Jeremy Irons doing in this kind of film (something which they might have been asking of themselves).

So, a piece of semi-raucous American froth, which might be described as an undemanding comedy.

MALCOLM AND MARIE

US, 2021, 106 minutes, Black-and-white.
Zendaya, John David Washington.
Directed by Sam Levinson.

Words can be brutal. Silence after brutal words can be healing.

And we share these experiences with Malcolm and Marie. While their conversations and recriminations are complex, this story is filmed in stark black and white.

Malcolm (John David Washington, [BlackKkklansman](#), Tenet) is a film writer-director, returning from a successful premiere of his new film, audiences responsive, critics praising. He is on an adrenaline high, singing and dancing around the kitchen, beyond exuberant. Marie, (Zendaya, The Greatest Showman, Euphoria) is his partner, dressed stylishly for the occasion, rather silent but cooking macaroni cheese for Malcolm (which he devours avidly).

Then the point – or at least the initial point... No, after 90 minutes, it is definitely the point. Malcolm has not thanked Marie publicly, omitted from his huge list of thanks, badly-unconsciously overlooking her. Her reminder is an accusation. In fact, there are layers and layers under Malcolm's exuberance. Marie challenges him to go down into those layers. As their interchanges go on, emotionally gruelling for them, emotionally gruelling for us, the audience. How do we identify? With whom? Different points of view, different perspectives, changing sympathies.

Malcolm is a bluff male, dominant, self-assured, shocked at Marie's outburst and sustained attack, an onslaught. And he is shamed by his behaviour. But he goes on the attack, questioning her motives, revealing her past story, the past, drug addiction, which he has incorporated into his film.

But she goes deeper. Why didn't he cast her in her own story?

John David Washington is convincing as Malcolm. But Zendaya has the more complex role, more complex and tortured character, having more mood swings – and a powerful scene with a resume of her painful past. And writer-director, Sam Levinson, gives her a marvellous sustained monologue where she puts a long list of gratitude and thanks into Malcolm's mouth.

After the verbal and emotional battle, comes the realisation of their love, and the film ends in silence.

MAX RICHTER's SLEEP

UK, 2019, 99 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Natalie Johns.

No, this is not a documentary about the sleeping habits of Max Richter. Rather, it is something of a portrait of Max Richter himself but one more, a focus on his composition, Sleep.

Max Richter was born in Germany but is an international composer and performer. His IMDb credits list indicates a range of compositions as well as the scoring of films and television series.

Sleep is a musical composition but also its performance is an event. And that is how the film begins, the introduction to a performance of Sleep, in the Grand Park of Los Angeles (with some glimpses of the performances in Amsterdam, in the UK, and in the Sydney Opera

House). We discover that Sleep is an eight hour composition and performance.

We see audiences gather at the Grand Park, allotted cots available for people who want to lie down, people bringing pyjamas and blankets, settling into the cots. There are all talking heads, a range of people who indicate why they are coming to this performance and what they might expect. For the first 10 minutes or more of the film, the audience settles down and the performance begins, very quietly, the music in the background, lulling, soothing...

Then the documentary moves into interviews with Max Richter himself, the great support he has from his wife, interesting information and comments from her. We see them together, at home, ordinary sequences.

And, the rest of the film is an intercutting between the portrait of Richter and the performance of Sleep. The music plays in the background, quietly, Richter at the piano, chamber music with six performers, solo violinists, and a singer. And there is a synthesiser on stage blending the musical experience.

The aim of the experience and its art is for people to move into restful consciousness, to sleep itself, perhaps to dream, different stages of awareness, waking, resting, sleeping again, the whole performance starting at 10 PM, moving to early dawn and sunrise and the beginning of activity in the city, coming to an end to begin the day at 6 AM.

The music style is classical, generally slower and quieter, even inducing for the film audience to nod off...

For audiences who want narrative in their films, it is minimal here. For audiences who want a different cinematic experience, aural and visual, this one is different.

MINARI

US, 2020, 115 minutes, Colour.

Stephen Yuen, Yeri Hahn, Alan S.Kim, Yuh- jung Youn, Will Patton.

Directed by Lee Isaac Chung.

Arkansas. The 1980s. The Reagan era and hopes for prosperity.

Into the countryside with a family, Korean migrants who have been living and working in California, labouring with 16 chickens. The father Jacob (Steven Yeun)) has bought a property and is determined to support his family and live the American dream . The mother, Monica (Yeri Han) is sceptical, especially when she sees the trailer like dwelling. They have a daughter, Anne (Noel Cho), and a little boy, David and Alan Kim), who has a heart condition requiring him to be near a hospital. Jacob is single-minded. Monica is argumentative. The children are upset by the fights.

We know that this is going to be a struggle for survival. Jacob is independent, not wanting to pay for a water diviner, digging a well which may not supply sufficient water for his crops, Korean vegetables that he hopes to sell to Korean-Americans². Bank loans, Monica working full-time with chickens, Jacob working part-time, buying a tractor. He also becomes friends with a local character, Paul (will Patton), hard-working, religious, eccentric as he carries a

large cross along the roads every Sunday. The family are welcomed into the local church.

One solution for coping with problems is for the family to enable Monica's mother to come from Korea to join them. Audiences may have been expecting a sweet old lady, but... She is tough, not against rough language, is unable to cook, snores, and David is forced to share his room with her. He is not pleased.

The strange thing about the drama is that while there is a great deal about the work on the farm, the work with the chickens, so much of the drama, with comic touches, is devoted to the relationship between the grandmother and David. In some ways, this makes the screenplay lopsided, many audiences much more interested in the story of grandmother and grandson rather than the problems on the farm.

As might be expected, in real life as well as in the drama like this, disaster looms. And there are complications with Monica thinking about leaving, Jacob becoming determined, more determined, testing his choices about family and farm. There is bad news with grandmother's health. There is better news with David's health. And, then, fiercely shown in the trailer, perhaps unfortunately, a fire.

And the title? The grandmother has brought with her and her from Korea (amongst some other local produce her drink which David detests, throwing it out and being into the glass and testing out his grandmother). She planted near a water hole where it thrives. A symbol.

Audiences have been very moved by this story and its characters, the struggle for survival, the hopes for success. Golden Globe winner for Best Foreign Language Film.

NEWS OF THE WORLD

US, 2020, 117 minutes, Colour.

Tom Hanks, Helena Zengel, Ray Mc Kinnon, Mare Winningham, Elizabeth Marvel, Michael Angelo Covino, Thomas Francis Murphy, Bill Camp, Fred Echinger
Directed by Paul Greengrass.

News of the World sounds quite a contemporary title. So, it is something of a surprise to find that the setting for this drama, this western, is 1870. And the setting is Texas, Confederacy territory, with bitter memories of the Civil War, the issues of slavery, the consequences of defeat, payment, and the fact that General Ulysses S Grant was president of the United States.

This is a Western and there are many familiar episodes. But, it is a different West. First of all, it is seen from the perspective of Captain Kyle Kidd who had served in the war, had been a printer before the war, had lost his wife to cholera, and was travelling the small towns of Texas, collecting newspapers, small gatherings in the town, everybody paying ten cents, listening to the stories that the Captain would choose, local stories of heroics, of natural disasters, but also stories of Federation which go down badly with the Texans bitter about the consequences of the war.

Tom Hanks plays the Captain, his going to the west for the first time. And, once again, Tom Hanks shows that he is the embodiment of American decency, a confident righteousness, a humanity that can be challenged.

But, what makes the difference to this story is his encountering a man hanged by racists, the carriage overturned, a little girl cowering. While the Captain wants to entrust her to the military, they refuse and order him to go to the authorities for her to be taken back to an uncle and aunt. The documents indicate that her family had been killed by the Kiowa Indians and she had been taken and had lived with them, learning their language, absorbing their culture, but they too had been massacred.

Which means that the film is something of a road film on the American West trails. The Captain and the little girl, Johanna, though she indicates her name from the Kiowa is Cicada, experience a number of Western adventures which keeps the film interesting and at times, frightening and exciting. They go to a town where the owner of the boarding house is able to speak the Kiowa language and tell the Captain something of the girl's story. There are former soldiers who want to buy the girl and pursue them into the mountains, a subsequent shootout. Their carriage crashes and the horses need to be put down. They have to trek through vast plains.

There is an enormous tornado. There is a strange self-contained community of workers, slaves under the domination of a drunken exploiter. There is an encounter with homeless Indians on the move.

Which means then that the film is episodic but continually interesting as the two begin to bond, despite the limited language, despite the girl's fears.

And the strength of the film is very much in the performance by Helena Zengel as Johanna. The very young, the actress was acclaimed at the Berlin Film Festival of 2019 for her performance as a wilful young girl in *The System Crusher*. Here she is able to hold her own with Tom Hanks – and an indication of a successful future career.

And the film has many moving moments – but, a literally happy ending as the captain reads the news but then tells his eager audience and amusing shaggy dog story. Which amuses them – but also amuses us, bringing to a close the couple and their wanderings and our sharing their adventures with them.

THE PAINTER AND THE THIEF

Norway, 2020, 98 minutes, Colour.
Barbora Kysiklova, Karl- Bertil Nordland, Oystein Stene.
Directed by Benjamin Ree.

An audience coming upon this film without any fore-warning, would assume that it is a drama, a fictional story – and that is the way that it plays out. It comes as something of a surprise to find that it is, in fact, a documentary.

The central character is a Czech artist, Barbora Kysiklova, with a very distinctive visual style, using photographs but developing characters and situations with sketching, pencil drawing, a fast pallet of paints and high imagination. She is living in Oslo, the film explaining that she had an abusive relationship in the Czech Republic but was rescued by a writer-director,

Oystein Stene, and moved to Norway, where she has been successful, mounting an exhibition.

There are many sequences throughout the film showing her at work, different moments in her process of painting, and close-ups of many of them.

The complication comes when two of her paintings are stolen from a Gallery. Surveillance footage is shown of the theft. However, the thieves are apprehended fairly quickly, there is a court case.

The other central character is one of the thieves, Karl- Bertil Nordland, and the documentary shows Barbora's portrait of him as well as offering a visual and psychological portrait of him himself. A harsh growing up, some talents in carpentry, intelligent, addiction, prison, involvement in the theft.

Which means that the central drama is the relationship between Barbora and Karl- Bertil, her questions, his responses, their being comfortable in each other's presence, her decision to paint him, his extraordinary and weeping response to seeing the first portrait, more portraits, especially of his hand and its wound which looks like stigmata.

Documentary film-maker, Benjamin Ree, also one of the cinematographers, follows each of the characters over the years, Karl Bertil and his reckless car accident, hospitalisation, another prison sentence, and sequences in the prison (so much more civilised than those huge American prisons with surly and violent prisoners in yards). The filmmaker also follows Barbora, some sequences of marriage counselling, her growing involvement with Karl- Bertil, especially in his rehabilitation after the accident, not communicating with him in prison, but their meeting again, he something of a different person, clean and with ambitions to do something with his life as he turns 40.

The film keeps part of its intrigue until the final 20 minutes, some revelations about what happened with the theft and the consequences.

Audiences will wonder how the documentary came to be made, has it has such access to surveillance, the art, to the lives of the two characters. The IMDb (under the unfortunate title, Trivia) offers some detailed information – to be read after the viewing of the film.

The film started as a short documentary, but the filmmakers changed their plan when Karl- Bertil saw himself painted for the first time. Then they decided to keep on filming for many years to come. They filmed from 2016-2019 not knowing what would happen or where the story might go.

Interesting?

The reason why Barbora Kysiklova (the painter) is speaking English in the film is because she doesn't understand Norwegian.

From the director's statement: "From the moment I began filming I wanted to explore the complex friendship between the painter and the thief. Two questions were the driving motor: What do we humans do to be seen and appreciated, and why do we help others? For me, filmmaking is about asking intellectually stimulating and emotionally engaging questions

through observing human behavior. I hope I have managed to raise some intriguing questions with this film, questions you will think about long after the end credits. I have also tried to push the cinema verite form onto a new path, with several perspectives jumping back and forth in time, revealing new layers of the friendship throughout the whole film. I have worked hard to find a cinematic form to suit the content for each scene, that reflects the inner state of the characters."

A friend of Barbora began filming her already back in 2014. She took photos and filmed the making of the two paintings that later would be stolen and she was also there during the exhibition. She also participated in the trial. The courtroom recordings are the actual recording of the first meeting of Karl- Bertil and Barbora. Together with the CCTV footage, these archives makes up the beginning of the film.

The filmmakers read about the robbery in various Norwegian newspapers. They contacted Barbora and began filming her first, and it took some time to get access to film Karl- Bertil (the thief). They began filming him the 4th time Barbora and Karl- Bertil met.

PIXIE

UK, 2020, 93 minutes, Colour.

Olivia Cooke, Ben Hardy, Daryl Mc Cormack, Colm Meaney, Alec Baldwin, Dylan Moran, Olivia Byrne, Chris Walley, Ned Dennehy, Pat Shortt, Sebastian De Sousa.

Directed by Barnaby Thompson.

For a girl's name, Pixie sounds rather elf-like, fairy-like. In fact, Pixie here is something of a bewitching witch played with self-confident charm by Olivia Cooke. But this is something of a fairytale – more in the vein of the Brothers Grimm than Hans Christian Andersen!

There is an instant caption: Once Upon a Time in the West, in red. Then, in bold white, is added: Of Ireland. So we know we are in the land of leprechauns and of the IRA.

This is one of those enjoyable adventures where it is probably best to leave some moral sensibilities at the door. It is not meant to be taken literally – or is it? The Irish can spin a yarn and this is what this film is, a complicated yarn with so many twists and turns, so many characters with dubious and double values, and betrayals galore.

And, of course, Ireland has been a Catholic country with Catholic traditions and pedestals for the clergy. These come tumbling down pretty fast, also an indicator of what is to come. Two young robbers gatecrash a clerical meeting, local Irish, visiting clergy from Afghanistan – but, all is definitely not what it looks like, machine guns drawn, and down go the clergy who, in fact, were negotiating a huge drug deal, 15 kilos.

There is a romantic complication between the two men, one Pixie's former boyfriend, on a long break, as he says, and her new boyfriend. Shooting, taking the bag of drugs, stalking Pixie.

Meanwhile, down at the bar, we are introduced to Frank and Harland (Ben Hardy and Daryl Mc Cormack), old friends, eye on the girls, the drugs, Pixie giving them the come on. Pixie is a photographer and Frank ends up as a model, Harland seeing the threat from the old

boyfriend, crashing into him – finishing up with a seeming corpse in the boot, the three on the run.

Meanwhile, there is a complication of Pixie's father, discovering the dead man in the car, his being a gangster, past IRA gunrunner with Father Hector Mc Grath (Alec Baldwin of all people), devoted to his daughters, tolerating his hefty son from a former marriage, but delighting in being a chef. There is also the sadness of the death of his wife, and Pixie visiting her grave.

Which all leads to more shenanigans, dad in pursuit, his hiring of a vicious hitman from IRA days, Seamus (Ned Dennehy), Frank and Harland relying on their friend who works at the airport, Daniel (Chris Walley) who suggests taking the drugs to his main dealer, his uncle (Dylan Moran). Uncle tries to be too smart but doesn't count on Pixie and a swift knife with a thrust to his hand!

Pixie and co-on the run, eventually caught, finding out the truth about Pixie's mother's death. Audiences who were surprised, may be dismayed, by the sacerdotal revelation of drug dealing, there is an even more hyped-up climax, more priests, Father Hector Mc Grath in vengeance mood, but always acknowledging God, an arsenal of machine guns, old-style habited nuns (of the severest Irish visages), a huge church shootout, but Pixie and her friends saved by the intervention... More twists than the coastal highways.

All's well that ends well, so it seems, and for Pixie it is, but as for Frank and Harland...

THEN CAME YOU

US, 2020, 97 minutes, Colour.

Craig Ferguson, Kathie Lee Gifford, Ford Kiernan, Phyllida Law, Brett James, Elizabeth Hurley.

Directed by Adriana Trigiani.

With a title like this (and a valid song with the same title at the end), this has to be a romantic comedy.

And, it is, but with a difference. The target audience for *Then Came You* is women of a certain age. And the central character is a woman of that same certain age, Annabelle, played by actress and television host, Kathie Lee Gifford, who also wrote the screenplay, obviously empathising with the experiences and feelings of this kind of woman of a certain age.

Not that the film is not entertaining and targeted also for men of a certain age. Actor and writer, Craig Ferguson, plays Howard, the owner of a mansion in Scotland, near Loch Lomond. He is a widower, living rather reclusively, but making rooms in the mansion available for tourists. Annabelle books in and leaves her home in Nantucket where she lived with her late husband, working in his hardware store, and sets out for a tour of the world, beginning in Scotland.

Perhaps it is a Scots characteristic, but Kathie Lee Gifford gives Howard quite a lot of antagonistic comments, especially concerning Americans, their rather extroverted attitudes and behaviour, different vocabulary (petrol and gas) and on which side of the road to drive.

After Howard picks up Annabelle from the railway station, it is only a few moments of screen time before they are arguing, Howard running out of petrol, Annabelle irritably walking the rest of the way...

Obviously, we know how it is all going to end up, but the enjoyment of this kind of story is getting to know the characters, experience their cantankerousness, become more comfortable in their getting to know each other, an experience of some crisis or other, and...

One of the complications is that Howard has decided to marry an attractive business woman from London, and, with some glamour, she is played by Elizabeth Hurley. Clearly a match not made in heaven, even Howard's son not wanting to come to the wedding.

But, it turns out there is a reason for Annabelle coming to Scotland, to this particular part of Scotland, which has a connection with her late husband and a family connection of Howard's, an old lady played by Phyllida Law (in her late 80s). The other character on hand is Gavin (Ford Kiernan), a plumber, Howard's good friend and handyman.

Annabelle is, as they say in America, quite feisty. Howard, a touch of the Scot dour manner, has feisty in him. So, we are treated to something of a low-key battle of the sexes, a sexual encounter which needs to be reflected on by the two, Annabelle wanting to go on her way, but, of course, finding her way back.

There are quite a number of songs throughout, and the credits indicate that they have been written by Kathie Lee Gifford herself, along with her writing partner and musician (who appears with her in the pub sequence singing a key song, Whiskey and Wine, which Howard in fact detests), Brett James.

One of those easy entertainments for a morning or matinee gathering at the local cinema with refreshments.

THE TRUFFLE HUNTERS

Italy, 2020, 84 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Michael Dweck, Gregory Kershaw.

Possibly the first question to ask most audiences is: what exactly is a truffle? And a follow-up question: have you ever eaten truffle? A great number of responses would be in the negative.

This brief documentary does not answer every question about truffles but leads the audience to northern Italy, the Piermont area, centring on Asti at the foot of the Alps. It seems that the forests in this area are a key growing ground for truffles, though they are still fairly rare, have to be sought out by experts, the truffle hunters, and the special truffle hunters, their dogs who go sniffing through the forests, digging up the soil, revealing the rare truffles.

For those of an economic/financial frame of mind, there is a line in the film which reveals that truffles sell at €4500 a kilo. There are scenes of local sales and bargaining where prices for the truffle hunters are much, much lower.

The whole film is something of a jigsaw – or, perhaps, mosaic might be a better word. In fact,

the various sequences could have been placed in any order and the result be much the same.

The film opens with one of the old codgers, the veteran truffle hunters, with his dogs, climbing a forest hill. He appears throughout the film – and shows himself quite an expert drummer and percussionist. One of the other old codgers, Carlo, is 84, with a rather dominating wife who summons him into the house, to meals, and does not want him to go out during the night still in search of truffles, for fear of accidents. He climbs out the window! Then there is another eccentric old man who has given up truffles, works in mechanics, but sits at an old typewriter writing his poems. They are the main characters we get to know and to see in action, and are, absolutely, devoted to their dogs. (Definitely a film for dog lovers.)

Then we have the background of the truffle agents, some part of a family dynasty in this work, urging the old men to go out to find more, doing financial deals, talking about orders coming in from all over the world. Then there are the more official sales, experts examining the truffles for their quality, and everybody, everybody, continually sniffing the truffles. There is something of a dignified exhibition, some of the truffles rather enthroned for observation. And, the chief tester and taster having a meal of eggs and fondue, with grated truffle sprinkled over. He responds with gourmet satisfaction.

The company that made the film, also with the strong backing of the Sundance Institute and Festival, is called Beautiful Stories. Depending on one's liking for documentaries, for exotic growth and culinary interests, for stories about old men and dedication, and a liking for dogs, this multi-award-winning film, will be a pleaser. (For those for whom truffles are dirty and ugly old funghi, perhaps not,)

WILD MOUNTAIN THYME

Ireland/UK, 2020, 102 minutes, Colour.

Emily Blunt, Jamie Dornan, Jon Hamm, Christopher Walken.

Directed by John Patrick Shanley.

An initial helpful piece of advice might be that an audience needs to be in a genial frame of mind before entering into this unusual romantic comedy. It is an Irish comedy. In many ways it is fey. In many ways it is twee. So, the genial frame of mind and mood for this visit to County Mayo requires a blend of fey and twee, with more than a touch of tolerance. (The IMDb as something of a catalogue of comments without that touch of tolerance!)

The film has been written and directed by American playwright, John Patrick Shanley, who had some screen popularity in the 1980s with his screenplay for Moonstruck and his foray into film writing and directing with the (fey and twee) Joe versus the Volcano. However, he was very successful with the screen adaptation of his play about a priest and accusations of sexual abuse and his interactions with the local nuns (Philip Seymour Hoffman and Meryl Streep), Doubt.

In fact, he has adapted one of his plays, Outside Mullingar, for this film. He has chosen the title with reference to a flower, the wild mountain thyme, and a song that is sung throughout the film, plaintive melody and lyrics.

The fey begins almost immediately, a narration by the older Anthony (Christopher Walken

with the demands of an Irish accent), telling's that he is dead, but taking us into this tale of his family. We get a glimpse of his son Anthony as a boy, scenes sniffing flowers (no spoiler, but this is most significant for a revelation at the end of the film, more than fey!). Watching him is the little daughter of the neighbours, Rosemary. When Anthony plays with Fiona, Rosemary is more than glum, having to be urged on by her crow-shooting father. So, not exactly Romeo and Juliet, but Anthony and Rosemary are neighbours on rival farms.

Then the adults. Rosemary becomes Emily Blunt, grieving for her ill mother who dies, managing her farm with great energy – and, singing Wild Mountain Thyme, but her eyes fixed on Anthony. Anthony seems to be something of a klutz with his metal detector and pratfalls, also managing his farm. Jamie Dornan plays Anthony, about 180 degree turn from his 50 shades shenanigans.

When older Anthony has a birthday party, and a nephew arrives from New York, Adam, the reliable Jon Hamm, very upfront, very out there, a moneymaker who enjoys drawing attention to himself, thinking about farming, wanting a wife, encountering Rosemary. He invites her to New York and, on impulse, she flies there one day, watches a ballet which is her main ambition, enjoys a meal and flies back, Anthony not noticing her absence.

When Adam decides to return, having kissed Rosemary New York, it is time for some kind of confrontation between Rosemary and Anthony. She, of course, takes the initiative.

What follows is one of the most eccentric romantic conversations in film, he revealing his personal secret (back to his smell and the flowers when young), she not particularly bothered, evoking his jealousy about the kiss with Adam, giving him Guinness to drink, and, eventually, love.

In case anyone was worried, Adam meets a very sympathetic passenger on the plane!

And, in the end, despite the emotional tangles, happiness prevails.

WRONG TURN

US, 2021, 109 minutes, Colour.

Charlotte Vega, Matthew Modine, Bill Sage, Adaiin Bradley, Dylan Mc Tee, Daisy Head, Emma Dumont, Valerie Jane Parker, Rhyen Elizabeth Hanavan.

Directed by Mike P.Nelson.

Wrong Turn is a pretty good title for a creepy thriller. In fact, it was used back in 2003, a group of young people, the Virginia mountains, difficult tracks and treks, mysterious inhabitants in those mountains. Good reviews. Fan support. And the title held good for another four sequels from 2007 to 2011 with added themes to the titles: Dead End, Left for Dead, Bloody Beginnings, Bloodlines.

And, in 2021, here we are again. But, better.

Prolific writer, from Star Trek to horror films, Alan Mc Elroy, created the original characters and wrote the screenplays for the sequels. He has written this film. We are back to a group of young adults trekking the Appalachian mountains, warnings from the locals, looking eerie

and suspicious, not to veer from the tracks, that nature devours travellers and no one returns. But, this time the subtitle of the film is: Foundation. And we discover what Foundation means, quite an arresting idea, that in 1859, 12 families took to the mountains, prior to the Civil War, and set up a society that would be an exemplar so that if the world collapsed, the members of the Foundation and their descendants could emerge.

However, the film opens with veteran Matthew Modine as a father searching for his daughter who was one of the trekking group. The locals are not particularly welcoming or helpful. Then the action goes back six weeks to the group arriving in the town, getting the same warnings.

The six adults on trek are not entirely sympathetic. The main one who is is Jennifer, Charlotte Vega (who has some action sequences which she could do because she was a star of the Netflix series, *Killer Nuns!*). Matthew Modine is her father. Her boyfriend is the leader of the group, urging them to go off the beaten track to see a Civil War fort, only for them to get lost (understatement) and experience weird goings-on in the woods.

So, a lot of weird scenes, characters wearing huge animal masks, stalking the group, vicious traps in the forest, lots of fear – and, one of the characters, more than smugly arrogant, denouncing these backwoods people. (We look forward to his comeuppance!)

Actually, these are not supernatural experiences at all. It is the members of The Foundation, the descendants of the original people, preserving their isolation (although we have seen the daughter of the leader and a little girl in town and selling souvenirs). Actually, the members of the foundation are rather barbaric, despite their claims that they are not, with a large prison, execution rites...

There are some flashbacks to the father, then he takes centre screen for a while, locals offering to help him search for his daughter, experiencing the traps in the woods, face-to-face with the Foundation members, and seeing the fate of his daughter.

There are sufficient twists and turns, some wrong turns, to keep us alert – and the screenwriter seems to have prepared three possible endings, and includes them all. One seems ordinary enough. The other is a dramatic trick. And, just as the credits start to come up (and a warning not to leave), the third and final ending (quite effective) takes place as the credits roll.

The young adults are prone to limited vocabulary over-swearing – something which tapers off as we encounter the foundation people. There are some gory moments. But, overall, this is an entertaining variation on its themes.

ZAPPA

US, 2020, 129 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Alex Winter.

Audiences will come to this documentary-portrait with different expectations. Many, younger, since it is almost 30 years since the death of Frank Zappa, may not know him at all.

Others will have heard of him but his life and music not registering. And, there will be those who know his life and music, who have great admiration, who are critical, who want to be reminded of who he was, his musical heritage, what he achieved.

All potential audiences will not be disappointed.

Alex Winter is a long-time actor (best known for Bill and Ted) but also a long-time documentary director. He has known show business for many decades. And that is evident here in the range of talking heads incorporated into the documentary, Zappa's wife and children, colleagues, co-workers, and a range of celebrities who knew him and/or have opinions about him.

Frank Zappa was born in 1940, died in 1993, a significant 50 years, a half-century of the second part of the 20th century. As we go through his career, the background of his life is built up, Italian origins, migrant tradition, grew up in the 40s, educated in the 1950s. Ready to enter into the enormous changes of the 1960s. While he lived something of a wild lifestyle, in common with many rock stars, he did not consider himself hippy and his style, was against drugs. In fact, he was something of a perfectionist in his work and in his expectations of himself and others.

It is surprising for those not familiar with him and his work, that he was such an international figure, excerpts throughout this film from various concerts, especially in different countries of Europe, early in the piece making significant contribution to Czechoslovakia and the politics following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Empire.

Of course, a great deal of attention is given to his music. While he had quite a range of rock music and performance, this was not exclusive. In fact, a lot of attention is given to the influence of the idiosyncratic composer, Varese, his notations, his sounds, his compositions. Which means that the Zappa was something of a classical composer – and, once again, there are a number of excerpts of performances of this style of music and communication.

We see the founding of the Mothers of Invention – and recurring talking heads of a great number of musicians who worked with Zappa – and who say he changed their lives and careers, especially the devoted Ruth Underwood.

On stage, however, there was a variety of impressions an impact, music theatre, performance art, the touches of cruelty, theatre of the absurd. And, in dire ways, the absurd entered his life with severe accidents and long convalescent periods.

Out of the limelight, just as himself, Frank Zappa seems to give an impression of ordinariness – this is particularly the case when he is interviewed about his wife and relationship with her, his pride in his children, some clashes in production and interpretation with his daughter, Moon, his being sometimes distant, not hugging, at other times proud of his children. But the calm Zappa is seen especially when he is showing the director and the crew around his archive. And, it is an enormous archive of his compositions, recordings, performances, all meticulously ordered and dated, his wanting to have a record of his life, for himself more than for others.

Throughout the film there are clay figures. The story is told about who was a sculptor in clay, Bruce Bickford, encountered Zappa, created figurines, delighted Zappa and became part of

his entourage, a significant figure in Zappa's life and career.

This review is not familiar with Frank Zappa at all, except for his name and for passing references and the suggestion of touches of weirdness.

Many audiences, unfamiliar with Zappa, will join with this reviewer and be thankful for such a rich dramatic portrait, the heritage of music, the cultural challenges of the second part of the 20th century.

FRENCH FILM FESTIVAL SELECTION

BOITE NOIRE/ BLACK BOX

France, 2020, 129 minutes, Colour.

Pierre Niney, Lou de Laage, Andre Dussollier, Sebastien Pouderou.

Directed by Yann Gozlan.

This is an intense detective story. However, detective story might be overstating the case, even misleading. But, it is an investigation.

A flight from Dubai to Paris over the Alps, opens the film, audiences familiar with flights identifying easily with what is going on, the range of passengers, meal service, movement around the plane, the taking of selfies... We see the flight attendants bringing meals to the pilot in the cockpit. Then, danger, upset, the mystery of a crash and debris scattered through the Alps.

Then we are introduced to the expert investigators. The focus is on Mathieu, a substantial role for popular French actor, Pierre Niney, an intense young man, revealed more and more as passionately obsessive, who has had theories about causes for crashes – speculating but evidence indicating he was wrong. Some of the authorities prefer him not to be on investigation cases – and that is the case here. The sequences at the crash site, the finding of the black box, the opening, are televised and Mathieu watches. The recording from the black box is downloaded, taken to the laboratories and listened to over and over again, trying to detect sounds, irregularities, voices...

Mathieu wanted to be a pilot, has poor eyesight, but has an intensity of sensitivity to sound.

Mathieu is married to his wife, Lou de Laage, who is also an expert in aviation, working on checking security for aircraft. She is being lured to another job with the aviation company whose plane has crashed. She is friendly with the Chief Executive and with other flight authorities. Mathieu, on the other hand, perseveres with his work, the initial investigator having disappeared. He is supported by his boss, played by French veteran, Andre Dussollier.

The disappearance of the chief investigator moves the action into a detective story, with Mathieu searching the investigator's office, finding an address, going to the house, unearthing further information, leading to the solving of a mystery about the black box itself.

In the meantime, he continues with hypotheses, continually testing, trying the patience, even of his boss who has to ask him to step down. And, he clashes with his wife, even taking

documents from her computer, with leads to severe estrangement.

In fact, the last 20 minutes of the film are quite action-packed, Mathieu and danger to his life, finding the information that solves the case, the film visually showing what happened on board, and the dramatic and public expose of the person responsible, ultimately, for the crash and a cover-up.

For those of a technical mind, plenty to interest with the details of the technology for aircraft, for security, for investigation of black boxes, of computer hacking... But, for those who can be a bit bewildered by such technical knowledge, an interesting character study, an intriguing investigation.

FINAL SET/CINQUIEME SET

France, 2020, 105 minutes, Colour.

Alex Lutz, Ana Girardot, Kristin Scott Thomas.

Directed by Quentin Reynaud.

From the title, it is no surprise to realise that this is a tennis film. And, for those who are tennis fans, quite a deal to enjoy. And, for those who are not tennis fans, this is a drama about ambition, seeming failure, disappointment, rekindled hopes and...

At the centre of this story is a 37-year-old veteran tennis player, with the unusual French name of Thomas J. Edison. His played with quite some intensity by Alex Lutz. We quickly learn that he had a disastrous match in 2001, injury, failure, a disappointment to the public because he was an emerging French hero of the tennis court. In 2019, there is another 17-year-old tennis player whom the crowds are hailing, Damien Thosso.

Edison is very conscious of the injuries to his knee and leg, able to analyse x-rays with great accuracy to his doctor. But, he wants to play again, to make a comeback, able to list a variety of players who achieved success and rank in their 30s, including Jimmy Connors. Is it possible? And, what of his devoted wife, a former tennis player who played for clubs, Eve (Ana Girardot) but who has sacrificed a lot of her life staying at home with the young son, Gaspard. With the seeming termination of his tennis career insight, Eve is hoping to start a course on Sports Management, something for herself.

And, at first in the background, then coming into the foreground, Edison's mother, as they say, formidable. And, as played by Kristin Scott Thomas, this is not just a mother-role, this is a mother with dominant influence, coaching him in the past, disappointed in his failure, wondering about his mental stamina for success. And, she is not afraid to voice her opinions. Towards the end of the film, there is a strong sequence, a frank exchange between mother and son, an opportunity for the son to express his frustrations, his disappointments, his driving hopes.

Edison is able to participate in the qualifying rounds for the French Open. He participates in a number of rounds – some scenes of playing, some focus on the scoreboard, some of the aftermath, especially with his injuries and the blood coming from his hand.

There is quite some drama about Edison, his attitudes, his moods (even with his good friend

who trains him), and the issue of possibilities for further tournaments and the offer of a commercial contract for advertising.

The title indicates that there will be five sets – and this is in the first round of the French Open, and his draw is against the up-and-coming Damien Thosso. Needless to say, it will be something of a marathon – and this is where the film incorporates quite a number of serves, rallies, glancing shots, crowd enthusiasm, physical strain.

And, if this is what the audience would want, Final Set, the fifth set, certainly supplies it.

POLICE

France, 2020, 100 minutes, Colour.

Omar Sy, Virginie Efira, Gregory Gadebois, Payman Maadi.

Directed by Anne Fontaine.

A French film with the title Police might expect to be a tough action show – and there have been many. This one is rather different insofar as it is set in a local Paris precinct, rather low-key compared with officers, charged with dealing with a lesser, investigating terrorism...

And the central character is female, Virginie a married officer played by Virginie Efira, mother of a child, tensions with her husband, different tensions with the various men in the precinct. And, with this emphasis, it is significant that the film was directed by Anne Fontaine, not a director known for action films but rather studies of relationships and a portrait of Coco Chanel.

The two supporting characters are male. The ever-genial Omar Sy gives the appearance of being self-assured but is also self-conscious about his origins in Senegal. And has taken advantage of his relationship with Virginie. The other supporting character is Eric, a veteran of 20 years, straight up-and-down, letter of the law, but feeling the pressure and also alienated from his wife despite his best efforts.

We are shown the three involved in three cases, one of domestic violence, a wife still loving her husband but treated brutally by him – and his brutally treating Virginie when she comes with the investigating team. The group also has to go out to quell a city riot.

The main task is to accompany a refugee held in a detention centre who is to be deported. The three take him to the airport and questions are raised as to the justice of his deportation, an attempt to help him even escape but he cowers in the back of the car thinking the police are going to kill him. There is an extreme of the ultimate solution – symbolising a protest against harsh detention regulations.

At the back of all this action is an abortion issue.

A police film with a difference.

SKIES OF LEBANON. SOUS LE CIEL D'ALICE

The 2020, 892 minutes, Colour.
Alba Rohrwacher, Wahdi Mouawad, Isabelle Zighondi,
Directed by Chloe Mazlo.

Over the years there have been many films about the civil war in Lebanon, some from Lebanon itself, others from Israel and the Israeli perspective on the war, Hezbollah and its antagonism towards Israel, Israel and attacks.

This is a personalised perspective on Lebanon, decades of peace, antagonism, civil war and brutality, the collapse of the country. The English title emphasises the focus on Lebanon itself. On the other hand, the French title focuses on the central character, Alice and her experience in Lebanon and of the war.

The film opens with Alice sitting on a boat, leaving Beirut in 1977, writing a letter to her husband who has remained behind. Then she destroys the letter. Later during the film, we see her writing another letter, reflecting on her reasons for returning to Switzerland, and her disappointment.

The action of the film then moves into animation, clay animation, eccentric figures, life in Switzerland in the mountains, the young Alice and her training in infant care, the nuns supervising, her getting her diploma, scenes with her family at the meal table, an invitation to work in Lebanon, her farewell to the family and sailing for Lebanon. There is some animation later in the film, especially in maps for travels.

However, the style then moves into live-action, but often very stylised, like animation. Alice is dressed like Alice in Wonderland, with a pinafore. One of the key focuses on Alice and change is what she wears throughout the film. She is met at the wharf by what seems like a fairy godmother character (who will later become involved in the violence of the Civil War). Very quickly, sketches of Alice wheeling a pram, studio sets with photos and paintings in the background.

However, the action becomes more real as Alice encounters a friendly man, Joseph (played by Wajdi Mouawad, play on which the excellent Lebanese film, *Incendies*, was based) at a cafe who recites a poem – and then quick action, Alice meeting his family, love, marriage, their life together, a touch of animation as storks with bundles fly over with Alice reaching for one, and eventually capturing one, baby daughter, Mona.

All is well with Alice, bonding well with Joseph's brother and his family, and his sister. And Joseph, who has revealed that he is interested in rocket science and works in a laboratory, continues with his work, some achievement, Alice going to the launch of some rockets.

It all seems rather idyllic.

1975, rumblings of war, bombardments, assassinations, fighting in the streets (symbolised here by one street and a pile of sand bags, a group of enemies on each side, clashing). The hostilities gradually impose on Alice and Joseph, their daughter wanting to go to Paris to follow her boyfriend who has left, bombings on the rocket laboratory, troops invading the house in search for weapons, peacekeeping forces intruding. While not much war action is actually shown on screen, the tensions, the atmosphere, the dangers are ever present.

And back to Alice on the boat, Joseph staying to keep working on the rockets, regrets - but the audience leaving the film with great feeling and some hope.

FILM REVIEWS APRIL 2021

BEE GEES, The : HOW CAN YOU MEND A BROKEN HEART

CAPONE

CHAOS WALKING

COLLECTIVE

COSMIC SIN

COURIER, The

CRISIS

DEMON SLAYERS THE MOVIE: THE MUGAN TRAIN

DISCLOSURE

ESCAPE FROM PRETORIA

FATHER, The

FELLINI OF THE SPIRITS

FRANCESCO

FRENCH EXIT

GODZILLA vs KONG

GOLDEN VOICES

GREAT BARRIER REEF

GREENLAND

JUDAS AND THE BLACK MESSIAH

LAST VEMEER, The

MOXIE

NOBODY

PETER RABBIT 2

RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON

SAINT MAUD

SUPERNOVA

SYNCHRONIC

TOM AND JERRY

TWO BY TWO: OVERBOARD

YES DAY

THE BEE GEES: HOW CAN YOU MEND A BROKEN HEART

US, 2020, 111 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Frank Marshall.



How can you mend a broken heart is one of the Bee Gee's immediately recognisable songs. But, as this pleasing documentary highlights, there are so many others. And, of course, the film begins and ends with Stayin' Alive.

This is a film about the Bee Gees and their career, their music. It is not a film about their personal lives, though indication of their family bonding, the move from the Isle of Man to Queensland, the return to the UK, the role of their parents, their father as manager, the younger brother, Andy, and his career and their making him part of the ensemble in 1988 (with a brief indication about his drug use and the regrets about his heart attack and death at the age of 30). There is some information about the marriages of each of the Bee Gees, some quotations from some of their wives. But, this is not a film about gossip.

Which means that there is a great emphasis on each of the three brothers and their personalities, Barry the oldest and something of a surrogacy-father during their careers, the twins Robin and Maurice, Barry with the strong voice, discovering his falsetto, Robin and his genial personality and harmony, Maurice and his ability to harmonise.

The Bee Gees came in the aftermath of the Beatles' breakup. And, while the Beatles still dominate musical memory, this documentary indicates the worldwide popularity of the Bee Gees, emerging at the end of the 1960s, coming into their own during the 1970s, and, of course, disco. There are some details about Robert Stigwood becoming their manager, his commissioning a film that would become *Saturday Night Fever*, the time in a French château and composing the score, the melodies, their collaborators with techniques to enhance the soundtrack. And, then the extraordinary success of the film, the records, Grammy...

But, the film also includes an event in 1979, in Comiskey Park, Chicago, where a DJ held a rally, "Disco Sucks". Participants were invited to bring a disco disc, their all being collected and then exploded. Meanwhile, the Bee Gees were on tour, but this anti-disco mood had some effect, but actually led to them reasserting themselves, and further collaboration with a great number of singers from Barbra Streisand to Celine Dion. (And one commentator on the Comiskey Park episode notes that it was started by someone whose name I have already forgotten!).

The Bee Gees certainly had strong life after disco, some performances but exercising their skills as songwriters.

The film indicates the sadness of deaths, Andy at 30, Maurice with complications from surgery in 2002, Robin dying of cancer in 2012. But, Barry is interviewed extensively throughout the film, and is seen singing, falsetto and *Stayin' Alive* at Glastonbury in 2017, age 70.

The lives of the Bee Gees did not make headlines like those of other groups and of The Beatles. They had their problems, a breakup when they were very young at the end of the 1960s, but reuniting and having a 30 year successful career.

The film runs for just under two hours and cannot include everything. Some bloggers list the songs and events that are not included. Interesting to note that Sylvester Stallone's sequel to *Saturday Night Fever*, *Stayin' Alive* (1983) does not get a mention.

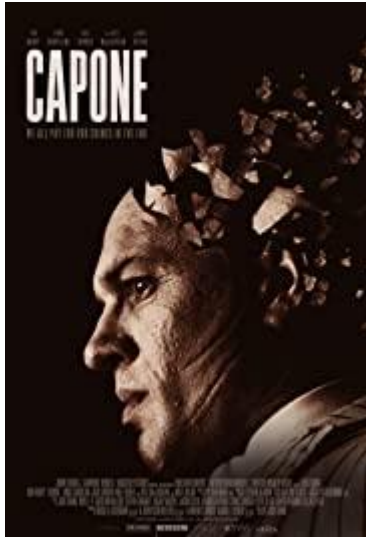
The film was directed by veteran producer, especially with Steven Spielberg over the decades, Frank Marshall. It is a tribute film – but highly enjoyable for those interested in the history of popular music in the latter part of the 20th century. It will probably be a surprise to many audiences who don't see themselves as music aficionados as they recognise so many of the Bee Gees songs.

CAPONE

US, 2020, 103 minutes, Colour.

Tom Hardy, Lynda Cardellini, Matt Dillon, Kyle Mac Lachlan, Gino Caffearelli, Kathrine Narducci, Al Sapienza.

Directed by Josh Trank.



This portrait of famous gangster, Al, Alfonso, Capone, is not what audiences might have been expecting. It takes for granted that audiences are aware who Capone was, his presence in Chicago, gangster domination, Prohibition and bootlegging, violence on the streets. They would also know that he was arrested for tax concerns and imprisoned in Alcatraz. They might know that he had contracted syphilis when he was a teenager and that that had consequences for his physical and mental health. They might not know that after his release from prison he retired to a mansion in Florida.

There have been many films about Capone himself, especially the 1932 *Scarface* with Paul Muni (it is said that Capone had his own copy). However, from the 1960s there have been many films focusing on Capone himself and his activities, with Jason Robards as Capone in *The St Valentine's Day Massacre*, a portrait with Rod Steiger, Ben Gazzara, F. Murray Abraham and Robert De Niro in *The Untouchables*.

Here Capone is portrayed by Tom Hardy, English actor, a picture of a crumbling personality, physically handicapped, experiencing a stroke and its consequences, gruff in speech and manner. It is a portrait of dementia, a criminal haunted by his past, ghosts, fantasies which dramatise his cruelty and ruthlessness. He is supported by his wife and son, is haunted by another son, Tony, with tentative phone calls. He is cared for by his doctor, Kyle Mac Lachlan, and has a visit from a previous mentor played by Matt Dillon.

While he has spacious grounds and mansion, he is continually under surveillance by the FBI, visits and interrogations, interested parties, including family members, wanting to know where he buried his money. It was never found.

While this psychological study might be disappointing for those who wanted a story of a gangster and his action, which apparently many did want, this is a striking and different look at a man who found his place, infamously, in American history.

CHAOS WALKING

US/Canada, 2021, 109 minutes, Colour.

Tom Holland, Daisy Ridley, Mads Mikkelsen, Demian Bechir, David Oyelowo, Kurt Sutter, Cynthia Erivo, Nick Jonas, Ray McKinnon.

Directed by Doug Liman.



Chaos and does not usually walk. Rather, it hurtles along. There is some hurtling here, especially a journey and a quest, but the initial information announces to us that chaos occurs in the confusion of the male human mind, chaos walking can be men walking.

The film is based on a trilogy of science-fiction, science-fantasy, futuristic fable by Patrick Ness who contributes to the screenplay of the film. Its appeal is certainly towards a younger demographic. Its director, Doug Liman, has ventured in the past into science fiction and fantasy with *The Jumper* and, especially, the Tom Cruise saga, *Edge of Oblivion*.

We are introduced into a world of 2257. Not our world, exactly. Rather, a planet which takes 64 years of space travel from Earth to reach. There is a colony, made up solely of men, an explanation of the disappearance of women coming rather later in the film. The central character is a young adult, Todd Hewitt, played by Tom Holland who has had quite a spectacular career even though he is in his early 20s, known especially as Spiderman. Todd works on a farm with his father and friend.

But, we are introduced to Todd's mind, the voice-over of his thoughts, the projecting of his thoughts in images, some revelations which he tries to conceal from others. This phenomenon is called *The Noise* and, with the voice-over, there are visuals of wisps of smoke, coloured fumes, swirling, so that we can see something of *The Noise* – and long shots of clouds of Noise rising from the gatherings of men.

The strange thing about the narrative is that this world of the future looks remarkably like the American frontier West of the 1890s. We do discover a motor bike but the transport is by walking or by horse. We do see some capsules of pills. But, by and large, this seems a very primitive, elementary community. It is ruled by the Mayor, an opportunity for Mads Mikkelsen to do something of a villainous role again. His obnoxious son is played by Nick Jonas.

So far so 2257. Then, a young woman, Viola, Daisy Ridley (who has had considerable experience in fantasies in her *Star Wars* films) is seen in a crashing spacecraft, landing near this village, having to hide, under suspicion and eventually pursuit by the men of the town. What we expect happens. Todd encounters Viola, they bond (even as he tries to control his thoughts and Noise), make their escape from the pursuing men, on that motorbike, then by foot, encountering strange river keep creatures which Todd kills for their food, an encounter with gangling aliens, then finding refuge in a normal village, men, women and children, and their mayor, black, woman, Cynthia Erivo.

So, journey, quest, and eventual struggle, conflict between good and evil, the discovery of the vast hulk of a crashed spacecraft, radio contact, peril for Todd, rescue by Viola, leaving us wondering - or, perhaps, this has been enough for us - what the futuristic future holds for the two.

COSMIC SIN

US, 2021, 88 minutes, Colour.

Frank Grillo, Bruce Willis, Brandon Thomas Lee, Corey Large, C.J.Perry, Lochlyn Munro, Costas Mandylor, Adelaide Kane.

Directed by Edward Drake.



Cosmic Sin sounds as if it ought with the title of a vast narrative about explorations of space, or a documentary about climate change and its effects. The title has overtones of metaphysics and theology. However, none of this is found here. It is an 88 minutes science-fiction, futuristic action show.

The film opens with a mini kind of Star Wars explanation of what is happening in the galaxies. We move through settlement of Mars, upheavals, wars, bombings, alliances until we reach the 26th century. Almost immediately, there is a first contact with some ugly aliens (variations on the Darth Vader look) who are threatening an outpost of the Alliance. Contact Earth, check with the commanding officer, his immediate reaction to calling a disgraced official who had dropped a Q Bomb killing 70 million people.

The commanding officer is played by Frank Grillo – who then seems to disappear for most of the film, finally arriving for some desperate heroism. The disgraced official is played by Bruce Willis, playing the familiar Bruce Willis, deadpan, smirk, bald domination.

The screenplay gives the impression of being incomplete, that there should be a longer director's cut, elaborating on a whole lot of the characters, explaining the situations for greater clarity and audience participation. However, a group is collected around the commanding, they go off in their private space shuttles to the outpost to confront the aliens and save the day, save Earth.

The film generally plays like an old B-budget space exploration but with more elaborate special effects. One of the main difficulties is that the 26th century on earth looks extraordinarily similar to the present day on earth, familiar vehicles, some familiar technology, no improvement in the swearing vocabulary of the future... Even the bulb-lit robot serving at the bar, the bar looking familiar as do the bar brawls, even spilling the drink as it pours.

Which undermines a great deal of the credibility of the whole enterprise. and the dialogue is, to say the least, extremely conventional and less than sparkling.

Just checking the bloggers on the IMDb within weeks of the film's release, there is 99% condemnation of the film, many of the bloggers not feeling the need to restrain any of their comments! (But, there is the distraction in realising the young hero, Brandon Thomas Lee, is Pamela Anderson's son!)

There is an odd character called Dash, a friend of Bruce Willis's commander, wandering in and out, spouting what seems somewhat dumb dialogue and behaving, perhaps intentionally comic, in a dumb manner on some serious circumstances. Then, it comes as something of a shock to find that this is the actor, Corey Large, who actually co-wrote the screenplay with the director, Edward Drake. Were we missing something?

COLECTIV/ COLLECTIVE

Romania, Germany, Luxembourg, 2019, 115 minutes, Colour.
Catalin Tolontan, Vlad Voiculescu, Tedy Ursuleanu.
Directed by Alexandre Nanau.



A documentary with many nominations and awards. A number of commentators suggest that it is one of the best films about investigative journalism. It certainly keeps the attention.

This is a Romanian story. The title, with its overtones of Soviet collectivism and society, also refers to a nightclub in Bucharest where, in 2015, a fire broke out, no fire exits which led to 27 victims in the fire and 37 for the victims dying in hospital from burns. At one point, some footage of the actual fire and panic is included in the film.

The first part of the film and the director's investigation focuses on a journalist from the Sports Gazette who begins to investigate the causes of the fire and its consequences. There are many scenes in the press room and offices, the journalist, Catalin Tolontan, seen working with his colleagues, discussions, phone calls, contacts, publishing... And, there are many sequences of press conferences with: Tolontan asking questions. And, Romanian journalist, at least in this context, ask some very demanding questions – demanding Lee.

One of the main targets of the questions is the Health Minister. What emerges is, and dramatised with footage of protests and demonstrations against the ministry and the authorities, and with comments and questions by parents and relatives of those who died, is a mess of political and social corruption.

The film also focuses on one of the victims of the fire, Teddy Ursuleanu, who agreed to a series of photographs graphically illustrating the injuries on herself, photographs that were exhibited in a Gallery, with interviews about her survival and her looking forward in life rather than recriminations and regrets.

Perhaps it is the long tradition of the Soviet rule and corruption in Romania, but many audiences will be shocked at the mismanagement of the hospitals, the limitation of burns units, the need for victims to be transferred to Vienna for appropriate treatment. But, mismanagement also emerges, political patronage, bribery for accreditation ignoring standards, the role of bribery, even for doctors...

The second part of the film, also interesting, focuses on a new Minister of Health, Vlad Voiculescu, in his early 30s, who allowed the filmmakers unlimited access to his office, his political discussions, investigations into the health corruption, his press conferences.

At the end of the film, there are elections in Romania, the minister discussing the dire results for his re-election with his father, the Social Democrats who had fostered a great deal of corruption, being returned.

Which means then that those who do not know recent Romanian history, some Googling for further information.

THE COURIER

UK, 2020, 112 minutes, Colour.

Benedict Cumberbatch, Merab Ninidze, Rachel Brosnahan, Jesse Buckley, Angus Wright, Anton Lesser.

Directed by Dominic Cooke.



This is a 60 years retrospect. The action takes place in the early 1960s – the atmosphere of the times, Cold War, tension between the Soviet Union in the US, nuclear acceleration, Russian planting

missiles in Cuba facing the US, the October 1962 missiles crisis. The film offers an opportunity to reflect on those times, the potential consequences, subsequent history, the collapse of the Soviet Union, 21st century relationships between the US and Russia.

For some, this might be a visit to what one could call John Le Carre territory, British espionage, Cold War undercover, relationship with the Americans, possible Soviet defections.

And, it is based on actual characters and events – with a welcome clip before the final credits of an interview with the central character, British salesman and businessmen, Greville Wynne.

The initial focus is on Nikita Krushchev, sequences of his ranting to the Soviet authorities, his eagerness to develop nuclear weapons. Amongst the audience is a war hero, Oleg Penkovsky, played by long-time Russian actor, Meran Nidnize, credible in the role of an official with access to military information, who is dismayed by Krushchev, wants peace and is prepared to send information to the UK and the US.

Which leads to the courier of the title. MI6 and the US receive a message from Ben Cops and decide that the best way to get information from him is to get a non-political businessman to promote his company in Russia, travel frequently, make contact with Penkovsky (wearing a tie pin that is the indication for contact), befriend him, receive documentation and deliver it – without knowing any detail of what the documentation contained. The liaison is with a CIA agent, played by Rachel Brosnahan, who is controlled by CIA chiefs in Washington.

Benedict Cumberbatch is at his best as Greville Wynne, initially surprised by the proposal, going through with it, becoming very friendly with Penkovsky, welcoming a Russian trade delegation to London, inviting Penkovsky, to a meal with his family.

Most of us are unfamiliar with the outcome of Greville Wynne's activities and the fate of Oleg Penkovsky. We are led into the world of KGB suspicions, surveillance, poisonings, arrests, imprisonment, cruel prison conditions.

On the other hand, there is Wynne's relationship with his wife, Sheila (another good role for Jessie Buckley), his secrecy, gradual Revelation Is – and his being seen as something of a British hero.

For older audiences, some of whom lived through these episodes, it is a fascinating retrospect. For younger audiences, it serves as an introduction to the tensions of the Cold War and a reminder that at all times there are similar kinds of espionage activities taking place – and now.

CRISIS

US, 2021, 118 minutes, Colour.

Gary Oldman, Armie Hammer, Evangeline Lilly, Greg Kinnear, Michelle Rodriguez, Luke Evans, Lily-Rose Depp, Veronica Ferres, Scott Mescudi, Indira Varma, Martin Donovan, Mira Kershner, Nicholas Jarecki.

Directed by Nicholas Jarecki.



Our 20th century has had more than enough crises. The crisis at the centre of this drama, both entertaining and challenging for an adult audience, is the current American dependence on opioids.

Writer-director (previous crisis drama concerned the world of business and corruption, *Arbitrage*) has decided to highlight the complexity of the crisis by telling three interconnecting stories. At the centre is the DEA, the Drug Enforcement Agency, its investigations, setting up stings. And, along with this story of investigators and dealers, there is the story of laboratory research, especially concerning painkillers, and more especially, that they do not become addictive, research feeling the pressure of the corporations who manufacture the drugs. And, the screenplay also operates on a personal story level, a woman, mother, teenage son, his mysterious death, her searching for the truth, her wanting revenge. (Some have complained that this is too much material, the three stories – but those who find the film interesting will be satisfied with its interconnections and intricacies.)

Armie Hammer is Jake Kelly, a DEA agent, with dealings with Armenian underworld criminals, drug transporters, with manufacturers of illicit drugs in Montréal, a big boss who owns a club and goes under the name of Mother, immersed in a world of harsh realities, informants, corrupt customs officials, unscrupulous criminals for whom murder is not a difficulty. He walks a tight rope, working with agents and supervisors (Michelle Rodriguez as his boss, the director at, Nicholas Jarecki, playing his assistant.) Anything could go wrong – and frequently does. Jake Kelly also has the pressure of an addicted sister (Lily Rose Depp) who defies her brother, is anguish to their mother.

With the research narrative, the focus is on a Professor, Gary Oldman, who lectures at the University but also supervises laboratory investigations and experiments, with substantial grants from the University and from the drug corporations, discovering that an experiment for a non-addictive painkiller works for four weeks but, after that, it becomes addictive. This aspect becomes a whistleblower story, crisis of conscience for the Professor, pressure from the Dean of the University, played by Greg Kinnear. There is also the pressure from the manufacturing company, board meetings, self-congratulations at success in producing the drug, unwillingness to face the

uncertainties of the experimentation, willingness to go ahead, or financial considerations in play. The company chief is a tough Veronica Ferres. And her go-to man, strong arm tactics, psychological pressure, is played by Luke Evans.

The mother in the personal story is Evangeline Lilly, an intense woman who knows her own failings, wants to save her son and his sports ambitions at school, finds that he is dead from an overdose – and sets out to find his school connections, hiring a private Detective, discovering the work of Mother, getting mixed up with the DEA investigation but warned off.

A film like this with its entangled threads of narrative cannot have a simple resolution. What of the DEA sting? What of the dealers? What of the professor and his truth? What of the relentlessness of the corporations? And what of the bereaved mother?

DEMON SLAYER THE MOVIE: THE MUGEN TRAIN

Japan, 2020, 117 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Haruo Sotozaki.



This is a feature film version of a popular television series, Demon Slayer, popular in 26 episodes.

This is a film for the initiated, for the fans of Japanese Anime, for manga films, for Japanese traditions of animation. The older, uninitiated audience, this film may be difficult to watch and appreciate.

However, audiences will be impressed by the quality of the animation style, the drawing, the characters, the vast imagination, action, violence. And, the editing and fast pace propel the action forward – until the end, rather drawn-out, elegiac and mournful about death, but finding a new hero to carry on the tradition of the Demon Slayer.

This is a basic tale of the struggle between good and evil. It presupposes a world of Demons, supernatural creatures, hostile to humans, invading the human world, here the passengers on a train, determined to destroy the humans. It also presupposes a world of human heroes, some specially chosen with destiny, younger fighters, aspiring to be heroes and to join in the quest against the Demons. The film opens with a master Demon Slayer visiting the cemetery, seeing the

headstones and naming all those heroes who had died in battle. The film then goes on to introduce three youngsters, one of whom had wears a boar's head, who hurry on to a train, eager to find the hero slayer.

The hero was on the train, talks to the youngsters, they in admiration of him.

The rest of the film, there is a mysterious presence of the Demon, the human shapes, young male, that he assumes. There are all kinds of combat sequences, the three youngsters and their trying to help, even to being wounded, but the hero going on, long battles and confrontations, the hero being wounded, but defiance against the Demon who is equally determined. And the three youngsters look on with both admiration and dismay.

All the human Demon Slayers live transient lives, and, ultimately, the present hero also dies. However, the youngster who has been in admiration is clearly marked out to be his successor and, while there is a long sequence of mourning for the dead hero, the young man then steps into the hero's shoes and marches on... To the next Demon slaying adventure.

DISCLOSURE

Australia, 2020, 85 minutes, Colour.

Mark Leonard Winter, Miranda Ridgway, Geraldine Hakewell, Tom Wren.

Directed by Michael Bentham.



Here is an Australian drama that demands attention and considered discussion. The disclosure is something we might not have expected, a four year old girl tells her mother about what the nine-year-old son of friends and neighbours has done to her.

In many ways, this film is a case-study. And, it is dialogue-driven, and could transfer very easily and powerfully to the stage. The time span of the drama is limited, a visit from one set of parents to the other, words exchanged, anger expressed, hurt on both sides, threats...

The location is an outer suburb of Melbourne, filmed around Fern tree Gully, a comfortable home, grounds, swimming pool. The two couples are friends.

With a focus on sexual, sexualised behaviour, the film opens, during the credits, with one of the couples filming their sexual encounter. We see them naked at their pool. This sets a tone. Then their friends visit, drinks, discussions, and challenges to each of the couples – but, also, challenges to the audience. Are Daniel and Emily (Mark Leonard Winter and Miranda Ridgway) right in believing what their little girl has told them? Should they go to Child Protection? Should they challenge Joel and Beck (Tom Wren and Geraldine have equal) about their own behaviour, the raising of their son

The also complications because all has political ambitions – which would be threatened by the name of his son appearing in official documents. Beck, on the other hand, has had harsh experiences in her life, is both assertive and withdrawn, in absolute denial.

Joel has a police escort who looms in the background, seeming somewhat sinister – but not so.

Which means then that the audience shares the emotional experiences of each of the parents. And it means that the audience must listen to the rational arguments put forward by each parent. Which also means that the audience is challenged to ask themselves what would they do in similar circumstances, how much the personal relationships would influence decisions, how much is demanded by the law, child protection, parenting.

Quite a lot to take in and consider in the brief running time.

ESCAPE FROM PRETORIA

Australia, 2020, 106 minutes, Colour.

Daniel Radcliffe, Daniel Webber, Ian Hart, Mark Leonard Winter, Nathan Page, Grant Piro.

Directed by Francis Annan.



With escape in the title, there is always a promise of action adventure. The main South African escape story was the popular Cry Freedom, the story of Steve Biko and journalist Donald Wouda and his escape from South Africa.

This is a smaller scale film, written and directed by Francis Annan, London based, black background.

The particular escape focuses on two young white men, anti-apartheid protesters, planting bombs in popular places, streets, and their exploding sending anti-apartheid leaflets into the air. It is 1978 – and little political prospect for the end of apartheid.

They are Tim Jenkins and Stephen Lee, played by Daniel Radcliffe, not looking at all like Harry Potter, and Australian actor, Daniel Webber. They are arrested, tried, sentenced to prison in Pretoria, a prison for white criminals.

The film shows their incarceration for over a year, indicating time passing by captions with particular indications of days in prison. Tim is the leader, determined to escape. Stephen is loyal support. They encounter a strange prisoner, French background, Antoine (played by Australian actor Mark Leonard Winter, quite different from his other performances, *Measurable Measure*, *Disclosure*). They also find a veteran prisoner, Dennis Goldberg (played by Ian Hart) who is serving a long sentence for anti-apartheid behaviour. The guards in the jail are brutal and racist.

The film, based on a book by Tim Jenkin, shows the men sharpening their ideas, especially for the making of substitute keys, ways of getting impressions, woodwork, as well as other means for the escape. With the keys, they are able to explore at night the opening of various doors.

There is some tension in the time passing, the development of the plan, some pathos in Antoine's son visiting him, allowed thirty minutes a year, and the guards interrupting the visit. Dennis Goldberg and other veterans decide not to participate in the escape – questioning where they would go.

There is also quite some tension in the actual escape – and some time spent on the exhilaration of what it was to be free, a taxi ride, crossing into Mozambique, Tanzania, and, eventually, to London to continue with anti-apartheid activities.

Some bloggers complained about the bad South African accents and the film not being made in South Africa. Some of the bloggers seem to misread the film about its political stances. In fact, the film was made in South Australia with Screen Australia finance as well as finance from South African producers.

THE FATHER

UK/ France, 2020, 97 minutes, Colour.

Anthony Hopkins, Olivia Colman, Olivia Williams, Rufus Sewell, Mark Gattis, Imogen Poots.

Directed by Florian Zeller.



Bewilderment. That might be the key word for appreciating this powerful cinema experience. It is the bewilderment experienced by the elderly Anthony. It is the bewilderment that the screenplay skilfully exercises on the audience, making them share in upsetting and mystifying experiences with Anthony.

The film was directed by the French writer-actor-director, Florian Zeller. And the screenplay is based on his play, collaborating for the screen with the veteran playwright and screenwriter, Christopher Hampton (*Dangerous Liaisons*, *A Dangerous Method*, *Cheri*). As the audience experiences the film, we come to realise how intricately clever the screenplay is.

But, it is brought to the screen by Anthony Hopkins in one of his greatest performances (and that is saying something). His character announces that he was born in December 1937 – and that is the date of Hopkins own birth. Which means that he is acting a man his age, but playing a man who is not able to act his own age. Hopkins plays with great subtlety, often quiet, sometimes bombastic, seemingly sure of himself, then becoming, that keyword, bewildered.

The setting is London. Anthony is seen living in his quite comfortable flat. He is visited by his daughter, Anne (another quite different performance from Olivia Colman, *The Crown* as Queen Elizabeth, Oscar Winner for *The Favourite* as Queen Anne) is middle-aged, divorced, looks after her father, bringing in food, cooking for him. However, she has met someone, Paul (Rufus Sewell) and is planning to move to Paris with him. Anthony objects, repeating several times of the don't speak English in Paris.

And, then we the audience become bewildered because suddenly Anne appears again, bringing chicken for a meal, but she is played by Olivia Williams. So, who is the real Anne? And further complications because Anthony suddenly finds a man sitting in his flat, reading the paper, telling him that he lives there, that he is Paul (Mark Gattis).

And, there are further complications. Anthony has been asserting his independence. He doesn't need a carer – and picks quarrels with them, dismissing them. However, Anne introduces him to a young carer, Imogen Poots, Laura, who momentarily gets on with him but then he taunts her and humiliates her. She does come back, trying to do her best.

And then, the layout of the flat and its pictures change, and it is Anne's flat was mysterious corridors and doors.

We realise that we are being invited to share the experience of ageing, of possibilities of dementia, of possibilities of Alzheimer's, experiences of senility and the consequent bewilderment.

While there have been some powerful portrayals of ageing and mental and emotional confusion on screen, *The Father* can be wholeheartedly recommended.

FELLINI OF THE SPIRITS

Italy, 2020, 100 minutes, colour/black and white.

Directed by Anselma Dell'Olio.



This documentary was made as part of the celebrations of the centenary of the birth of celebrated Italian director, Federico Fellini.

This is not so much a review of the documentary but a recommendation that all Fellini fans take the opportunity to see it. And, to indicate, that for film buffs it may be quite an exhilarating way to be introduced to the work of Fellini.

The film is filled with talking heads, Italian experts, offering all kinds of interesting perspectives on the films, on Fellini himself and his wife, Giulietta Masina, on his background and interest in circus and grotesques, in more transcendental themes, the background of Italian Catholicism, his being rooted in Italian culture, various experts who intrigued him and influence his films, including Carl Jung, other psychologists and experts in paranormal phenomena.

For English-language audiences, the talking heads include directors William Friedkin, Terry Gilliam, Damien Chazelle.

The film is organising various chapters, highlighting Fellini's background, his interests. Not all of his films are covered, depending on one's point of view, some interesting absences, brief references to *Amarcord*, practically nothing on Fellini's Roma, important as it was as a satire on things ecclesiastical. While there are some references to later films (perhaps not enough, for example *Ginger and Fred*), quite a lot of detailed attention is given to some of the pre-La Dolce Vita films, especially *La Strada* and *Nights of Cabiria* and, especially, *Il Bidone* and *The White Sheik*. Which means that the main attention is given to the classics of the 1960s, most especially *Juliet of the Spirits* and interesting comment on *8 ½*. (Nothing from *Satyricon*, brief mention of *Casanova*.)

Many of the commentators indicate Fellini's technical skills, his use of black-and-white photography, colour photography, editing and pace. There is, towards the end, a tribute to composer Nino Rota including some comments from him.

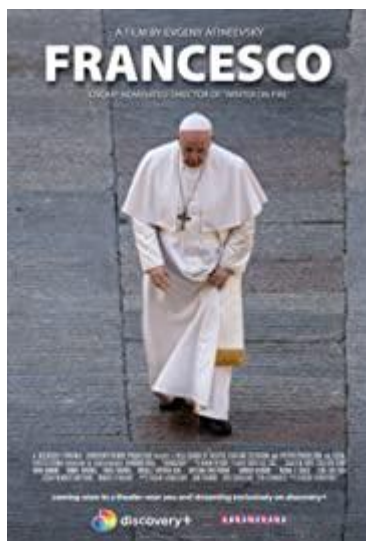
As has been said, this is a strong recommendation for a Fellini experience or an enticing introduction.

FRANCESCO

US, 2020, 116 minutes, Colour.

Pope Francis.

Directed by Evgeny Afineevsky.



This is the fifth major feature film focusing on Pope Francis. There was a 2015 Argentinian drama, *Francisco, El Padre Jorge*; there was the 2015 Italian drama, *Call Me Francis*; worldwide audiences watched *The Two Popes*, 2019, a fictionalised encounter between Francis, played Pryce and Benedict XVI, played by Anthony Hopkins. In 2019 there was a documentary by celebrated German filmmaker, Wim Wenders, *Pope Francis, a Man of his Word*, with limited release (but, Googling the title and adding You Tube, several previews as well as some substantial clips can be found).

Francesco has been acquired by the Discovery Channel, with limited screenings, but with rental or video on demand.

Francesco completed filming in April 2020, featuring the Pope and an assistant on the dais altar in an empty piazza in front of St Peters. But, at the end, there is enthusiastic footage from countries all over Europe and the United States, people in lockdown, but coming to their windows and doors, waving, shouting, applauding – images of hope (not yet fulfilled). This film is a lively and challenging overview of Pope Francis' seven years as Pope, 2013-2020.

The director is Russian and has made a number of documentaries, focusing on the war in Syria, conflicts in Ukraine, as well as a documentary about divorce. In this film, as with Wim Wenders' documentary, the words of the Pope are significant, from public addresses, to more personal encounters, to interview statements. But, these films are not simply "talking heads" documentaries. The director and his assistants have done extensive research all over the world, finding a powerful range of footage from Pope Francis visits to different countries, to meeting significant personalities, and striking and vivid footage to illustrate the particular crises around the world of his seven years' pontificate.

Instead of providing some background to Francis, his Argentinian and Jesuit backgrounds, his work as Archbishop in Buenos Aires, two key issues are initially highlighted. The first is that of climate change, the Pope's document, *Laudato Si*, his visit to the Philippines in the wake of the severe typhoons. The second issue is that of migrants throughout the world, his visit to the refugees on the island of Lampedusa, refugees from Africa, refugees from Syria and visuals of the desolation of ruined Aleppo...

With this social consciousness in mind, the film then goes to the portrait of Francis, a sketch of his life, photos of his family, the story of their migration from Fascist Italy, growing up in Argentina, his vocation, joining the Jesuits, his role as Jesuit provincial – and quite a section later taking up the issue of accusations of collaboration with the Generals during the Dirty War, vocal criticism, examination of the issues, some critics retracting, the Pope explaining a more silent approach to work behind the scenes, followed by two years seeming exile away from Buenos Aires. It seems this period gave him time to reflect, to mellow his stances, to be conscious of the poor, something he took to his ministry as Archbishop.

The film provides quite a number of clips of Cardinal Bergoglio and his work in Argentina, continually with the poor, taking public transport, but also his strong interfaith links.

There is quite a challenge as the film documents Francis' visits to conflict centres around the world, to the Central African Republic, to the island of Lesbos to meet the refugees, to Myanmar where diplomacy required no mention of the Rohingya, to Bangladesh and meeting the refugees. He also goes to Mexico denouncing walls that separate instead of building bridges which reunite (and a glimpse of President Trump). There is also the sequence of his addressing the American Congress (with Joe Biden, then VP, sitting behind the Pope).

There is a very personalised sequence where the Pope has a Zoom conference with those working on the American-Mexican border, especially his singling out unknown a nun, champion of the poor, and a close-up of his more affectionate language with her.

There are several other very personalised encounters, the three Muslim families that he brought back to Italy as an example of leaders welcoming refugees, his visit to them, their testimonies, the

finding home and employment in Italy. Then there is the father who wrote a letter to Francis, giving it to him at an audience, explaining that he and his gay partner had three children, wanting the Pope's assistance in their being accepted at the parish school. The Pope phoning the father, encouraging him, the film including a quotation of the Pope talking about recognition of gay men and women in society, of civil unions... The film does not quote, "who am I to judge?", but includes this more ordinary episode.

The issue of women in the church is raised, a number of speakers, the Pope emphasising that women must have roles in the church – but, interestingly, for all the ceremonies, those assisting and servers are all male.

But, the treatment of sexual abuse by clergy is presented in a tantalising way, something like the old-fashion serials, the audience left with cliffhangers, wondering what and when the sequel will be. In fact, the subject does receive quite a lot of attention but in separate sections, increasing in dramatic tension, throughout the film. There is the sequence where the Pope seems to have lost his temper accusing critics of the Chilean Episcopacy of slander. Later, especially with interviews with Juan Carlos Cruz, the leader of the young men who accused the Chilean celebrity priest, Karadima, of years of abuse, presenting his case, being invited to the Vatican, wary that it was a PR exercise, meeting the Pope, hearing his apology, having a three hour conversation, present at a papal audience. Then there is the episode, surprising those in Chile, of summoning the Chilean bishops, firing a number of them, declarations about stricter investigations, the sending of official investigators to Chile, their 2,300 page report...

Juan Carlos Cruz is one of a significant number of authoritative talking heads throughout the film.

So, here is an opportunity, a two hour consideration of Pope Francis, growing awareness of all the world situations where he has intervened. But, there is a chance to see him at greater length in close-up, with people (as with his Jewish and Muslim long-time friends as well as leadership of churches and world religions), his body language, his unsteady walk, for instance, in Auschwitz, the close-ups when he is speaking officially, or in homily, or in personal encounters.

Not the last word. Not the last image. But an opportunity to make some kind of assessment, some kind of appreciation (and, one hopes, a good impression on those Catholics who have publicly expressed disagreement with or condemnation of, Francis) of an unanticipated Pope and seven years of unanticipated papal service.

FRENCH EXIT

Canada/Ireland, 2020, 110 minutes, Colour.

Michelle Pfeiffer, Lucas Hedges, Tracy Letts, Valerie Mahaffey, Susan Coyne, Imogen Poots, Danielle Macdonald, Isaac de Bankole, Daniel Di Tommaso, Eddie Holland.

Directed by Azazel Jacob.

French Exit is a striking title. However, this drama of an ageing, self-preoccupied, New York wealthy woman may strike audiences differently.

On the one hand, Michelle Pfeiffer gives an impressive performance as Frances, her marriage behind her, her coldness towards her husband leaving him dead at home when she went on holidays, the police even arresting her, but now finding that her finances are running out. What to do? The suggestion is that she go to Paris, stay in an apartment owned by a good friend, take her young son with her, and take all the cash and do with it as she wishes. She does.

On the other hand, Michelle Pfeiffer's performance is so good that for many it may be quite alienating, not eliciting the sympathy which, she often says, she does not crave, but, in her heart of hearts she does. And, of course, we suspect that she is ill.

So, enjoyment of the film will depend on the response to Michelle Pfeiffer. And, some response to her son, played by Lucas Hedges (who has had quite a number of screen mothers over the years: Julia Roberts, Frances McDormand, Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep as a mother-figure, is attempting some kind of independence, even engagement to his girlfriend, Susan, Imogen Poots, but very much acting as a sponge for his mother's emotions. She had virtually abandoned him to boarding school when he was young.

What has intrigued many viewers is the touch of magic realism, suggested on the voyage to France by an encounter with a young medium, Danielle Macdonald, who has some strange powers, employed to search for a missing cat (which Frances believes her late husband inhabits). In fact, Frances' eccentricities lead to all kinds of people coming to live in the flat, a bereaved widow who craves company, the private investigator hired to search for the medium, even the fiancé and her current boyfriend...

Another intriguing aspect is what Frances does with her money, leaving inordinate tips, gifts to unsuspecting types, even young man harassed by the police outside her window knows that she is giving him too much and offers her some back. Facing death, living in Paris, wandering the streets, does Frances eventually discover some self-awareness. At a moment of kindness, she does remark that she has made a slight move, which is something.

So, an appeal to some audiences, detachment or alienation for others.

GODZILLA vs. KONG

US, 2020, 113 minutes, Colour.

Alexander Skarsgaard, Rebecca Hall, Millie Bobby Brown, Kaylee Hottle, Demian Bechir, Julian Denison, Brian Tyree Henry, Lance Riddick, Eiza Gonzalez, Kyle Chandler.

Directed by Adam Wingard.



If ever there was to be an action show to be seen on the largest screen, this is a principal contender. It looks very good up there on the screen, especially the action sequences and lots of special effects.

Of course, the title tells all. In fact, there are two major battle sequences between the two alpha-creatures, Godzilla (the baddy) and King Kong (the goody). And, as if this would not satisfy most audiences, a dastardly corporation entrepreneur is creating a Robo-Godzilla to control the world!

So, the creatures are the most important focus. Here is King Kong (with memories of all the films from the 1930s on), in retirement, one might say, on Kong Island. There are scientists there who are keeping an eye on him in his environment, keeping him safe. Rebecca Hall is one of the main scientists but communication is had with Kong through a young girl whose parents had been killed. She is deaf, uses sign language, and has been able to communicate with Kong response to her. Very nice.

In the meantime, what is Godzilla up to? Destruction, of course, invading the city and, looking more gigantic than ever, smashes everything in sight and within distance of his swinging tale. (Giving new meaning to a smash hit!).

However, Walter Simmons (Demian Bechir) has the most enormous plant you have ever seen for technological development, not only of the surface but 33 storeys down. And, when Godzilla tears into this, he has an alternate plant in Hong Kong (and the tunnel from the US to Hong Kong which two youngsters, who team up with an investigative plant who wants to expose Simmons, Madison (Millie Bobby Brown) and Josh (Julian Denison – from the Wildepeople – with his New Zealand accent intact) all travel down.

Simmons employs the help of a scientist, Nathan Lind, Alexander Skarsgård, who teams up with Kong's protectors to transfer him to Antarctica and an underground prehistoric jungle, with deadly pterodactyls, but containing King Kong's original throne and sceptre. The screenwriters' imaginations have been working overtime!

If we accept the plot and its, to say the least, improbabilities, and enjoy the portrayal of the two alpha-creatures, especially the fights and effects, there should be no complaint!

GOLDEN VOICES

Israel, 2019, 88 minutes, Colour.
Maria Belkin, Vladimir Friedman, Uri Klauzner, Alexander Senderovich.
Directed by Evgeny Ruman.



This is something of a gentle entertainment for older audiences. And, the plotlines are quite unpredictable.

The opening explanation indicates that the Jews in the Soviet Union were able to leave after its collapse, from 1990, many making their way to Israel. For many, especially the older migrants, it was an uprooting from their way of life, their work, their language, having to learn Hebrew as well as find employment.

The golden voices of the title belong to Raya and Victor, both in their 60s, whose career has been in dubbing films for many decades. They are delighted to be in Israel, Victor photographing Raya at the plane, a relative finding them an apartment, their going to Hebrew classes to, hauntingly, say something about their day. And, it is the period of the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein aggressive, and they line up for their allotted gas masks.

The film immerses its audience in the atmosphere of Israel at the time, apartment blocks, interiors, the streets, the cinema, video shops, offices...

The central part of the film dramatises how Raya and Victor find some work. If this review so far has been tantalising and you would like to see the film, don't read any further because there are spoilers (some spoilers you might not expect at all!).

For those reading on, Victor gets involved in illegal dubbing with a couple who run a store of illegal videos, films which they photograph secretly in the cinema, falling foul of the cinema owner.

Raya answers an advertisement in the paper, and finds that it is a phone sex operation – saying no, thinking it over, saying yes, really entering into the spirit of the calls for lonely Russian migrants. There is what turns out to be quite a delightful sequence when she agrees to meet one of the customers with gently unexpected consequences.

Two other things to add: Victor has a passion for Fellini, having a photo with the director from the Moscow Festival, 1963, promoting 8 ½ against Soviet censorship and the film winning the main award, and his dubbing Fellini's *Voices of the Moon* in Israel. The other thing is that, during the screening, Saddam Hussein sends rockets on Israel, reminding us of reality along with the fantasies.

An entertainment for older audiences.

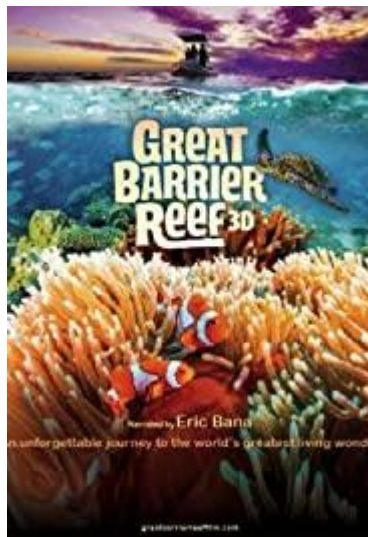
GREAT BARRIER REEF

IMAX, 3-D.

Australia, 2018, 45 minutes, Colour.

Narrated by Eric Bana. With Jemma Craig, Peter Gash.

Directed by Stephen Armezdroz



This is a film that can be seen by all audiences, from primary school audiences to grandparents, even great-grandparents! It is a film that can be recommended.

Over the years, there have been many documentaries about the Reef, including a 2015 film hosted by David Attenborough. However, this film is different. For a start, it is filmed in IMAX format, a huge screen, presenting spectacular underwater photography as well as surprising overhead drone photography with huge impact. And, as well, it is filmed in 3-D, enabling a very close encounter with all the living creatures, fish and plant, in the reef which stretches over 1000 km along the Queensland coast.

What makes this film significant, even important, is not that it is, as the director remarks, tabloid in its presentation of issues. The aim is not to sensationalise but to present the life and vitality of the reef in all its wonder. Obviously, it does campaign for activity concerning climate change and illustrates it profoundly. The film takes the camera under the water (and, there are many close-ups of the sophisticated cameras in action with the divers), shows us this world, gives explanations, information about so many of the creatures, the nature of the reef itself, polyps and anemones, the effect of the Crown of Thorns predator destroying the reef (and activists showing how, with an injection of image vinegar, they can be overcome).

There is a voice-over narrative, friendly, by Eric Bana. But communication relies on audiences identifying with Jemma Craig, who grew up on the reef island, Green Island, she and her brother with their parents, learning in the sea from an earliest age. We accompany her underwater, listening to her story, her experiences, her concerns, travelling on a boat that patrols the reef, rescuing a floating (disabled) turtle (after some vivid panoramas of turtles gathering annually at the reef), taking it to Fitzroy Island with the headquarters for the voluntary Turtle Rehabilitation Centre, and her reminding us that we are in the social media age and her showing us her extensive blog.

There is also a visit to Lady Elliot Island, a rehabilitated island, the mining of guano deposits, and, in the 1970s, the establishing of resort centre which is an eco-resort centre, established by pilot Peter Gash, who also appears in the film and accompanies Jemma underwater. There are extensive activities for the visitors to the resort, taking them underwater, but also encouraging them to participate in activities which contribute to scientific knowledge (vivid scenes of swimming under Manta Rays, photographing them and computer identification of all these Manta Rays). Sequences of sharks, Minke whales, vast schools of extraordinary fish, vast visions of coral.

(One of the effects of watching this film is probably an increase in bookings to Lady Elliot Island and Fitzroy Island as well as of Jemma Craig's blog.

A visit to IMAX, if it were possible, would be an excellent outing for school children, especially those in primary school who are discovering such wonders of the world as the Great Barrier Reef, are caught up in the concern about climate change, who can see so many possibilities for careers, imagining themselves working with the creatures, diving under the reef, working in the ever increasing sophisticated laboratories advancing scientific research ever more quickly.

GREENLAND

US, 2020, 117 minutes, Colour.

Gerard Butler, Morena Baccarin, Roger Dale Floyd, Scott Glenn, Hope Davis, David Denman, Holt McAllany.

Directed by Ric Roman Waugh.



Greenland is not the location for this popular thriller and disaster movie. It is a destination.

There has been a perennial popularity with disaster films. The audience expects a heightened story, an almost impossible scenario, special effects for fire, flood, crashes... Then there is the human element, especially family and relationships. Since the films are not meant to be documentaries, a lot of liberties are taken in creating the scenario, some impossible

situations which to defy credibility (something which purists and science and fact-checking audiences condemn, as they do with Greenland).

It is over 20 years since there have been disaster films with asteroids threatening Earth. There was the outer space expedition with Bruce Willis, Armageddon. There was the more domestic drama and parable of the impending tsunami, Deep Impact. It seems that powers that be thought it was time for another asteroid crash.

Interestingly, in the screenplay, this is referred to as an “Extinction Event”, likening it to asteroids destroying the dinosaurs. Actually, this sounds rather heady, a category listing. While we have been naming disaster films apocalyptic or Post-apocalyptic, this one seems to be a cataclysmic catastrophe!

At the opening, all seems ordinary, John, a structural engineer at his building site, returning home to his wife, Allison, and seven-year-old son Nathan. John is played by Gerard Butler, not so much with the heroics of his Fallen series, but rather something of a strong Everyman (who is attacked and fights back, even causing the death of an opponent which preys on him). Allison is Morena Baccarin and a young Roger Dale Floyd is Nathan, a rather fragile boy, suffering from diabetes one, leading to quite a complication about medication and rejection from a flight.

There is talk about the impending asteroid, a lot of looking to the sky initially, then television news and images, the nearing of the asteroid to Earth, pieces splitting off and crashing to earth, the complete destruction of Tampa, tsunami repercussions, explosions and fire.

The main part of the film concerns John and family being selected for a presidential communication, that they have been chosen to survive, to make their way to an air base to get their personal wristband – but, as might be expected, cars jammed on freeways, rebellious crowds screaming, demanding selection, images of looters, and, volunteer military checking out people, getting them on board planes. But, Nathan has left his medication in the car – and there are all kinds of consequences, separation of family, John getting a lift but a fight for his wristband ensuing, Allison intending to go to her father’s house in Kentucky, being given a lift which turns sour.

But, obviously for a finale, the family is reunited and sets out again for a possible flight to Greenland. Actually, from the plane window, Greenland looks both green and snowclad, craggy mountains... And bunkers prepared for survivors who will build a new world.

Probably best to describe Greenland as a San standard apocalyptic disaster movie.

JUDAS AND THE BLACK MESSIAH

US, 2020, 126 minutes, Colour.

Daniel Kaluuya, LaKeith Stanfield, Jesse Plemons, Dominique Fishback, Ashton Sanders, Lil Rel Howery, Martin Sheen.

Directed by Shaka King.



For so many reasons, the 1960s was an extremely turbulent decade. A decade of change, a decade of challenge, a decade of revolution. This was especially true of the United States. It was a decade of civil rights, of Martin Luther King, of the March on Washington, of assassinations. 1968 was a particularly significant year, in the Vietnam war, in the election of Richard Nixon, of student revolutions in Paris, in uprisings in Czechoslovakia...

And, 1968 in the United States was a key year, not only in the election of Richard Nixon but in the protests, especially in Chicago, as recently seen in Aaron Sorkin's *The Trial of the Chicago Seven*. Meanwhile, in Chicago, there were movements of protest and revolution with the Black Panthers. This film takes us into the local chapter of the Black Panthers, the leadership of the local chairman, Fred Hampton. He is the Black Messiah or at least that was the hope of his followers.

In fact, the film opens with a speech by J Edgar Hoover declaring that the Black Panthers were one of the chief threats to American society. It is a fiery, antagonistic speech, racist tones. Later, there will be another appearance by Hoover interrogating one of his agents, fomenting racist sentiments so that he will pursue Fred Hampton, asking the agent to imagine his daughter bringing home a black man to the house... (It is rather hard to recognise through the strong prosthetics, Martin Sheen appearing as Hoover.)

At the end, it is something of a surprise to find that Fred Hampton was only 21 when he was killed. He is played by British actor, Daniel Kaluua, 30 years old at the time of filming, (an interesting phenomenon to see British actors effective in key black American roles, David Oyelowo as Martin Luther King in *Selma*, Chitwitel Ejiofor in *12 Years a Slave*, John Boyega in *Detroit*, Delroy Lindo in *Da 5 Bloods*, Idris Elba). Daniel Kaluua won a golden globe as Best Supporting Actor, particularly strong in two sequences where he speaks, preaches, exhorts his followers.

However, the first word in the title is Judas. And the film opens with a 1989 television interview with William O'Neal what his children will think of his activity with the Black Panthers. In 1968, O'Neal was a petty criminal, Fleshly dressed, holding up an FBI agent badge, rough handling young black men, stealing their cars. However, he is caught, interviewed by agent Mitchell, Jesse Plemons, a firm believer in FBI philosophy, a family man, with a hold over O'Neal, threatening years of imprisonment, especially because of the false FBI badge, and getting him to infiltrate the Black Panthers. And, so successfully, that he becomes the security chief, a friend of Fred Hampton, seen going to swanky hotels and smartly dressed to give information to the agent. And, yet, having some bonds with

Hampton and sympathy with the Black Panthers' philosophy. This is a fine performance by La Keith Stanfield, a callow and conflicted man.

The film takes us inside the organisation, Fred Hampton and his loyal supporters and friends, his attraction to a young worker, Deborah Johnson, love, her becoming pregnant. And he is betrayed by his Judas, spends some time in jail, is released pending an appeal.

The racist ruthlessness of Hoover, American fears about black uprisings, lead to violence, and a ruthless attack for the elimination of Fred Hampton.

There are some sombre pieces of information before the final credits, some footage and photos of Hampton and his friends, and audience Discussed at the Hoover-inspired ideological assassination – but the continuation of the work of the decade by Deborah and Fred Hampton Jr.

THE LAST VERMEER

US, 2019, 118 minutes, Colour.

Guy Pearce, Claes Bang, Vicki Krieps, Roland Moeller, August Diehl, Karl Johnson, Adrian Scarborough, Susannah Doyle.

Directed by Dan Friedkin.



This reviewer had not come across the Dutch artist of the 1930s-1940s, Han van Meegeren. Which means that this narrative did not unfold as history with documentary touch but, rather, as something of a thriller.

It opens atmospherically, a secret tunnel in Austria, weeks after the death of Hitler, Allied forces discovering a train carriage full of the art treasures stolen by Herman Goering. And, among them, a Vermeer painting of Christ and the Adultress.

The action then moves to an investigator into art collaboration with the Nazis in Holland, an officer, former resistance activist, Jewish background, Joseph Pilar. He is played with some authority by the rather imposing Danish actor, Claes Bang. There is an atmosphere of post-war relief in Amsterdam as well as vindictiveness against collaborators with the Nazis, their being executed in the streets.

Joe Pilar, with the help of a resistance friend, Dekker (Roland Moeller), begin investigations on Goering's art which lead them to the broker for the sale, Van Megeeren. And, a highlight of the film, he is played with supreme insouciance, more than a touch of the narcissistic, long hair and clothing style, by Guy Pearce.

Van Megeeren claims that his sale to Goering was not collaboration but, rather, to fleece him of over 1 million guilders which could be used by the Dutch resistance. The authorities do not agree. In fact, local Dutch investigators, led by De Klerks (a cold August Diehl), pursue their target, to defy Joe who is able to quickly abduct the artist and install him in an attic, coming to believe that he was telling the truth.

And, not only that. Audiences who know the story of Van Megeeren will be interested in this expose about his forgeries, six paintings, gospel themes, painted in the style of Vermeer. Those who don't know the story will be more than intrigued.

The second part of the film is a court case, Van Megeeren sitting on the platform, seemingly supremely indifferent and sometimes intervening with devil-may-care remarks. He is defended in court by Joe, with the help of an elderly licensed lawyer, Karl Johnson. And, there are ups and downs in the fortunes of the artist in the court, some information he neglected to let Joe know, testimony from his ex-wife and mistress, but interesting explanations of how he forged the paintings, with some flabbergasted responses by experts in the courtroom.

Whether it happened that way or not, the judges bringing down their verdict of guilty, Dekker creating a violent scuffle in the courtroom, Joe dramatically acting to prove the painting a forgery, it is highly entertaining as a climax – with the dismay of the judges, the prosecutor, the experts!

Biographical information is given at the end of the film, Van Megeeren dying not long after the case, De Klerks giving Joe a copy of Van Megeeren's book, gift to Hitler with an incriminating inscription (which Van Megeeren is able to laugh off with great ease).

And the information as to how the authorities inform Goering about the forgery and his reaction is a dramatic highlight.

MOXIE

US, 2021, 111 minutes, Colour.

Hadley Robinson, Laurence Tsai, Alycia Pascual-Peña, Nico Haraga, Patrick Schwarzenegger, Sydney Park, Josephine Langford, Amy Poehler, Ike Barinholtz, Marcia Gay Harden, Joshua Walker. Directed by Amy Poehler.



More than topical.

Had Netflix premiered Moxie in January 2021, most of us would have nodded our heads, a high school version of Me#Too, teenage sexual harassment, bullying, some inept responses from school authorities. But, premiering in March 2021, it is not just an American story, it is a universal story.

And, it is highly significant in the Australian social context, political context, sexual harassment context, legal context, that has provoked enormous media consideration, public and private discussions, protests.

A bit of help from Wikipedia first: there is a definition of 'moxie':

1 : energy, pep woke up full of **moxie**.

2 : courage, determination it takes ... **moxie** to pull up roots and go to a land where the culture and probably the language are totally foreign— M. J. McClary.

This film is based on a contemporary novel by Jennifer Mathieu, female screenwriter, Tamara Chestna, and directed by well-known and popular comedian, Amy Poehler (who plays a significant role of the central character's mother). This is a women-focused story, centring on a 16-year-old at high school, Vivian, played effectively as both shy and strong by Hadley Robinson.

Vivian's mother, Lisa, was something of a rebel and protester in her day and has communicated something of this to Vivian who does not quite know how to assert herself, is in admiration of a new student, Lucy (Alycia Pascual-Peña) black/Hispanic, who makes quite a mark in the literature class on the first day of the new school year, posing the question of why they should study The Great Gatsby ('written by an old rich white man...'). She is brusquely interrupted by the supreme self-confident football jock, Mitchell (Patrick Schwarzenegger, quite dashing but in what turns out to be a courageous performance for a most unsympathetic character). Mitchell continues to taunt Lucy.

In the Australian context, Chanel Contos, remembering her school days at a private school, collected stories and testimonies 'over 3,000 testimonies of sexual assault from current and former schoolgirls from across Australia, some claiming they were raped by boys from all-boys private schools, some when they were as young as 13'. Moxie illustrates most tellingly a lot of this kind of harassment. Incidents can seem small and insignificant, easily passed over – the Principal (Marcia Gay Harden) answering Lucy's complaint by distinguishing what is annoying (can be discussed and quietly settled) from what is harassment (which requires the trouble of investigation and paperwork).

Incidents help us appreciate how hurtful and harmful male presumptions and conscious and unconscious arrogance can be – and are. Texts assessing students quickly do the rounds, 'the most bangable'. 'best fat ass'. Male giggling, Mitchell as super-hero, presumption that he be the only candidate for school sports representative (with a \$10,000 scholarship).

Vivian is stirred and designs a small magazine to highlight the issues. She calls it Moxie, at first 50 photocopied issues, hopefully left in the restroom, that someone will pick it up. Success. The girls find a voice and begin to make it heard. They decide to nominate one of their own sports captains to stand against Mitchell. (Vivian also has some sixteen year old's issues, attraction to a nice fellow-student, Seth (Nico Haraga) who is on her side, sexual relationships seriously considered, but difficulties with her mother finding a sympathetic friend).

There is an appeal to all the students to physically protest, going outside to gather, challenging the school status quo and the principal.

Then, in the final fifteen minutes, Moxie becomes even stronger and more topical. A girl anonymously emails Vivian to reveal she had been raped on prom night. At the protest, she reveals herself and the 17 year old fellow-student who was responsible...

Netflix offers an opportunity for accessible story, images and incidents – and serious discussion, especially for school students, teachers and parents.

NOBODY

US, 2021, 91 minutes, Colour.

Bob Oden Kirk, Connie Neilson, Christopher Lloyd, Aleksey Serebryakov, Michael Ironside, Colin Salmon, RZA.

Directed by Ilya Nailshuller.



It doesn't come as a surprise to learn that the writer for this violent, action show is Derek Kolstad, the writer for all the John Wick actioners. The central character, moving towards the end of middle age, is called Hutch Mansell, played by Bob Oden Kirk, best known for television series like *Better Call Saul* and *Breaking Bad*, a longtime screen writer with a talent for comedy.

Thinking about John Wick and his violent career, hitman, high body count, one might conclude that this is a version of John Wick Sr, the hitman getting an opportunity to career change, drop the violence completely (well, not exactly completely) and his becoming a husband and father with a regular work routine. In fact, the film begins very well with a quick outline and visuals of each day of Hutch's week, including missing out on getting the garbage bin out on time for the collector (and wondering why he doesn't put it out the night before as most of us do), the signalling of the days of the weeks getting faster and faster.

Hutch's life is routine, but becoming more than a touch frigid in his relationship with his wife, Rebecca (Connie Neilson) a professional woman. His teenage son doesn't seem to think all that much of him. But he is devoted to his little daughter.

And then, two masked burglars turn up, the son tackling one of them, Hutch restraining himself from smashing a golf club on the female burglar's head. The son is not impressed.

In the meantime, Hutch has some ambitions to take over his wife's father's family business where he works. And he goes to visit his ex-FBI agent father, played with enormous vigour, as we see by the end, by Christopher Lloyd, relishing his role, in a home for the elderly.

Determining that he will assert himself more strongly, especially for his son's admiration, he tracks down the burglars only to find they had some reasonable cause for the burglary. But, it is on the way home, on a bus, that he encounters a group of reckless young men who have crashed their car, get on the bus, menace the few passengers – and then provoke Hutch. His repressed inner rage breaks out, helped by his military training in the past. He is on the receiving end of a lot of hits and punches himself, but, in bone-crunching way, he wins the night.

We might expect that there are consequences and there are, tangling with the Russian Mafia, a most obnoxious villain who dresses showily, snorts cocaine, sings on stage in his nightclub, supervises millions of dollars of illegal cash – and has henchman galore at his beckoning.

If this sounds interesting and provocative, then *Nobody* is your show, a lot of action, a lot of ingenuity with weapons, some huge shootouts. A lot of this is done tongue-in-cheek, hyperbole, to say the least. And, continually in the background is a range of popular songs, lyrics apt for the action, including Louis Armstrong and *What a Wonderful World* as his house burns to the ground, *To Dream the Impossible Dream* at the height of the shooting, and *I'll Never Walk Alone* from *Carousel* during the climax. Actually, there is a happy ending, of course, with *Let the Good Times Roll* over the final credits!

Hutch proves that he is not exactly a *Nobody* even if that is the name in his highly secret government file.

PETER RABBIT 2

Australia/UK, 2021, 93 minutes, Colour.

Rose Byrne, Domhnal Gleeson, David Oyelowo. Voices of: James Corden, Margot Robbie, Elizabeth Debicki, Lenny James, Ewen Leslie, Damon Herriman, Rupert Degas, Colin Moody.

Directed by Will Gluck.



A couple of years ago, one of Beatrix Potter's most beloved characters, Peter Rabbit, appeared on our screens, along with his cousin, Benjamin Bunny, his sisters Mopsy and Flopsy, and Cottontail (who this time discovers jellybeans and the effects of a sugar high). The rabbits and various friends live on a farm which is now owned by Thomas and Bea McGregor (Rose Byrne and Domhnal Gleeson). Bea has written a book, *Peter Rabbit*, which is a commercial success and is preparing sequels.

So, this is a combination of animated characters in a live action film. And, they all blend very well indeed.

Peter can be somewhat mischievous, and Thomas has his suspicions, even misinterpreting Peter's kind deeds to save Thomas's tomatoes. However, when Bea discusses the sequels with her smarmy publisher, Nigel Basil Jones, played smoothly by David Oyelowo, they decide to see Peter as something of a villain, bad seed. Actually, Peter is rather exhilarated by seeing the huge posters for the book and, falls into temptation as a villain.

By and large, everything is going well at the farm, an entertaining array of animals from a foppish Fox who was persuaded not to chase the others but to go jogging! to a rather slowly enunciating deer. And, there is a fine array of actors voicing

the animals, James Corden repeating his role as Peter Rabbit, but Australian voices (the film was made in New South Wales), Margot Robbie, Elizabeth Debicki, Ewen Leslie, Damon Herriman.

While the live action focuses on Bea and her books, visits to the publisher, his insinuating charm to get his own way and ideas, Thomas suspicious, and plans to have Peter and the animals dressed in jeans, go to the beach, actually go into space... But, to our relief, these stories do not eventuate.

But, there is a lot of improbable action as all the animals combine to use their skills to ward off their enemies!

The animated action focuses on Peter being beguiled by a sinister rabbit, Barnabas (voiced by Lenny James) claiming to be his father's friend, but scrounging on the city streets, grooming Peter to participate in a market heist, the robbery of all the contents of the stand for dried fruits! Peter succumbs to temptation, persuades all the farm animals to participate, leading to pandemonium at the market, a successful theft, but, no honour among thieves, Barnabas and his assistant cats making off with the loot.

Peter has to face himself and be humble about it, even talking to Thomas and Bea, so that there is peace back on the farm and reconciliation all round.

A pleasant, light entertainment.

RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON

US, 2021, 107 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Kelly Marie Tran, Awkwafina, Izaak Wang, Gemma Chan, Benedict Wong, Alan Tudyk, Sandra Oh

Directed by Don Hall, Carlos Lopez Estrada.



This is a rather lavish Disney animation, computer-generated, full of bright colour, a lot of action, some comic touches (a touch corny!), But a quest, an adventure, a female hero, a female villain, and a female Dragon, who acts and talks in many ways as one commentator said, "goofy".

The film received favourable critical comment but was not as successful at the box office as hoped for, but released simultaneously in cinemas and on the Disney streaming channel.

This is a princess story, in the tradition of so many Disney princesses. But, more in the tradition of Mulan and Moana. In fact, this story derives from Southeast Asia, one of the main writers, Vietnamese background, the other, Malaysian background (and contributed to the screenplay of Crazy Rich Asians). And all the characters have a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

Which makes the reviewer wonder why many of the public put up barriers to the film. Are they being invited into a world which is strange, which they do not understand? And, wide audiences uncomfortable with the range of the characters and their behaviour? Not necessarily consciously so, perhaps unconsciously reacting negatively?

That said, we certainly are introduced to a strange world, an exotic kingdom. Unfamiliar. 500 years ago, there were many dragons, flying around the skies, with magic powers, protecting the humans and their cities from an insinuating evil power, black and smoky, the Druun, invade, turning the dragons into stone, petrifying humans, sucking out their life force and stop all rain.

Now, in the present, it is time to fight against the Druun, to find the last surviving Dragon, Susi, to find the pieces of the broken orb which gives power to repel the evil attackers. The one chosen to lead this crusade is Raya, a spirited young woman, trained as a warrior by her father, experiencing the petrifying of her father and so much of her world. The five cities are at enmity with each other and Raya is persecuted and pursued, especially by a young woman, her age, Namaari.

We share the quest, Raya searching for and discovering Susi (who can shape shift into human form), encountering a range of allies, a large armadillo who is friendly and that she can ride, a young boy who has a boat and is a top chef, a rugged and rough warrior with one eye, and for tiny tots making eccentric sounds but able to infiltrate enemy territory with some skills!

Which means then to a climax. After retrieving some of the parts of the orb, the remaining parties held by the city of Fang, Namaara's mother. Strategies are thought up: direct attack or, Susi's suggestion, friendly negotiation. Which seems to go well at first, but builds up to extreme mistrust, an elaborate sword fight between Raya and Namaari, Susi wounded, the orb seeming to lose its power. But, there is also self-sacrifice as each of the characters is willing to be petrified.

Not a spoiler to say that all is well in the end and we are all delighted, peace, reconciliation, healing rains, the return of the dragons, happiness all round.

SAINT MAUD

UK, 2019, 84 minutes, Colour.

Morfydd Clark, Jennifer Ehle, Lily Knight, Lily Fraser, Rosie Sansom, Marcus Hutton.

Directed by Rose Glass.



No, this is not hagiography. But, the central character, Maud, feels she is called to be saintly in her work as a palliative carer.

The trailer seemed to indicate that this is a horror film. There are a few moments which looked like horror film material, but they are a few moments. Rather, this is a psychological study, of a young woman, her nursing experience, her tasks in palliative care, her relationship to her patients/clients.

We do see Maud initially kneeling on the floor, with blood on her hands. We are initially suspicious. Some explanation will be given much later. But, then we see Maud, in the Yorkshire town of Scarborough, a very small flat, a dingy street, her commenting that she was not well, going to the bottom of a high hill, trudging up to the mansion she glimpses, welcomed by the departing carer, settling in, meeting her client, Amanda, terminally ill, a former choreographer and dancer.

Maud is played by Morfydd Clark. Amanda is played by veteran, Jennifer Ehle.

Maud looks plain, dresses in uniform, is devout, signs of the cross, crucifix, Marian statues, religious iconography in her flat, grace before meals. So, an introduction to St Maud. She is diligent in her work, preparing meals, sharing and supervising physical exercise for Amanda, even, at Amanda's invitation, talking about her experience of God, her all-pervasive sense of God, even the physical repercussions of her sense of God's presence.

She shares with a sympathetic Amanda, who calls Maud her little saint, gives her an inscribed book of the art of William Blake which stirs Maud's imagination, especially with images of God, flexed Annunciation organised religion as a detrimental to spirituality. But this will have unexpected consequences for Maud.

Maud's proper and disapproves of Amanda's relationships, visitors, even taking one visitor aside to warn her not to come back and disturb Amanda.

And, there is continual voice-over, Maud's voice, praying to God, talking to God, God talking back.

And, with some of her behaviour, wondering about her past, Maud encountering a friend from past work and finding she has another name, we are also wondering about Maud's mental state. And, the rest of the film gives quite some cause for

our wonder and concern. Schizophrenia suggests itself, Maud and her alternate name, alternate behaviour, Maud indulging in severe bodily mortification, burning her hand willingly, nails in her shoe as she walks...

Morfydd Clark gives a persuasive performance, perhaps reminding the audience of a young Sissy Spacek in look and manner (and, at the end of the film, reminiscent of Sissy Spacek in the climax of *Carrie*).

While the film's screenplay leaves it to the audience to assess Maud and what happens to her, the finale, on the beach at Scarborough, reinforces both Maud's sense of holiness, even martyrdom, as well as destructive madness.

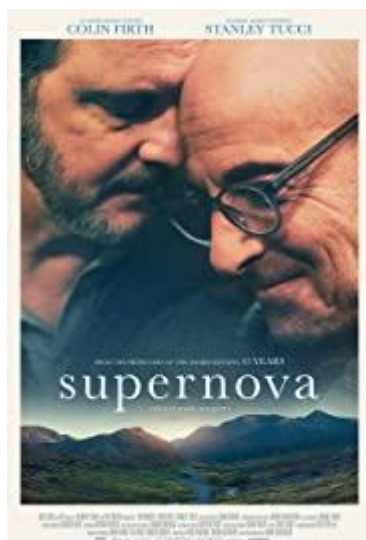
Quite a challenging case study.

SUPERNOVA

UK, 2020, 95 minutes, Colour.

Colin Firth, Stanley Tucci, Hayward, Peter MacQueen.

Directed by Harry MacQueen.



The supernova can serve as a bright metaphor for human life. As we see in the opening credits, gazing at the stars in the sky, gradually multiplying and multiplying, bright stars, and a supernova at the centre, flaring vividly, then disappearing, dying.

So the image is used for one of the two central characters of this two-handed drama, the story of the final times of a long-term relationship between the men, Sam and Tusker. Each of them has, in his own way, publicly, Tusker as a published novelist, Sam as a concert pianist, have had their moments of brightness. Now, Tusker is terminally ill.

Basically, the framework of the narrative is a road trip. And an opportunity to visit the range of vistas in the English countryside, the roads, the fields, the mountains, and visits to country homes. Tusker has organised the itinerary. Sam does the practical work, packing, driving, shopping. And the immediate destination is the family home of Sam's sister, a stopover on the road trip.

Sam is played by Colin Firth, always a strong and reliable screen presence. Tall and strong, he seems to tower over his co-star, Stanley Tucci, who plays Tusker. And the point of the road trip is that Tusker has been diagnosed with the onset of dementia, gradually taking him over, difficulties in memory, confusion in physical coordination, unable physically to write or do up shirt buttons. And, he can be cantankerous, even with Sam, despite their decades of being together.

One of the main issues is the depiction of the onset of dementia, the gradual physical manifestations, the psychological manifestations, difficulties in communication, and depression consequences, even to the consideration of suicide, not wanting to be the object of pity when all consciousness memories of the past have gone. The screenplay does raise the issues of palliative care, possibilities of life for the person experiencing dementia. The screenplay raises the issue of personal decisions, the reasons for taking one's own life.

And, the other issue is the role and responsibilities of the carer, and a lifetime of love which motivates the caring, prepared to look after the partner whatever the gradual and long-term deterioration.

Which means that there are some moving and challenging conversations throughout the film between the two men. When they stop at Sam's sister's house, there are further discussions, especially during a surprise party, longtime relatives and friends being supportive and caring.

There is also a musical motif throughout the film, excerpts from quite a number of songs, but the playing of a piano piece by Edward Elgar, culminating in the public performance by Sam in a concert.

Films like *Supernova* raise for the audience, the realities of the onset of dementia, the consequences for the person concerned, for relatives and friends, and for the moral choices to be made.

A helpful reference on dementia is the film, released at the same time, *The Father*, with a powerful performance by Anthony Hopkins bewildered by his experience of dementia.

SYNCHRONIC

US, 2019, 102 minutes, Colour.

Anthony Mackie, Jamie Dornan, Katie Aselton, Ally Ioannides, Ramiz Monsefi

Directed by Justin Benson, Aaron Morehead.



Synchronic is actually the name of a highly powerful, deadly drug. It requires a detailed chemical process, the 'syn' of its name, synthetic. However, there is also the allusion to 'chronos', the Greek word for time. Synchronic has a time-travelling effect.

This is science fiction. It is futuristic science-fiction.

There are two paramedics, played by Anthony Mackie and Jamie Dornan. They are experiencing difficult times in their work, tending victims of synchronic. Mackie is Steve, but suffering from a terminal illness which he doesn't let on to Dennis, Jamie Dornan. Dennis is having marital problems. And his daughter disappears – with the synchronic connection.

The main feature of the science fiction is that when anyone takes the drug, they disappear. And the novelty of the screenplay is that they disappear into the past. Steve has been confronted by the creator of synchronic, who is going around the country buying back the drugs. Steve has five tablets and decides not only not to destroy them but to try them out.

In the further novelty of the disappearance into the past is that the taker is transported into that very spot – and in a variety of pasts, back into the ice age, back into the era of the Conquistadors, the 1812 war with Britain...

And the drama of the action then is Steve's decision to go to where Dennis's daughter disappeared, to take a tablet, to take one into the past for her, getting her back. And, this leads to some dangerous action, confrontations, split-second timing and rescue. But, what about Steve?

The writers-directors, Justin Benson and Aaron Morehead, made a tantalising science fiction, endless. This one is not so tantalising, but it is imaginative.

TOM AND JERRY

2021, 101 minutes, Colour.

Chloe Grace Moretz, Michael Peña, Jordan Bolger, Rob Delaney, Patsy Ferrn, Palarvi Sharda, Colin Jost, Ken Jeong, voices of Bobby Cannavale, Lil Rel Howery, Tim Story.

Directed by Tim Story.



Tom and Jerry look as sprightly as ever up there on the big screen in 2021. They are great advertisement for Stayin' Alive!

Nostalgia reminds this reviewer that he saw Jerry dancing with Gene Kelly back in 1945 in *Anchors Aweigh* and, in 1953, Jerry swimming with Esther Williams in *Dangerous when Wet*! The IMDb tells us that William Hanna Joseph Barbera created the Tom and Jerry cartoons in 1940 – making this reviewer a few months older than they! They were probably very popular with the great grandparents of star, Chloe Grace Moretz. (Later Hanna and Barbera were responsible for many, many, many cartoons including *Scooby Doo*, the *Flintstones*, the *Smurfs*.)

But, enough of the past where their continual feuding, chases, tactics, slapstick violence, kept us entertained and wanting more. But, that is how they come across in our contemporary world. No ageing here!

One of the attractions of this film is that, while it is an animated cartoon, it is also a live-action film, set in New York City, streets, hotels, parks, a recognisable world. And, to cheer us up even more, Tom and Jerry are not the only animated characters. There are some singing pigeons to open the film. There is a ferocious large bulldog (marvellous for chases and creating a visual mini-tornado), a preening pretty cat, peacocks – and, surprisingly taking part in a wedding in the Royal Gate Hotel, a ferocious tiger and two elephants, delighting in pretty butterflies but alarmed and frantic because of a mouse!

The storyline, which one reviewer expressed disappointment at because it was so unsubtle – but, who wants or needs subtlety in this kind of comedy adventure! (He also expressed disapproval that the highlighting of the huge interior dome in the hotel, glass galore, signalled that it was sure to be destroyed – isn't that what signalling means and intends, that we are looking forward to that moment when there will be the huge crash and smash!). With Tom and Jerry pursuing each other, memories go back to the energetic chases of the *Roadrunner* and *Wily E Coyote* and other memories of slapstick enjoyment.

Which means, then, that there are enough hijinks, cat and mouse games, pursuits, one upmouseship, cartoon environments, to keep the younger audiences amused. With the wedding story, something to occupy adult attention. And, interest in the other storyline where Kayla, Chloe Grace Moretz, is sacked from her job, pretends to be an events expert, has the gift of the situation exploiter, gets the job, to the displeasure of Terence, Michael Peña, the actual events manager

who explains that he has clawed his way to the middle! They both have to rid the hotel of the menace of Jerry, employing Tom, fiascos all round.

The event is a lavish wedding, which gets lavisher and lavisher as the film goes on. But, there are some nice admissions of irresponsibility at the end, some pleasant reconciliations and, after an extraordinary New York chase, Jerry on a drone, Tom on a skateboard equipped with Wi-Fi, pursue a limousine to make sure that the bride comes back for a simple and happy wedding celebration.

And, if you are eager to see the most elaborate wedding smash and schmozzle, everything crashing down (contributed to by Ken Jeong as an angry chef), book now!

TWO BY TWO: OVERBOARD

Luxembourg/Ireland, 85 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Max Carolan, Dermot Magenniss, Ava Connolly, Tara Flynn, Mary Murray, Brendan Mc Donald, Carly Kane.

Directed by Toby Genkel, Sean Mc Cormack.



Filmmakers who specialise in animation entertainment for younger audiences know that there is quite a range in the target demographics. There is a particular demographic for the [littlies](#) audience, particularly for television shows to occupy/entertain/educate them in the mornings or the afternoons, their special times and channels.

And, there are the feature films especially aimed at that audience for a special outing with parents or grandparents. This is one of those films.

It is a great pity that we do not have reviews from the littlies, how they responded to the film, how they enjoyed it. They would be quite different from the reviews written by the adults, the media film critics, who seem to be writing their reviews as if the children's animation tale was geared for adults – and found wanting, very wanting. They seem to be focused on how they enjoyed the film rather than the littlies.

Which is very much the case with *Two By Two: Overboard*, a sequel to the 2015 film, *Oops, Noah's Gone.../ All Creatures Big and Small*.

But, in trying to see this little adventure through the eyes of its audience, we see it is full of colour and delight, animals galore, after all it does start on a variation of Noah's Ark, animals two by two, a Lion King in charge, sending out a bird to find land (the audience is a bit too young to get the Genesis 6 references!). The motley group of animals, bonding and fighting, is enough to gain the interest, as well as the fact that the food is running out, there is a horrible green slop which they all have to eat at every meal.

There is here are two central characters. Finney, a Nestrian (funny looking creatures to say the least) who can live above and below water, whose father is the chief chef, Dave, trying to maintain some peace on the Ark. It is Leah, a Grymp (a cat-looking type), whose mother, Hazel, works with Dave. They are up on the Ark lookout. A wave washes them overboard – and, so, this is their adventure, in the sea, discoveries, their being separated, Leah surviving on an island paradise, Finney finding more Nestrians, even a secret colony, where he is delighted to be welcomed – even though the Nestrian in charge, a severe lady called Patch, is not too keen on outsiders coming in.

In the meantime, especially for the parents and grandparents accompanying the littlies, there is also the story of David and Hazel, on the Ark, the search for their children.

As with all the variations on the fairy stories, there have to be some adventures, some scary bits, some funny bits, the joy of parents finding children, and the possibility of peace all round.

Which means then that this is a film that is designed for the children aged 6 plus or minus (and not for film critics imagining that the film was made for them!). (As illustrated by the opening paragraph of her film review by Lesley Felperin in the UK Guardian: "Although the first [Two By Two film from 2015](#) was almost the cartoon equivalent of a war crime, this sequel is merely annoying for the most part, and even has fleeting moments when it's sort of OK. That said, the script is still super-derivative and the retina-searing palette should carry a health warning."

YES DAY

US, 2021, 85 minutes, Colour.

Jennifer Garner, Edgar Ramirez, Jenna Ortega, Julian Lerner, Everly Carganilla, Tracy Thoms, Fortune Feimster, Nat Faxon, Arturo Castro, H.E.R..

Directed by Miguel Arteta



Who is the audience for Yes Day? Not older, possibly cranky, audiences who do not have children or who get irritated by children. (Unless they want to have 90 minutes of irritation.) Is this a film for parents? Well, yes, but with some cautions. They need to let themselves know that this is a blend of fantasy and reality, that they are supposed to enjoy the fantasy, imagining themselves involved in a Yes Day – but steeling themselves for the grim realities of the consequences!

Is it a film for children? Well, yes, an opportunity to indulge in “what if...?”, Imagining that their parents might offer them a Yes Day and what that could mean.

It all starts quite enthusiastically, at least with Allison and Carlos, meeting, enjoying each other's company, adventurous escapades, leading enthusiastically to the alter and an abundance of yes, yes, yes. Then, the years passing, three children, and Allison a very conscientious mother whose main word in her vocabulary now seems to be, No. Carlos, on the other hand, seems to be playing good parent to her perceived bad parent (at least in terms of saying no all the time to her children).

So far, so ordinary. Allison goes through job interview but is overqualified. Carlos goes to his workplace, testing toys, having to control and direct his staff. Of the children, Katie is 14 and wants to go to a concert with her friends rather than with her parents. Nando is not very good at maths but loves science and makes a video of his mother for a school project, linking her with Hitler and Mussolini... Ellie is little but not always sweetness and light.

A weary teacher, coach, school advisor suggests to the parents the idea of a Yes Day, a whole day without No. After seeing the video, Allison agrees to the day, even making a bet that she will win and will accompany Katie to the concert.

The kids (mainly with the help of the screenwriter!) devise all kinds of challenges for parental consent – to the flamboyant style of the clothes they wear, a bulk ice cream eating competition (no charge if everything is gobbled down within 30 minutes – and Carlos wins), drive-through a car washing procedure – with the windows down! Then, gathering a crowd for four teams, a paintball fight competition – which Allison wins. The parents then decide to break a travelling distance rule and go to the fair, Magic Mountain with all its rollercoasterss, rides, carousels.

Unfortunately, this is where parental example breaks down, Allison wanting to win a pink gorilla at a stall for Katie, clashes with a rival who also wants it, a fight, security, arrest, in jail.

Then things go to the worse!

Katie lets Nando and Ellie go home where Nando has his Nerd Day, a science experiment of explosions, crowds of kids, mayhem, explosions and foam everywhere. And Katie joins up with her friends and goes to the concert, finally becoming a bit wary.

How can one top all this! Obviously, Allison goes looking for Katie, she decides that the way to appeal to Katie is to go on stage, actually getting the sympathetic help of the main singer, played by H.E.R. and, it works, with Allison and Katie on stage with the singer to great applause. Carlos goes home and, in an exemplary way, takes charge, halting the kids and their mayhem, but not letting them escape, everyone having to help with the cleanup effort.

So, some parental advice about saying yes. Some caution for children about make-believe freedom and the realities of responsibility.

And all in 85 minutes.

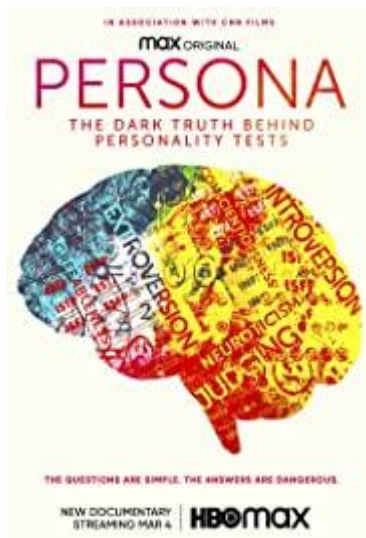
(Jennifer Garner worked for director, Miguel Arteta, in the family film, [Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day](#))

AN APPENDIX FOR THOSE INTERESTED IN THE MYERS BRIGGS TYPE INDICATOR

PERSONA: THE DARK TRUTH BEHIND PERSONALITY TESTS

US, 2021, 85 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Tim Travers Hawkins.



This is a documentary about psychological tests, especially in the United States. Its subtitle suggests sinister aspects.

The principal focus is on the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, MBTI, established by two Americans, mother and daughter, Katherine Briggs and Isabel Myers. It is based on Personality Types by Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung, (with visual quotes from him in the film).

There are some cautionary remarks to be made. They are being made in this review by a practitioner of the MBTI for almost 4 decades.

The first caution is about the use of the word “test”. Although this is said by sympathetic talking heads in this film, not necessarily heard by the filmmakers or others, the MBTI is an Indicator, **never considered a psychological test**. Its questionnaire is not geared towards exploring mental health. Nor is it, as criticised by a number of characters throughout the film, to be used as criterion for job applications or job employment. To do so is an abuse of the Indicator. Rather, this is just one focus on personality. There are others which are complementary or overlap. (Some of the Talking Heads refer to the questionnaire lightly as a ‘quizz’.)

On the positive side, the story of Katherine Briggs and Isabel Myers is told verbally, by way of a collection of photos, from home movie clips. This story is generally well explained, backgrounds, the intentions, their experiences, the forming of the first questionnaire during World War II as a contribution to peace and harmony. And, throughout the film, there are quite a number of quotations from Isabel Myers as well as visuals of the indicator, the 16 emerging types.

Also on the positive side, two of Isabel Myers’ granddaughters are interviewed, speak very well of their experience with their grandmother, are able to talk with some insight into the Indicator and its use. There is also an important interview with Richard Thompson, CEO of the Myers Briggs enterprise, who voices accurate information, descriptions, and, very importantly, noting how there has been scrupulous observance of copyright and clarity about the Indicator but that many people, especially in the social media age, have developed “knockoff” often easy to access derivatives which have been employed, not approved by the authorities, by a number of companies for sorting out job applications, acceptance and rejection is. But, that is the nature of anything that is created and enters into a competitive, sometimes exploitative, world.

Another advantage to the documentary is the presence of Frank James, a stand-up comedian who, over the years, has created quite a number of You-Tube performances illustrating the Indicator and various aspects of the Indicator. He is often very funny. He is often very accurate.

However, Merve Emre, who serves as Executive Producer, author of *The Personality Brokers: The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Testing*, after explanations of the origin of the MBTI, turns against it: *Persona* is informed by the 2018 book *The Personality Brokers* by the Oxford University professor Merve Emre, “I wanted to understand how these two women who had no formal training in psychology had come to design the world’s most popular personality test.” (Isabel Myers had...written a wildly racist novel. “You have this woman who, on the one hand, is committed to a certain set of progressive ideals, particularly for her time, and on the other, everything she’s doing is weighed down by a very troubling set of ideologies,” Dr. Emre says in *Persona*. The test contains traces of her racist, sexist, ableist, and classist ideals.”

It is these accusations that granddaughter, Katherine Hughes, refutes.

While there is consideration of other approaches, including The Big Five, along with information about some tests have been used for hiring and rejecting, the focus on their dark side and use leads to MBTI guilt by association.

In terms of guilt, *Personal* has a film within the film (or, it might be asked, is the treatment of MBTI a film within the film that is the very sad story of Kyle Behm, a young man with bipolar disorder, interviewed extensively throughout: his personal background, his tests for job applications, his being rejected by the tests, his depression and, tragically, his suicide. And the grief of his father and his moves to lobby for legislation against tests and some applications. The father is interviewed. And with the deep emotions that Kyle’s story elicits, right up to the end of the film, there is emotion against the use of tests for hiring, emotion against the MBTI.

There are people speaking in sympathy with Kyle and his treatment, sequences with a school in New York concerning tests and jobs and, forcefully, with the frankness and directness associated with autism, “Personality tests are by and large constructed to be ableist, to be racist, to be sexist, and to be classist,” says the disability justice advocate Lydia XZ Brown (with her noting her Asian background, her gay sexual orientation). “That’s what happens when you have a test ... based on norms devised from college-educated straight white men with no known disabilities. Personality tests are useful for individual people sometimes on journeys of self-discovery. But when they’re used to make decisions by other people affecting someone’s life, they become dangerous tools.”

Information can be found online, many sites quickly noting the documentary with its release on March 4th. In Australia, it screened on Foxtel Showcase on March 17th with many repeats.

For reading after watching the documentary – headings and quotations from a range of online sites, from HBO to personal sites. Many of the comments come from watching the trailer, responding to HBO publicity material. (The trailer is on YouTube.)

1. Taking a personality test can provide useful insights into our sense of self, but many may not realize how deeply embedded personality assessments are in everything we do. *PERSONA* explores the unexpected origin story of America's great obsession with personality testing, uncovering the intriguing history behind the world-famous Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, while raising a slew of ethical questions and demonstrating how some personality tests may do more harm than good – like impacting online dating matches or job prospects. This eye-opening documentary reveals the profound ways that ideas about personality have .
Rotten Tomatoes.

2. A documentary exploring the history and growing dangers surrounding the seemingly innocuous Myers–Briggs personality test.

medium.com

3. But as the decades have gone on the purpose of the Myers–Briggs test and others like it has changed. What started as a self-help tool useful for analyzing your personal beliefs, aspirations, and challenges has morphed into a new way to sort people both in the workplace and in their dating lives. *Persona* will seek to explore a number of ethical questions about our society's reliance on these tests and if they're actually creating another class of people to be discriminated against.

decider.com

4. *Persona* is informed by the 2018 book *The Personality Brokers* by the Oxford University professor Merve Emre – also one of the documentary's executive producers – which traces the history of the two women who created the namesake Myers-Briggs instrument. "I wanted to understand how these two women who had no formal training in psychology had come to design the world's most popular personality test. Emre says in the film.
5. Ultimately Hawkins hopes the film will make us all approach things like personality tests with a more critical eye. "We're often drawn to systems that seem to explain the world in a way that's simple and seems to be neutral, but I would always want people to be wary and to think about where these instruments come from. All of these instruments have a past, and if you really delve into them, you can start to find out things about why they exist that might make you uncomfortable."
6. "Personality tests are by and large constructed to be ableist, to be racist, to be sexist, and to be classist," says the disability justice advocate Lydia XZ Brown. "That's what happens when you have a test ... based on norms devised from college-educated straight white men with no known disabilities. Personality tests are useful for

individual people sometimes on journeys of self-discovery. But when they're used to make decisions by other people affecting someone's life, they become dangerous tools."

The Guardian

7. *Persona: The Dark Truth Behind Personality Tests* offers a glimpse of quiz dystopia. (Mashable)

"Persona" argues convincingly that it's time to stop personality tests.

"Persona" explores the dark history of personality tests like Myers-Briggs — and how they're used to oppress (salon.com)

8. Exploring the unexpected origins of America's obsession with personality testing, this documentary takes a look at the profound ways that ideas about personality have formed the world around us.

IMDb synopsis

9. One of the documentary's pivotal moments is the inevitable milkshake ducking of Isabel Briggs Myers, one of the co-authors of the Myers-Briggs assessment. Long story short: She was a white supremacist who believed people with lower IQs were incapable of self-perception and designed her first tests based on the idea that men and women have different natural aptitudes. That triple punch of racism, ableism, and sexism isn't surprising considering the state of pop psychology in the early 20th century, but *Persona* brings up this revelation only to drop it a few moments later for one of its many disparate narratives about personality testing. Alexis Nedd on mashable.com

10. Tim Travers Hawkins's doc takes a deep dive into how the personality test evolved from a way to self-identify into a "dangerous tool" in the hands of the powerful.

11. "It's being used to make decisions about who's worthy and who's unworthy," an interview subject say in the trailer.

deadline.com

12. “The Myers-Briggs Company has for decades taken a public stance against using the [MBTI® tool](#) for hiring or selection,” a spokesperson from the company told Refinery29 in a statement. “We do know that Isabel and Katharine created the MBTI with the intention of bridging differences and bringing people together.”
13. (Isabel Myers had...written a wildly racist novel. “You have this woman who, on the one hand, is committed to a certain set of progressive ideals, particularly for her time, and on the other, everything she’s doing is weighed down by a very troubling set of ideologies,” Dr. Emre says in *Persona*. The test contains traces of her racist, sexist, ableist, and classist ideals, Dr. Emre says.
14. Molly Longman, refinery 29.com
15. *Persona* leaves room for the idea that Myers-Briggs and tests like it can be used [on an individual level to further our personal journeys](#) and to help us understand ourselves.

Molly Longman

16. But *Persona*, from HBO Max and CNN Films, exposes a piece of information about Isabel Briggs Myers that calls all of her work into question, according to Merve Emre, an associate professor of English literature at Oxford University and author of the book *The Personality Brokers: The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Testing*....But while researching her book, Emre came across a startling find: Briggs Myers wrote a little-known second installment called *Give Me Death* that Emre describes as “a really horrifyingly racist novel.” “I was completely stunned to realize that Isabel was a successful novelist before she designed the Type Indicator, and in the late 1920s, she had written a mystery novel,” Emre said in *Persona*. “And then I realize that she had written a second novel, but that novel wasn’t advertised anywhere on the website. It was very difficult to track down in any mainstream library, and when I finally found it and I read it, I understood why — because that novel features the same team of detectives, only this time they’re investigating a series of suicides that take place among an old aristocratic, Southern family. And it turns out that the reason the members of this family are committing suicide is because they believe they have a single drop of African-American blood in their veins.”

Emre felt “betrayed” while reading it, she said.

“Because you have this woman who, on the one hand, is committed to a certain set of progressive ideals, particularly for her time — and on the other hand, everything she’s doing is weighed down by a very, very troubling set of ideologies,” Emre continued.

“It was really telling to me how Isabel’s prejudices, which it would be very easy to dismiss as being of her time, were not of her time. They were of our present, and they continue to be used today to sustain the powers of the dominant classes.”

moviemaker.com

17. But Briggs Myers’ granddaughter, Kathleen Hughes, says her grandmother has been misunderstood.

“Merve Emre came out with a book *The Personality Brokers* — she made some assumptions and implied some things I don’t even want to repeat because I found them so profoundly offensive,” Hughes said in *Persona*. “Isabel did care deeply about preventing another Hitler, about intolerance. And I think her primary focus was to appreciate your own uniqueness and being able to appreciate people who are different.”

On the Myers Briggs website, there is a page dedicated to explaining that “[All types are equal](#),” and that no type is better than another: “The goal of knowing about personality type is to understand and appreciate differences between people. As all types are equal, there is no best type.”

FILM REVIEWS MAY 2021

CINEMA RELEASES

ANTOINETTE IN THE CEVENNES

ASCENDANT

BREAKING BREAD

DE GAULLE

DISSIDENT, The

EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE

FINDING YOU

GUNDA

LAND

MAN IN THE HAT, The

MORTAL KOMBAT

NEST, The

SIX MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT

SON OF THE SOUTH

THIS LITTLE LOVE OF MINE

TWO OF US/ DEUX

UNHOLY, The

US vs BILLIE HOLLIDAY, The

VOYAGERS

WRATH OF MAN

STREAMING SERVICES RELEASE

BORAT, SUBSEQUENT MOVIE

I CARE A LOT

LOVE AND MONSTERS

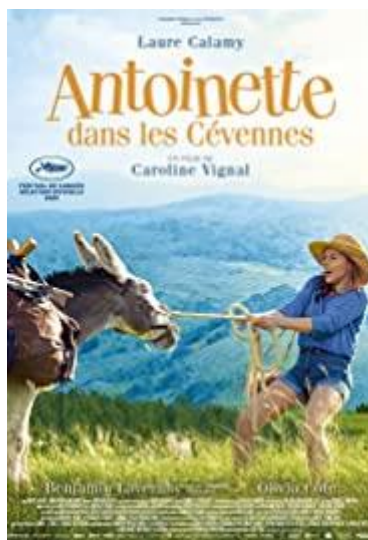
MAURITANIAN, The

ONE NIGHT IN MIAMI

TINA

ANTOINETTE IN THE CERVENNES

France, 2020, 96 minutes, Colour.
Laure Calamy, Benjamin Lavernhe, Olivia Cote.
Directed by Caroline Vignal.



One of those brief Gallic celebrations of l'Amour, blending the fluffy, the cute, the romantic.

It comes as something of a surprise to find that it is indebted to the story of Robert Louis Stevenson, his love for the American divorcee, Fanny Osborne, his disappointment in her disappearance to America and his riding a donkey on a trip into the Cevennes.

In fact, the donkey is central to this film, along with Antoinette. And the donkey, has Irish background, is called Patrick. (One has never heard the French pronunciation of Patrick called out so frequently in any other film!).

And, who is Antoinette, played with exuberance by Laure Calamy? She is a primary school teacher, seen changing into an evening dress, leading her class on stage to sing for the parents (a rather eyebrow-raising sexual song for such an occasion). She smiles at one of the parents, and he acknowledges her – and, within minutes, we realise that they are in a sexual relationship. Antoinette is young and passionate. Vladimir is something of a serial womaniser.

And why the Cevennes? Vladimir backs off from a week with Antoinette, telling her that he and his wife and daughter are booked to go on a hiking trip in the mountains. Impulsively, overnight, she books in, turns up at the Lodge, tells her story rather quickly to the gathered guests who seem to take this kind of liaison for granted, are curious, make their comments, and return to their concern throughout the week of hiking.

Quite inexperienced in hiking, Antoinette has booked a donkey – the aforesaid Patrick. He makes quite an impact on Antoinette, of course, pushing, pulling, cajoling, and her eventually falling in love with him. And, we are focused on Patrick, enjoying his obstinacy, enjoying his accompanying Antoinette, always pleased to see him.

Needless to say, there is an encounter between Antoinette and Vladimir – and his wife. Some tense moments, some truth is told, a lot of dismay for Antoinette. And a sprained ankle when Patrick goes racing off, dragging Antoinette behind him.

Which means that Antoinette has both a broken heart and a sprained ankle. Of course, she is young and resilient, and even postpones the train back to Paris when she wants to say farewell to Patrick

and finds that he is already tracking with a genial young man. He asks Antoinette to accompany him so that he can get used to Patrick... Of course!

ASCENDANT

Australia, 2021, 12 minutes, Colour.
Charlotte Best, Jonny Pasvolsky, Alex Menglet.
Directed by Antaine Furlong.



One of the creative aspects of filmmaking in Australia is that young writers, producers, directors, have possibilities for developing their projects with the help of Commonwealth and state funding. Often the films are small-budget, rely on character actor casts rather than stars, are able to exercise technical expertise, especially when they make genre films – and many of them have made small horror films. This is one of those films.

However, one of the difficulties is financing distribution, a reliance on international audiences (and often some international settings and accents with a touch of the American). And, distribution often relies on streaming services. This also happens with this film.

Actually, it is the kind of horror-drama that is popular with audiences of specialised festivals of horror films. The title actually refers to a very tall building in Shanghai, a hotel, over 100 floors, and a series of elevators. One particular elevator is a lot in the ascendant but it also has some crashing down, descendant.

On the whole, the action is confined to the cabin of the elevator, making the early part of the film quite claustrophobic, not just for the young woman who has been abducted, drugged, awakens in the elevator to find herself bound and gagged, but for the audience itself. There is some relief for the audience – not for the young woman, Aria (Charlotte Best). She can escape in her memories and imagination – but they are visualised, however briefly, for some relief for the audience. Aria remembers her twin sister, playing on the beach, their devoted parents, the loving father, and the suggestion of some mysterious powers that the girls have. Just suggestions in the early part.

The action is literally jolting, especially when the lift suddenly descends, Aria hanging suspended and then crashing to the floor (quite a number of times).

There is some explanation as to what happens – and the use of a television screen in the elevator cabin, showing Aria’s father, being tortured, the standover interrogator, Russian, with a couple of thugs, wanting to get information from her father. He refuses. She does not know the answers.

Aria also has the benefit of a mobile phone – although, at one stage, she has to get herself out of the elevator and onto high beams in the shaft to recover her phone.

This kind of mysterious claustrophobic thriller may not appeal to a number of audiences – but for those who find the synopsis and its mysteries rather tantalising, most probably their film.

BREAKING BREAD

Israel, 2020, 85 minutes, Colour.
Dr Nof Atamna- Ismaeel.
Directed by Beth Elise Hawk.



Actually, there is very little bread to be seen in this quite spectacular chefs’ story. The focus is on a vast array of dishes manifesting the creativity of that area of the Middle East referred to as the Levant, ranging from Syria through Lebanon on to Israel and Jordan to the Gaza Strip. And for audiences outside the area, these dishes have star quality! As the camera frequently moves to extreme close-ups, it is almost as if these dishes were echoing Gloria Swanson’s demand in *Sunset Boulevard*, “I’m ready for my close-up....”.

Given the enormous popularity of television programs like *Master Chef*, there is a vast audience and they are ready, even eager, for this kind of documentary and one hopes they hear about it and go to enjoy seeing it.

Speaking of *Master Chef*, the host for this documentary and for the Festival is Dr Nof Atamna Ismaeel, Israeli- Arab background who some years ago excitedly won Israel’s *Master Chef* competition. Already, in herself and in her talent, she is a sign for peace in the region. She is a very genial host, offerings all kinds of information, a good tour guide for all the dishes which will feature.

The audience is invited to the Israeli coastal city of Haifa. There is to be a special three-day food festival, especially of Arabic cuisine, presented in the context of Israeli cuisine, a festival of

collaboration. In fact, the film opens with a quotation indicating that while food will not be the solution for world peace, it is a good start. And here we see it in action.

In fact, the participants often point out that they are citizens of Haifa, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, are able to live in harmony, critical of the small percentage of extremists in the city. They do not shirk the difficulties and tensions in Israel and the Gaza Strip, but emphasise that common humanity is the key to living together.

And this is nicely exemplified by three pairs of chefs who work on the specialist dishes. There are pairings of Jewish whose ancestors migrated from Europe and an Arab Israeli living in a town bordering on Lebanon which then was cut in half, one part in Lebanon, the other in Israel. There is also a chef with French Catholic and Jewish parentage, another whose ancestors came from Morocco. And there is a genial middle-aged couple who for decades have shown harmony in their marriage, she Jewish, he Arab, but both considering themselves Israelis.

So, the political situation is not ignored.

But, the focus is definitely on the food, visits to markets, selection of fish, meats, vegetables, explanations of specialties of the region, the detailed preparation of the ingredients, techniques of preparation, cutting and chopping, plate arrangements, sources and oils, salads, fish and lamb, cooking and timing... And, of course, the finished products in those spectacular close-ups.

The main participants (interestingly the featured chefs are men) own restaurants and tell the stories of their families, the origins of the restaurants, customers. On the other hand, talking head interviews of Festival judges indicate that many of them are women.

So, *Breaking Bread* might be called a specialist film – but, amongst the audiences who will enjoy it, there are many cooks who would love to be specialists!

DE GAULLE

France, 2020, 108 minutes, Colour.

Lambert Wilson, Isabelle Carre, Olivier Gourmet, Catherine Mouchet, Gilles Cohen, Tim Hudson, Philippe Laudenbach, Clemence Hittin.

Directed by Gabriel le Bomin



This portrait of Charles de Gaulle was made for release on the 80th anniversary of De Gaulle's going to England, his broadcast on the BBC in June 1940, the beginnings of the Resistance and the Free France movement that culminated in the defeat of the Nazi invasion.

The film presupposes audience knowledge of France at the time of the attack on France in Paris, the relationships between France and Britain, the role of Winston Churchill, the role of Charles de Gaulle. So, for those interested in these film explorations of World War II and leadership, a fine recreation of the period, its tensions and danger.

There is a portrait of De Gaulle which emerges from the film, his military background, President Paul Reynaud promoting him to general and his becoming part of the French Cabinet, but also of De Gaulle as a person. There is his relationship with his wife, Yvonne (a sympathetic Isabelle Carre), his children, especially his youngest daughter, Anne, with a flashback to the difficulties of her birth, the parents concern, the opinions of the doctor, her being a Down Syndrome child – which led to a particular devotion to Anne from her parents.

On the political side, it is interesting to see the role of President Reynaud, decisive, indecisive, hesitant, influenced by his wife, trying to cope with the political opinions of the military, especially of national hero, Marechal Petain, acclaimed as the hero of Verdun, wanting to make peace with the invading Germans, an armistice. De Gaulle on the other hand, with a scene of his visiting the front with some devastations of defeat, not wanting to surrender, always wanting to fight back.

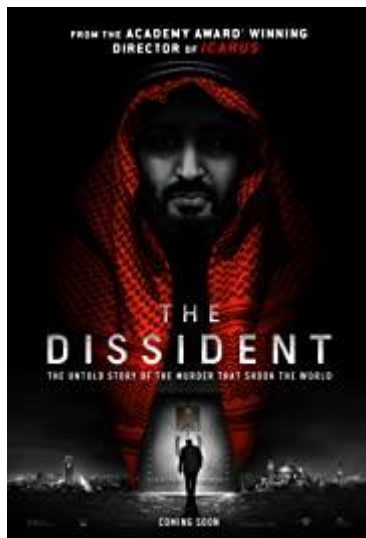
Audiences, especially those who have seen the many films about Churchill, will be interested in Tim Hudson's version of the Prime Minister and his interactions with De Gaulle.

It would probably be fair to say that those not familiar with the characters and events may find this film something of a revelation about these episodes of World War II – but, on the other hand, they may not be caught up, characters and events seeming rather distant, political, psychological drama rather than war action.

THE DISSIDENT

US, 2020, 119 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Bryan Fogel.



One of the strong features of recent years is the development of the documentary as a means of investigative journalism. While television is the main outlet for these investigations, filmmakers have become more ambitious, taking up controversial issues, having big budgets for research, interviews, collecting film footage, having almost 2 hours at their disposal to make their impact and challenge an audience.

Collective, the Romanian expose of corruption in health administration in Bucharest, was a recent Academy award nominee. And this film is worth a nomination.

In 2018, the story behind this film made world headlines, a focus on the Saudi Arabian journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, who went into the Saudi Arabian Consulate in Istanbul for documentation in preparation for his marriage to a Turkish citizen. He never came out.

The world reporting of this event led to a confusion of headlines, additions to the story, denials, admissions, mysteries concerning the number of men from Saudi Arabia at the consulate, admission of the death but variations on what happened.

American researcher, director, Bryan Fogel, has a great deal of film footage from the period to incorporate into his reconstruction of the events. He also has the advantage, a sad advantage, of being able to have Khashoggi's fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, participating in the project. This certainly personalises the story along with footage of Khashoggi making speeches, photographed in various situations, highlighting the injustice of his murder.

The documentary also has the advantage of incorporating the presence of a Saudi exile, living in Canada, Omar Abdulaziz. He is interviewed and his presence in the film, the way he is photographed, edited into the narrative, seems more like a character from a spy thriller. In fact, he made friends with Khashoggi, especially when the journalist became the target of an extraordinary campaign on social media, on Twitter, intrusive hacking, a set up by the Saudi government – and, the continued implications of the Crown Prince as the instigator of the murder.

While the audience is absorbing this information, there is a striking animation sequence inserted, noting that the intrusive Twitter attack is likened to Flies – and, they are visualised, along with a collage of hundreds of Arab men sitting at their computers. And, it is explained, the counter-attack is named as Bees, again animation illustration of this counter-attack.

Amongst the many talking heads for the documentary are Turkish authorities, the police, politicians, giving interesting accounts of how they handled the situation. There are also quite a number of interventions by International authorities.

The challenge to the audience is to look at how the Saudi Arabian authorities handled the fact of the murder, the accusations, arresting and trying several of the participants in the courts. But, the film also suggests that countries around the world have been very hesitant in terms of condemnations, sanctions, links with the Crown Prince and the Saudi government.

The Dissident plays as a drama as well as an investigative exploration of the events in Istanbul, the motivations behind them, and the consequences – and lack of consequences.

EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE/ YOU BELONG TO ME

US, 2021, 105 minutes, Colour.

Casey Affleck, Michelle Monaghan, Sam Claflin, Veronica Ferres, India Isley, Emily Allyn Lind, Vincent Gale, Lilly Krug.

Directed by Vaughn Stein.



There is a whole tradition of thrillers where by a stranger comes to a household, ingratiates himself, turns everything upside down, destructive. This is one of those thrillers.

It is based on a premise that most psychologists would condemn, that a psychiatrist, in sessions with a client, would decide that instead of listening and asking questions, he would actually tell his own life story as a means of drawing out the client's own story. That being the case, and the client writing down her memories of the conversations, some dire consequences follow.

The film is set in Washington State (though filmed in British Columbia), plenty of rain, clouds, brooding mountains. Just for the mood for this story. The psychiatrist in question, Philip, is played by Casey Affleck (more prominent as an actor since his Oscar-winning *Manchester by the Sea*). His life and emotions are quite complicated by the death of his son in a car accident, the scene with which the film opens. He is married to his second wife, Grace (Michelle Monaghan), who is stepmother to his daughter, Lucy (India Isley).

So, a household with grief tensions for some years. And the effect on Lucy is her experimenting with cocaine and being expelled from school, dressing in Goth style, a disgruntled teenager.

Then the news that the client has killed herself, that Philip will be subject to scrutiny by the University Board, relying on his friend and associate, Vanessa (Veronica Ferres).

And, then the brother of the client arrives, James (Sam Claflin), grieving, packing up his sister's house, returning a book to Philip, kindly invited to a meal, Grace offering to help in the sale of his sister's house, Lucy intrigued.

James, of course, is a mystery. He is able to exert charm. But, what are his motivations? What are his intentions?

All building up, course, to some high melodramatic confrontations.

FINDING YOU

US, 2021, 118 minutes, Colour.

Rose Reid, Jedediah Goodacre, Katherine McNamara, Vanessa Redgrave, Tom Everett Scott, Judith Hoag, Saoirse- Monica Jackson, Patrick Bergin, Fiona Bell

Directed by Brian Baugh.



Finding You is a pleasant way of indicating that this is a story of finding oneself (nicely finding good selves in others). This is a pleasingly entertaining story with quite a number of strands, subplots,

plenty for the young adult audience, enjoyment for the middle-aged, and some good drama for older audiences – and some visual echoes of Game of Thrones for the fans of all ages.

The opening of the film is in a very busy New York City, Finley (a charming, strong-minded Rose Reid) plays the violin and goes to an audition – and fails. Before you can say Mother Machree (if you do), Finley is on an Aer Lingus flight to Dublin, following her brother's footsteps, to do a summer course in Ireland, County Louth. She is upgraded to 1st class (the audience immediately a touch envious!) And find she is sitting next to the star of the heroes and dragons films, shot in Ireland. He is Beckett (a touch reminiscent of Kit Harrington's looks, something of an unwilling celebrity, still rather boyish in many ways.) He is played by Canadian actor, Jedediah Goodacre (now there's a name!).

It is a great relief for all of us that most of the rest of the film is set in rural Ireland, an attractive village in County Louth, a picturesque coastline, and some visits to the Cliffs of Moher. And Finley's accommodation is a lovely B&B, with a family her brother stayed with. And, when she is asked to take the breakfast into the guest, who does he turn out to be!

Actually, Finley is not very impressed by Beckett at all. He, on the other hand, is controlled by his father who is his manager, who manipulates the press with gossip-magazine stories, especially about his relationship with his co-star. In fact, Beckett really would like a life outside the movies. But, as mentioned about Game of Thrones fans, there are some enjoyable sequences on the film set, costumes and action, swords and fights, dragons breathing smoke.

We know there is going to be a romance but is rather an intricate way of getting there, starting with Beckett asking Finley to help him rehearse his lines. She reluctantly does so. But, some melting of her haughty attitude, his taking her to the local pub where Seamus, the local drinking busker who plays a mean fiddle (and engaging Patrick Bergin), invites her to join him, urging her to move away from technique and to feel the music. She does. And Beckett offers to be a tour guide. And she is searching for a Celtic cross which was sketched by her brother, quest to her.

In case the older audience feels left out by events so far, there is a strong subplot focusing on a crotchety old lady in a nursing home – and, she is played, a master class as always, by Vanessa Redgrave. Finley, as part of the course in Ireland, is to accompany her. Much easier said than done – and the old lady has a sad back story that needs to be explored.

So, Finley has to go back to New York for an audition but she is better prepared to play more personally. Beckett has to face his father and reality and make choices. But, most will be glad to know that we do go back to Ireland.

A pleasant entertainment with something for everyone.

GUNDA

Norway/US, 2020, 93 minutes, Black-and-white.

Directed by Viktor Kosakovskiy.



Gunda is the name of a sow who is at the centre of this documentary. There is striking black-and-white photography, close-ups of Gunda and her piglets, chickens and cows on the farm, with a vivid sense of detail.

The film has been acclaimed by film critics and cineastes. However, with its specialised focus, minute detailed attention and its more contemplative approach to observing farm life, it may well prove very difficult for mainstream audiences to sit through. It has made some viewers rather angry, their labelling the film pretentious.

The director has a Russian background, has been decorated by the state for his work, and, from 1992 to 2020 has directed 15 documentaries. For Gunda, he has concentrated on one farm but has travelled internationally for other farm sequences.

Audience attention is immediately on Gunda, lying at the opening of a shed, the camera remaining minutes contemplating her, something of a feature of the documentary style throughout. Piglets emerge. They suck on their mother's teats. They vie for positions. Gradually, we see the piglets growing, a dozen or more, still vying for position, with a touch of bullying (or whatever is the appropriate word for pig rivalry).

There are interludes with the chickens, including one with one leg. There are interludes with the cows. There are quiet moments as Gunda and the piglets show what it is like to be contented like a pig in mud. The piglets have their moments of content but they tend to be on the move and that jostling with one another.

There is a narrative in the film, dramatised towards the end when a huge tractor appears, carrying a huge container – for removing the piglets. In filming Gunda after they leave, the camera work in the close-ups suggest to the audience the emotions of the sow, indications of grief, bewilderment, wandering – then finally lying down. Further insemination? Further birth of piglets? The cycle over again?

LAND

US, 2021, 90 minutes, Colour.

Robin Wright, Demian Bechir, Kim Dickens, Sarah Dawn Pledge, Warren Christie, Finlay Wjotok Hissong.

Directed by Robin Wright.



It is not good for anybody to be alone, the words from the book of Genesis. This is one of the main messages of this portrait of a middle-aged woman, her retiring from the world, coping in the mountain wildernesses of Wyoming. While the title does emphasise the land, it might have been more appropriate to call the film Solitude. While there is wonderful scenery, the story is nevertheless introspective.

It can be noted that there is beautiful scenery photography – some drone shots over mountains and valleys. However, the film uses the strange device of minimal drone shots compared with a considerable number of photos of the scenery, like stills, like photos for a coffee table travel book, interpolated throughout the action.

The film is something of a labour of love for actress Robin Wright, striking performances and screening presence over the decades, now making her directorial debut. And, she takes on the central role of Edee, a middle-aged woman, seen initially at a counselling session, urged to express her feelings, but lost in her interior anxieties, feeling that she should separate herself from everyone and so going into the Wyoming mountains.

As might be gauged from these comments, this is not a film for audiences who demand action. Initially, out in the mountains, in the primitive hut with its outhouse, the narrative is very quiet, rather introverted, even somewhat claustrophobic.

Robin Wright's Edee experiences a number of flashbacks, puzzling the audience, someone who seems to be her sister, possibly a husband and child, but no explanations. -Until later.

The winters are particularly severe, the cold, Edee unwell, probably ready to die.

The drama of the film changes halfway through, the sick Edee discovered by a hunter, Miguel, a sympathetic performance from Demian Bechir, not exactly changing Edee's decisions for solitude but reminding her, as well as us, that we do depend on others. At one point she asks why Miguel has helped her and he replies that she was in his path and therefore he would help. He himself has his own background story which has quite some elements of pathos at the end.

This is the kind of film that puzzles, the central character who can alienate the audience at times, but a film which grows on its audience, eliciting feelings of compassion.

And, we realise again at the end, it is not good for anybody to be alone, that we are dependent on one another, that we need to surrender to the goodness and kindness of strangers, otherwise we live in solitude, an isolation that can lead to death.

THE MAN IN THE HAT

UK, 2020, 95 minutes, Colour.

Ciaran Hinds, Stephen Dillane, Sasha Hails, Maiwenn, Muna Otaru.

Directed by John Paul Davidson, Stephen Warbeck.



Jacques Tati. His name came up frequently while watching *The Man in the Hat*. And then the rush to include his name in a review so that this response would be original rather than suggested by other reviewers! (And, then checking the bloggers on the IMDb, there were, in fact, four who named Tati.) Two other names came to mind while watching, Elia Sulieman and the adventures of the eccentric characters in his film, and a touch of Wes Anderson. (Other bloggers did not name these two but came up with Chaplin, Keaton, Bunuel.) So, the aim of this paragraph is to indicate to lovers of arthouse movies, small-budget independent films, why they might enjoy this one!

And the question arises: have you have dreamt of getting in a car, leaving from Marseille, driving through the French countryside, back roads across rivers and bridges, up into the hills, out into the fields, up into the mountains and the small villages? Well, this film offers something of an opportunity as we sit in our chairs and live the trip vicariously. We are in the company of a central character who has not been given a name except *The Man in the Hat*. His played by veteran Irish actor Ciaran Hinds, versatile in so many films over the decades. We really know nothing about him though there are various suggestions, touches of flashback, imagination.

Actually, there is a bit of a panic about his trip into the mountains, having witnessed a group of rather sinister -looking men throwing what looks like a wrapped body into the water, he being a witness. And, they keep turning up on the roads, in cafes, in garages, which keeps the *Man in the Hat* busily moving on.

As with Tati the storytelling is in mime and performance, body language, rather than words (the *Man in the Hat* utters two or three throughout the whole film), the main words coming from our and his overhearing some conversations and stories. Tati always was a touch

awkward in his manner and bearing, the Man in the Hat is less stiff but nonetheless often awkward.

And entertainment is also in the range of people he meets in the mountains, an attractive woman on a bike, a character named in the credits as The Damp Man who seemed to this reviewer The Forlorn Man, and he looked a bit like Stephen Dillane (and, in the credits, so he was). He has quite a story, sitting under a bridge, getting wet, on a park bench, in a restaurant and feeling suicidal, encounter with a jolly chef... And a number of incidental characters including some traffic wardens who spend the time measuring roads, heights, gaps, with a tape measure (and gradually getting closer to each other).

The opposite of a blockbuster, cowritten and directed by John Paul Davidson (who has a long career behind him with television) and Oscar-winning composer, Stephen Warbeck, who also contributes a frequently jaunty score for this entertainment.

MORTAL KOMBAT

Australia/US, 2021, 110 minutes, Colour.

Lewis Tan, Jessica McNamee, Josh Lawson, Joe Taslim, Mehcad Brooks, Matilda Kimber, Laura Brent, Tadanobu Asano, Hiroyuki Sanada, Ludi Lin .
Directed by Simon McQuoid.



There is a different response for this action show, based on the celebrated video game, already filmed in the 1990s with Christopher Lambert, between the opinion of a reviewer and the opinion of a Mortal Kombat fan and player.

From a reviewer's point of view, the main comment would be on the technical bravura of the whole film, its visual scope and style, the staging of the action sequences and battles, the importance of the

intricate editing for the effect of the fights, the creation of the characters, their look, make up, iconic status, comments on the quality of the dialogue (functional for this kind of storytelling), the screen presence and performances of the cast (more iconic with martial arts talents than acting), the recommendation that it is a film for fans (which non-fans may not be interested in find more than a touch bewildering!). Lewis Tan is generally a cool hero, a touch of the laid-back to egos into action. Jessica McNamee, sporting an American accent, is a strong and attractive heroine. Josh Lawson, with his Aussie repartee, is a sometimes trying good deed turning baddy.

From a fan's point of view, questions are raised – and can be seen in bloggers' comments on such sites as the IMDb – as to its fidelity to the video game, its interpretation of the characters and their heroism, the treacheries, the building up of the conflicts, the staging of the fights. Fans will respond with enthusiasm if they like the fidelity and like the creativity of this interpretation, otherwise there will be disappointments and making some odious comparisons!

One of the major achievements of this film is that it was made in Adelaide, some moonscape sequences near Coober Pedy, others in the Mount Lofty Ranges, relying on South Australian resources, drawing on international talent as well as local. A mythical world is created, Earth and the Outworld, with particular look, costume and production design. There are sequences in the Japan of the past, Chicago of the present. And, vast caverns, vast arenas for conflict, a certain vastness in everything.

So, a review is mainly to note aspects of the film and deferring to the reactions of the fans.

THE NEST

UK/Canada, 2020, 107 minutes, Colour.

Jude Law, Carrie Coon, Oona Roche, Charlie Shotwell, Wendy Crewson, Michael Culkin, Adeel Akhtar.

Directed by Sean Durkin.



What does it profit...? A gospel question that has been dramatised so often over the centuries and finds itself the subject of many morality plays, many films. And, this is certainly one of them.

Interesting to speculate on the title. The nest could refer to the security of the family life. The nest could also refer to the security of a home where everyone can feel at home. So, something of both in this story.

The world is that of corporate business, the showiness of business in the United States, less flamboyant but equally ambitious business in the United Kingdom.

This is the story of Rory O'Hara, played with quite some flair by Jude Law. He certainly does not want to allude to his humble beginnings, although he has to go back there and acknowledge them at some stage. Rather, he is the corporate star has come from London and is prospering in the US, married to his wife, (Carrie Coon) and with a son and a daughter, the daughter at that troublesome age of self-assertion and discovery of the world of sexual encounters, drugs, rebellion against parents. The younger son, on the other hand, is bookish and rather introverted.

But this is not enough to satisfy Rory, making arrangements and deals behind his wife's back so that they can return to England where he can find a superior position, buy a mansion in the country, a house in London, his wife setting up a stable (she is an equestrian trainer), the children finding new friends and schools.

The American dream? The British dream? But, of course, the morality play nightmare!

Like many ambitious businessman, Rory overrates himself and falls foul of reality. Allison becomes more desperate, the children more tangled in their problems. At the end, Rory insists that Allison come to a corporate dinner, for wooing clients – but, she cuts through his pomposity and lies, walks out, Rory left with his close friend who is tired of being exploited by Rory and also walks out.

The screenplay certainly tackles the problems – but, ultimately might not be without some hope, as Rory and Allison return home, encounter the children, everybody back at the nest with the possibility of confronting reality and the future.

SIX MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT

UK, 2020, 109 minutes, Colour.

Eddie Izzard, Judi Dench, Carla Juri, James D'Arcy, Celyn Jones, Finty Williams, Jim Broadbent.
Directed by Andy Goddard.



A British espionage story but not quite the story we might expect.

It is the summer of 1939. In fact, it begins when there are only 19 days before Hitler's invasion of Poland. We are in Bexhill-on-Sea, an attractive coastal town with impressive cliffs and local Castle ruins. But the action takes place principally in the neighbourly to school for girls. Before the final credits, there are photos of the school in the 1930s, photos of the students. And the star, Eddie Izzard, grew up in Bexhill, knows the stories (as well as being inventive) and has co-written the screenplay and a central role for himself.

The film opens, as many an espionage story does, with a mysterious character, searching for something in the dark library, failing to find it, night, bicycling away from the school to the local pier, sitting in a deck chair, waiting. No surprise when his body turns up later on the beach where the girls are doing gymnastic exercises.

Which means that the school has a vacancy so Eddie Izzard as Tom Miller turns up for an interview with the principal, played with her usual effective presence by Judi Dench. There is only one other member of the staff, an energetic young woman who supervises the girls, Ilse (Carla Juri), coaches them in their sport and athletic activities, prepares them for a choral reception for local and visiting dignitaries.

To some extent, familiar and ordinary.

But, of course, the question is who are the girls? They are German, daughters of significant people in the Nazi regime, part of an Anglo- German alliance of sympathisers to German culture and to Hitler's politics.

Actually, Tom fits into the school rather well, girls responding to his English literature classes, his playing the piano for their rehearsals, and for their exercises, their poise as they walk with dignity books balanced on their heads. But, of course, it cannot last.

All kinds of German connections and, with the women imminent outbreak of war, the plan is to send a plane from Germany to pick up the girls on top of the cliffs near the castle where they had visited on an excursion. Whitehall has been trying to find out information as to the plan and the location for the landing and evacuation. Tom becomes more involved in it than we had initially imagined. So does the tutor at the school. But it all happens behind the back of the headmistress who becomes bewildered at what is going on.

Also in the scenario is the local bus driver, Charlie, an ever-genial Jim Broadbent. There are military officials down in Bexhill trying to make contact. A captain and a corporal are sent down to make investigations, especially when the Whitehall authority is shot dead. Tom, of course, is suspected and spends a lot of time evading pursuit (helped by Charlie and his bus as well).

This is the kind of film that gets moderate reviews from reviewers who suggest that they have seen this kind of thing before and seen better. However, it is an old-fashioned spy thriller which offers significant appeal to audiences who do like old-fashioned spy thrillers.

SON OF THE SOUTH

US, 2020, 105 minutes, Colour.

Lucas Till, Jake Abel, Lucy Hale, Cedric the Entertainer, Brian Dennehy, Julia Ormond, Sharonda Vanier.

Directed by Barry Alexander Brown.



Several films were in production well before the Black Lives Matter protests during 2020, police killing black men and women, the storming of the Capitol in January 2021. Which means that looking back into the racism of the past is prominent in American consciousness – as well as around the world.

Son of the South shared release time with the United States vs Billie Holiday, One Night in Miami, and Judas and the Black Messiah. The Billie Holiday film takes us back into the 1940s and 50s. One Night in Miami is set in February 1964, the night Cassius Clay defeated Sonny Liston. Judas and the Black Messiah takes us into the late 1960s.

This film is set in Alabama and Georgia in 1961, part of the preview to the 1963 March on Washington and the introduction of Civil Rights legislation.

It is the story of the young Bob Zellner, brought up in the Jim Crow south, his grandfather a member of the Klan. His grandfather continues to pursue him, threaten him. His father, on the other hand, brought up in a Klan family, went on study tour to Russia, heard a black choir on tour there and was moved, becoming a minister on his return home and bringing up Bob in this more open setting. A study project at the University led Bob Zellner to a black congregation, to the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, a change in consciousness about black lives, his staffing an office in Atlanta in the summer of 1961 and his consequently becoming a key campaigner for Civil Rights.

He has been significant for the movement, a white campaigner, especially during the years of the murders of white protesters in the Southern states. The Freedom Riders are significant in this film.

Lucas Till plays Bob Zellner, dramatizing his change of perspectives and his activity commitment – enhanced not only by Ralph Abernathy but his meeting with Rosa Parks in the years after her 'disobedience' in riding a bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

The drama is more intense as the film opens with a lynching party – and Bob as the target. The film will arrive at this point again, Bob and a defiant choice for his life's work. There are photos and clips at the end of the film of the actual Bob Zellner.

The film is released 60 years after the events portrayed – so much change for the better, but, still, so much racism ingrained and needing to be challenged.

THIS LITTLE LOVE OF MINE

Australia, 2020, 90 minutes, Colour.

Saskia Hampele, Liam McIntyre, Lynn Gilmartin, Craig Horner, Monette Lee, Tiriël Mora, Lawrence Ola, Martin Portus, Rajan Velu.

Directed by Christine Luby.



A light and easy romantic comedy.

In fact, a very nice comedy, a touch of rivalry between the sexes, more than a dip into the world of big business and finance, and the promise that despite difficulties, there can be happy resolutions.

The film was made in far North Queensland at Palm Cove, the sea, the beach, boats, scuba diving, fishing, resort hotels, banquets... Which means then that the film could serve as promotion of those Queensland reef islands, reminding audiences watching the film of happy times there and the possibility of going back, or an enticement to the audiences that this is somewhere they should certainly visit!

While the film has an appeal for Australian audiences, it is made with a wider appeal, especially to the Americans. The central character, Laura (Saskia Hampele) grew up on Sapphire Cove but went to America, law degree, workaholic, promise of a partnership in an important firm. By contrast, the other central character, Chip (Liam McIntyre), talented and a builder of contemporary homes, lives the easy life where he grew up, a captain in a boat, tours, no ambitions to move beyond.

But, the central tension is that he could inherit a vast empire from his grandfather if he signed the contract. Laura comes out to persuade him to sign. Actually, both are fairly straightforward in their approaches, even a deal that she will accompany Chip on some relaxing activities and he will read a page of the contract per time!

In fact, we know where it is all going so it is practically predictable (which some condemn but, as with so many popular entertainments, we want the outcome to be what has been predictable!).

There is a touch of the American about the dialogue and trainings in the accents. The director, Christine Luby, was born in the United States, worked in London, migrated to Australia where she has worked in the film industry. So, Laura is bit of a parallel with Christine. And the writer, Georgia Harrison, has delved into this plot device before in *Rip Tide*, Americans coming to Queensland and finding fulfilment.

The central characters, including friend Gem (Lynn Gilmartin), all have the kind of familiar face we see on television, especially in television series, Liam McIntyre having an Aaron Eckhart resemblance, Gem a variation on Amy Adams...

And, it could play very well date movie or, pleasantly, at morning matinees in suburbia or country towns, audiences enjoying the light entertainment and refreshments, an engaging outing – and nothing at all in dialogue or situations the least unseemly.

TWIST

UK, 2021, 90 minutes, Colour.

Raff Law, Michael Caine, Lena Healy, Sophie Simnett, Rita Ora, David Walliams, Noel Clarke, Jason Maza.

Directed by Martin Owen.



What does Charles Dickens do in his heavenly afterlife? Perhaps he spends a lot of time looking down on Earth, seeing all the different adaptations of his stories, for cinemas, for television. There is quite a lot, perhaps enough to keep him fairly occupied. And, so, the question arises, how do we respond to this adaptation of *Oliver Twist*?

The screenplay keeps a lot of the basic narrative from Dickens, bringing it into the 21st-century. We are treated to some scenes of Oliver as a little boy, artistic, devoted to his mother, her death, his becoming an orphan, finding his way in the world, squatting on roofs, surviving.

But, there is an extraordinary element, right from the beginning, that pervades the whole film, possibly making Dickens breathless (if that is appropriate for life in heaven) as he watches all the running, leaping, acrobatics, not only of Oliver but also of some of his fellow-thieves. The film is full of Parkour, one might say Parkour Partout. (And for those who may not be quite up-to-date with this vigorous activity: the activity or sport of moving rapidly through an area, typically in an urban environment, negotiating obstacles by running, jumping, and climbing, the name coming from “obstacles”).

There are some pauses for breath but, just as the audience relaxes, there is yet another chase, frantic running and leaping over the roofs of London.

Oliver is played by Raff Law – and, yes, he is the son of Jude Law, resembling his father both in facial appearance as well as manner of speaking and delivering his lines.

And Fagin? Dickens might well be pleased that he is played by Michael Caine, aged 88, 60 years of filmmaking and performance, just himself and easy to watch. And, while there is Nancy (Sophie Simnett), there is another substantial change from the novel. Not Bill Sikes, but simply Sikes, played intensely by Lena Heady after her stint in *Game of Thrones*, dressed in black, fierce, and in strong competition with Robert Newton and Oliver Reed from the past.

And, the villain is a duplicitous art dealer played by David Walliams.

In fact, the bloggers have been savagely severe against *Twist*. Perhaps, they should simply sit back, relax, enjoy the adaptation and the Dickensian overtones.

TWO OF US/ DEUX

France, 2019, 99 minutes, Colour.
Barbara Sukowa, Martine Chevallier, Lea Drucker.
Directed by Filippo Meneghetti.



France's nominee for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, 2021. Golden Globe nominee, winner of the Cesar award for best first feature direction. Many further distinguished nominations. Strong expectations – and, they are well fulfilled.

The tone is set in the prologue, two little girls playing hide and seek, one dressed in black, one in white, the girl in white disappearing. This episode is replayed with sad consequences later in the film, symbolic, when we identify the girl in black with the central character of the drama, Nina.

Then we are introduced to two elderly women, Nina and Mado, intimate, ordinary domestic sequences, yet revealing their deep relationship with each other. In fact, we have to glean the information about their past from various conversations throughout the film, but, especially a finely dramatic sequence (after an hour's running time) where Nina explains to Mado's daughter, something of her past and their past, the camera focusing in close-up on Mado's eyes and tracking steadily towards them for extreme close-up. The director uses

many of the stylistic devices to reveal characters and to help us appreciate their personalities, their emotions, the relationship and the demands on it.

There have not been so many dramas focusing on older women and same-sex relationships, the pressure on each of the women, the secrecy, finding the right moment for revelation. This is especially true for Mado, married for many years, tyrannical husband, two adult children, the son resenting his mother's attitude towards her father, the daughter, a hairdresser, tending her mother, and her son, a young boy, devoted to his grandmother. The right moment comes – but it passes. And there are consequences, some sad and disturbing consequences.

And, for review, that is more than enough information. This is a drama which has so many unexpected developments, turns, the audience wondering where it is leading, where it can be leading. To know nothing about these developments helps, quite considerably, one's response to the characters, consequences which both enhance and puzzle.

Barbara Sukowa, veteran actress in European and American films, has the opportunity for one of her best performances as Nina. Martine Chevallier is Mado, quite a demanding performance, more passive than active. The tension is strong, especially with the responses of Mado's daughter and with Muriel, a nurse who becomes involved in care for Mado.

One might not have expected this film to be France's nomination for the Oscars, but, after experiencing it, one can understand this choice.

THE UNHOLY

US, 2021, 99 minutes, Colour.

Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Cricket Brown, Cary Elwes, William Sadler, Katie Aselton, Diogo MorgaE.

Directed by Elio Spiliotopoulos.



The Unholy is a screen adaptation, written and directed by Elio Spiliotopoulos (writer of a wide range of films from *Beauty and the Beast* to *Charlie's Angels*), from the novel by reputable British author, James Herbert, *The Shrine*, transferring its location from England to Massachusetts (with its memories of the witches of Salem and the burnings).

(There were some pre-release cautions by religious groups, apprehensive about themes, Marian apparitions, the devil, cautions which are not always reliable.)

The film works at several levels for review and reflection.

First of all, there is the popular movie level, of religious horror film, in the vein of *The Exorcist* and the intrusion of the devil. There are some shocks and scares, a couple of jumps out of the seat. There are the elements of witchcraft in the prologue, set in 1845, the burning, the denunciations of a priest, then ghosts and hauntings. This is a world of superstition. There are references to Satanism and pacts with the devil. There are also superstitions and apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, healings, in the context of the contemporary American Catholic Church. The impact of the horror film does not depend on an audience understanding Marian apparitions, which most audiences would not be familiar with. There is plenty of plot, a solid cast, quite some drama (and no worries to a careful audience concerning sex, language, but with some expected violence). But, the intentions of the filmmakers are somewhat deeper.

Secondly, the film and its plot, the religious focus, can be viewed with hostile response by an audience which is anti-religion, anti-church. The portrayal of the visionary, the apparitions, Marian devotion and piety will probably confirm scepticism, such piety and activities appearing somewhat ludicrous to the sceptic. There is also the role of the clergy, the authority of the Bishop, the role of the hierarchy including an exorcist. But, there can also be some scepticism about the diabolical and satanic interventions in the world. The behaviour can be dismissed as religious mania, a world of the irrational which can be criticised and/or mocked. But these are not the intentions of the filmmakers.

At a third level, *The Unholy* can be considered from an informed Catholic perspective. The author, James Herbert, had a British Catholic upbringing and draws on his understanding of the church. So, there is much to be considered in this context of the horror/exorcism genre and its conventions.

The screenwriter has done his homework, there are quite explicit references and vivid and visual images of the apparition at Lourdes, at Fatima, at Medjugorje. There is also reference to the work of Pope Benedict XIV in the 18th century Enlightenment era and his regulations for the requirements and acknowledgement of miracles: something incurable, instantaneous cure, lasting. So, the film has quite a Catholic atmosphere and a Catholic advisor is mentioned in the final credits (though, the scenes of the ritual of the Mass are not too accurate).

So, this is a drama of the conflict between good and evil, using religious language, and some graphic imagery of Satan, deriving from the art of the Middle Ages. One of the characters remarks that when God builds a church, Satan builds a chapel next door (attributed to Martin Luther).

The film goes back to the burning of witches in the 19th century, the use of dolls as retainers of superstition, the finding of such a doll at the site where the audience knows a witch was burnt. However, the attention is given to the young 18-year-old deaf-mute girl, Alice (Cricket Brown), living in the priest's house with her uncle, the parish priest. She is devoted to Mary and surprises those who see her hasten to the tree, able to speak, say that Mary, The Lady, has appeared to her, giving her messages, encouraging people to faith. And, what happens, of course, is that crowds come, that Alice is able to heal, that she enthuses the crowd with her devotion.

In fact, the central character of the film is a sceptical journalist, played by Jeffery Dean Morgan, who has fabricated stories in the past and lost his reputation. He is a witness to what is going on, gets an agreement that he alone will be the mediator between Alice and the media. In the 21st-century, the apparitions certainly get media and social media attention.

The parish priest is supportive of his niece. The Bishop is consulted and brings in an exorcist Monsignor whose task is to disprove the reality of the miracles. However, the Bishop, more than a touch smarmy, gets caught up in the atmosphere, building a shrine and encouraging people to come.

A religious and Catholic sensibility will soon realise that the whole focus is on Mary, with plenty of images and statues of Mary and other saints, but minimally of Jesus, minimal reference to God. It is all Mary-focused, that the faithful should have faith in Mary, with many scenes of dedication to her, including the Bishop. The screenplay is very critical of an obsessive piety and devotion to Mary which does not lead, as the dictum says, to Jesus through Mary. There is no focus on faith in God as God.

So, the film is actually a film about faith, misguided faith in sincerely devoted people, emotional faith that is not God-centred. And, there is a dramatic conclusion, some fiery purging, but also the possibility of the truth and peace.

The Unholy is probably not going to get this kind of attention from audiences or reviewers – but, as indicated, it has themes and treatment which are pervasively Catholic.

THE UNITED STATES vs BILLIE HOLIDAY

US, 2020, 130 minutes, Colour.

Andra Day, Trevante Rhodes, Leslie Jordan, Miss Lawrence, Natasha Lyonne,

Directed by Lee Daniels.



This is a portrait of celebrated (and racistly-targeted) black singer of the early 20th century to the mid-1950s, Billie Holiday. (Filmgoers may remember the 1973 portrait of the singer, *Lady Sings the Blues*, with Diana Ross and the central role.)

2020 saw a number of significant, award-nominated, award-winning films from the United States with race and Civil Rights Themes. This film takes us back to 1947 to 1957. The others go back into the 1960s, *Sob of the South* is set in 1961 in Alabama, *One Night in Miami* creates a drama of the meeting between Malcolm X, Cassius Clay, Jim Brown, Sam Clay, in 1964, the night when Cassius Clay defeated Sonny Liston, indirect themes in *The Trial of the Chicago 7* which took place in 1968, and much more directly in *Judas and the Black Messiah* and the assassination of Fred Hampton, another target of the FBI.

And 2020 was the year when George Floyd was killed by a police officer kneeling on his neck for nine minutes with subsequent protests, Black Lives Matter, all through the United States as well as throughout the world.

It is a strong context for watching this story of Billie Holiday.

It has been directed by Lee Daniels (race themes in *Precious*, *The Butler*). While there is a narrative thread of Billie Holiday's life, her reputation strong amongst black audiences,

becoming a target of the FBI, especially the agent, Harry Anslinger (Garrett Hedlund), who pursued Holiday for years, urged by the sinister legal adviser, Ray Cohn, to target her for drug addiction, a cover for the racist pursuit.

There are flashbacks to Billie Holiday's early life, growing up in a Baltimore brothel, leaving home after being raped, beginning to sing, making an impact, gaining a reputation. However, her significant song for an American impact, and a focus for this film, is Strange Fruits, the FBI not wanting her to sing it because of the passions that it roused, a song where the strange fruit are the bodies of lynched blacks in the South.

The screenplay is very frank about Billie Holiday and her drug addictions, arrest, court case, imprisoned, serving a year sentence. There are also the tangles with her husband promoter and her divorce from him, the plans of white advisors and produces, her being manipulated and physically and sexually abused by a go-getting entrepreneur whom she marries.

There is some creativity in interpreting a central character, Jimmy Fletcher (Trevante Rhodes) a black soldier back from the war, employed by the FBI, anti-drugs, becoming the arm of Harry Anslinger in pursuing Billie Holiday, leading to imprisonment, but his continual fascination with her, feelings for her, the possible saviour – but, it is noted that this thread of the film is more fiction than fact.

Andra Day, in a powerful performance and commanding screen presence, also sings the songs that Billie Holiday made popular. To that extent, the audience will feel that they have encountered the actual Billie Holiday, as a woman, as a conflicted person, as a performer, as a powerful singer, and as a victim of US racism.

VOYAGERS

US, 2021, 108 minutes, Colour.

Tye Sheridan, Lily-Rose Depp, Fionn Whitehead, Colin Farrell, Archie Madekwe.

Directed by Neal Burger.



Throughout the action of this space adventure, set in 2063, all the characters are adolescents. Which may account for some of the hostile reviews on blogging comments, dissatisfied adult audiences who think that the adolescents should be behaving better. But, this also might indicate how it is the Young Adult story and treatment, appealing to the experiences and aspirations, especially of teenagers, a variation on their world and experiences.

There have been quite a number of journeys into space, characters lost in space, odysseys, as well as science fiction/fantasies of travel beyond familiar galaxies, searches for inhabitable planets, Jennifer Lawrence in *Passengers*, the scenario for the Young Adult fantasy, *Chaos Walking*, planets well beyond ours, decades of travel to reach them, the search for possibilities of living beyond a decaying Earth.

This time the voyagers are young children, first seen being created in laboratories, artificial children who will grow up in isolated protection, destined for a mission to a planet where humans can survive, but taking 86 years of travel. The children are to be trained in handling the complexities of space voyaging, travelling by themselves, reproducing, a next-generation, and then grandchildren generation who will inherit this “earth”. They are dressed in black. They live in community. They have their lessons, trained with expertise.

There is an adult, Richard, played by Colin Farrell, who has devoted his life to training, who wants to be allowed to go with the children. He does go on board – and then the action advances 10 years. The children are now adolescents, still with communal living, dressed in black, with high expertise in the management of the spacecraft, the craft programmed with answers for all their problems over the 86 years.

Richard dies.

Those familiar with William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* will soon make the connections between this scenario and that of the novel of young boys isolated from adults, on an island, becoming ever more primitive in their behaviour, passions and instincts unleashed, especially violence and dominance.

In the 21st-century, the group on board is of carefully chosen mixed races, boys and girls, a boy who is obviously destined to be leader, Christopher (Tye Sheridan), a girl who is in charge of medical issues (Lily-Rose Depp), and a boy who has been centrally cast, so to speak, to look like the potential rival and villain (Fionn Whitehead).

And so, as we expect, there are jealousies, factions, revelations of violence and, instead of the dead skeleton, the Lord of the Flies, there is the Phantom bogey of an alien in the craft. There is also the element of sexual awakening – but, presented generally, as with some of the violence, more restrained than we might have expected.

Can there be order? Can good conquer evil? What is human nature? And, using religious language, what is the impact of “original sin”?

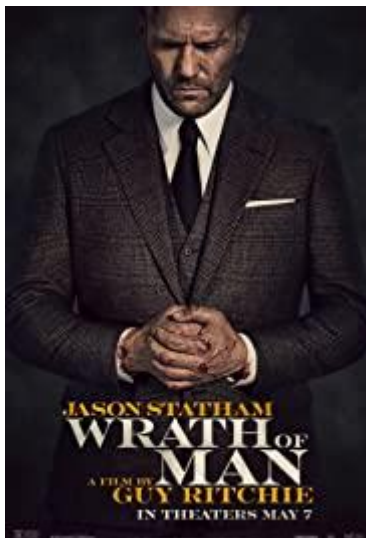
So, some pessimism about human nature – and, a final optimistic view about the human soul and spirit, and possibilities of life beyond Earth.

WRATH OF MAN

UK, 2021, 118 minutes, Colour.

Jason Statham, Holt McCallany, Josh Hartnett, Jeffrey Donovan, Scott Eastwood, Andy Garcia, Eddie Marsan, Niamh Algar.

Directed by Guy Ritchie.



We might fear the wrath of God but, looking at headlines, watching TV news, we realise that we might fear even more the wrath of man.

As might be expected from this title, this is a revenge action thriller with vigilante overtones. And it has been cowritten and directed by Guy Ritchie, something of the specialist in gangster films over the decades, so we can expect some high quality within the conventions of this kind of thriller. And, he delivers.

The star is Jason Statham. His first film was Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels, 1998, one of Guy Ritchie's earliest films. For more than two decades, Jason Statham has become an iconic screen figure, tough, unsmiling, laconic, sometimes hero, sometimes antihero (and the opportunity to both as he exercises his wrath here).

This is a film for the big screen, panoramic views of Los Angeles, especially the industrial area. And, there is a lot of close-up action, special effects, gun battles, machine guns.

But, the screenplay is quite complex (adapted from 2004 French film, Le Convoyeur/Cash Truck), not told in straightforward linear narrative, but rather a succession of chapters, moving forward to the events, going back into the past, a jigsaw effect, showing the audience the pieces, ultimately bringing them together. And each section has an evocative title, from A Dark Spirit to the final ominous, Live, Lungs, Spleen, Heart. Which means that it is hard to put a finger on Jason Statham's character, H, interviewed for a job with a security firm, collecting cash from businesses around the city, wondering whether he is an undercover cop, a criminal, but certainly an enigma.

The film opens with a robbery, the audience seeing it from a very limited angle. Later, the sequence will be revisited – and the revelation of some dire consequences.

One key question is the puzzle as to who committed the initial robbery – and, this is revealed, powerful Afghan veteran motivation, rebellion against American society, questions about post-traumatic stress disorder.

However, the plot is much more complex, much more puzzling as it unfolds. And, in this rather macho world of security drivers and war veterans, there is a very strong supporting cast, notably Holt Mc Callany as Bullet, genial guide to H as he begins his security work, Jeffrey Donovan as the leader of the veterans, Josh Hartnett as a co-driver, Andy Garcia as a mysterious authority, Eddie Marsan as the manager of the depot and, looking rather the image of his father, Scott Eastwood as a malcontent and ambitious veteran.

STREAMING SERVICES RELEASES

BORAT SUBSEQUENT MOVIEFILM: DELIVERY OF PRODIGIOUS BRIBE TO AMERICAN REGIME FOR MAKE BENEFIT ONCE GLORIOUS NATION OF KAZAKHSTAN.

US/UK, 2020, 95 minutes, Colour.

Sacha Baron Cohen, Maria Bakalova, Dani Popescu, (and Mike Pence and Rudy Giuliani).

Directed by Jason Woliner.



Even Sacha Baron Cohen might issue a warning about this Subsequent Moviefilm where he takes up his character, Borat from Kazakhstan (who has been in jail there for 14 years as a result of his shenanigans in the United States, harming international relations). His fans from the days of Ali G, through Borat, Bruno, The Dictator (while acknowledging his strong serious performance as Abbie Hoffman in The Trial of the Chicago 7) will know what to expect.

Enjoyment of his films will be a matter of taste. And some might add, a matter of bad taste. But, that is the intention of the satire, with everything (and everyone, here especially American politicians from Donald Trump to Mike Pence to Rudy Giuliani) considered fair game (by Sasha Baron Cohen that is, not the targets). All human behaviour can be the target for humour, for satire, sexuality and bodily functions, of course, issues of race and prejudice, bigotry, and stances on the extreme right.

So, with fair warning, and expecting the challenge to taste, it can be said that there are some very funny sequences in this film over and above the long title. Borat is his old self, accent and all, often obtuse, out of prison, discovering he has a 15-year-old daughter, newly commissioned to go to the United States to offer the gift of a celebrated monkey to Mike Pence. On the way, through various states, and with all kinds of disguises (including a Donald Trump mask at a Republican Convention with Mike Pence), with all kinds of pranks set-ups that Sasha Baron Cohen is famous for, encountering a lot of pleasant ordinary people along the way (Brian who sells mobile phones to an amazed Borat, the generous man who keeps faxing messages to the Kazakhstan president and back, the lady in the shop who acts as a fashion consultant, the beautician offering advice for his daughter, the kindly babysitter Jeanise Jones, who bonds with his daughter.

And the daughter is played by Bulgarian actress, Maria Bakalova, rather a game performance with all the things she is asked to do, with a hideously out of date book for sex instruction, her embarrassing breakthrough, an even more embarrassing dance at the prom. She received a Golden Globe nomination as well as Oscar nomination.

The most famous scene, talked and written about, causing controversy, is a prank set up where Rudy Giuliani eagerly agrees to do an interview with the daughter, is seen behaving more than a touch compromisingly in the aftermath, caught by borate.

Sacha Baron Cohen has very little time for American right-wing politics, has a sequence with two conspiracy theorists, Borat also believing that there was no Holocaust but meeting elderly Jewish women in the synagogue who explain that it happened.

Some of Sacha Baron Cohen's fans have complained that it was too much like the original film – but, others have enjoyed his taking up the character once again, traversing the United States, holding so much up to satiric mockery, an ending, before the 2020 election where he was certainly not for the re-election of Donald Trump, and the sadness of the covid lockdown.

I CARE A LOT

UK/US, 2020, 118 minutes, Colour.

Rosamund Pike, Peter Dinklage, Eiza Gonzalez, Dianne Wiest, Chris Messina, Isaih Whitlock Jr, Macon Blair, Alicia Witt, Damian Young, Nicholas Logan.

Directed by J Blakeson.



I Care a Lot/ Not.

While the film is about fraud, taken from today's headlines, fraud in exploitation of the elderly, cheating them of their savings, virtually imprisoning them in harsh institutional conditions, a company taking over administration rights, power of eternity, it makes for an interesting screenplay, but can it be entertaining?

On the level of interest, we are introduced to the supremely confident business executive, Marla, played with ruthless style and manner, by Rosamund Pike (winning a Golden Globe for this performance). We might be momentarily dazzled by her manner in court, her ability to turn on compassion, but the more we get to know her, the more repellent she is. And, she has a network of doctors, complicit in the fraud, making recommendations for likely targets, legally and inhumanely keeping them in literal lockdown. And, over the years, she has charmed a judge who listens to her rather than any appeal by any angry and disgruntled relative.

On the level of entertainment, the screenwriters have decided to bring in the Russian Mafia!

One of the recommended victims for the fraud is a not-so-little-old lady, despite initial indications she is a touch dodder. She is played by Dianne Wiest, a sudden intrusion into our home, Marla blending charm and decisiveness, getting her out of the house and into the nursing home before the old lady and we have had time to absorb what was going on.

The information was wrong – and what follows is a mixture of serious and satiric comic ups and downs as the son of the old lady, Russian Mafia as mentioned, tries his utmost (including crooked lawyers, violent thugs) to extricate his mother. For tantalising entertainment, he is played by Peter Dinklage.

Which means then that the conflict will build up to a confrontation (actually, many confrontations) between Marla and the sun – and a moral solution (“moral solution”?) is found in our capitalist slickly-greed-motivated world, fraud.

This solution is rather breathtaking – although, audiences who dislike Marla will be cheering, perhaps, at her breath-taking finale!

LOVE AND MONSTERS

US, 2020, 109 minutes, Colour.

Dylan O'Brien, Jessica Fenwick, Michael Rooker, Dan Ewing, Ariana Greenblatt, Bruce Spence.

Directed by Michael Matthews.



Love and Monsters is a smaller budget fantasy, a popular kind of story with Young Adult films, perhaps more geared to the Younger Adult audience, teenagers, and family audiences. It struck a mark, was very popular, streamed by Netflix, and an eagerness for a sequel.

Dylan O' Brien had proven himself a successful hero-warrior three times in the Maze Runner series. This time there is a variation on his character, something of a nerd in his way (which means then that the Young Adult audience of young men who don't see themselves as heroic or not considered as heroic, sports stars et cetera may well identify with Dylan O' Brien's character, Joel).

The film is rather derivative, happily so – touches of the pursuits by creatures in the Jurassic Park films, silence around the creatures as in A Quiet Place, and the touch of the Percy Jackson's amongst other influences. All elements which the audience will enjoy.

The opening is in California, an invasion of giant deadly creatures, people trying to escape, trapped and destroyed, including Joel losing his parents but rescued by a group in a truck who form an underground community. And this is the status for human beings for the next seven years.

Joel can make minestrone but is hopeless as a warrior, tentative and fearful. But, he was in love with a young girl, Aimee, Jessica Renwick, back at home and is able to keep in some kind of radio contact with her. After his failure in a vicious creature attack, he decides to go on a quest, to visit Aimee.

The bulk of the action of the film is his journey, pursued by creatures, dangers and risks, escapes, getting the companionship of a friendly and intelligent dog, Boy (who could be a cousin of Red Dog), finding an old warrior and a young girl who accompany him, who give him the rules of survival, encourage him in archery target practice. He also encounters an android who is winding down, shows him images of his family, sets the radio, gives him encouragement.

One might have expected the film to end as Joel arrives, rescued from his experience of deadly leeches, meeting Aimee who is in charge of her community who live on the beach. Enter an Australian yacht, the captain and his associates, friendliness all round.

But... Which means that there is more to the plot, some more action and adventure at the end, and not only a happy ending but all the ingredients for a welcome sequel.

THE MAURITANIAN

UK, 2021, 129 minutes, Colour.

Tahar Rahim, Jodie Foster, Benedict Cumberbatch, Shailene Woodley, Zachary Levi, Dennis Menochet.

Directed by Kevin Macdonald



9/11. Al Qaeda. Terrorism and the war against terrorism. Guantánamo Bay.

This film reminds us of the devastation of 9/11, of loss of life, of destruction of the Twin Towers, of America being at a loss, grieving, wanting vengeance. And, while Osama bin Laden was the main target, eventually discovered and killed, it was a large number of internees in Guantánamo Bay that became the target of some of the American vengeance.

This film focuses on the Mauritanian internee, Mohamedou Ould Slahi, who wrote up his memories and experiences for his legal counsel, Nancy Hollander, which were later published as a book, Guantánamo Diary. The screenplay for this film is based on Guantánamo Diary and the film is directed by veteran and Oscar winner, Kevin Macdonald, who has directed a substantial body of film work, both documentary and feature film.

The film opens with the Mauritanian setting, a wedding ceremony, and Slahi, taken aside, warned, leaving. Eventually, the audience learn some of his background, his going to Germany when young, finding a different way of life, caught up with dissidents, Al Qaeda, some training, visit to Afghanistan, and accused of being one of the chief recruiters and organisers of the 9/11 attacks.

We are introduced to Nancy Hollander, a tough legal expert, with social justice concerns, played by now so much older and experienced Jodie Foster. She has a young associate played by Shailene Woodley. Nancy Hollander is approached, agrees to take on the case, visits Guantánamo many times, interviews Slahi, experiences the tough security, documents in sealed envelopes, getting permission to go to archives but finding so many of the documents severely redacted, urging Slahi to write his story.

The story fills in Slahi's experience of arrest, internment in 2002, nothing about him surfacing until 2005, his treatment by the guards, in his cell, exercise, disappearance of fellow internees, and torture – but the screenplay keeps the graphic torture sequences until the last half hour, building up the character of Slahi and his dire experiences, his confessions, and, ultimately, the impact of the torture.

Slahi is played by French actor, Tahar Rahim (The Prophet, The Past, and Judas in Mary Magdalene). He communicates a complex character, made more complex by the Guantánamo experiences, a strong screen presence.

The Mauritanian also focuses on the American prosecution of Slahi. A military colonel, Stuart Couch, who had known one of the dead pilots of 9/11 and his wife, is persuaded to take on the case. Played by Benedict Cumberbatch. Starting with a militant approach, he becomes more and more frustrated with the redacted documentation, even going to Guantánamo, meeting with the authorities who rebuff him, asking for leads from a friend who had been involved authorising torture, finally reading the documents, disgusted, a man of integrity with religious background, resigning.

While Slahi won the case, he continued interned for some time until finally being released in 2016, publishing his book, returning to Mauritania – with a final credits sequence with the actual Slahi singing an American song back home in Mauritania, Bob Dylan's The Man in Me, with an American accent and enthusiasm.

(While Zero Dark Thirty had sequences of torture, the 2019 film, The Report, with Adam Driver and Annette Bening, can be recommended as a drama exploring the legislation about torture, obfuscation of the investigation, the eventual repeal.)

ONE NIGHT IN MIAMI

US, 2020, 114 minutes, Colour.

Kingsley Ben-Adir, Eli Goree, Aldis Hodge, Leslie Odom Jr, Lance Reddick, Christian Bagby, Michael Imperioli, Beau Bridges, Emily Bridges.

Directed by Regina King.



What do we say when we are confronted by something difficult and challenging? We need to process it. And, that is something we certainly need to do after watching this film – but, with concentration and attention, processing while watching it.

The film is an adaptation of a play by Kemp Powers, character portraits, and a reliance on interactive dialogue.

The action, after some significant introductions to the four central characters, takes place over one night, the night when Cassius Clay fought Sonny Liston who threw in the towel, Cassius Clay becoming world heavyweight champion, February 25th, 1964. The writer is interested in exploring race issues of the time, the immediate aftermath of the March on Washington and the influence of Martin Luther King contrasting with the violent approach of Elijah Muhammad and The Nation of Islam. 1964 would be a significant year in civil rights activity legislation (and, in movie issues, the same month Sidney Poitier won the Oscar for Best Actor, the first black actor to win, for *Lilies of the Field*).

It would be interesting to ask contemporary American audiences how much they know about the four central characters. Non- American audiences will be far less informed about some of them, even Cassius Clay becoming Muhammad Ali and the influence of Malcolm X. So, the film has the most interesting prologue, dramatising each of the four central characters, but setting each of them up for some kind of fall.

Malcolm X is in the process of separating from the Nation of Islam. He is shown as a verbal firebrand, persuasive in his speeches, a family man supported by his wife, but insisting on drawing the lines between them and us, white and black. (It is well worthwhile Googling background information about Malcolm X, his poor background, criminal activity, prison experience.) And influence on the young Cassius Clay, persuading him to embrace Islam. Then there is the singer, Sam Cooke, shown failing at the Copacabana nightclub, audiences walking out on him. The fourth character is the football player turned actor, Jim Brown. The sequence where he returns to his island home in Georgia, strong reputation, welcomed by one of the locals and his daughter, sitting on the porch,, Brown offering to go into the house to help move furniture – and then being told that ‘niggers’ are not allowed into the house. A jolting sequence – and played by Beau Bridges and his daughter, Emily Bridges.

The championship fight with Liston is shown, Clay dancing around, claiming to be the greatest. Malcolm X is a keen photographer, cheering on his protégé. They team up with Cooke and Brown and go to a hotel, Malcolm X with very serious bodyguards and security, it is to be a night of conversation, propaganda, intense examination of race attitudes in the US, the repercussions for each of the four men. Malcolm X serves as something of a conscience, especially in prodding Sam Cooke, critical of his songs, seeing him as pandering to white audiences, strong business acumen. Cook defends his approach to his talent and career, interested in collaboration. Brown has some frank talks with Malcolm X, about the world of football, of acting, of collaboration in a black-white world.

There are happy scenes. There are angry scenes. There are highly confrontational scenes. And some measured peacefulness as Malcolm X phones his wife and talks to his daughter.

So, the film is an exercise in consciousness-raising, an invitation to go back into the 1960s, to try to understand and empathise with African- Americans at this time of bigotry, Civil Rights activity, the promotion of non-violence by Martin Luther King, the violent stances of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X.

And, again worth googling if the information is new, Malcolm X being assassinated just over a year later (and Spike Lee's film with Denzel Washington worth watching), Sam Cooke involved in a burglary attack and dying, Jim Brown's long movie career – and, of course, the troubles, especially about the Vietnam war and conscientious objection for Muhammad Ali as well as his long life, successes, and, one might say, his entertaining self-promotion.

The film was directed by Oskar-winning actress, Regina King.

TINA

US, 2021, 118 minutes, Colour.

Tina Turner.

By Daniel Lindsay, T.R.Martin.



This is a vigorous and dynamic documentary, in keeping with the personality of its star, Tina Turner.

The film is framed by interviews with Tina in Switzerland in 2019, age 75, looking back over her tumultuous life, her career with her husband, Ike Turner, revelations about violence and abuse, her comeback and becoming a superstar of rock 'n' roll. There are also quotations from her revelatory interview in 1981 for People Magazine.

The film is satisfying in so far as we are shown Tina Turner and listen to her voice, her memories of the past, telling her story, the ups and downs, the struggles, the final triumph and her exhilaration.

The film goes into various archives, providing a great deal of film footage of the young Tina, of her work with Ike, footage of Ike himself, television interviews, music. And there are photos of her home town of Nutbush Tennessee. Both her father and mother disappeared and she was in the care of relatives. Her mother does reappear at the end of the film, critical of her daughter, seemingly unable to love her, but Tina providing some comfort and luxuries for her mother in her older years.

The film spends considerable time on Tina's relationship with Ike Turner, his promoting her, their vigorous performances, growing success, Ike's musical abilities. She joins him in 1957, marries him, four children, two from his previous marriage, one from her previous relationship, one son whom they both parented. There is a great deal of footage, plenty for fans to enjoy of Tina and her performances, the costumes, her reliance on the vigour of her body, movement and dance, distinctive style.

The film also covers the truth about her relationship with Ike Turner, his music success, his management of Tina, the violence of their home life, her attempted suicide with pills, the role of the children, her eventually moving away from him, leading to divorce in 1976, her not benefiting financially from the divorce, her having to work in all kinds of situations, take on television guest appearances...

And, that might have been the end, but then liberated from Ike, and with enormous determination, she moves towards a comeback (although the narrative indicates that with the Ike and Tina performances she had never arrived as Tina herself, and this was her coming).

Roger Davies became her manager at the end of the 1970s, determined that she should have an album, making all kinds of contacts, failing, Tina eventually moving to London. She met Terry Britain – and, at first unwillingly, she created her hit What's Love Got To Do With It (and with quite some renditions here). She also collaborated with Kurt Loder for an autobiography which was also highly successful. There followed tours all around the world, featuring 186,000 people at a concert in Rio. There were book signings, television interviews – and her strong regrets that interviewers still kept going back to Ike and her time with him rather than focus on her emergence. It was at this time that she made Mad Max, Beyond Thunderdome in Australia (a minute more of this would have been welcome!)..

Some attention is given, with interviews with star, Angela Bassett, to the film on her life and career, also called What's Love Got To Do With It.

Tina became a household word own, Turner not really necessary. From the 1980s, she has been a world star, distinctive in her performances, her vigorous voice. There are excerpts from later concerts and with songs such as Simply the Best.

In 2019, Tina Turner attended the premiere of the musical based on her life, staged on Broadway. She also talks about her relationship with her husband from 2013, Erwin Bach, who served as a producer for this film and is also interviewed. She has lived in Switzerland since the 1990s and is a Swiss citizen.

While Tina Turner has had a hard life, she is obviously quite a survivor, and encouragement for show business performers, and beyond.

FILM REVIEWS JUNE 2021

CINEMA RELEASES

CARMILLA

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FIRST KISS

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QUIET PLACE, A, PART 2

SONGBIRD

SPIRAL: FROM THE BOOK OF SAW

THOSE WHO WISH ME DEAD

THREE SUMMERS

STREAMING SERVICES

ARMY OF THE DEAD

BLITHE SPIRIT

I AM ALL GIRLS

MONSTER

GERMAN FILM FESTIVAL

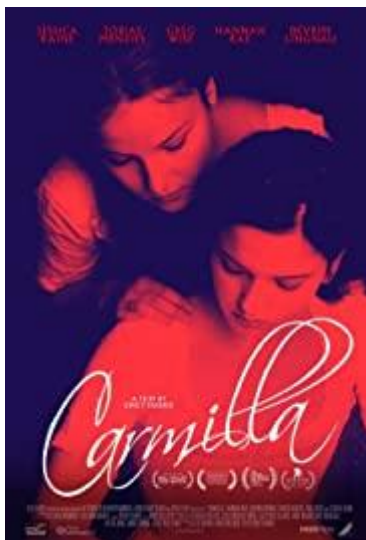
BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ

SPACE BETWEEN THE LINES, The

CARMILLA

UK, 2019, 94 minutes, Colour.

Hannah Rae, Devrim Lingnau, Jessica Raine, Tobias Menzies, Scott Silven, Lorna Gayle, Greg Wise.
Directed by Emily Harris.



From the title, audiences in the know would be expecting a vampire story, a focus on women and relationships and vampire consequences. Audiences will be thinking of the novel by Irish writer, Sheridan Le Fanu, a strong reputation during the 19th century, and an influence on fellow countryman, Bram Stoker, for his 1897 vampire classic, Dracula. (An interesting cultural question as to why key English language vampire novels emerge from 19th-century Ireland!.)

Someone trying to categorise this particular version of the novel, Carmilla, has come up with the tag description “romantic horror”.

In fact, there is very little real horror in the expected sense during this film. The emphasis is definitely on the romantic. The setting is a wealthy mansion in the English countryside, a countryside with woods, a lake, surrounding mountains. A lot of the action takes place in the grounds, beyond, and in the interiors of the mansion. Plenty of attention to costumes and decor. And an appropriate classic style musical score. It is the setting for a Gothic tale.

At the centre of the story is a teenage girl (although this sounds too modern a description of this young lady of the upper-class). Her name is Lara (Hannah Rae). She lives with her father and has a governess, Miss Fontaine. Her father, Mr Bauer is played by Greg Wise. Miss Fontaine, a telling performance from Jessica Raine, one of those ambiguous 19th-century characters, romantic but with a touch of Mrs Danvers as well, strict supervision of Lara, every detail, manners, prayers, meals, etiquette – and, well, Lara left-handed and having her arm tied behind her back for so many activities so that she will become properly right-handed. Lara is pining for some company and a young lady from town, Charlotte, is due to arrive.

Instead... A carriage is overturned on the country road nearby, and another young teenager (young lady) is rescued, recuperates at the house. Her background is something of a mystery. Her name is Carmilla (Devrim Lingnau). In the original, there is a strong lesbian falling in love, more explicit vampire conventions. They are not employed here, the conventions, except that the two girls bond eternal friendship by blood. Rather, the relationship and its sinister consequences are suggested by atmosphere, health complications, loneliness and languishing.

Audiences who were expecting more realistic interpretation of the classic expressed disappointment and frustration. Audiences who are satisfied with differing interpretations, drama by suggestion and intimation rather than the obvious may find this version interesting as well as tantalising.

THE CLIFF WALKERS

China, 2021, 125 minutes, Colour.
Zhang Li, Yu Hwei, Zhu Yahwen.
Directed by Zhang Yimou.



In recent decades the Chinese film industry has produced a great number of films about the experience of China in the 1930s, the invasion by the Japanese and their occupation, harsh government, installation of puppet local authorities, atrocities and executions, leading up to such events as the siege of Nanking and the outbreak of World War II. This is acknowledged at the beginning of this film – and, at the end, there is an encouragement for the Revolution.

This film is set in 1931, winter, many of the sequences with snow falling. Four Chinese who have been undergoing training in Russia are parachuted in for a mission, to find an escapee from a

Japanese torture camp and get him over the border so that the world can discover what the Japanese are doing.

The four, two men, two women, decide to go in pairs, taking suicide tablets with them.

With the espionage dimension of the screenplay, audiences have to pay quite a deal of attention, the journeys of the two pairs of spies, the local commander and his assistants, the intricacies of infiltration, cover, betrayals.

It is interesting to look at some of the details of Chinese life at the time, an extensive ride in a train, the station and railyards, a city and its streets (often at night, dark alleys, car chases and crashes), the bright neon lights, especially for the local cinema, Cinema Asia (where Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* is screening and we are treated to some glimpses of its most famous scene, Charlie and his shoes), the Romanian embassy and its lavish interiors.

The characters of the four spies gradually emerge, Zhang, the leader, along with the young woman, travelling by train, accosted, framed by the authorities, a safe house, but Zhang arrested and tortured, physically and with psychedelic drugs.

There is drama with a grim sequence initially of prisoners lined up and casually shot, one tortured and pressurised into betraying the other members of the group. The commander is bullish and relentless. However, gradually one of his closest assistance is revealed as being part of the operation. This leads to tension, visiting the cinema, the revealing of the plan, the involvement of the Romanian embassy, betrayal, pursuits, suicide pills...

There is some relief at the end, some moments of sentiment and happiness and hardened viewers and reviewers might be wondering what the director is up to, indulging in feelings. However, during the final credits, there is a sequence where no doubt is left about espionage, betrayals, retribution.

Director, Zhang Yimou, has been making some key Chinese films for over 30 years, beautiful historic dramas in the 1990s, some very personal stories also, then a move into action features, history, martial arts – and his being the director of the opening of the Beijing Olympic Games.

CRUELLA

US/UK, 2021, 134 minutes, Colour.

Emma Stone, Emma Thompson, Joel Fry, Paul Walter Hauser, John McRea, Emily Beauchamp, Mark Strong, Kayvan Novak, Kirby Howell-Baptiste.

Directed by Craig Gillespie.



Cruella. We all know who she is. In fact, she achieved worldwide fame 60 years ago, Disney's animated film version of Dodie Smith's popular novel, *101 Dalmatians*. Her reputation, especially with her surname, De Vil, was reinforced in the 1990s in Disney's live-action stories with Glenn Close embodying Cruella. Who could ask for anything more! Well, of course, in the trend in the superheroes and villains movies, an origin story.

So, here we are, back in the 1960s, at least for this story's purposes, with the birth of Estella, growing up in the north of England, sometimes quite abrasive at school, especially towards the bullies, her characteristic black and white hair, and a kind of dark personality, Cruella, sometimes emerging. And, soon, expulsion from school (though her kindly mother quickly insists to the principal that she is transferring her daughter to avoid expulsion).

And this is all being narrated by the older Cruella, Emma Stone.

There are many elements of quite black comedy in this origin story, an initial death which is rather shocking – and has quite some shocking consequences. Estella wanders around a lavish mansion, chasing her dog, causing all kinds of mayhem, the home of fashion-designer icon, the Baroness. Of course, Cruella is going to meet her match – or the Baroness meet her match in Cruella – a clash of the Titans of the fashion world, so to speak, especially when the Baroness is played by Emma Thompson. Emma is the queen of British haute Couture (lending itself to the happy pun, haughty Couture). Her staring and arrogant manner is a severe one-note performance.

But, there is a lot of preliminary entertainment when little Estella teams up with two young thieves, Jasper and Horace, spending 10 years picking a pocket or two on London transport. But, Estella has a talent for fashion design and eventually, Jasper providing false references, gets a job at the Baroness's enterprise, cleaning the toilets amongst other things! And looked down on by a prim, haughty manager. And there are several of those in the Baroness's employee, especially with her extensive security guard.

One of the challenges in appreciating Estella is that we know that Cruella is going to overwhelm Estella. The voice-over keeps reassuring us of this. And Estella does have some good moments, and relates well to her friends Jasper (Joel Fry) and the rotund Horace, a touch dim and sentimental (Paul Walter Hauser from *Richard Jewell*).

Ultimately, fashion takes over, fashion in London in the 1970s (accompanied by a huge playlist of popular songs of the period). The costume designer's have obviously been

working overtime, lavish dress after dress, gown after gown, displayed by the two Emmas.

Which will ultimately lead to combat, confrontation, a great deal of mean-mindedness on the part of both Cruella and the Baroness, and an ultimate stand-off. No prize for working out who will win! It is how the victory is achieved is the important thing, quite tricky and complex (from Australian Tony Mc Namara's ironic screenplay).

The film runs for 134 minutes so it is not just some quickie either in running time or in production values.

LA DARONNE/ THE GODMOTHER/ MAMA WEED

France, 2020, 104 minutes, Colour.

Isabelle Huppert, Hippolyte Girardot, Farida Ouchani, Liliane Rovere, Iris Bry, Nadja Nguyen, Rebecca Marder, Rashid Guellaz, Mourad Boudaoud.

Directed by Jean-Paul Salomé.



Isabelle Huppert has been headlining, top billing, for almost 45 years. And still she goes on, looking much the same in each film, even as she grows older – though, in this one, she does get quite an opportunity to change her appearance. But, she is a reliable screen presence, bringing strengths and variety to each of her films.

It seemed necessary to google the meaning of the title, indicating some kind of slang for a mother figure. The English title, The Godmother (with echoes of The Godfather) does seem a little formal. There is another English title circulating, Mama Weed, which probably does indicate the themes of the film as well as the tone.

On the surface, this is a police thriller. Drugs are coming from North Africa, trucks driving through Spain and into France for delivery and distribution. The police are on to different gangs and families, North African based, a lot of surveillance, phone tapping, GPS... And, amongst those working at headquarters is Patience, herself of North African background with family migrating to France decades earlier. She is a widow with two daughters. Her mother is suffering from forms of dementia and is being cared for in an institution, paid for by Patience. And Patience works in the department, listening in to surveillance tapes and translating from Arabic to French.

So far, not so exactly Mama Weed.

At one stage, Patience has to make a decision, especially her concern about the kind aged-home carer who looks after her mother, turning out to be the mother of one of the truck drivers. And the decision has all kinds of unanticipated consequences.

Patience, in fact, is finding it hard to make ends meet, owing substantial rental to her landlady, an imperious Chinese landlady, Patience mother being threatened with eviction from the home for financial reasons...

In some ways, we suppose, the screenplay is indirectly asking us what we would do in a similar situation, protecting the kind carer, the consequences with the drug load in the truck, diverting the drugs to save the driver, and the interesting challenge as to what to do with such a huge haul of drugs!

Well, the title does indicate that Patience is going to become Mama Weed – using her considerable wits, to locate the drugs, buying a former sniffer dog as a companion and accomplice, set up the very contacts that the police are keeping on surveillance. And, the big chance for Isabelle Huppert to appear not exactly like herself, donning very fashionable Arabic clothes, headscarf, dark glasses, for her rendezvous.

There is also another complication, she is beginning a fond relationship with the police chief in charge of operations and surveillance, his becoming more and more frustrated. And, there is quite some tension in the action, and then thugs invade a Chinese wedding, hosted by the landlady (who, of course, become something of an accomplice), and there are shootings and bodies to be disposed of!

We are in admiration for Patience and her skills – but, this is a moral/amoral world and we have to check what our attitudes are has Patience literally sails off to a new life.

DEATH OF A LADIES' MAN

Canada/Ireland, 2020, 100 minutes, Colour.

Gabriel Byrne, Jessica Pare, Brian Gleeson, Antoine Olivier Pilon, Karelle Tremblay, Pascal Bussieres, Joel Bissonette.

Directed by Matthew Bissonette.



To appreciate the intentions of this challengingly-named film, it is best to bypass any expectations of close-ups of a ladies' man and to focus on the theme of death. Death is certainly at the centre of the

story – although, in this process of death, of a man being able to go back through his life, the people in his life, the events of his life, his successes and, with greater emphasis, his failures, it could be likened to some kind of “Purgatory of a Ladies’ Man”. (This kind of Purgatory/Death experience is a theme that was explored in its exciting Pixar way in the Oscar-winning *Soul*.)

The storytelling here is quite stylised, divided into three chapters, focusing on Samuel and the way that he is hooked throughout his life, and a chapter on his travels and writing, and a final chapter bringing all the themes together.

And, the storytelling is particularly stylised in so far as it moves from realistic narrative into what is sometimes called “magic realism”, what seems to be ordinary but events and, here, particularly characters, real and fictional, appear and disappear in Samuel’s life. (He is also diagnosed as having a tumour on the brain.)

The trouble with this kind of central character is that, despite some past Irish charm, he is not particularly likeable – and doesn’t go out of his way to make himself more likeable (except to the end when he is moving towards, we hope, some kind of redemption). He is played by Gabriel Byrne, himself an Irishman, long-time resident in the US, but playing an Irish character who has settled in Canada. He tells us that he is 64. A bit late for a midlife crisis – a pre-old ageing crisis, perhaps.

We are suddenly introduced to Samuel and his sometimes hectic life, discovering his wife’s infidelity and demanding a divorce, hurrying to see his son (who announces that he is probably in love and definitely gay) who is also a hockey player. And then, the magical realism really starts, Samuel watching the hockey players line up and then move into dancing routines, balletic on their skates, figure dancing. This kind of hallucinatory experience becomes more frequent, even in the middle of lecturing when he hears one of the students give a spiel when he is simply being matter-of-fact.

Samuel goes to see his daughter rehearsing an avant guard play (and she and her boyfriend on drugs). There is his ex-wife who is going to marry again. There is his university colleague to whom he confides that he would like to write a book. Samuel is a drinker, has had affairs, is not particularly reputable.

But the key thing is, his father keeps entering his life, the younger version of his father, and they reminisce, discuss the past, his mother, his growing up, the father concerned about his son and critical.

So, where can this go? Answer, Part two, to Ireland! He goes back to his old house, finds his father there, settles in quite nicely. At the local store he discovers a young woman who has come from Montréal to look after her sick mother. They are attracted, begin an affair, have happy conversations with the mother. But, there is a jealous man in the background, who threatens, shoots through a window, pursues the running couple in his car, hits a rock and he and the car are catapulted over the cliff. Is Samuel coming to terms with his life or not? His daughter turns up – sees what is happening (or, rather, cannot see what is happening in his hallucinations).

There is some hope for Samuel, frank AA meeting, Samuel telling his story, especially about his concern with his daughter’s addiction and health, and, as they proceed to the church, this particular gathering turns into a song and dance routine. It looks as though there could be some happy ending despite the fact that Samuel is diagnosed terminally.

Since everything has been unpredictable, we find that the ending is also unpredictable, not without some hope, not without some final self-awareness on Samuel’s part. The death of the ladies’ man is not quite what we anticipated.

What makes this story even more distinctive is that especially in three episodes, that Leonard Cohen’s songs are used to dramatic effect, especially Hallelujah after the AA meeting and Did I Ever Love You..

DELIVER US FROM EVIL

South Korea, 2020, 108 minutes, Colour.
Jung-min Hong, Jung-jae Lee, Jeong Min Park.
Directed by Wong- Chan Hong.



Deliver us from Evil been used many times as a film title, more recently in connection with documentaries and fiction on the sexual abuse of minors. There is abuse of a minor and minors in this film, but the particular focus is on the traffic of children, for sexual purposes, but, more sadistically, on using them for organ donation to the wealthy, criminal exploitation.

This is a Korean action film targeted for the many fans of this genre. The narrative is interspersed with violence, sometimes quite graphic (even the film opening with a paid assassin eliminating a gangster). There are many choreographed fight sequences, a smashing car Chase, all those popular ingredients.

And, one of the problems for identifying with the story and characters is that none of the central characters is admirable – though one becomes more and more sympathetic.

However, as said, this is a film about child trafficking. The opening sequences are in Korea, the world of gangsters, elimination, revenge. However, most of the action takes place in Thailand. Mother and daughter live in an affluent home, the mother trying to do a real estate deal. But, the daughter is abducted from school, disappearing, hidden with an alarming number of small children, marshalled to respond to affluent requests for organs even surgery that would kill the children who are easily disposed of.

Then, quite quickly, we discover that the initial assassin was part of a crack team of assassins in the past whose group was closed down and the members left adrift – assassin for hire in his case. Then, some flashbacks, and his discovering that the abducted girl was his daughter. And, we know what the rest will be as he gets his ticket for Thailand (postponing his ticket for anonymous retirement in Panama).

But, of course, there is more. A very suave looking (though his nickname is The Butcher his propensity for slitting his victims as they hang down) is the brother of the initial assassinated gangster. The brother is bent on relentless revenge, and has quite a thug entourage to assist him in his quest.

Which means then that this do a double pursuit, our hero (becoming more sympathetic because of his absolute search for his daughter) is also the target of a vicious chase.

What makes the story somewhat different is the introduction of a character who is to be the guide of the hero, getting information, accompanying him, all kinds of help. This character is a singer in a club, transgender, a Korean in Thailand who can do translations, wanting to earn money for final surgery. At times were distracted from the violent pursuit by the whims and ways of the guide, posturing, posing, camper mannerisms, but, essential to the completion of the mission.

And so, the evil that we must be delivered from is a contemporary scourge, the trafficking of children.

FATALE

US, 2020, 104 minutes, Colour.

Hilary Swank, Michael Ealy, Mike Colter, Damaris Lewis, Tyrin Turner, Danny Pino.

Directed by Deon Taylor.



The title quickly signifies what we are to expect. Will there be a femme fatale? And, with the overtones of Fatal Attraction, will there be a man entangled with an uncompromising woman?

Actually, for the first 20 minutes of this film, it goes exactly as might have been expected. Michael Ealy is Derrick, something of a self-made businessman, agent for sports stars, working with his best friend as partner, with a very glamorous wife and a very large affluent mansion. But, tension at home. A visit to Las Vegas, his partner encouraging him to temptation, a one night stand, hello and goodbye! Well, of course, definitely not goodbye.

Because the first 20 minutes are so expected, we are sitting in our seats wondering when the twists will come and how effectively twisted they will be. They do come – and they are!

In fact, in the second 20 minutes of the running time, there are quite a number of twists involving a reconciliation between Derrick and his wife, a home invasion, police investigation.

And Hilary Swank plays the chief detective, investigating the robbery, but discovering more and more about Derrick, his wife and his partner – and quite some twists.

Which means that the third 20 minutes of the running time leads to twists within twists! There is a story of an up-and-coming political man who is accused of financial double dealings protesting innocence, rather arrogant – and then the discovery that he has been married to the detective, which does, of course, lead to a few more twists.

After an hour of running time and involvement in the anxiety of Derrick, the strong presence of Hilary Swank (always a strong and commanding presence on-screen) and further leads in the investigation, the next 20 minutes introduces the murders. Building up more and more tension, and a focus on Derrick as the most probable suspect.

There are only 20 minutes left in the running time so that has to be for the solutions and the resolutions. Once again, not exactly what we might have anticipated but some violent confrontations. Will and can Derrick survive?

So, a variation on the Fatal Attraction scenario, always an interesting and involving movie pastime.

FIRST LOVE

Japan, 2020, 108 minutes, Colour.

Masayuka Kubota, Sakurako Konishi, Shota, Sometani.

Directed by Takashi Miike.



A rather enticing title, a gentle invitation to experience the blossoming of love. But, what follows is not exactly gentle nor genteel! This is a crime drama, drug dealing drama, a tough fist fight and sabre-wielding action, one might say, extravaganza.

It is probably prudent to write in a review that this is a Japanese drama that will not appeal to audiences who find it difficult to cope with on-screen violence. Rather, it is for a niche audience for the films of Takashi Miike, very popular in Japan as well as round the world, his films range from samurai blade films to gangsters and guns). It is a film which appeals to his fan base (and bloggers wax enthusiastic about his films and about First Love).

So, a question arises, will one become part of this fan base? An IMDb blogger suggests an approach: "When one goes to see a Takashi Miike film one expects certain things. It has to be grotesquely violent, slightly tongue in the cheek and an over the top story that that would never work with anyone else at the helm." Another fan adds: "[Devilishly intricate and delightfully insane](#) "

So, how does First Love fit in with this scenario? Actually, the title doesn't come up for 13 minutes, after an introduction to central characters and complex and conflicting themes. There is young Leo, training to be a boxer. There is Yuri, sold by her father to drug dealers, her having to pay off his debt by prostitution, and her becoming a severe addict. Then there is the corrupt policeman, doing deals with the Yakuza, a tough boss getting out of prison, a baby-faced psychopath who will cause all kinds of trouble – and mayhem.

And, yes, as the corrupt policeman is dragging Yuri down the street, plans to get hold of a bag of drugs, Leo bumps into him and Yuri runs away. Not exactly Romeo and Juliet, but one might say with some overtones, touches of tragedy, pursuit, threats, the prelude to love, and saving-love in action.

There are quite a lot of characters in this drug dealing world and in the world of the Yakuza, as well as rival Chinese gangs, all in pursuit of the drugs, but complicated by the psychopath and his greed, his outbursts of violence, carelessly and viciously killing people but getting his comeuppance from

one of his victims whom he tried to kill by burning her apartment, confronting him in a clothing warehouse and (spoiler!) decapitation.

In the culmination of the action that does take place in this warehouse, all the interested parties are present, pursuits, shooting, fights, swords, and the police arriving with machine guns.

Actually, the end of the film does have the tone of first love, some gentle sequences with Leo and Yuri, his boxing, her cold turkey experience, some nice sequences in broad daylight with ordinary people around.

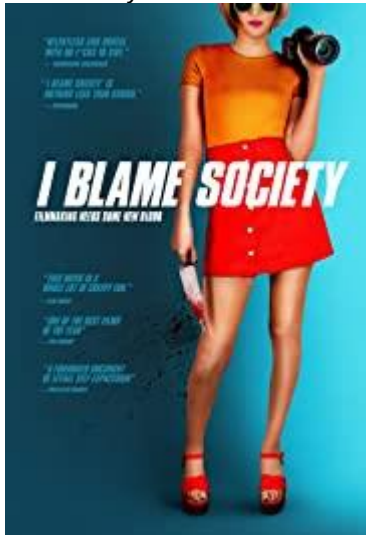
For the fan base.

I BLAME SOCIETY

US, 2020, 84 minutes, Colour.

Gillian Wallace Horvat, Keith Poulson, Chase Williamson, Lucas Kavner, Morgan Krantz, Alexia Rasmussen, Jennifer Kim, Devon Graye, Garrett Coffey, Jonny Mars, Macon Blair.

Directed by Gillian Wallace Horvat.



This is an extremely idiosyncratic film. It is the work of writer-director, performer, Gillian Wallace Horvat.

The focus is on Gillian, using her own name, talking with her partner, Chase, about making a personal movie. What attracts her is that Chase's girlfriend, whom she nicknames Stalin, has made a comment about her qualities as a killer. Chase listens to her proposal, becoming more and more bemused about her plans to make such a film, opts out.

The action moves forward three years, Gillian in a relationship with Keith, with whom she discusses her projects, whom she also films at home, in discussion, in sexual activity. Ultimately, Keith will give up on her. She is recommended to meet with two producers of independent films, lots of discussions, offbeat suggestions, Gillian encouraged.

Then, she sets out to start her film, actually to murder, proud of herself as she disguises herself as blonde, eventually cutting and redesigning her hair, provocative with her clothing, driving around scouting locations. She encounters quite a number of men, those whom she disapproves of. However, she meets up again with Chase, goes on a walk with him, upbraids him for still wanting to marry Stalin. He then has a choking fit and it emerges that she has given him a bagel with sesame seeds to which he has an allergy. She films all this, including his death and her callously not giving him an injection to counterbalance the allergy until he is dead. Later, when Stalin asks her for Chase's last words, she taunts her, omitting a deathly gurgle.

When she has realised how easy it is to kill, she sets off on her spree in earnest, on the one hand killing men that she considers deserving of death, including one man talking about insurance, talking down his date, Gillian making a date and then killing him. She also explains her situation to an innocent man so that she will not make an easy profile for the police, killing an innocent man. She also attacks an actress of whom she is jealous. There is also a man who listens with eager bemusement to her stories – and is then killed.

Ultimately, she confronts Keith and Stalin, eventually breaking into Stalin's house (she has perfected techniques of break-ins), poisons her, immerses her in a bath, cuts out all her organs to donate to good causes!

Ultimately, the two producers tell her that they think she has been setting women's causes back by her story. And, of course, it's for them to die as well.

The director has said she found it very difficult to make a film, working within the systems, male domination. This is an allegory of her self-assertion – and probably some wishful thinking!

JUNE AGAIN

Australia, 2020, 99 minutes, Colour.

Noni Hazlehurst, Claudia Karvan, Stephen Curry, Nash Edgerton, Pip Edwards, Darren Glishenan, Wayne Blair, Otis Dhanji, Brendan Donoghue,
Directed by JJ Winlove.



Already in 2020-2021, we have seen the high-profile, Oscar-winning *The Father*, with Anthony Hopkins experiencing dementia, the film inviting audiences to share his bewilderment and bewildering experience. Then there was a British film, *Supernova*, story of two gay men, one a carer, the other realising he was slipping into dementia. And now an Australian experience of dementia, the dementia of June, and her temporary recovery where she becomes June again.

The beginning of the film is full of pathos. Noni Hazlehurst, such a strong presence in Australian film and television for so many decades, is discovered in an institution, has been there for five years, living a bewildered life, supervised, urged to participate in activities, some visits from her sympathetic family but her not recognising them. But, she has an underlying shrewdness. We're not exactly sure what happens to her, but she recovers her awareness of herself, as if she had returned to the moment when she collapsed into the dementia. She gets out. She gets a taxi. She goes to her home – only to find another family living there.

The main part of this story is June becoming herself again. And there is a real emotional problem. Do we really like this June?

Boy oh boy! Has she been a tough lady! Once recovered, taking some time to get used to the fact that five years have passed, we realise that her old self was quite a dominating and domineering matriarch. She had high expectations of her daughter, Claudia Karvan, married but tangled with some financial inadequacies of her husband (and two sons whose eyes and noses are continually buried in their phones – sigh of relief and applause when, finally, their mother shocks them by forbidding them their phones!). June had been manufacturing quality wallpapers with special stylised design. But, the factory has fallen on hard times, shocking June, but not stopping her intervening and interfering.

Worse has been her domination of her son, Stephen Curry. She discovers that he has not lived up to expectations at all, abandoning his legal studies, an unsteady job, divorced from his wife, whom June definitely approves of, love for his son, but a secret that needs to be surfaced.

And, the children have got rid of her stuff at a garage sale! There is a table that has fond memories and so she goes to get it back. Which leads to some revelations, some deeper parts of her past (and some flashbacks).

Where can it end? Some hope for her children and their families? Some reconciliation between brother and sister? And can this again period of June's life be sustained? Does dementia eventually dominate?

KING OTTO

US/Greece, 2021, 82 minutes, Colour.
Otto Rehhegel.
Directed by Christopher Andre Marks.



Yes, this is a bit of history. But, no, it does not take us back into the European past when kings were called Otto. Rather, this is the story of Star German football player and coach, Otto Rehhegel.

For football fans, this is an obvious must. For Otto Rehhegel fans, they will not be disappointed. For those who don't follow football or the World Cup in great detail, an enjoyable sports film. And, for those who do not follow soccer/football at all, but are devoted to their own codes, the Rugby and Australian Rules, they probably will not be sorry if they happen to see King Otto.

But, for Greek audiences, whether in Greece or in the Greek communities around the world – probably more than a must!

The film introduces an interview with Otto Rehhegel, filmed in the year that he turned 80. (Those in who enjoy historical flashbacks, there is extensive footage of Otto's life during World War II, the bombing of his native city Essen and, his skills as a child with sport, his spectacular career as a German player.) He is certainly good advertisement for a healthy sports life. The interview material is interspersed throughout the film along with the interviews with his assistant, Greek origins, growing up in Germany, serving as a football agent, able to bridge the language gap between Otto and the Greek players. He is a pleasantly, genial personality. And, there are quite a number of interviews with the Greek players reflecting on their experience with Otto, from hesitation, wariness, to admiration. And there is a lot of television footage of the period.

And, of course, there is a great deal of play included in the film, much of it exhilarating for the fans.

However, the drama of the film is the story of the Greek national team, certainly considered underdogs (or even a lower level). While there were talented players, they were haphazard in their behaviour and training, often more interested in social life, the local population not particularly interested in them.

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When the Greek football management hired Otto Rehhegel, it was something of an achievement – however, not working well initially. Otto had no Greek. And he had the Germanic attitude. Which included not immediate empathy for Greek culture and the more relaxed Greek way of life. He made the wise choice in hiring his assistant who is able to translate (not literally) Otto's commands. Gradually, there was a building up of confidence, teamwork, especially for the entry into the 2004 World Cup.

And, here is the full drama of the film, the first match against Portugal, the host country, and a win. And then further matches, France (with Zidane and Ronaldo), Czech Republic. All fans would know the result, and nonfans are anticipating the impossible. And, this is what happens in the final match, once again against Portugal. Rejoicing, national pride – and the realisation of how significant in European countries, at least, is this kind of achievement in sport.

This is what King Otto offers as a film – and what it achieves.

LOCKED DOWN

UK/US, 2021, 118 minutes, Colour.

Anne Hathaway, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Dule Hill, Mark Gattis, Ben Kingsley, Ben Stiller, Sam Spruell, Stephen Merchant, Mindy Kaling, Claes Bang, Lucy Boynton.

Directed by Doug Liman.



Locked Down are probably two of the most used words throughout the world in 2020. Audiences looking at the title would be aware of their own experiences of lockdown and possibly curious to see a film on this theme.

Anne Hathaway and Chitiwel Ejiofor portray Linda and Paxton, a couple together for 10 years, he British, she American, their having met in their wild Dakota days but now living in London. In fact, this is a very London film, where the couple are experiencing lockdown in an apartment block in a street in the west of London.

The first 20 minutes or more of the film make audiences experience something of lockdown and their memories of being confined. Whether that was exactly a wise dramatic move is open to question, some audiences rather unwilling to be in lockdown again, even watching a movie about lockdown. A lot of dialogue, a lot of the interaction between Linda and Paxton, their feelings of alienation and irritation with each other. And, of course, up comes Zoom, Paxton checking with his half-brother in New York, and many audiences remembering their Zoom and Skype conversations and communication.

So, where could this drama be going? Perhaps not far because of lockdown!

What emerges is that Paxton has something of a criminal background and is employed as a truck driver – with a cameo by Ben Kingsley at his comically sinister boss, religious but also rather bent according to the law. There is a big job coming up because, as we remember, minimal shopping during lockdown and big stores, especially Harrods which becomes one of the stars of this film, has very valuable merchandise which needs to be transferred into safe storage. This is not quite according to the law for Paxton so his boss gets him a pass under the name of Edgar Allan Poe!

Meanwhile, we discover that Linda is a powerful executive, has worked for five years at Harrods, is moving up in the world of administration. And her company is invited to supervise the transfer of goods from Harrods to the storage. And, and here the screenplay moves into the realm of thriller, a possible heist, there is a £3 million diamond to be transferred.

Temptation!

The latter part of the film is more dramatically interesting, of course, and the continued to and froing of the moral issue, to steal or not to steal. There is Linda's motivation and the solving of all financial problems. There is Paxton's motivation, especially in some reconciliation with Linda.

One of the advantages of the film is that quite a number of character actors turn up in cameos, some quite unexpectedly. Ben Stiller turns out to be the boss on the other end of zoom in Vermont with his rebellious son mocking him behind his back (played by one of Ben Stiller's sons). Then there is Stephen Merchant doing a Stephen Merchant gawky cameo, Mindy Kaling being quite genial. Lucy Boynton works at Harrods. And, especially, there is Mark Gattis as Donald, one of those executives whom Linda has to fire – on zoom! He turns up at Harrods at the moment of the dilemma of whether to take the diamond or not.

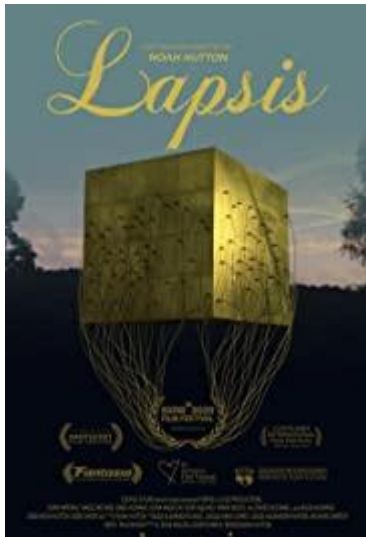
And, for audiences who want to know whether they will steal the diamond or not, they have to remain right to the end to get the answer. (Some who found the early part of the film difficult have not wanted to be lockdowned right until the end of the film.)

LAPSIS

US, 2020, 105 minutes, Colour.

Dean Imperial, Madaline Wise, Babe Howard, James McDaniel, Frank Wood, Arliss Howard.

Directed by Noah Hutton.



Certainly an intriguing title. What could it mean?

This is an arresting first feature film by documentary maker, Noah Hutton.

Hutton creates a world in towns and countryside of upstate New York. Seems ordinary enough at first. There is Ray (Dean Imperioli), middle-aged, running a delivery service, very much concerned with his half brother, Jamie (Babe Howard) who is suffering from Omnia, a.k.a. Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Ray would like to make more money so that Jamie could get the best treatment. Ray has some connections, often chats with Felix, who runs a bar (and who has some dubious associates).

However, there is an odd sequence with someone trying to set up a television set to show the credits for the film. Then there is a lot of talk about Quantum, the newest technology, which everybody needs adapting to for their mobile phones to run properly. This Bewilders Ray a bit.

Then, this familiar world takes on something of a guise of a parallel world, not entirely an alternate world. We learn more and more about Quantum, about its offering opportunities for ordinary citizens to make some money, laying Quantum's cable through the countryside, a lot of it inaccessible, even difficult for hikers. The name of this cable-laying vocation is CBLR.

As said, Quantum makes this seem a parallel world – but, with technology corporations, media promotions, takeovers and amalgamations, and the revelation that there are huge seeming monoliths in the woods, will this be the actual world? Quantum power storage - and also little mini machines scratching through the countryside, laying cable, finding some of the terrain difficult, overtaking the cablers in order to cut off their income. The challenge for the cabler is to overcome (or, despite temptation), to destroy these little machines. Everything is controlled by apps, even the time taken for rest. The cablers camp out at night, form something of a community. And there are drones in the air, ready to drop more cable when requested.

This is in the world that Ray never imagined working in but, having checked Jamie into an expensive institution, and Felix giving him a special medallion to qualify him as a cabler, off he goes, trudging, puffing, earnest to finish his route, encountering some ordinary and some odd characters on the way.

The film spends quite a time out in the countryside, perhaps a bit repetitious and prolonging Ray's experience.

And the question is, how would we feel if we were a cabler, controlled by the corporation, at its beck and call, minimal remuneration, capitalism rampant? Well, we might rebel, to say the least. And not just against the tech development corporations, but also manipulations and scams in healthcare!

And that is what is happening towards the end of the film.

And who or what is Lapsis? Actually the cabler's name, originally from the inventor of the code who has now betrayed the company.

Some commentators have been critical of the ending – and, one is tempted to be critical because the film just seems to stop. But, maybe the filmmaker wants to make the point that there are no final victories, that we do what we can, a win here, a loss there...

(Noah Hutton has interesting credentials: he comes from a filmmaking family, actor Jim Hutton his grandfather, his parents Timothy Hutton and Debra Winger. And, included in his cast is his younger half-brother, Babe Howard, and his stepfather, Arliss Howard as an eccentric doctor on the phone.)

MARTIN EDEN

Italy, 2020, 129 minutes, Colour.

Luca Marinelli, Jessica Cressey, Denise Sardisco, Aurelia Ranieri, Elisabetta Valgo, Carlo Cecchi.

Directed by Pietro Marcello.



Novelist, Jack London, is best known for his stories, *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. He wrote a number of short stories about the Klondike and the gold rush where he spent a great deal of time as well as stories of the Pacific. He was also concerned about social and socialist issues and individualism. This is reflected in his novel, *Martin Eden*, which has some autobiographical links. The original novel was set in Oakland in the early 20th century.

This version is an Italian interpretation, keeping close to many aspects of the original novel. It is now set in Naples and retains the names of several of the characters, Martin Eden himself and his eccentric friend and sometimes-mentor, Russ Brissenden. However, the names of the women and families have been changed.

On the one hand, the scenario plays as if it was a realistic dramatising of Martin Eden's life and career. On the other hand, there are continued suggestions, evocations, that while this is a 20th-century story, it is a 20th-century somewhat parallel to the reality. Throughout, there are implications of different decades, mixed together, costumes and decor, cars and transport,

technology from recorders to typewriters. Which means then that, while we are watching an Italian unfolding, the story is universal and transcends the decades.

This is reinforced by the inclusion of a great deal of film footage from the past, again illustrating different decades, ships and seafaring, crowd sequences and political movements...

Luca Marinelli won the Best Acting award in Venice, 2020, for his portrayal of Martin Eden. Eden is not a particularly sympathetic character, which means that the audience is observing him, often judging him, rather than empathising with him and his struggles. We see his poor background, his devotion to his mother, his relationship with his sister and her husband whom he dislikes but who challenges him to work. He is a sailor, harsh experiences at sea.

The film dramatises a turning point in his life when, after visiting a bar, he helps the wealthy young man who is set upon by thugs – and the young man gratefully introduces him to his family, the Orsinis, upper-middle-class, conservative, initially welcoming him, and his being smitten by the daughter of the family, Elena (Jessica Cressey). She challenges him, especially concerning his education and he begins a two-year course, going to exams and failing, learning to read, learning to speak grammatically, buying a typewriter, beginning to write stories, sending them off and being rejected.

However, his education and continued reading means that he gives a great deal of thought to social conditions, going to meetings, encouraged by the eccentric Russ Brissenden, making speeches about the importance of the individual, a critique of socialism (all really being enslaved by the socialist bosses), heckled and rejected. And, rejected by Elena and her family who disagree him.

But, he succeeds with his reputation, is preparing for a lecturing tour of the United States. He is disturbed by Russ Brissenden's death, is in a relationship with the young woman, Margharita, whom had first met years earlier at the bar.

The climax of the novel is Martin Eden confronting himself, what he has made of himself, what his success has made of him – something of the confrontation that Jack London himself felt, dying at the age of 40, suggestions of suicide.

This is something of an esoteric interpretation of London's novel.

MINAMATA

US/Serbia, 2020, 115 minutes, Colour.

Johnny Depp, Bill Nighy, Hiroyuki Sanada, Minami.

Directed by Andrew Levitas.



A contribution to the increasing number of feature films (and, as always, impassioned documentaries) which highlight abuses by corporations and their contamination of environments. Even going back to the 1980s, there was Silkwood, later there was Erin Brockovich, John Travolta in A Civil Action, numerous television movies, especially as regards disasters in the United States, and, at the same time as this film, a very powerful and persuasive drama on a similar theme, Dark Waters.

This time the setting is Japan and a story from the 1970s. A true story.

We are introduced to celebrated World War II photographer, Eugene Smith, who confined his telling photographs to black and white. He is played with some passion by Johnny Depp. By the end of the 1960s, he was on hard times, divorced, alienated from his children, alcoholic. He was dependent on the editor of Life Magazine for financial support and commissions for photo stories. However, by this stage, Life Magazine was in decline with its subscriptions and loss of advertising revenue, to finish publication within a year, managed by its editor, played unexpectedly by Bill Nighy with an American accent.

Gene Smith is approached by Japanese campaigners to come to Japan and do a story on the contamination on a coastal town, the disaster for fishing, the quite serious ailments of many of the inhabitants. Rather desperate, and promising his best to the editor of Life Magazine, he goes to Japan.

As might be expected, the company leaders are initially welcoming him for interviews but then turning against him, even to his being physically assaulted, his hand stomped on, during the local protests. He has been offered a bribe – and wonders whether he should have accepted it to be able to support his children. Smith then is a mixture of depressed realist and heartfelt enthusiast.

However, he turns back to drink, disappoints his Japanese supporters, accessible rates his editor.

It may have been a moment of grace, but encountering some of the sick people, and despite his hand injury, he goes to the village and takes a number of photos which had a profound effect on the readers of Life Magazine – and on the corporate managers and their decisions. Challenged in public, they decide to offer compensation – but, not much not as much was done as promised (in this way, the film has great similarities with Dark Waters, even to the and needing of their commitment by

DuPont chemicals).

There is some aftermath information that Smith did not further his photography career but that he married Aileen, the campaigner who first asked him to take up the Japanese cause.

In comparison with some of the other films on similar themes, this one moves into high emotions as well as preaching and propaganda stances which audiences may interpret as trying to manipulate them rather than challenging them by the drama. To that extent, while the subject is worthy, some moments have less impact because of some rather heavy moralising.

A lot of emotion has been put into the film with Johnny Depp and Bill Nighy acting as producers.

A QUIET PLACE PART II

US, 2020, 97 minutes, Colour.

Emily Blunt, Millicent Simmonds, Noah Jupe, Cillian Murphy, Djimon Hounsou, John Krasinski.

Directed by John Krasinski.



The first A Quiet Place made quite an impact on its release, a horror film, mysterious monsters, threats to a family, the basic concept that the monsters were attracted to attack by sound, so the humans having to survive in a world of quiet and silence. It was intelligently made. Actor John Krasinski wrote and directed and acted with his real-life wife, Emily Blunt.

There was an eagerness for a sequel. The trailers were screening for this Part II in April-May 2020. Anticipation for more success. Then covid-19, postponements, more postponements, even more postponements because of cinema closures in the US and around the world. Then, April-May 2021 and those same trailers re-emerging. And, the film finally released to some acclaim – and box office resurrection in the US.

In a way, this scenario is more or less a repeat of the original film. However, while it re-creates the eerie world of enforced silence, the ever-menace of the creatures, it focuses on mother, daughter and son. (There is a return to Day One, a folksy day in an American town, baseball matches, cheering parents, nervous young players, encouragement – then an ominous cloud in the sky, the descent of the monsters, chaos car crashes, the father dying, mother surviving with her children.)

And then the action takes place on Day 447... The family escaping along a country road, seeking refuge in an abandoned warehouse, discovering their neighbour (Cillian Murphy), his unwillingness to help them, but their having to combine to survive. The monstrous creatures are never far away.

The advantage of the drama of Part II is that it divides into three parts, intercutting each of them, and each with its particular intensity, danger, horror. At the simplest level, the mother makes a quiet excursion into the local town, going to the pharmacy, collecting medicines, especially necessary because her son's leg caught viciously in an iron trap and needs treatment. At the next level, there is the story of the son with his wounded leg, the baby that the family has been carrying for refuge, but oxygen cylinders needed when the family take shelter in safely secure enclosed areas of the factory, the boy coming out of the enclosure but making noise and having to hurry back, protect the baby, ration the oxygen...

So, quite some tension there. But, the main adventure/tension concerns the daughter. She is played by Millicent Simmonds given more scope than she had in the first film, a hearing-impaired actress. She comes into her own in this film, strong, courageous, intelligent and shrewd. She also has a talent for machine repair. Listening on radio to Bobby Darin singing Beyond the Sea, she works out that there are survivors on islands beyond the coast, the monsters unable to swim. She goes to explore on but shames the neighbour into coming with her.

Which means then that we go beyond the warehouse, along the railway tracks, the abandoned carriages, the discovery of the boat (and some drunken men survivors who threaten the girl), and go to the island where they find sympathetic leader ,Djimon Hounsou.

With a crisis on the island, with the mother returning from the store and discovering the situation with her son and the baby, there is enough to keep the audience tense (plus several jump cuts in editing which propels out of our seats!).

If we enjoyed the first film, we will enjoy the revisit.

SONGBIRD

US, 2020, 84 minutes, Colour.

KJ Apa, Sofia Carson, Craig Robinson, Bradley Whitford, Peter Stormare, Lia Mc Hugh, Paul Walter Hauser, Demi Moore.

Directed by Adam Mason.



Songbird was released at the end of 2020. Presumably production took place during the year, the filmmakers experiencing coronavirus, the seemingly sudden pandemic, experiences of lockdown, and found this action thriller through having nightmares – or, at least, transferring them to their computers for a nightmarish plot, and the question as to how long the pandemic would last. They decided that it would be still with us in 2024, devastating Los Angeles, the wealthy surviving in lockdown luxury,

those with Covid 23 (alarming information in itself) gathered by the government Department of Sanitation and relegated to a huge walled quarantine area.

So, an early movie contribution to the Covid 19 experience.

And, stirred into the screenplay are a romance, brutal behaviour by sanitation officials, a racket to provide immune bands to those prepared to pay. Plenty of melodramatic ingredients.

The romance is quite lively, especially with KJ Apa as Nicky, starting as a law student but forced by the pandemic to be a courier for a huge, Amazon-like company which delivers packages on order, which arrive at their destination, go into a sanitising box, retrieved by the customers. GPS, phones, drones ensure security. Nick is in love with Sarah (Sofia Carson) who is in lockdown with her Grammy figure, who does succumb to Covid 23. Nicky would like to get Sarah an immune band, he himself being immune and free to cycle around the Los Angeles Hills as courier.

The main villain of the piece is played by Peter Storemare (originally from Sweden but becoming one of the most regular villains on the American screen). By default, he has become the chief of sanitation, imperious and sadistic. But, he is also involved in the racket for providing the false immune bands. This is run by a wealthy family, the husband rather ruthless (Bradley Whitford) also involved with a singer whose career has been cut short (Alexandra Daddario). The singer is online with the controller of drones, Paul Walter Hauser, wheelchair bound but who saves the day for her. The wife, Demi Moore, cares for their sick young daughter but is also involved in the racket. Nicky is referred to them. Which, of course, provides quite a deal of action, doubledealing, betrayals, confrontations, fights.

This is the kind of entertainment that was produced very quickly, not intended to be high art, nor even subtle. It's the kind of pastime romantic thriller that one might watch in lockdown or on a slow night.

SPIRAL, FROM THE BOOK OF SAW

US, 2021, 91 minutes, Colour.

Chris Rock, Max Minghella, Samuel L. Jackson, Marisol Nichols.

Directed by Darren Lynn Bousman.



Most movie fans know how to react when they see Saw in the title of a film. (And something of a shock when they realise that the first Saw film opened almost 20 years ago – and that this is the ninth episode in what has become the Saw Franchise.) No problem for fans. They will immediately want to see Spiral.

For audiences who are not sure that they want to see *Spiral*, to enter into the world of *Saw*, a grim world of capture, imprisonment, torment, death, they might like to watch the first five minutes of this film (but will probably need fewer than five) to determine whether they want to stay or not.

There is a chase, a capture, a gruesome hanging of the victim in the New York subway, a train approaching, a television monitor challenging the prisoner, accusing him of police corruption and lying in court cases, an impossible option whereby he might save his life...

Reassuring fans of the franchise, this kind of scenario is repeated regularly throughout the **film**. In the early 2000's, commentators coined the phrase "torture porn" citing the *Saw* films as examples of this graphic, grim, depiction of torture in close-up. *Spiral* will probably be cited also in this context.

But there is a shift in the storytelling. If the torture sequences were omitted or, at least, toned down, then this would be a police investigation story. There is the issue of the unexpected deaths, discovered to be vindictive executions, accusations of police brutality.

At the centre of the investigation is veteran policeman, Zeke Banks. He is played, of all people, by Chris Rock who, for many decades, has had a strong reputation as a stand-up comedian as well as over the years building up a catalogue of comedy movies, romantic comedies, dramas. In the initial minutes where he appears, waiting to go on a raid, he reminds us of his comic routines, an amusing riff on how to talk about Forest Gump with politically correct vocabulary, about his disabilities. And there are some comic moments throughout the film.

However, all is deadly serious. Police are being killed. Zeke's father, the former chief of police, now in retirement, becomes involved in the investigation – and, as a bonus, he is played by Samuel L. Jackson. In the meantime, the officer in charge appoints a rookie, William (Max Minghella), to work with Zeke, Zeke is initially resentful, but immediately they are called out to the first above-mentioned torture/execution.

On the one hand, there is the buddy aspect of the two police working together. There are tense details of the developments of the investigation. Then there is a twist, three possible suspects as to who is behind all these *Spiral* killings – and a surprise (or not a surprise) to discover the truth and the credibility of the motivation.

Perhaps the most unsatisfactory aspect of *Spiral* is its final moment! Just as everything is resolved, Zeke turns towards the killer – and the final credits suddenly appear. Well, that obviously means a sequel!

THOSE WHO WISH ME DEAD

US, 2021, 100 minutes, Colour.

Angelina Jolie, Finn Little, Nicholas Hoult, Aidan Gillen, Jon Bernthal, Medina Senghore, Jake Weber, Tyler Perry, Tory Kittles.

Directed by Taylor Sheridan.



Certainly an arresting title. And it is interesting with the opening of the film to identify the Those of the title, two respectable -looking but deadly-sadistic hitmen. And then it is interesting to identify who is the Me of the title. A 12-year-old boy.

And the tone for a thriller is set as the two assassins, allegedly working for a finance company, insinuate themselves into a mansion – which then blows up. Villains clear – motivation to be revealed. And, it is revealed very quickly, a situation where an accountant has exposed irregularities and the corporation bosses are out to eliminate him. The accountant is played by Jake Weber and his son, very effectively, by Finn Little, from Brisbane, who was the star of the remake of Storm Boy. Finn Little has to work with Angelina Jolie and, in a sense, bear the burden of the pursuit drama – and he does.

But, to make the thriller more intriguing, the main settings are in the state of Montana. Almost 70 years ago there was an action thriller called Red Skies of Montana, the mountain and forest fires of that state. And, they featured here, some very effective sequences of large, fierce and raging fires. And, we are introduced to the firefighters, especially the fire jumpers who parachute into dangerous situations. The old brigade stand around yarning with all kind of banter – focusing on Hannah, tough, hard-working, but tormented by memories and nightmares of a past episode, her misjudging the direction of the wind and the fire, some young boys dying in the flames. Hannah is played by Angelina Jolie.

The other important characters in the film are the local sheriff and his wife, pregnant wife (Jon Bernthal and Medina Senghore).

The screenplay blends the themes of the hitmen pursuing the boy, Hannah and her work and problems, the inevitable crime against the father and son and the sheriff and his wife being caught up in the action. There is ambush and machine-gunning, car crashing, the hitmen lighting a fire and its raging, Hannah and her work in a remote tower, the escape of the boy and his bonding with Hannah.

The hitmen are particularly alienating. Aidan Gillen is the ruthless older brother, no compunction whatsoever. Nicholas Hoult (once a chubby boy in About a Boy, now and gangly six foot three) looks as if he ought to have compunction – but does not. The pursuit is relentless, even involving the sheriff, a confrontation with his wife, who can be as tough as the men.

The film has been written and directed by Taylor Sheridan who has a strong reputation for action films in the rather wilder states of the union, Wind River and Hell or High Water.

It is easy to note some implausibility in the plot development and detail, but that is not the point – the point is a night out for an exciting action show, which it is.

TRES VEROES/ THREE SUMMERS

Brazil, 2019, 94 minutes, Colour.
Regina Case, Rogerio Froes, Gisele Froes.
Directed by Sandra Kogut,



The three summers are those of 2015, 2016, 2017 leading up to New Year's Eve for 2018. The setting is the coastal city in Brazil, with the combination in Rio.

This is an entertaining film and the credit goes (apart from the screenwriter and the director) to the star, Regina Case, a veteran of Brazilian cinema and television, certainly a larger-than-life personality on screen, coming into her mid-50s at the time of the making of this film. She is immediately engaging, capturing our attention, even affection.

She is the housekeeper, Mada taken away for interrogation, the staff upset, no pay. But, the ever-inventive Mada works are quite a number of solutions, first of all the staff enjoying this stocked food for an intended party,, arranging land of his garage sales...

So, what can there be in the third summer? Actually, that something of an anti-climax, a great deal of attention is given to the filming of a commercial program in the house, one of Mada's brainwaves (along with a rather revived Lira) to make the house available for a kind of AirBnB. While this is amusing, and, eventually, Mada has to take a central role though is, initially, surprisingly ineffectual, she does win through.

But, on the principle that good things come to those who wait, Mada and the staff do come into eventual good fortune, celebrating in Rio on New Year's Eve, high hopes for 2018.

Easy entertainment, an engaging central performance, a lively supporting cast, and quite some implicit/explicit criticism of corruption amongst the upper classes, widespread fraud, in Brazilian society.

STREAMING SERVICES

ARMY OF THE DEAD

US, 2021, 149 minutes, Colour.
Dave Bautista, Ella Purnell, Omari Hardwick, Ana de la Reguera, Theo Rossi, Matthias Schweighofer, Hiroyuki Sanada, Garrett Dillahunt, Tig Notaro.
Directed by Zack Snyder.



Who said that zombies were dead? Well, of course they are – but, after all the zombie films in recent years, is the zombie genre dead? Well, no. Here is an Army of the Dead. And they are on screen for 2 ½ hours!

In 2004, Zack Snyder (later to come to prominence and controversy with 300 as well as the Superman, Batman and Justice League sagas), did a variation on the classic zombie films of George A. Romero (Night of the Living Dead...). This one was Dawn of the Dead.

With this new film, it is not a remake of a Romero story but, obviously, the influence is there while there are many variations on the theme.

Released through Netflix, the bloggers instantly went into action during May 2021. Fans proclaimed this is a masterpiece, inventive and creative. Non-fans (and trolls) went to work condemning it for its lack of originality, for cramming all kinds of conventions into a long (and for them, boring) zombie rising.

Clearly, this is a film for those who enjoy the zombie genre. It is graphic in its presentation of the zombies, the gory deaths turning humans into zombies, some slashing, shooting, splattering of pursuing zombies. The film is for those who have this kind of splatter-tolerance (or eagerness).

There is a variation on the zombie theme. The zombies still live and doing their walk of the dead pursuit. However, they are living a kind of life, with some intelligence, having a leader who rides on a horse, a leader who has a queen. (There is also an infected hybrid Tiger on the prowl).

The opening shows a couple married in Las Vegas distracted by sex, crashing into a huge military convoy – releasing the zombies, who create mayhem (vividly displayed) in Las Vegas which then has to be walled off, quarantined, plans for nuclear warhead to be dropped on the city to eliminate the disaster.

And then the heist narrative is introduced, a Japanese businessman rounding up Scott (former wrestler turned actor, Dave Bautista) and his contacts, men and women, who can get into Las Vegas, combat the zombies, open a safe in the basement of a hotel where millions of dollars are stashed. So, the film becomes something of a mission impossible, or something of the 21st-century Dirty Dozen invasion. The dozen is quite a motley crowd, a couple of mercenaries, a timid German safe cracker, a sleazy government official (so he says), some warrior women, and even Scott's daughter who is also on a rescue mission.

Which means then lots of combat, some doublecrossing, the opening of the safe, the retrieval of the money, the threats from the zombies.

Actually, a subtitle might be that one from the Agatha Christie story, And Then There were None...

So, who escapes, what about Las Vegas, any survivors? Any indications that there could be a sequel? Of course, yes.

BLITHE SPIRIT

UK, 2020, 99 minutes, Colour.

Judi Dench, Dan Stevens, Leslie Mann, Isla Fisher, Michelle Dotrice, Emilia Fox, Julian Rind-Tutt, Simon Kunz.

Directed by Edward Hall.



Blithe Spirit is a play by Noel Coward. It was filmed by David Lean in the mid 1940s with Rex Harrison in the central role and a delightfully eccentric performance by Margaret Rutherford as the medium, Madame Arcati. (This was the period when David Lean directed versions of Noel Coward's *This Happy Breed* and *Brief Encounter*.)

This 21st-century version is an adaptation of Coward's play, not retaining some of his witty dialogue, but elaborating further on his characters. The setting is 1937, pre-war, the touch of upstairs and downstairs with country estates and servants – and taking time off for tennis. There is also the background of the film industry, some glimpses of the facade of Pinewood Studios, some interiors on film sets, final scenes in Hollywood with references to Hitchcock, Gable and Garbo.

The plot concerns an author with writer's block, Charles Condomine, played effectively by Dan Stevens. He has been commissioned to write a screenplay by his father-in-law. He is married to Ruth, Isla Fisher, but was married to Elvira, Leslie Mann.

There is an occasion at the local theatre where Madame Arcati is to perform, crowded theatre, sceptical, the performance beginning with the intrigue, a winch failing as Madame is lifted high, her falling and exposed as a fraud. She is played by Judi Dench.

The author decides that he will incorporate aspects of seances and mediums into his screenplay and arranges for a session at home – dramatic, lightning striking the house... Next day, Elvira appears, tantalises Charles, sexually provocative, critical of Ruth? There is amusing dialogue where Charles is speaking critically to Elvira whom nobody sees and it is assumed that he is talking to Ruth or to her father, leading to the father punching Charles.

The idea would be to get Madame Arcati to have another seance and send Elvira back to the other world. In the meantime, Elvira has cut the brakes on Ruth's car and she crashes and dies.

While Charles seems to be rid of ghosts, he has finished his screenplay with Elvira's help, seeming success in Hollywood, gossip columnist Header Hopper denounces him as a plagiarist (and, in fact, Elvira had written all his books). Befuddled, he is knocked over by a car – and is able to be with his wives for eternity!

The film was directed by Edward Hall, son of the celebrated Old Vic director, Peter Hall.

I AM ALL GIRLS

Africa, 2021, 107 minutes, Colour.

Erica Wessels, Hlubi Mboya, Deon Lotz, Mothusi Magano.

Directed by Donovan Marsh.



The poster gives an emphasis about how the title of this film should be spoken. All Girls is actually printed ALL GIRLS. It is something like the equivalent of "I am Spartacus". The speaker is saying that she represents all the young girls who have been abducted, abused, trafficked.

And this is the theme of the film, setting South Africa towards the end of the apartheid era as well as an investigation in the present, in Johannesburg.

Any film about child trafficking can be harrowing to watch as are many sequences here. The target is black children, lack girls, rounded up by white men and women, black collaborators, connection with the government officials, and international connections with Middle East countries. (This is shown by planes flying in to secret locations, men in Arab dress inspecting the girls, their being loaded onto the planes – but, at the end, part of the screenplay says that a group coming in is from Iran – and many have commented that this is not accurate, this kind of trafficking was not carried on for Iran.)

After watching the plight of a group of girls, we moved to the present where there is an investigation, a special squad, moving against child trafficking. The central character is a film, a white police investigator (Erica Wessels) is a driven woman, rather stolid in her intensity, over-willing to take leaps in her investigations, failing to work by the book, getting warrants.... She is part of a team, exasperating her supervisor George (my first seem a Ghana) a long-time veteran. Also working with her is a young woman, Ntombi (Hlubi Mboya), a researcher. She and Jodie have a tentative relationship.

We see black cloaked and masked person watching secret tapes of a confession of the child traffic who had then been murdered. And, throughout the film, there are posters of missing girls with their names and initials – and these initials start appearing on the chests of kill-victims either masked and cloaked investigator. Just as we suspect where this is going, the killer takes off the mask and we understand the driven nature of the pursuit, the harshest of judgements in the killings, the memorial with the bloodied carved initials.

And so, the main part of the film is the investigation, the further killings of perpetrators, Jodie intensely pursuing leads, especially in a container section of wharves.

All throughout the film and the audience has been seeing a politician, his contacts, at the airfields, and his choice and exploitation of a young girl who was not sent to the Middle East. He is found, a dramatic climax, a group of girls, the plane landing, taking off, his execution.

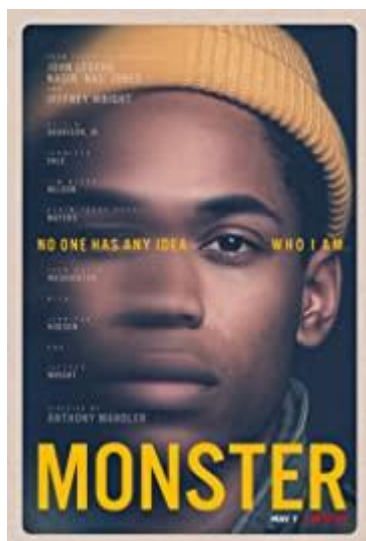
The film gives statistics at the end, always alarming, always half horrifying, a crime plague with millions of victims still today.

MONSTER

US, 2018, 98 minutes, Colour.

Kelvin Harrison Jr, Jennifer Ehle, Jeffrey Wright, Jennifer Hudson, John David Washington, Paul Ben-Victor, Tim Blake Nelson.

Directed by Anthony Mandler.



Netflix has record resurrected this attention-grabbing drama. Filmed in 2017, briefly released in 2018, it disappeared until streamlined in 2021.

While it was relevant at its time, racist typing of young black men by police and the law, it is more relevant in its later release, especially in the context of the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 and the consequent Black Lives Matter rallies, not only in the United States, but all around the world.

This is the story of a young man, Steve Harmon, 17, peaceable, living with his sympathetic parents (played by Jeffrey Wright and Jennifer Hudson), a photographer, interested in filmmaking, attending courses at a New York college, encouraged by his lecturer (Tim Blake Nelson).

There is an attempted robbery in a Korean bodega in the city, some suspects arrested, surveillance footage suggesting that Steve was part of the robbery which led to a murder. Without notice, he is dragged by the police from his home and sent to jail. He is both bewildered and embittered.

His play by Kelvin Harrison Jr who was emerging at this time as a substantial actor and who went on to greater success in films like Luce and Waves.

The film shows the legal aspects of the case against him, spending some time with his initial reluctance to talk to the legal counsel appointed to his case, played with a blend of businesslike efficiency and compassion by Jennifer Ehle. There are the sequences in court, the severe and aggressive cross-examination by the prosecutor, Paul Ben-Victor. And there is the anguish of his bewildered parents watching the proceedings, his girlfriend also present, supporting him as she did by collaborating with him in his photography and film studies.

This idea of making a film is to the fore in the early sequences, some verbal descriptions of how the film's screenplay might appear on the page.

The court case is complicated by witnesses, surveillance footage, Steve and his passing acquaintance with the other two accused of the crime (including one giving witness against his companion, who is played by John David Washington).

The film develops with the experience of Steve in prison, some fellow prisoners encouraging him, his discussions with his attorney, the plea that he will make, just telling the truth.

This would be a harrowing case no matter what the ethnic background of the central character accused. But, in the American context and Black Lives Matter, it is more significant.

A drama that is worth giving attention to.

OXYGENE

France, 2021, 100 minutes, Colour.

Melanie Laurent, Mathieu Amalric, Eric Hersen- Macarel, Laura Boujenah, Malik Zidi.

Directed by Alexandre Aja.



The name of the director, Alexandre Aja, will be well known to fans of the horror genre. He actually has quite a good reputation, beginning with his French macabre Haute Tension, which led him to the United States for the remake of The Hills Have Eyes, Piranha 3, and the very effective hurricane film, rule, the heroine struggling with floods and alligators. So, it is something of a surprise that he made this intelligent futuristic science-fiction film, and back in France.

We gradually discover, along with the central character who comes to consciousness finding herself confined, tomb-like and bound, in a scientific container. She does not know who she is or why she is

there. But, then an artificial intelligence voice begins to communicate with her, giving her some information, suggesting ideas, her memory slowly coming back, her anger at her situation.

This is the part of the review where the reviewer has to stop revealing the plot because it is important that the audience share the discovery with the trapped Liz. She is played by the prominent French actress, Melanie Laurent. And, she elicits compassion from the audience in her situation, in her entrapment, her gradual discovery of who she is, why she is there who was responsible – and the continued information that her oxygen supply is gradually dwindling.

One of the interesting features of the entombment is that the artificial intelligence is able to suggest how she might deal with her situation, call the police who can track her down, enable her to make phone calls – but much of this prove something of an illusion.

One thing that can be said about the scenario is that it takes place in the distant future, that the world population is under threat of extinction, that space exploration has become essential, that cryogenics is one way of preserving lives and ensuring continuity in the future.

If this scenario sounds appealing, with the assurance that the film is well written, well-acted, that it can be described as intelligent science-fiction, then it is certainly worth a look.

GERMAN FILM FESTIVAL, AUSTRALIA, MAY-JUNE

BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ

Germany, 2020, 183 minutes, Colour.

Welket Bungue, Albrecht Schuch, Jella Haase, Annabelle Mandeng, Joacjim Krol.

Directed by Burhan Qurbani,



Berlin Alexanderplatz, by Alfred Döblin, is one of Germany's classic 20th century novels. It was published in 1929, filmed in 1931. It is a story of Berlin and Germany between the wars, before the rise of national socialism and Hitler as Chancellor. In 1980, it became a 14 part television series directed by one of the star directors of the time, Rainer Werner Fassbinder. This was the time of the divided Germany, adapting the basic outline of the novel, and its characters, to the period.

This version, running for three hours, brings narrative and characters into the 21st-century.

The central character is Francis (in the original novel, a prisoner being released from jail). This time (and the film opens with two people struggling in deeper waters), Francis is a refugee crossing the Mediterranean, escaping from Guinea-Bissau, arriving in Berlin, no documentation, some guilt about the drowning of his partner during the crossing, labouring in a vast tunnel engineering project, makeshift accommodation with the fellow workers.

This picture of African refugees and their plight, coming to Europe, trying to survive, is part of today's headlines. It is all the more convincing with the strong presence throughout the film, substantial, in the performance of Welket Bungue, a Portuguese-Guinean actor-director.

The voice-over tells us that Francis is a good man, wants to be good, but experiences difficulties, temptation, succumbing, reform, a comment that life doesn't seem to want him to be the good man he desires.

The film is divided into five chapters, with Francis arriving in Germany, his becoming involved in the world of Berlin drug dealing, gangsters and burglaries, falling foul of the dealers, hospitalised, friends finding him accommodation with a young prostitute...

The other main character in the film is Reinhold (Albrecht Schuch), a sinister and wily dealer, manifesting ever more manic, even demented behaviour, a tempter, a manipulator, Mephistopheles. (And one might see some intimations of Othello, Francis is Othello, Reinhold as Iago.)

Over the three hours, we are immersed in this Berlin world, especially in clubs and some cabaret (echoes of Berlin in the 1920s and 30s). We have sympathy for Francis. We regret his lapses and bad choices – but, ultimately, he is a man of principle who will be able to survive whatever the Berlin of the future brings him.

THE SPACE BETWEEN THE LINES/GUT GEGEN NORWIND

Germany, 2020, 123 minutes, Colour.

Nora Tschirner, Alexander Fehling, Ulrich Thomsen, Ella Rumpf, Claudia Eisinger, Katharina Gieron.

Directed by Vanessa Jopp.



The space in this story is cyberspace. And, it is a film about relationships.

This is a German film, set in Hamburg, with interesting views of the city, especially the water and a vast bridge. But, it is very much an interior story, a story of a relationship between a man and woman, and questions of intimacy, real and online.

Some of us remember relationships through correspondence, pen to paper, penfriends. (Are they a thing of the past?) The films of the 20th century that we have enjoyed often have their characters spending a lot of time on the phone, verbal communication. Well, the 21st-century still has phones but just how differently they are employed! Well, it can be voice communication, the quick and instant communication is back to words (abbreviated and accompanied by emojis), constant texting. (And how really romantic can that be?)

The central character is Leo, Alexander Fehling, a linguist, someone who takes pride and delight in words. His life seems to be perfect, about to propose to his girlfriend, secure job... And then she confesses to be in love with someone else. He feels shattered. He does get some support from his sister, but is distant from his mother, even despite visits, and then the pathos of her death.

The film actually opens with a text message. A woman has texted Leo to cancel her subscription to a magazine. And later she repeats this. His reply is that she has got the wrong address. And, this seems to be one of the most unlikely beginnings of a personal relationship! But it is. One interesting feature is that we hear the voice of the complainant, Emma (Nora Tschirner, whom he nicknames Emmi), but do not see her until 40 minutes into the film. We discover that she is married to Bernhard (Ulrich Thomsen) an orchestra conductor and his stepmother to his two children. We see her, know what she looks like, how she behaves, her place in her family, love for her husband. Leo has none of this experience.

While there were a lot of scenes of phone calls in those old films, here there is more of a focus on thumbs, rapidly moving thumbs, texting, texting, texting, phones buzzing at all hours, anytime, anywhere, light shining in the night, reverberations during the day. And the two have never met, have never seen each other, the relationship, the online intimacy, still with characteristics of anonymity.

So, how do we respond? It probably depends on our attitudes towards this kind of cyber communication, on our own practice and whether we take this for granted – or in our reactions against this personal/interpersonal communication.

There is some drama in the unfolding of the stories, the self-revelations (gradual as they are), the need for some kind of actual and personal encounter, a real encounter. And, by the end, that is what we are left with – what have we been wanting for Leo and Emma, what we think they need, what do we think they deserve?

(And, do we now and in the future have to adapt to the emotional, psychological, social consequences of this kind of communication?)

REVIEWS JULY 2021

BLACK WIDOW

BUCKLEY'S CHANCE

CONJURING, The: THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT

COUSINS

CRANSTON ACADEMY: MONSTER ZONE

DATING AMBER

DREAM HORSE

ESCAPE ROOM: TOURNAMENT OF CHAMPIONS

FAST AND THE FURIOUS 9, The

FINAL ACCOUNT

FROM THE VINE

HEROIC LOSERS

HERSELF

HITMAN'S WIFE'S BODYGUARD, The

IN THE HEIGHTS

LITTLE JOE

LUCA

MOLE AGENT, The

MOONBOUND

MY NAME IS GULPILIL

MY ZOE

PERCY VS GOLIATH

PERFUMES

POMPEI, SIN CITY/ POMPEI – EROS E MITO

WEREWOLVES WITHIN

BLACK WIDOW

US, 2021, 134 minutes, Colour.

Scarlett Johansson, Florence Pugh, David Harbour, Rachel Weisz, Ray Winstone, O-T Fagbanle, William Hurt, Olga Kurylenko.

Directed by Cate Shortland.



A check on Scarlett Johansson's career in film appearances indicates that this is the ninth film to feature her character, Natasha Romanoff/ Black Widow, appearing first in Iron Man 2.

While she has been a presence in all these films, she has tended to be overshadowed by the other characters, the other Avengers, the male Avengers. Now, here she has the opportunity to be herself, a character with personality, not just martial expertise.

As with so many films these days, this is an origin story, situating Natasha Romanoff within the context of her family, her training as an assassin Black Widow, her relationships within the family and their consequences.

So the film opens quietly in Ohio in 1995, a seemingly ideal family, parents, two little girls, devoted, playful... Until the moment arises when it is revealed that they are Russian Sleepers, have to escape, and, in the manner of the Marvel Universe, fly their secret plane, pursued by American government agents, father fending off attack with a machine gun from the wing of the plane, mother wounded, little Natasha flying the plane – to be greeted in Russia by the powerful tycoon, Dreykov, and the little girls taken away to be trained as Black Widows. So, that is the explanation for the Natasha Romanoff, a Black Widow but one who has escaped to the US to become an Avenger.

Scarlett Johansson has an opportunity to be more than just an action hero this time, more of a character, more of a person, taking refuge in Norway (beautiful scenery), persuaded to go to Budapest (beautiful views of the city and the Danube with action and car chases), meeting her long lost sister, Yelena, a strong performance from Florence Pugh, whom we have seen operating as an agent in Morocco (more beautiful scenery).

And just when we might have thought we had seen the last of father and mother (David Harbour and a welcome Rachel Weisz), the daughters rescue their father from prison where he had been interned for 20 years (but no love lost), meet their mother and learn the truth about their life in the US.

The main part of the plot and the final action is the families plan to confront the tyrant, Dreykov, and wreak revenge. No spoiler to realise that they do!

One of the difficulties for the film is the casting of Ray Winstone as Dreykov. Ray Winstone has had a career of playing British thugs and heavies, with the consequence that it is very hard to accept him, even wearing spectacles and talking technology, as the 21st century equivalent of Bond villain, Blofeld.

The film was directed by Australian, Cate Shortland, who brings something of a more humane quality to her characters.

The important thing is to sit through the very long credits because, as with Marvel Films, there is an extra sequence indicating the future, very important information given to Yeena (by a surprise appearance by Julia Louis Dreyfus).

BUCKLEY'S CHANCE

Canada/Australia, 2021, 95 minutes, Colour.

Bill Nighy, Milan Burch, Victoria Hill, Martin Sacks, Julie Billington, Ben Wood, Kelton Pell, Anthony Gooley.

Directed by Tim Brown.



As they say, you've got Buckley's chance (whatever, in fact, that may mean). Or a choice between Buckley's and none. During this film, the very sympathetic indigenous character, (Kelton Pell) tells the youngster, Ridley (Milan Burch), the 19th century story of Buckley who disappeared and, seemingly miraculously, appeared again sometime later. So, Buckley's Chance – and it is the name of the homestead where this story takes place.

In fact, this is a Canadian production with financial support from Screen Australia. Writer-director, Tim Brown, is Canadian. And the perspective is a focus on a young boy and his mother, living in New York, having to go to Australia to live with his grandfather on a spread somewhere out West. Local audiences will enjoy the film although there will be a few question marks, especially the discovery of a river out there in the deserts, a waterfall pouring into a large lake. (Perhaps viewers are thinking, if only...!)

So, this is a story of discovery, seen through the eyes of young teenager who has idolised his father who has been killed in an accident saving others. As it transpires, his father, Australian, grew up on the homestead, a talented football player who clashed with his father after his mother's death, left home and went to America.

The boy, Ridley, is very much 21st-century, headphones, video camera, liking the comforts of the city, unprepared for the ruggedness of life on the homestead – which his grandfather very quickly demands of him, going out, camping, repairing fences. His mother, Gloria (a sympathetic Victoria Hill) tries to encourage her son. He is also encouraged by his grandfather's foreman, Jules. But, for movie buffs, the intriguing aspect is that the Australian grandfather is played, of all people, by Bill Nighy, with an Australian accent, and without most of his familiar (and often engaging) tics.

Tim Brown must have seen and liked the Red Dog films because dogs are important here, especially a dingo (always under suspicion after the as Azariah Chamberlain case), running with his pack but becoming friendly with Ridley, sharing the harsh experience when Ridley (following two farm hands, rather dumb, with some nefarious schemes) gets lost in the desert and the community makes all efforts to find him – and the dingo.

So, a familiar enough story, quite pleasingly presented, location photography of the desert (and that river and falls), a sympathetic presentation of a country town and a boy coming to terms with the death of his father, relating to his grandfather, facing a new life.

THE CONJURING: THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT

US, 2021, 112 minutes, Colour.

Patrick Wilson, Vera Farmiga, Ruairi O'Connor, Sarah Catherine Cook, Julian Hillyard, John Noble.
Directed by Michael Chaves.



This is the third in the Conjuring series but Ed and Lorraine Warren have been associated with a number of other films in what is now franchise, the Annabelle films, The Nun. The Warren's rose to some prominence with the haunting of the house in Amityville, filmed in 1978 as The Amityville

Horror, which also led to a series of Amityville films and telemovies. They also worked in Enfield, in London.

Most drama requires a suspension of disbelief – films like this and the activities of the Warrens perhaps require a suspension of scepticism.

The Warrens were well known with their work in connection with diabolical possessions, satanic rituals, exorcisms. They worked in collaboration with the church. They also became famous as television personalities – and, at the end of this film, there are clips from an interview with the Warrens themselves as well as the audio of the exorcism performed and visualised in the prologue here.

In fact, the prologue is quite alarming, obviously in the tradition of *The Exorcist* with the priest arriving outside the building to perform the ceremony, this time a boy of eight, possessed, writhing and contorting, convulsing, his parents present, his sister and her boyfriend, the Warrens and the priest joining them. This kind of thing is always disturbing to watch, especially with a young boy. It is only when the boyfriend offers to receive the demon out of the boy, that the situation becomes calm.

What emerges is the story of Satanists, the Disciples of the Ram, arrested, tried in court and imprisoned. However, they have left an underground cavern, a satanic altar, cup for blood, an animal's death head, and a mysterious presence, a woman who has organised the ritual and continues in her search for a soul.

Which means then that there is quite a lot of drama and melodrama, the young man, Arnie (Rauri O'Connor) possessed, viciously attacking a friend, arrested, in court, with a plea for violence under the influence of spirit possession. And his woes continue in prison, despite the help of the prison chaplain.

The film follows two lines of drama, the Warrens investigating a similar kind of case in Massachusetts, discussions with the detective, Lorraine exercising her extraordinary powers, seeing and sensing evil, becoming involved in the past story and murder. The second line is information about a former priest, who helped with the arrest of the Disciples of the Ram, but who lives alone with the relics from the sect.

Needless to say, and what we were expecting, is a buildup to a final confrontation, especially between Lorraine and the mysterious female presence, Ed coming to Lorraine's rescue but influenced by the evil woman, a violent confrontation.

As in the other films, Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga portray the Warrens.

Perhaps audiences are getting used to the franchise. While there have been favourable comments, many also say that this is not as exciting and powerful as the previous films. But, for most audiences who venture to see the *Conjuring* films, plenty of excitement, plenty of alarm.

COUSINS

New Zealand, 2021, 98 minutes, Colour.

Tanea Hake, Briar Grace Smith, Rachel House, Ana Scotney, Chelsie Preston Crayford.

Directed by Ainsley Gardner, Briar Grace Smith.



Cousins comes from New Zealand. It is based on a popular novel by Patricia Grace, adapted into feature-length running time (though, certainly, there is more than enough material, more than sufficient characters for it to be developed into a miniseries).

The film opens with the introduction to three young girls, playing together, out in the countryside, Maori background. The voice-over tells us that they have happily come together, that they will be separated, but that they will come together again. And this sequence is repeated the end after we have shared the stories and journeys of the three girls – but especially of one, Mata, whose story is, in fact, a very sad one.

The audience has to keep attentive because there is a lot of moving from the present to the past, to various stages of the journey of the three girls.

The film also takes us back to the 1940s, incorporating footage from films and newsreels of the time, especially indication of the men who went to war and came back from the war. At various stages, the narrative moves into the 1950s, to the 1960s and beyond.

In the present, we see an older woman, bushy black hair, wrinkled face, overcoat, bag, standing at the city traffic lights, putting her thongs in her pocket, reciting chant about numbers from 1 to 10, waiting for the indication at the end of the green light, then crossing the road. She seems homeless, is given some food at a Chinese takeaway, dosses down. We discover that this is Mata – and we

wonder how the little girl could have come to this. Tanea Hake is strikingly impressive as this bewildered adult Mata.

So, it is Mata's story that absorbs us. We have seen the little girl. We have seen her as an orphan, bullied at the home, invited to share with the young girls whom she sees as cousins. But, she is one of New Zealand's stolen generation children, taken from the orphanage by a dominating woman, who does express racial prejudice at times, severe on Mata and her upbringing. We also see the teenage Mata, rather reserved, having to leave home for the city, to get work. She does see a jovial young man on the train who later courts her and marries her. But, Mata is severely repressed – although, she does get an opportunity to blossom when a friend from the orphanage asks Mata mind her young son for some time and Mata and the boy bond – but he is taken away.

Some attention is given to the other two girls. Makareta eventually escapes an arranged marriage in the Maori tradition, goes to the city, studies law, becomes involved in civil rights issues. By contrast, Missy, marries the jilted man, a happy marriage, family, Missy being the custodian of the traditions.

The three women eventually do come together, the lost Mata eventually coming home, touches of sadness, but Missy (the always lively Rachel House) continuing her role as custodian.

We can welcome this opportunity to experience a New Zealand story, sharing the memories, sharing the hardships, acknowledge the oppression, and experience the sadness.

CRANSTON ACADEMY: MONSTER ZONE

UK/Canada/Mexico, 2020, 85 minutes, Colour.
Voices of: Jamie Bell, Ruby Rose.
Directed by Leopoldo Aguilar.



It is a pity that the target audience for these holiday animation films are not the writers of reviews! Their views on the entertainment value need to be heeded (rather than critics' analysis of strengths and shortcomings, valid though they may be).

We can try to imagine what the young audience might write. First of all, this is all very colourful, the characters, the students at the Academy, the teachers, life in the Academy itself – and, the explosion and excitement of the transformation and the engineer caught up in it.

While this older reviewer thought that Danny, the young hero, seemed to be about seven or eight, the synopsis tells us that he is 15! So, a readjustment question for the audience – does it appeal to the seven or eight's or does it appeal to the 15-year-olds? This reviewer's hunch, the former! We can also note, that in these times of equality, while Danny seems to be the dominant character, he is soon joined by Liz, who is not going to take any bossing from Danny, preferring some of her own bossiness, and getting him to admit eventually that they are a team. So, boys and girls can respond equally!

And the action? Well, there is a lot of it, and much of it is the same! A whole number of monsters who indulge in repeat performances! But, the main attention is given to the engineer who splashed his sauce on the computer console and caused the explosion, his being whisked into the maelstrom, transformed into something of a monster (but benign) moth (with quite an infatuation for torches and lightbulbs!). When the staff and the students are all captured, it is up to Danny and Liz, collaborating with the engineer to rescue them. Which means a whole lot of threats, menacing, dangers, confrontations, death-risks and ultimate victory.

A reviewer hunch – this might be enjoyed more by the younger audience, older children and teens perhaps judging it was a bit below them. And not necessary for parents to watch.

DATING AMBER

Ireland, 2020, 91 minutes, Colour.

Fionn O'Shea, Lola Petticrew, Sharon Horgan, Barry Ward.

Directed by David Freyne.



Dating Amber is in very funny. However, it is also a very serious film in its themes. It is an Irish story but certainly has its universal aspects. We are back in a town near Dublin, a lot of the action taking place at the high school, the focus on students in their final year and the prospects of what happens next.

The setting is 1995. And for audiences who don't know much about the film and expect romantic comedy from the title, the issues are far more serious. This is a dramatic comedy about adolescents, sexual identity, doubts and fears, the pressures of society and expectations, coming out.

So much has happened in world consciousness about sexual identity in the last quarter of a century, issues becoming much more explicit and discussed, legislation for same-sex marriage, many more films and television series dramatising the issues, it is difficult to go back to realise what was said and done at the end of the 20th century. But, throughout the film, there is the lurking question – how similar is it for students at school in the third decade of the 21st-century? How similar are struggles these days? How much help is available? How much acceptance and support?

Lola Pettigrew is quite dynamic as Amber, acknowledging her identity, putting up with but angry at all the slinging off at school. She lives with her mother, her father dead. Teenage prejudice means that, although she is rather extroverted, she is a loner.

Fionn O'Shea is rather different as Eddie, living at home with his parents, loving mother, wise and supportive younger brother, his military father away for six months of the year but intending to do his best with his sons. It has been lurking in his subconscious, Eddie certainly unwilling to allow it to surface, that he is gay. He denies it. And, like many deniers, he is vocally against gays and indulges in verbal faggot-bashing. And he is extremely gawky in his behaviour with girls.

Audiences will now guess the meaning of the title. Amber and Eddie come to an arrangement, that they will be a couple at school, diverting all the criticisms, even getting some admiration from previous critics, especially those boys whose homophobia is both ignorant and aggressive.

On the one hand, the friendship flourishes – and, in fact, the scenes between the two, their talking, their shared interests, family visits, remind us how valuable friendship is irrespective of sexual orientation.

On the other hand, long-term partnership is doomed. Amber, acknowledging herself, is comfortable in encountering a girlfriend. Eddie, on the other hand, will not admit anything even to Amber, is fearful of being discovered, has a crush on his teacher which he then misinterprets and is shamed. In the meantime, is trying to follow in his father's footsteps, Army training, a lot of the talk about being a real man.

Whether truth will out for Eddie is a difficult matter. However, the ending reminds us, especially with Amber and her most generous gesture, of how valuable true friendship is.

DREAM HORSE

UK, 2020, 113 minutes, Colour.

Toni Collette, Owen Teale, Damian Lewis, Karl Johnson, Nicholas Farrell, Alan David, Sian Phillips.
Directed by Euros Lyn.



No false advertising here. The title is accurate!

Over the decades, horse racing films have been always popular. There are the horses. There is the training. There are the races. There are the triumphs. And, of course, there are moments of tragedy.

And they are all here in this story, based on actual characters and events, the horse, Dream Alliance, 2001 until 2012 when he was put out to stud.

And this is a true Welsh story. There hasn't been so much wealth patriotism on screen for quite a while. The valley setting, the small town falling on hard times, friendships – and, later, the national anthem sung by Katherine Jenkins, other Welsh songs, and some rivalry with Tom Jones in several sing-songs of Delilah.

And, this is an unlikely story. Jan Vokes is getting older, sleepless beside her heavily-snoring husband, up early to do the cleaning at the Co-op supermarket, working at the checkout, night jobs in the local pub, her husband, Brian, sitting at home, watching the television, not hearing Jan talk. He has lost his job as a vet. Not the most likely setting for a racing story let alone a success story.

The great strength of the film comes from Toni Collette as Jan, Toni Collette always versatile in her roles, versatile in her accents, not afraid to portray hard-working ordinary women. Jan did have some success in her early years, caring for animals, winning trophies. When she hears a somewhat loud-mouth accountant, Howard (Daniel Lewis) boasting in the pub, she gets the bright idea of buying a mare, taking it to stud, hoping for a cult.

And that is what she does, the screenplay giving attention to her hard work, research, showing that this was not an easy achievement. And for finance? She suggests a local syndicate, about 10 or more people contributing £10 a month for two years. Howard agrees to manage the finances – and, initially reluctant townspeople agree, the pub owner, the young worker, the local official who loves quoting rules and regulations, the matriarch of the town, and the town alcoholic...

Of course, it all takes time, and we share Jane's anxieties. But, she is supported by Brian (played by Owen Teale whose teeth gaps are quite a distraction but, with some relief, he residential to the races!).

One of the difficulties will be a trainer. Jan goes for the best but receives an uninterested reception when their horse, Dream Alliance, is restless but, fortunately gallops and the trainer does a deal. And it is not lightning-instant success, seconds and thirds in races until a victory.

Part of the enjoyment is seeing the syndicate members, including the exuberant drunk, Karl Johnson, and Maureen (Sian Philip in her mid-80s) all in the owners' lounge, shoulder to shoulder with the racing aristocracy!

After one race, Jan and the syndicate have to make a decision, recovery from injury, Brian researching stem cell treatment, a comeback and a triumph at the Welsh National.

Yes, we have seen many variations of the theme, but you would have to be something of a stone not to respond to the enthusiasm of the syndicate and the energy of Dream Alliance.

As with many films these days, there are pictures of the cast along with pictures of the actual characters, and a 2012 photo of Dream Alliance. But, is quite a delight when most of the cast gather in a pub and sing, once again, Delilah. The real Jan, Brian and Howard, standing next to their acting counterparts, all singing – and the realisation that the real Brian, standing next to Owen Teale, looks very much like the actor, big bushy beard and, even fewer teeth in front then Owen Teale had in the film!

ESCAPE ROOM: TOURNAMENT OF CHAMPIONS

US, 2021, 88 minutes, Colour.

Taylor Russell, Logan Miller, Thomas Coerquel, India Moore, Holland Road in

Directed by Adam Robitel.



Escape Room seems a modest enough title for a horror film. But: Tournament of Champions seems a bit much for this sequel.

In 2019, Escape Room was a box office success, especially with younger audiences who could identify, in age, with the central characters. The studios were very pleased with the success and the sequel was, more than perhaps, inevitable. And, in fact, it is something of a rerun of the original. Once again, there is the threatening anonymous company which makes these lethal puzzles and games. Once again, the survivors from the first film, Zoe and Ben (Taylor Russell and Logan Miller) become involved in the new set of rooms to be escape from. But, Zoe, mourning the death of Amanda in the first film, is intent this time to defeat the company, Minos.

Just in case the action of the first film was not in the forefront of our memories, this sequel opens with a slick trailer-like collage to remind us. Zoe is also seeing a psychiatrist who warns her that anything she observes can become a clue to her puzzle – but this still does not solve her problem, her fear of flying. So, she persuades Ben to drive to New York for the confrontation, the Tournament.

One has to say that the pacing of these films is sometimes breathtaking, fast, dramatic, jolting. This is especially the case when the trapped characters are desperately trying to work out where the clues are, what the clues are, what the clues mean, going to action in time before they are trapped, the eagerness to get to the next room where the potential entrapment opens all over again.

Zoe and Ben are tricked into chasing a purse-snatcher into the New York subway, knocking people out of the way, then trapped in a carriage. It becomes ominous. The random collection of characters in the carriage inevitably turn out to be past survivors of Minos games.

We don't learn particularly much about the others, especially as it is a variation of "And then there were none...". However, one of the older ones is of more interest, Nate (Thomas Coquerel) who turns out to be a priest who had participated in the game where, with fellow priests, their faith had been tested in their attempts to escape entrapment. He feels guilty as the sole survivor. And he will have the opportunity to atone for his behaviour, literally reaching out to save another.

What makes the film interesting is that there are four set pieces, escape rooms, to test ingenuity. There is the train carriage. There is a rather sophisticated room full of deadly traps, keys and locks. There is an artificial sequence by the sea, the background painted, a lighthouse, a shop, but the seashore quicksand. And, finally, a New York setting with acid rain.

There is a twist, actually several twists at the end, Amanda reappearing and explaining what has happened, Zoe being tested about her aims of confronting the company and the possibility of saving Ben.

And, of course, and ending with Zoe actually on a plane, but...

While geared for the younger demographic, older audiences, like this reviewer, will quite enjoy the Escape Room films, even if sometimes rather out of breath,

THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS 9/ F 9/F9: THE FAST SAGA

2021, 143 minutes, Colour.

Vin Diesel, Michelle Rodriguez, Jordana Brewster, Tyrese Gibson, Chris 'Ludacris' Bridges, Nathalie Emmanuel, Charlize Theron, John Cena, Finn Cole, Sung Kang, Anna Sawai, Helen Mirren, Kurt Russell, Lucas Black, Michael Rooker, Shea Whigham.

Directed by Justin Lin.



'I never even knew you had a brother'. This quote suddenly came to mind (surprisingly, since it comes from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*) during the prologue of this ninth edition of the *Fast and Furious* franchise. Hollywood has been delighting in origin stories so, unexpectedly, the film opens in 1989 revealing Dom Toretto's father and his younger brother, Jacob. Some dubious goings-on, some regrets, clashing brothers which will be taken up (with a vengeance or more) during this almost 2 ½ hours of action, speeding cars, chases, crashes and smashes, explosions – one might say a hyperbole of mayhem.

And, while in the vein of metaphors, an extravaganza of implausibility! Even when two characters literally go into space. And, while we can welcome the great variety of international cities we visit, Cologne, Tokyo, London, Edinburgh, Tbilisi, often quite scenic if we distract ourselves from the car chases, the implausibilities that characters can move from one city to another seemingly just thinking about it!

It is all familiar territory and, probably, most fans will be pleased (although there always seem to be trolls ready to text that they hate inferior sequels). Characters from the previous films suddenly turn up, Charlize Theron in a glass case, Helen Mirren bejewelled and begowned and driving a speeding car (and, we suppose, that if it's all good enough for Helen Mirren, then it's good enough for us!). But, which films did they appear in? And what about Kurt Russell turning up as Mr Nobody? And all the Japanese connections, *Tokyo Drift*?

For those who do not retain all the details of the previous films, it would be very handy if there someone like a contestant on *Hard Quiz* whose expert subject was the *Fast Franchise* sitting beside us instantly reminding us who was who and where was where and when was when!

Vin Diesel gives his usual performance. Michelle Rodriguez and Jordana Brewster get a bit more action time. There is the comic patter between Tyree's Gibson and Ludicrous – which we may (or not) find funny.

And, then there is the whole espionage story, power and space, which does seem a little far-fetched.

But, for those who are wanting the familiar characters, the cars, speed, chases, crashes, personal rivalries and confrontations, who can complain?

FINAL ACCOUNT

UK/US, 2020, 94 minutes, Colour/black and white.

Directed by Luke Holland.



A documentary about the Holocaust – but not interviews with survivors and their families. Rather, this is a series of interviews with, mainly men, who were members of the SS or who were concentration camp guards. At the time of filming and the interviews, they are in their 80s. They are Germans and Austrians.

The director of the film, Luke Holland, who had family in Auschwitz, decided to do these interviews, to ask these SS and guard survivors about their attitudes of the time, motivations for joining the SS, the effect on them and their lives, their knowledge of what was going on, their allegiance to the Nazi party, the imprisonment and execution of the Jews.

The film is something of a jigsaw, the intercutting of the various interviews, the questions by the director, offscreen. There is also a special sequence, somewhat alarming as we listen to the questions and discussions, the presence of one of the veterans and his being targeted and his response. The conversation is staged in the house in Wannsee, the site of the meeting to discuss the Final Solution.

The speakers are quite open in their responses. The men were members of the SS, considering it an elite, members of other groups with special training. They remember that as children they were forever wearing uniforms, that their attitudes of loyalty to the Fatherland the part and parcel of their lives. They were selected when young, sent to special training, given documents, proud of their elite status and their Aryan blood. The women, on the other hand, who interviewed served in minor roles or in account and offices on the site to the camps.

The film lists the major concentration camps, films and the remaining buildings, office statistics of what happened in those camps.

The cumulative effect of listening to these men, many admitting the shame of what had been done by Germans, explaining their loyalties of the time and their age, one is still proud of their work, one

condemning the deaths in the Holocaust but indicating that it would be better to expel all the Jews from Germany to other countries.

Which means then that the film is a challenge to audiences, looking back at these key events of the 20th century, the role of Hitler, the persecution and deaths of the Jews, the audience is asked to make moral judgements as well as reflect on themselves. (One might make the parallel of Chinese soldiers in 1989 and Tiananmen square and how, in later decades, they would explain their action; or, Hong Kong police in 2020-2021 and the crackdown on dissidents in that city; or, Israeli soldiers and checkpoint guards and their treatment of Palestinians....)

Sadly, the film was released, three months after the death of the director in 2020.

FROM THE VINE

Canada, 2020, 97 minutes, Colour.

Joe Pantoliano, Paula Brancati, Marco Leonardi, Wendy Crewson, Tony Nardi, Tony Nappo, Franco Lo Presti, Kevin Hanchard.

Directed by Sean Cisterna.



From the vine came..., the grapes..., the wine, as the popular songs sings. And, certainly by the end of the film, the wine is flowing.

This is a Canadian story but it has its origins in Italy and it has its fulfilment in Italy, especially in the vineyards, the wine press, those barrels of local red. And the locality is in the Basilicata region of southern Italy, especially the hilltop Acerenza, one of the most picturesque and well preserved of those mediaeval cities (and filmed, frequently throughout the film, from spectacular helicopter angles). Anyone who loves cinema visits to the Italian countryside will not be disappointed in this display of wonderful scenery.

And Canada? This is the story of a young boy (Marco) who grew up in Acerenza racing the passing trains with his schoolfriends, bonding with his grandfather who owned and worked the vineyards. But, off he went with his mother to Canada, went to school, got his law degree, married, had a daughter, a great business success story. But, as they say, there comes a time in the tides... Marco's vision is challenged and he melts, publicly, quitting his job (and not telling his wife and daughter). He decides to escape, back to Italy, back to Acerenza, back to his past.

This is where the film becomes very Italian, the range of townspeople, many idiosyncratic to say the least, discovering his old friends, going back to his grandfather's house, becoming inspired by the vines and... Not hard to guess the rest. In fact, this is a great opportunity for veteran actor, especially in TV, Joe Pantoliano, to get main billing. He is likable, at moments irritating, having to get over himself, but exhilarated by going back home, his grandfather appearing to him from time to time (and, which may be a bit much for some audiences' sense of realism, some of the leaves of the vines talk to him, and he talks back.)

Canada then intrudes on Italy with a sudden visit from his wife (Wendy Crewson) and daughter (Paula Brancati), his wife exasperated, especially as she discovers he has cleared out there retirement account, the daughter having to get over resentment of her father's attempts to mould her into his own image.

But, this is popular and pleasing entertainment – someone criticised it for being “un-demanding”, scoffing by someone who demands demanding cinema! No, this is meant for sitting back, relaxing (and being reminded of what life is like – for some people anyway).

L'ODISEA DE LOS GILES/ HEROIC LOSERS

Argentina, 2019, 116 minutes, Colour.

Ricardo Darin, Luis Brandoni, Veronica Llinas, Chino Darin, Daniel Aroaz, Andres Parra.

Directed by Sebastian Borensztein.



Heroic losers seems a fair title for a film about a group of Argentinians who are swindled and robbed and fight to get their money back. But, it is the Argentinian title which is intriguing, the idea of an Odyssey, wandering towards a goal to be recovered – but then the question of los giles might mean.

The Wikipedia answer: "**Giles**" is the plural of "gil". And "gil" is quite a word used in **Argentina** and Uruguay. It translates "simple person, naive, silly, over-confident". And, in fact, the voice-over explains that this description covers those involved in this recovery exploit. It is repeated at the end, but that is after we have seen what the heroic losers have achieved.

This is a film about the working class in Argentina, memories of the dictatorship of the generals, the Falklands war, the need for Argentina to get on its feet again – only to have the financial collapse of 2001, the very months in which this film opens.

Service station owner, Fermin Pelassi (played by Argentina's pre-eminent actor, Ricardo Darin) and his wife, Lydia, decide that they want to start a cooperative, using silos that have been abandoned for some time. The first part of the film introduces quite a range of characters, Ferman and Lydia's approach to them, she being extremely forthright (and audiences will regret that she vanishes from the film in its middle, but, thankfully, being seen again in some happy flashbacks).

This gives the screenplay the opportunity to present a group of "fools", several of whom are not the sharpest tools in the kit. But, they all have some money put by, the manager of the local railway station (where trains no longer stop), the shrewd repair shop owner (a self-proclaimed anarchist arguing against the station manager who is convinced Peronist), a squatter with an ever-increasing family who believes in action up front, two happy but dim-witted brothers, a mother who is a wily financier, continually criticising her son but wanting him to join the group.

Not without quite some effort, they get the money! And then, disaster for Argentina and its finances – and, worse, the smooth bank manager persuades Ferman not just to keep the cash in safety deposit box but to invest it in the bank. Instead, he steals it, building a huge underground vault out on a farm, metal, alarms installed, safe-proof.

The second part shows the enterprise for getting the money back – some comic touches, a great deal of naive activity, Ferman planting his son, Roderigo (played by Ricardo Darin's son, Chino) who has had to stop his university studies, pretending to care for plants but keeping surveillance on the crook, but, fairly lightly, the beginnings of a romance with the secretary in his office.

Naturally, we, the audience, are getting more and more on side, certainly wanting to get the money back, certainly loathing the crooked banker, checking out the details of security on his safe, watching the elaborate plan to get the banker to switch off his alarm battery (learning a

technique from Peter O'Toole, seen in the 1966 caper, *How to Steal a Million!*) By continually setting off the alarm until he acts, frustrated.

And then, of course, there is the big scene, the raid on the vault – and, will they succeed! No surprise, but, by the end, we are all happily complicit and everyone deserves a happy ending.

HERSELF

UK/Ireland, 2020, 97 minutes, Colour.

Claire Dunne, Harriet Walter, Conleth Hill, Molly McCann, Ruby Rose O'Hara, Ian Lloyd Anderson.

Directed by Phyllida Lloyd.



Herself it is, as the Irish say. And they say it here, in this contemporary story from Dublin.

Domestic violence, a sadly relevant theme at any time but, particularly, in these times when discussions are much more public, when there are campaigns highlighting the prevalence of physical and psychological brutality in the home.

And, yet, this is a very positive film. It shows a woman, victim of violence, yet becoming more than a victim, even more than a survivor, a woman who discovers purpose and acts on it. Actress Claire Dunne who portrays this woman, Sandra, (Claire Dunne contributing the story and cowriting the screenplay), won an award from the Women Film Critics Circle for her performance, for “Women Saving Themselves”.

Sandra is a loving mother, with two little girls, seen playfully romping with them as the film opens, their father arriving home, the little girls running to him, then the father turning on Sandra beating

her, stomping on her wrist. Sandra leaves with the girls. And, later, there will be conflict about child custody, hearings in the court, Sandra making the comment there as to when she was asked why she didn't leave, the question should have been to her husband, to be asked why didn't you stop?

Sandra has to find accommodation, take the older girl to school, work in a bar as well as make ends meet along with child support by looking after a recovering invalid, Peggy, who had been a doctor. Sandra's mother had worked for Peggy and they had been friends. Peggy is played by that marvellous stalwart of British film and television, Harriet Walter. This aspect of the screenplay shows how blessed it is to have friends, supportive friends who will step up in their help. And this theme continues throughout the film, the value of friendship, people working together.

Because, In fact, Sandra discovers an online builder explaining how one could build one's own house. And this is where Sandra comes into our own, doing all the investigations, the financial implications, seeking advice, Peggy being financially supportive, Sandra making the decision to build. And, the sequences where, every weekend, Sandra and a friendly builder and his Down Syndrome son, a mother from school, a young woman who works at the bar, bringing some friends, patiently, with a zest, build that house. "Women saving themselves."

We are not prepared for an appalling shock towards the end of the film – audiences will recognise it when it happens. And, while there are custody difficulties, issues with the affections of the children, patience and perseverance, the film ends with a wonderful small sequence of hope. Sandra is well and truly 'herself'.

THE HITMAN'S WIFE'S BODYGUARD

UK/US, 2021, 109 minutes, Colour.

Ryan Reynolds, Samuel L. Jackson, Salma Hayek, Morgan Freeman, Antonio Banderas, Frank Grillo, Gary Oldman, Tom Hopper, Richard E. Grant, Caroline Goodall., Rebecca Front.

Directed by Patrick Hughes.



Over the top is the phrase that almost immediately springs to mind as we swirl into the comedy and action of this sequel to the very popular *The Hitman's Bodyguard*. Perhaps the writers and the director had the intention of going one better than the original but then opted for many better rather than one. And, it goes over many tops, not least the hyperactive performance by Salma Hayek as Sonia, the title wife, which goes beyond the tops!

Previously, bodyguard Mike Bryce, an often bemused Ryan Reynolds, had to accompany hitman, Darius Kincaid, Samuel L. Jackson to his trial. This time, Jackson is out and wants to team up with Sonia and marry her. He suggests a bodyguard and she mishears him and tracks down Mike Bryce. Poor Mike is bereft, has lost his license as a bodyguard (has dreams of his winning the annual award but sabotaged by Kincaid). And, worse, poor Mike goes off to a harassed therapist who urges him to talk to his inner self and pursue the use of guns (though is allowed the penknife which, of course, is crucial to a final dramatic encounter). He does use his phone to talk to himself for therapy!

Kincaid is not particularly impressed at having Mike as Sonia's bodyguard and there is continuous comic repartee between them, rivalry, trying to best each other. And Sonia is really no help!

But, the screenwriters must have been overdosing on James Bond films because they come up with a plot which more than resembles them. Here is Antonio Banderas as the contemporary Blofeld, millionaire, desire for superpower especially for his native Greece, resentful of the EU and their sanctions on Greece, wanting to get revenge – on the widest scale possible, sabotaging European communications. This involves getting a USB stick (something James Bond never had to do), and the hitman and his bodyguard having to stop the insertion of the stick to avoid sabotage explosions. And Mike waits to the last millisecond to achieve his aim.

There is also an American advisor played by Frank Grillo (the screenplay even having him reference his performance with Bruce Willis, *Cosmic Sin*). And he tangles with the European Union's equivalent of M, played by Caroline Goodall.

If we allow ourselves, and the invitation is most powerful, to let ourselves be caught up in these adventures, their straining of plausibility, the oneupmanship and rivalry, for Mike combating without any guns, then it is two hours of as they might say, mindless action entertainment with laughs. But, for good measure, Morgan Freeman also turns up as Mike's father, living in Tuscany in comfort, welcoming his son back (with Darius and the audience wondering how it is possible for Morgan Freeman to be Mike's father!) But then, more than a few twists as well.

The film was directed by Australian, Patrick Hughes, who made a mark with his action film in 2009, Red Hill. And, then, he landed on his feet in Hollywood, directing Stallone and co in Expendables 3, then the first Hitman film.

IN THE HEIGHTS

US, 2021, 143 minutes, Colour.

Anthony Ramos, Melissa Barrera, Leslie Grace, Corey Hawkins, Olga Merriott is, Jimmy Smits, Gregory Diaz IV, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Marc Anthony.

Directed by Jon Chu.



The Heights? Washington Heights – the northern part of New York's Manhattan where the island narrows between the Hudson River to the west and the East River to the east. For the last decades it has been a centre for migrants from Caribbean countries. And here, these cultures are being celebrated.

In the Heights was written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, the name to be reckoned with for the American musical in the 21st century. He has been immortalised with Hamilton. In fact, in the Heights was written before Hamilton but now it is getting the big screen treatment, directed by Jon Chu who directed a number of dance films, Step Up, but achieved great popularity with Crazy Rich Asians.

A prominent reviewer treated In the Heights with more than a touch of disdain, condemning it as "sanitised". The reviewer was referring to the social problems in the area, especially drugs and violence, killings – and, in 1989, the New York Times did state that Washington Heights was the crack

capital of the world. It is true that these issues are not to the fore here. Rather, this story intends to be a celebration, a celebration of the Latino cultures, the memories of homelands, the transition to the US, making a home in the US. It has the touch of the fairytale – and, that is certainly true of the end of the film and its resolution with a lottery ticket.

There is quite a lot of singing and dancing in the street. On a personal note, this reviewer did spend a year living in Washington Heights, 1989, and resonated with the story and the characters, the filming on the streets of Washington Heights, the precise situation of Usnavi's store on the corner of Audubon Avenue and 175 Street. But, this reviewer has to confess that he never saw any dancing in the streets although there was often a very festive atmosphere, celebrating the many patrons under the title of the Virgin Mary and the countries of origin.

The central character is a young man, Usnavi (Anthony Ramos) who tells stories about his growing up in the Dominican Republic to attentive children, who works a stall with the young Sonny, who is attracted to Vanessa (Melissa Barrera) who works in the local beauty shop (which is transferring to the Bronx). His good friend is Benny (Corey Hawkins) who works for Kevin (Jimmy Smits) who runs a local taxi service and bought it from the Irish. Benny is also in love with Kevin's daughter, Nina (Leslie Grace) who has been sent away by her father to improve her studies at Stanford, though she does not want to study there, feels out of place, wants to return home. And, overall, there is the presiding spirit of the genial grandmother.

So, lots of verve, dancing in the streets, even on the side of an apartment block! But, compared with, say, *West Side Story*, this one is comparatively low key, a local celebration inviting us all to share. And, again, a commentator has referred to it as a love letter to the cultures of Washington Heights.

SOME BACKGROUND ON THE LOCATION: Washington Heights is set apart among Manhattan neighborhoods for its high residential density despite the lack of modern construction, with the majority of its few high-rise buildings belonging to the [NewYork–Presbyterian Hospital](#) / [Columbia University Medical Center](#). Other higher education institutions include [Yeshiva University](#) and [Boricua College](#). The neighborhood has generous access to green space in [Fort Washington Park](#), [Highbridge Park](#), and [Fort Tryon Park](#), home to the historical landmarks the [Little Red Lighthouse](#), the [High Bridge Water Tower](#), and [the Cloisters](#) respectively. Other points of interest include [Audubon Terrace](#), the [Morris–Jumel Mansion](#), the [United Palace](#), the [Audubon Ballroom](#), and the [Fort Washington Avenue Armory](#).

Beginning as a middle-class neighborhood with many [Irish](#) and [Eastern European](#) immigrants, the neighborhood has at various points been home to communities of [German Jews](#), [Greek Americans](#), [Puerto Ricans](#), [Cuban Americans](#), and [Russian Americans](#). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, White residents began to leave the neighborhood for nearby suburbs as the Black and Latino populations increased. [Dominican Americans](#) became the dominant group by the 1980s despite facing difficult economic circumstances, leading the neighborhood to its status today as the most prominent Dominican community in the United States. While crime became a serious issue during the [crack cocaine crisis](#) of the 1980s and 1990s, in the 2000s Washington Heights became a much safer community and began to experience some upward mobility as well as [gentrification](#).

For the remainder of the 20th century the Dominican community of Washington Heights continued to increase considerably, most notably during the mid to late 1980s, when over

40,000 Dominicans settled in Washington Heights, [Hamilton Heights](#), and [Inwood](#). Around the year 2000, the Dominican community reached its peak and became a slim majority of Washington Heights and Inwood, propelling the neighborhoods' combined population to 208,000, the highest level since 1950.

in 1989, [The New York Times](#) called the neighborhood "the crack capital of America." By 1990, crack's impact on crime was evident: 103 murders were committed in the 34th Precinct that year, along with 1,130 felony assaults, 1,919 robberies, and 2,647 burglaries.

Washington Heights has faced [gentrification](#) throughout the 2000s, with the [2010 Census](#) revealing that from 2000 the neighborhood's Hispanic / Latino population had decreased by nearly 17,000 and its Black population by over 3,000, while its White population increased by nearly 5,000.

LITTLE JOE

UK, 2019, 104 minutes, Colour.

Emily Beecham, Ben Wishaw, Kerry Fox, Kit Connor, David Wilmot, Phenix Brossard, Sebastian Hulk, Lindsay Duncan.

Directed by Jessica Hausner.



Little Joe sounds like an endearing title. It also seems like an innocuous title. But, again, it is congenial. One of the central characters of the film is a young boy, Joe, but he is not the Little Joe of the title!

This reviewer came to the film without any previous knowledge at all. The narrative opened in unexpected ways and continued in that vein. So, for audiences who prefer to watch a film without any preparation, it is best to stop reading this review here. The review presupposes that readers are interested in knowing something of what the film is about and how it handles its themes. So, spoiler alert.

This is a film about genetic engineering. However, the main task at hand, in a vast greenhouse with elaborate laboratories, all bright and white, nothing overtly sinister, is focused on the cultivation of special flowers – and each flower is a Little Joe. As the film progresses, with the ambitions of the scientists to produce a flower with aroma that will lead to pleasant feelings, it emerges that the genetic engineering actually does have human intentions, human targets.

Emily Beecham is one of the chief scientists, committed very much to the development of Little Joe, the audience seeing vast rows of the scarlet-coloured flower developing, blossoming, producing its pollen, its scent. She is Alice, separated from her husband (who suffers from allergies), mother of the young Joe (a credible Kit Connor,) mother and son bond, son begins to change in his attitude, wanting to spend time with his father, spending time with Selma, a young fellow-student, things at home seeming more and more on edge. Or is it Alice who is more and more on edge – especially as she goes to discuss her problems with therapist, Lindsay Duncan?

Most of the action takes place at home or on the greenhouse/laboratory site (though there is a relief excursion as Joe goes fishing with his father).

Generally, the scientists are cheery enough people, feeling under pressure to produce the flowers in time for a fair which will bring both prestige and sales. Alice's co-worker, Chris (Ben Wishaw) is earnest, attracted to Alice, friendly with Joe. On the other hand, there is a veteran scientist, Bella (Kerry Fox), long working at the greenhouse, having time off for mental problems, disturbed when her dog seems to turn against her, then her voicing suspicions about the malevolent effects of the pollen of Little Joe...

Perhaps film analysts discussing Little Joe will be comparing it to the versions of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The story is in that vein – but more complicated because of the audience wondering whether we are looking objectively at the story and the characters or whether we have been transported into the wary and disturbed mind of Alice. A very significant clue is given in the last few seconds of the film and it would be a pity to miss this or overlook it.

Science. Science-fiction. Not what we might have expected.

LUCA

US/Italy, 2021, 95 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Jacob Tremblay, Jack Dylan Grazer, Emma Berman, Saverio Raimondo, Maya Rudolph, Marco Baricelli, Jim Gaffigan, Sandy Martin, Sacha Baron Cohen.

Directed by Enrico Casarosa.



Pixar Jr. Pixar for kids – especially for little boys. However, after the first half hour and our getting to know Luca and Alberto, enter Julia, and the film becomes especially for little girls as well. There are some parents in the plot, so a film for parents who will be glad that their youngsters are enjoying it.

It is also Italian Pixar, an Italian story, an island setting off the north-western Italian coast near Genoa, most of the characters speaking at kind of Italian broken English accent (but the sea creatures speaking with American accents). The setting seems to be the 1950s with a huge focus on the popularity of the Vespa. Movie fans who might be wondering about the setting will notice that there are some posters on the walls in the town, especially for Roman Holiday, La Strada, 20,000 Leagues under the Sea – the latter two being released in 1954 so that gives something of a date.

But, in fact, it is Pixar underwater. With echoes of The Little Mermaid in reverse, or a cousin to Finding Nemo and Finding Dory, we are introduced to a family who are, most unjustly, labelled by the humans who loathe them as they go fishing, “sea monsters”. (The fisherman are also upset because they blame their losing lots of their possessions overboard with the sea monsters upsetting the boats – and, when we are introduced to Alberto, we see they have some reason.)

While the sea monsters look different, mop hair, bluish features, they look and sound just like your ordinary suburban family except that they live under the sea! They are also wary of going to the surface and fearful of humans. Luca is the only son (voiced by Jacob Tremblay, so effective in Room and Wonder). As he discovers some of the lost human possessions on the seabed, he encounters Alberto (voiced by Jonathan Glazer). Luca ventures to the surface, goes to Alberto’s tree house, discovers the wonders of the Vespa, spends the day working with Alberto, enjoying life on the surface.

The added advantage is that once the sea monsters come out of the water they take human shape – and the danger, of course, that back in the water, they look again like the sea monsters they are.

Parents are worried, call in an uncle who lives in the depths of the sea alone (voiced by Sacha Baron Cohen – who has another minute of screen time after the last of the very long credits). Luca runs away and he and Alberto go to the town.

What follows are a whole lot of comic adventures, befriending Julia (voiced by Emma Berman), staying at her house with her father and working for him, discovering there is a marathon competition involving cycling and swimming – and pasta consumption. Julia has failed in the past and is mocked by the most obnoxious town bully, Ercole, and his sycophantic friends. So, lots of competition, training, Luca exhilarated by bike riding, Alberto becoming a bit jealous of Julia's attentions to Luca, giving him books to read, showing him a telescope. And, then, the parents come to town, transformed into humans, with lots of water to throw on the children so that they can find Luca!

With the happy ending, it means that Luca can be taken as something of a parable about outsiders, a different way of life, under suspicion, coming into a community, the community wary, the outsiders proving themselves, more than compatible, and finally being accepted. Memories of so many refugees coming to Europe in the 2010s

So, entertainment for youngsters, a pleasant experience for the parents, and some strong social messaging.

THE MOLE AGENT

Chile, 2020, 84 minutes, Colour.

Sergio Chamy, Romulo Aitken, Marta Olivares, Ruby Olivares.
Directed by Maite Alberdi.



Suddenly, in the trailer for The Mole Agent, large letters appear: "The Most Heartwarming Spy Story...". Spy story? And G-rated?

Here is a story from Chile, but a story that could happen anywhere around the world. Well, not the initial part of the story... We are introduced to an investigator who is conducting auditions for a spy, someone to infiltrate a home for the aged and find out information about how one of the women is being treated. But the surprise is, for the audience, and for the elderly gentleman who respond to the advertisement, the investigator is looking for someone between the ages of 80-90. We are puzzled. They are puzzled. We listen to what is required of them. And we see how they need to have a bit of knowledge of contemporary technology for the reports, and their "deliveries" ..

It was a bit surprising to find the man that they chose, Sergio Chamy, was rather quiet and retired, a gentleman, dapper in his way, wearing a suit and tie. He is committed to the home by the investigator and by surgeon's daughter. In he goes and begins his espionage!

The audience spends quite a deal of time in the home along with Sergio, 40 women living in and a few men. And we get to know quite a number of the women – although Sergio has a hard time trying to track down Sonia, the mother of the investigator's client. He asks people. He looks at the notices on the 40 doors. He also reports that he finds it difficult sometimes to tell one woman from the other – which may be the problem for us in the audience as well, this reviewer not being able to identify Sonia whenever she appeared, seeming to disappear within the group!

Actually, Sergio in his unobtrusive way, is a great hit with the ladies. They find him charming. They enjoy his conversation. One of them even imagines wedding bells. And, at one of the socials, he is chosen to be the king of the celebration, all the ladies wanted to dance with him. Obviously, the tasks of a Mole Agent are not always burdensome.

This is a very cheerful home for the aged. The ladies are happy together in the common room, enjoy celebrations, visiting singers, and quite a birthday party for Sergio's 84th.

He does do the investigation, talks with Sonia, talks with many of the other ladies, one something of a kleptomaniac who continually wants to phone her mother and the authorities comforting her on the other end of the phone, another a poet, a number not getting any visitors but Sergio finding photos of her family to console her. He expresses the opinion that loneliness is the main problem with those who live in the home.

(An aside on pastoral dimensions of home for the aged. This film highlights how wonderful some companionship is, some listening, some sharing, not leaving people alone in their loneliness. This is Chile, there are lots of Catholic images, prayers, but no sign of Catholic pastoral workers visiting, no sign of a priest, even at a funeral ceremony.)

MOONBOUND

Germany, 2021, 85 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Ali Samadi Ahadi.



Once again, for this kind of animation film for younger audiences, the opinions of film critics with analysis is rather irrelevant as to whether the children enjoy the film or not. There were high hopes for Moonbound, German production, but world release in 2021. It is based on a popular children's novel by Jonathan Fetter-Vorm.

At the end of the film, the two central characters, Peter (who loathes being called Petey) and his younger sister, Anne, wake up in their bedroom and both agree that they have had weird dreams. (But, of course, they actually lived through their dreams!) "Weird" may be the view of the children – and is probably the view of the adults who watch this extraordinary variation on fairytales. On the other hand, the publicity for the film refers to the journey as "magical". The synopsis takes this much further and describes it as "enchanted". That would not be the reaction of this reviewer except if "enchanted" is interpreted in the sense of powerful magicians imposing spells.

As the film opens, Peter finds Anne absolutely annoying (and he is not wrong). Anne, lively and feisty, considers Peter her "idiot brother". He is bullied at school but she stands up for him. His dream is to be an astronaut and go to the moon.

At the same time, there is little subplot about Beetles, enchantment, spells, a tree uprooted and going to the moon, the beetle losing one arm as well as his wife. He is determined to get back to the moon if only he can find three humans to help him.

We certainly then enter a world of enchantment, a fairy Queen (who could do with a course on management as well as empathy) gets involved trying to help, but Anne is abducted by the grim moon man and his henchman and trapped with some insects. (And that is only the beginning of the complications...!). Peter and the beetle are joined by the Sandman (the one who puts people to sleep) and a whole cohort of Nature Spirits. And a giant polar bear transports Peter and his group, leaping through space and clouds, to the moon.

And, all kinds of shenanigans, conflicts, pratfalls, magic, crises involving rescuing and, the beetle restoring his arm, Peter and his sense of achievement.

But, all in all, it seems that this is a film for the littlies audience rather than even the older pre-teens, and not for the teens. So much colour, so much movement, so many complications, not necessary to follow all the details the plot but for the littlies to be swept up by it all.

MY NAME IS GULPILIL

Australia, 2021, 101 minutes, Colour.

David Gulpilil.

Directed by Molly Reynolds.



2001 sees the 50th anniversary of the release of Nicholas Roeg's celebrated film, Walkabout. 2001 also sees David Gulpilil turning 68 (July 1st). However, he has not been in good health in recent years, cancer diagnosed in 2017, chemotherapy, the need for continued care.

However, as he was 50 years ago, so, in old age he is still a demanding screen presence. He knows where the camera is. He knows where to look, when to look away, when to capture a moment. And, as he says, he was in other people's films, so this is now his film. And Australian audiences, as well as international audiences, will be grateful for this opportunity to be reacquainted, to get to know him again, or to discover how significant and iconic he has been for Australians and for the film industry.

Director Molly Reynolds has worked with David Gulpilil and with her partner, Director, Rolf de Heer, for over 20 years (10 Canoes, Charlie's Country, Another Country). She has been filming interviews with Gulpilil for several years, at a time when his cancer was diagnosed and it was thought he would not have long to live, at times when the treatment was enabling some improvement with his health, at other times when he was more active, able to move about. But, all the time, he is talking to camera, reminiscing, celebrating his successes, and confessing to his failures, his time in prison in

Darwin, his violence towards his wife, drinking and drugs, and an admission, looking to camera, that he is an alcoholic.

His reminiscences go back before his being “discovered” for Walkabout. He is proud of being full-blood, trained by his father to be a dancer, the Kingfisher his totem, his appreciation of growing up in his community, family, with friends. Almost immediately after the initial moments of seeing him as an old man, we see him in Walkabout, teenager, enthusiastic, performer, dancer, skilled before the camera. And then, haircut, suit and tie, he and his friend on the plane to the Cannes Film Festival, to London, the press junket, an overwhelming experience – his liking the cities to visit but he wouldn’t want to live in them!

This documentary doesn’t do a year by year biography or analysis of his career. Rather, this is David Gulpilil remembering, reminiscing, good times, bad times. There are glimpses of sequences from nine of his films, especially Storm Boy and The Tracker, and, one that we might have been waiting for, a scene from Crocodile Dundee (and the young actor able to communicate Paul Hogan-esque jokes in Hoge’s style).

One of the features of this film is the technique of photographing the actor-dancer in Australian landscapes, stills, very painterly, the man in his environment, giving us a good amount of time just to gaze at him, to appreciate him, to appreciate him in the range of Australian locations and scenery.

And then, unexpectedly, perhaps, to many of us, who are not familiar with his One-Man Show, some very funny sequences with him on stage (directed by Neil Armfield, 2004) where he narrates his visit to England, a meal with Her Majesty, the Queen of England, all to do with her helping him to find and how to hold knives and forks, difficulties with cutting the meat, then mouth on plate – and her Majesty gallantly adapting to his eating style! And then a phone call to Ernie dingo about being in a new Crocodile Dundee film.

David Gulpilil has gone much more gently into his old age and his illness, living in Murray Bridge, South Australia, looked after by a jovial white mother-figure-carer, Mary Reefed. Their going for walks, collecting the post, taking his medicines (and his identifying them all), just taking it easier as he moves towards his death, which he acknowledges, and taking this opportunity, as he reminds us often, that this is his film.

MY ZOE

UK/Germany/US, 2019, 100 minutes, Colour.

Julie Delpy, Sophia Ally, Richard Armitage, Gemma Arteton, Daniel Bruel, Saleh Bakri, Lindsay Duncan.

Directed by Julie Delpy.



My Zoe is very much a film by Julie Delpy. After a substantial career as an actress, in French cinema as well as in the American movies, she moved into writing and direction. She has both written and directed My Zoe and stars in it.

But, what she has provided is two films in one – or, rather, one film, then a complete change of pace and another in the latter half.

The first part of the film is set in Berlin. Julie Delpy plays Isabelle, a research scientist, separated from her British husband, James (Richard Armitage), caring for her young daughter, Zoe (Sophia Ally). James blames Isabel for the alienation, especially after the birth of Zoe. He has become aggressive, even violent towards his wife but devoted to his daughter.

The key of the first part of the film, the first film, is Zoe becoming ill, the concern of her parents, the mystery of the illness, hopes for recovery, the dashing of these hopes and the consequences. This is a sad and challenging film in itself.

But, after the death of Zoe, Isabelle does not seem to go into mourning, and the film changes tone completely. Isabelle draws on her science background and the film becomes an exploration of science, genetic engineering and experimentation, moral issues, legal issues. The new setting is Moscow and introduces two significant characters, Thomas (Daniel Brühl) and his wife (Gemma Arterton), the film moving into quite some dialectic, serious conversations between the three central characters.

And this is what films can do – raise moral and ethical issues in principle but dramatise them through the characters and their crises, challenging audiences to think but also challenging audiences with empathy and potential conflicts between the two.

There is an enigmatic final aspect of the screenplay but audiences who have been alert, even puzzled, during the opening credits and the focus on pregnancy, will realise at the end something of what has happened.

Better for a review to stop here – no spoiler alerts.

PERFUMES

France, 2019, 100 minutes, Colour.

Emmanuelle Devos, Gregory Montel, Zélie Rixhon, Sergi Lopez, Gustave Kervern, Pauline Moulène
Directed by Gregory Magne.



An alternate title might have been Driving Mademoiselle Walberg. Mademoiselle Walberg is a demanding woman (rather an imperious lady) and Guillaume is her chauffeur. And, yes, there are plenty of perfumes throughout the film – unfortunately a film able to give only verbal descriptions rather than the audience smelling the real scents (which are often quite exotic)!

Veteran actress, Emmanuelle Devos, is a compelling Madamioselle. Gregory Montel is believable as her chauffeur.

It can be said that this is a film which you could take anyone to see – not something that you can say about a lot of films these days. But, Perfumes is interesting, entertaining, often moving.

We actually meet Guillaume first, suspicious of him, a touch abrasive, separated from his wife, going to meetings with a judge to discuss week by week custody of his daughter, living in a small apartment (which the judge tells him is too small for his daughter's privacy), scouting out better accommodation, and depending, especially for income, on his job as a chauffeur.

It is through Guillaume that we are introduced to Mademoiselle Walberg - eventually revealing herself as Anne. She is older. She is haughty. She is not a please and thank you person. And, if there is a word beyond fastidious, it would apply to her. She is highly sensitive to scents and perfumes. With such treatment, Guillaume is not an enthusiastic chauffeur – but she keeps asking for him.

The action of the film consists of ups and downs.

Ups include Guillaume discovering that Anne is a Nose (not on the nose but rather, an ability to differentiate an enormous range of scents and perfumes and to remember their origins). We see her in action, advising a company of handbag makers whose leather has something of an offputting odour, surveying a factory which emits smoke and rotten smells. Anne has solutions – get Guillaume to take notes, ask his opinion. He, in the meantime, urges her to become more sociable, even polite.

Downs include Anne losing her abilities, time in hospital, greater awareness of her loneliness. Guillaume's downs include losing points with his employer and therefore losing his license, explaining to his daughter on her 10th birthday that they will have to wait for the new apartment.

The film is upbeat at the end, Anne insisting that Guillaume work with her – and, delightfully, Guillaume going to one of those classes where the child gets a parent to explain their job. We leave Guillaume explaining to the rapt class, scents, combinations for perfumes.

While the film has strong-minded sentiment but never cloying, it can be described pleasingly as “nice”.

PERCY VS GOLIATH

Canada, 2019, 99 minutes, Colour.

Christopher Walken, Roberta Maxwell, Cristina Ritchie, Zach Braff, Luke Kirby, Martin Donovan, Adam Beach.

Directed by Clark Johnson.



Percy versus Goliath is not the first film version of this particular case, canola farmer in the Canadian midwest, Saskatchewan, Percy Schmeiser and his legal and moral battle with the giant Corporation, genetically modified crops, Monsanto. There had been a 2009 documentary, also using the David and Goliath symbolism, Percy Schmeiser, David versus Monsanto, a 65 minute film featuring Percy himself (who died in 2020).

One might say that this is such a focus on farmers, crops, financial issues that it may not be of great interest in itself for “city slickers”! Unless, of course, they are willing to be caught up in significant social issues, the influence of huge corporations, the victimisation of individuals. (And, in 2020-2021, there have been a number of films taking up these issues, Crisis and the and the pharmaceutical companies, futuristic satire about technology control, Lapsis,).

Audiences who think of Canada in terms of the cities in the east or Vancouver, or all Canada and the Rocky Mountains, might be amazed at the vistas of the vast fields, the crops, flat as far as the eye can see. And, it is interesting that this is a Canadian film about a Canadian issue (albeit with a number of American actors) and that it is a Canadian David-character who confronts and who experiences success against the giant, imperial and imperious global corporation.

A great deal of the impact of the film depends on the excellent performance by Christopher Walken, always a significant screen presence, this time believable as an ordinary farmer, descendant of migrant families, respecting the generations, respecting the land, studying the seeds, successful with his crops. He is supported by his loyal wife, Louise (Roberta Maxwell). He is Percy Schmeiser.

When Percy received correspondence from Monsanto, accusing him of breaking patent, of using Monsanto’s patent for genetically modified seeds for canola, he defends himself. The corporation is relentless, even demanding compensation if crops have been influenced by modified seeds blowing from other fields. The screenplay certainly develops this confrontation into a David versus Goliath battle, the shrewd and simple man standing his ground (for his crops and ground), giving speeches, receiving affirming correspondence and donations, persuaded by campaigner, Rebecca (Cristina Ricci) to travel to India and speak, an extraordinary experience for Percy, the contrast between India and its people, its vastness, corporations taking land, farmer suicides, and his life in Canada.

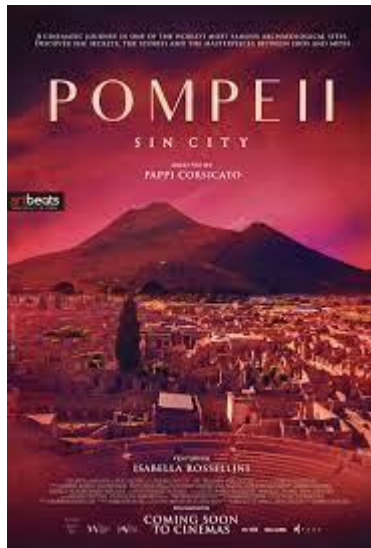
Zach Braff, with a limp and walking stick, plays Jackson Weaver, the local lawyer that Percy consults and who spends years working with Percy, local hearings, the appeals court and, with Percy’s final fierce determination, taking the case to the Supreme Court in Ottawa.

There have been many films about campaigners against corporations (think Erin Brockovich), there have been protests against destruction of the environment. Percy versus Goliath can take its place amongst this cinema gallery of fights for social causes.

POMPEII – SIN CITY/ POMPEII, EROS E MITO

Italy, 2020, 80 minutes, Colour. Isabella Rossellini, Darius Arya, Andrew Wallace-Hadrille, Ellen O'Gorman, Catherine Edwards, Massimo Osanna.

Directed by Pappi Corsicato.



Yes, a film with a visit to the ruins of Pompeii but not exactly in the way we might have expected. Interest in and enjoyment of this film will depend on what we had hoped to see. It turns out to be something of a mixture of documentary, travelogue, exploration of the subtitle, Sin City (although the original Italian title does not emphasise sin but rather highlights the relationship between the Myths and Eros), and some contemporary re-enactments of the myths seen on the frescoes that have survived, the reputation of the cities, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D., the overwhelming of the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum and their populace, but the extraordinary heritage of ruins that have survived more than 1900 years. In fact, there is some explanation but it comes in the last part of the film, a reflection on what has been explored, and a close-up of the mystery of the identity of the famous surviving skeletons.

For those who want visuals of Pompeii, walks through the columns, the remains of the homes, viewing the frescoes, and a range of drone views from above as well as a final visit to the barren craters of Vesuvius, plenty to satisfy.

For those who want some experts commenting on Pompeii, Roman civilisation, Roman culture and decadence (plenty of that), there is a range of academics from England and the United States interspersed throughout the film, some appealing, some bit off-putting. But, the main commentary is given to Isabella Rossellini (looking more and sounding more like her mother, Ingrid Bergman, as she grows older), who walks through the city, a distracting green coat, speaking, inviting us in, giving us some winks.

There is a lot (more than a lot) of talk about lust, power, sex, decadence. The emphasis, even from Isabella Rossellini, becomes rather tiresome. But, a lot of points are made about the city, the violence of the gladiators in the arena built in 70 A.D., the decree of the Roman Senate banning combat for 10 years, stories about Nero's self-aggrandising wife, Poppaea.

But the part that many audiences might say they could do without are the contemporary suggested re-enactments of various Greek and Roman myths from the frescoes, Leda and the Swan, Theseus and Ariadne, Bacchus, the Gladiators... all by very contemporary looking performers in contemporary clothes, some, some evocative, some provocative. On the other hand, some audiences will enjoy their comment on the myths.

So, perhaps best if an audience is prepared to know there is plenty that they might enjoy – and some aspects that they might question.

WEREWOLVES WITHIN

US, 2020, 97 minutes, Colour.

Sam Richardson, Milana Vayntrub, George Basil, Sarah Burns, Michael Chernus, Catherine Curtin, Wayne Duvall, Rebecca Henderson, Michaela Watkins, Glen Flesh, Harvey Guillen, Cheyenne Jackson.

Directed by Josh Ruben.



There's been quite a tradition of the werewolf films, especially from the 1930s and 40s. These are the films that older reviewers will be remembering. However, younger reviewers will tell the oldies that this particular title is that of a computer game – and has to be considered as a version of playing the game, oddball characters, dangerous situations, werewolf threats, and, of course, elimination of characters with more than a touch of the gory. (And the screenwriter's name happens to be Wolff!)

Which is what this film does. However, to the uninitiated, it does seem like something of a scratch concert, the actors enjoying themselves and indulging in caricature, and a lot of it seeming very much impromptu. This is not the kind of film we remember with solemn black-and-white, horror overtones, Lon Chaney Jr or even more free recent versions of The Wolf man with Benicio Del Toro, let alone the sinister Jack Nicholson in the 1990s, the grim Wolf.

Which means that the setup is quite contrived. We have a town out in the sticks somewhere with about a dozen inhabitants. We have seen that there are some sinister happenings at the beginning but then things turn jolly, and new Ranger, large and friendly, played by Sam Richardson, dives in and encounters Cecily, who runs the postal delivery and helps out at the local hotel. Gradually, we are introduced to the various characters, a couple who ran a garage (he a variation on the hillbillies), then a witch-like character with a pet dog whose husband has strayed with the garage wife, and a rather prissy camp gay couple. Visiting is an executive who is promising finance for the building of a pipeline, some eager for the money, some environmentally protesting. And, visiting, is a scientist to set up her laboratory in her hotel room. There is also a bushy-bearded aggressive hunter, a mountain man.

A lot of first part of the film is bickering, especially when the landlady's husband is found chewed up, electricity failing, everybody gathering in the hotel. This leads to cantankerous human nature, then violent human nature, reminding us we all have werewolf capacities within. And, when everybody decides to go home, the killings start! So, who is the werewolf?

With an ever-diminishing cast, it narrows down to just a couple of suspects – and, things brighten up (at least for those who are wanting some horror and gore) when the werewolf is revealed, monster appearance, going into malicious action.

So, very broad comedy, werewolf conventions, a cinema equivalent of a pastime like playing the computer game!

Reviews August 2021

FILM REVIEWS AUGUST 2021

BREAKING NEWS IN YUBA COUNTY

ENVOY: SHARK CULL

FAMILY, A

GUNPOWDER MILKSHAKE

ICE ROAD, The

JUNGLE CRUISE

MISFITS, The

MISS

NINE DAYS

OLD

ROSA'S WEDDING

ROSE MAKER, The/ UN FINE FLEUR

SNAKE EYES: GI JOE ORIGINS

SOME KIND OF HEAVEN

SPACE JAM, A NEW LEGACY

SUICIDE SQUAD, The

TOLL, The

STREAMING SERVICES/ NETFLIX

BLUE MIRACLE

CONCRETE COWBOY

FATHERHOOD

STOWAWAY

WOMAN IN THE WINDOW

BREAKING NEWS IN YUBA COUNTY

US, 2021, 96 minutes, Colour.

Alison Janney, Mila Kunis, Regina Hall, Awkwafina, Wanda Sykes, Ellen Barkin, Matthew Modine, Jimmi Simpson, Keong Sun, Juliette Lewis, Clifton Collins Jr, Samira Wiley, Bridget Everett, T.C.Metherne, Dominic Burgess.

Directed by Tate Taylor.



How well do Americans take to satire and parody? Generally, American comedy tends to be fairly broad, obvious, pratfalls and slapstick, and, as the decades have gone on, a move from innuendo to straightforward and crass language and situations. This is not the case here. This one is far more similar to the ironic parody of Saturday Night Live.

The structure of the screenplay is clever. Initially, there is a focus on one character, Sue, the timid housewife, trying to reinforce herself-confidence with mantras about her being important and significant. (And part of the parody is that this character is played, very effectively and credibly, by the tall Alison Janney, so strong in performances in *I, Tonya* and *The West Wing*.) It is her birthday and she has to buy her own cake, work associates happily buying a cake for another worker and ignoring her, her husband (Matthew Modine) forgetting her birthday.

In fact, this will all lead to an extraordinary tangle involving her husband, a motel, a liaison, Sue surprising him, his heart attack – and, the police or not, and disposing of the body.

But, Sue doesn't go to the police. What follows is an extraordinarily complex black comedy of errors, the discovery that the husband was laundering money at the bank, his delinquent brother, Pete (Jimi Simpson whose wife is now pregnant with twins) is entangled with two tough petty criminals (Awkwafina and Clifton Collins Jr), who have no scruple in killing, and standover tactics on behalf of a local businessman and the laundering of his cash. There is a large bag of cash buried with the body!

As if that isn't enough, the brother is reforming, works for the hard-nosed, wisecracking proprietor of a store (Wanda Sykes in stand-up comedy mode) who has seen all the TV films about how gangsters work and wants to be in on the act, including robbing a jewellery store to pay for a ransom.

It all gets very complicated (as if it wasn't complicated enough) when Sue's half-sister, Mila Kunis, a minor TV personality, who wants to interview Sue. But, there is a more high-powered television

interviewer on a more prominent channel, played unctuously by Juliette Lewis, and Sue would rather be on her program. Sue discovers that, while she might put herself down, media limelight is more than attractive.

Oh, yes. There are also the police, Sue reporting her husband missing, their staking out her house, bemused by her behaviour, tracking down the brother of the store..., the bumptious woman Sue's husband was having the affair with.

But, this being a black comedy, the writer has no particular concern about characters being killed off. And, mostly they are! All kinds of surprise scenes, variations on the action thriller conventions, always some surprises. And, despite Sue almost exposed by the truth, she is able to sail through all the hazards, even to writing a book about her experiences, sharing them with the host on the TV show who was also written a book!

A very good example of how Americans can do satirical black comedy. If you would like another film in the same vein, a recommendation is *Bad Times at the El Royale* (also with a large and interesting complement of character actors and comics).

ENVOY: SHARK CULL

Australia, 2021, 102 minutes, Colour.
Narrated by Eric Bana.
Directed by Andre Borell.



For many of us (most of us?), hearing the word “shark” raises alarm bells. We know about shark attacks. We know the grim realities of swimmers and surfers, aggression and mauling. In fact, the opening minutes of this documentary offer an extensive collage of television comperes and hosts offering the grim news of what sharks have done (or wreaked).

However, this is a documentary in favour of sharks, in favour of a more sympathetic understanding, seeing incidents where people have been mauled and/or injured as far less frequent than the media might indicate, that we need to give some kind of re-consideration to the role of sharks in our ocean ecology, of protecting swimmers and surfers without detriment to the shark population.

And, so, the challenge of the title. The envoys?

We, humans, are to be the envoys to government and public opinion about the reality of the oceans' shark population, the variety of sharks, their survival in the oceans, their interactions with humans. And, as narrated by the genial Eric Bana, this is persuasive.

The filmmakers have gathered about 10 experts in various fields to make their commentaries throughout the film. They are particularly fluent, particularly articulate, personally convinced, credible and persuasive. They include scientists, surfers, students, and an interview with a former Navy man who lost his leg and hand to a shark attack and who has had time to reflect and study the presence of sharks in our waters.

Throughout the film, of course, there are many sequences highlighting the sharks, moving through the waters, close-ups, expert underwater photography.

The film offers a challenge to the Federal and Australian state governments, critical of Queensland and New South Wales and their policies of culling and the particular means of protecting the beaches, devices introduced in 1937, details of the mesh and barriers, details of the anchor drops which trap the sharks. The point being made is that science and technology are continually finding more "humane" ways of warding off the sharks, without savagery, without destruction, without euthanising the sharks.

The film ends with commendation of moves in Western Australia and recommendations for further dialogue with government authorities and agencies. In fact, the morning after this reviewer watched the film, the Melbourne Age had a report that discussions were going on and one step was to change them terminology, to refer to "" rather than to "shark attacks".

Interesting that Jaws is never mentioned, nor its theme played.

A FAMILY

Australia/Ukraine, 2018, 91 minutes, Colour.

Miksym Dernenyov, Larysa Hraminiska, Tatiana Kosianchuk, Pavol Lehenkyi, Liudmyla Zamidra,
Directed by Jayden Stevens.



The credits are a surprise. Two Australians, writer Jaden Stevens and Tom Swinburn, under the auspices of the Melbourne International Film Festival, have made this existential drama, filming in Kiev, with local actors, speaking local language.

Existential is important. And, while audiences are trying to appreciate the characters and the situations, highly contrived, a final character notes that “life is a maze”. And, the nature of a maze is that those who enter become trapped.

The central character is, indeed, trapped. He lives alone, solitary life in a very mundane house, with some glimpses outside to a rather drab lane and surroundings. The credits call him Emerson. He interviews a young woman with strange questions. A middle-aged couple turn up at his house. Later he interviews another man away from his house. The characters arrive, they have set lines, they recite them, he urges them to recite them with more energy and realism, he films them. They are his created family.

Emerson gets out of his loneliness by contriving home situations, getting the actors to perform them (and, by and large, they get into their roles). It is hard to know what satisfaction Emerson gets out of this filming as he is so inexpressive. When the young woman who works at a diner that Emerson frequents fails to turn up, the actors demand their pay, Emerson refusing saying that they get money only when the performance starts – there is a revolution.

The second part of the film has Emerson tracking down the young woman, going to her house, encountering her widowed mother who takes quite a shine to Emerson. In fact, he sets up house with the two women as if he were a husband and father. No filming this time but enacting family situations – and the mother certainly entering into the spirit of the performance especially the sexual relationship. There is a dance sequence with the young woman who imagines she has some talent. Finally, her boyfriend turns up and makes the comment about the maze.

This is very plain filming, the visual equivalent of the literary term, prosaic. Plain setups, some extreme close-ups at times, plain framing, almost unsaturated colour, the audience observers of this eccentric behaviour.

A film for arthouse audiences – and a commentator noting that its screening would be without any risk of financial success! A curiosity item, plainness stylised.

GUNPOWDER MILKSHAKE

US, 2021, 114 minutes, Colour.

Karen Gillen, Lena Headey, Carla Gugino, Michelle Yeoh, Joanna Bobbin, Chloe Coleman, Freya Allen, Ed Birch, Paul Giamatti, Ralph Ineson, Angela Bassett, Michael Smiley.

Directed by Navot Papushado.



Now that's a title! Or, it might have been called Female Assassins like a Diner that Serves Double Scoop Milkshakes!!

In fact, we visit the diner several times, first of all with Samantha, Sam (a tough leading lady, Karen Gillen) and, as she sits, we see her 15 years earlier, with her mother, Starlet, similarly employed (Game of Throne's Lena Headey) – and her mother going off, absent for 15 years, entrusting her daughter to a company boss, Nathan (Paul Giamatti). As it turns out, Nathan is not particularly happy with Sam, she exceeded her task and, instead of eliminating one, she eliminated the whole group, including the rival boss, McAlester's (Ralph Ineson) only son.

Clearly, vengeance is going to be to the fore. And eluding vengeance will be more than a task ahead.

With its cleverly flip dialogue, with its stylised sets (gold-tinted), the diner, an immense library, a bowling alley and mall, this is not a story to be taken absolutely literally. Part of the enjoyment is exactly that it is all highly stylised, tongue-in-cheek. The word that often accompanies a review of this kind of film is, and here it is here, Tarantino-esque! I think Quentin would enjoy this one.

Nathan has an issue. An employee has stolen a lot of money and Sam has to get it back. But, it turns out that the man stole the money because some very comic book thugs (four of them wearing masks from popular past horror films including Dracula and Frankenstein) have abducted the man's daughter and are holding her to ransom. It looks as though Sam is not reliable, shoot first and ask questions afterwards. However, she has a heart, gets the wounded man to hospital, takes care of his daughter, Emily (Chloe Coleman) who endears herself to Sam and to the audience.

Nathan is not happy and Sam has some comic battles in the hospital with three nincompoops that he sends and who get high on laughing gas and so go to the final shootout, laughing uncontrollably. Nathan seems to be the head of a large corporation, all-male executives at the meetings, all with the presumption that this world can function only with male control.

But, and here is quite a bonus for older audiences, Sam's mother had three associates in the past who staff the enormous library – which is, in fact, a cover for a weapons bureau (with many of the guns concealed in the self-help section). And so, it is a pleasure to see Carlo Gugino, Michelle Yeoh, Angela Bassett – and see them in toughest action against the thugs. And, thank goodness, after an hour Lena Headey turns up again and joins her daughter in battle.

Hard to find vocabulary now to comment on the film's perspective. Feminist used to be the word, perhaps still is (and this despite the fact that the screenplay was written and directed by a male). There is an effectively written misogynistic speech from McAlester (when we go for the final confrontation back to the diner). McAlester solemnly tells Sam that he'd had three daughters, could not understand them in the least, was irritated by their giggling manner, then very happy to have a son whom he could bond with and with whom he could understand!

And, there are some gender equality issues that Nathan learns and has to live with.

There is a happy ending, of course, Emily, despite her assertions that she is 8 $\frac{3}{4}$, is obviously going to be the next generation of these female assassins. But not before the shootout – and a striking tracking shot along the length of the diner, the assassins in for action, wreaking vengeance and justice on the thugs. It's that kind of film.

THE ICE ROAD

US, 2021, 109 minutes, Colour.

Liam Neeson, Marco Thomas, Benjamin Walker, Amber Midthunder, Laurence Fishburne, Holt McCallany.

Directed by Jonathan Hensleigh.



Yet another action story starring Liam Neeson as the tough hero. During the 2010s, Nicolas Cage and Bruce Willis featured in even more similar films. However, Nicolas Cage communicates a kind of mania. Bruce Willis always has his smirk. Which leaves Liam Neeson as the more straightforward action star, a man who communicates some human sympathy.

This is a film about a mine explosion and cave in, the need for equipment to be hurried to save the men as they have only 30 hours of oxygen left, 26 surviving underground, the finding of truck drivers to drive on highly dangerous roads. Which is where the title comes in. Everything was photographed in the Canadian province of Manitoba, the mine situated in the extreme north, snow and ice country. In different seasons, roads are opened and closed, depending on the layers of ice on the Ice Road. With this kind of scenario, we know what kind of film we are watching.

But the point needs to be made that this is an action adventure rather than a documentary. Some bloggers have been at pains to point out a whole range of inconsistencies in truckie behaviour, management, details of haulage, declaring that this is not the way things are done. This is a kind of complaint that is made by some police when they watch films and television shows, by clergy wanting to point out that this is not the way things happen... For those who share these presuppositions, better not to watch.

However, it needs to be stressed that this is an action adventure, the contriving of crises and dangers, a work of popular fiction to excite the imagination rather than to analyse structures, methods, engineering.

And, at that level, *The Ice Road* literally keeps us on the move. Liam Neeson plays Mike, an ageing but sympathetic truckie, always concerned about his brother, Gurty (Marcus Thomas quite an engaging performance) who suffers from aphasia, getting the two brothers regularly fired. But, it means they are at hand, Gurty proving that whatever the mental and language disabilities, his ability with his hands and machines is expert (and has plenty of opportunity to illustrate this). The boss at the central station, Laurence Fishburne, also sets out with a truck as does a rather disgruntled young Native American, Tantoo (Amber Midthunder) is let out of jail because she knows the roads will and is a tough truckie.

Everything that could go wrong does go wrong – more even than we might have anticipated. There are engine breakdowns. There is breaking ice. There is tampering with fuel. There is dynamite on board. And, there is an insurance actuary on board (Benjamin Walker) who, we suspect, is not the pen pusher that he seems. It means also that there are quite a number of fights along the way, quite a number of chases, and, just when the end seems to be in sight, an avalanche.

Intercut with all the travel along the Ice Road are the scenes of the men underground, able to tap out messages and receive them, becoming desperate about survival and the oxygen running out.

For a reviewer who has never driven a truck and never will, especially along *The Ice Road*, this is the kind of action adventure that is entertainingly exhausting, and the reaction is something of an enthusiastic Whew!

JUNGLE CRUISE

US, 2021, 127 minutes, Colour.

Dwayne Johnson, Emily Blunt, Edgar Ramirez, Jack Whitehall, Jesse Plemons, Paul Giamatti, Veronica Falcon.

Directed by Jaume Collet-Serra.



Cruise is far too sedate a word to have in the title for this very action-action adventure. It opens with conquistadors on the Amazon searching for a flower with healing powers, tangling with the Indians, only to reappear in 1916. 1916 is the year for the setting of this action, the same year that Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn sailed on The African Queen to thwart the Germans. This time it is Dwayne Johnson and Emily Blunt sailing on the Amazon, Dwayne Johnson being a credible captain-cousin to Humphrey Bogart but Emily Blunt not nearly as ladylike as Katherine Hepburn. Her character, Lily, has no knowledge of ladylike.

40 years ago we were introduced to Indiana Jones and his adventures. 20 years ago there was Lara Croft. Jungle Cruise goes beyond both of these stories and, of course, has lots of 21st-century special effects (with some credit to studios in South Australia and New Zealand amongst others).

And, 1916, sinister Germans, first seen in the scientific academy on Piccadilly Circus, Prince Joachim (with Jesse Plemons talking vis ze sinister accent and proving himself a dastardly villain, pursuing our heroes in a submarine in the Amazon).

Dwayne Johnson is Captain Frank, introduced by taking a group of very Edwardian tourists on the river, providing lots of scares and jokes, Dwayne Johnson proving himself very adept with the screenwriters punchant for play on words (he continues throughout the film and the very last word, in fact, has Emily Blunt, previously not laughing, making a pun herself!).

There is something for everyone in this adventure. Plenty of action. Plenty of climaxes. Some literal cliffhangers. And scarcely a pause for breath. And it is romantic, but not in any sloppy way! Jack Whitehall deserves a special mention as Lily's brother, very uppercrust (with Oscar Wilde issues), but gradually getting into the swing of things, literally, becoming very much part of the action.

The inspiration for this film comes from one of the Disney World rides. One would imagine that with the success of Jungle Cruise on screen, there will be additions and improvements for visitors to Disneyland.

THE MISFITS

US, 21, 94 minutes, Colour.

Pierce Brosnan, Tim Roth, Nick Cannon, Rami Jaber, Jamie Chung, Hermione Corfield, Mike Angelo.
Directed by Renny Harlin.



Here is a piece of heist nonsense, a very undemanding action time-passer.

The film introduces us to a group of young adults with particular talents to facilitate robberies, like donning various disguises, a skill with explosives... They band together to approach a veteran thief who has spent time in prison, Richard Pace, played with his old style by Pierce Brosnan.

They all arrive in Abu Dhabi which features almost as a character in the film, the modern Emirates high-rise city, a centre for luxury living, surrounded by desert. It also holds a huge prison.

Pace encounters his daughter, Hope, who is earnest about civil rights, UNESCO and the fate of children around the world. In fact, it is she who is organised the meeting so that the group of thieves will work with her father to extract a huge amount of gold bars, preserved to fund terrorist activities, but held under strict guard in the basement of the prison.

The film offers an opportunity for the supporting characters to show a variety of styles, especially Thai a singer and dancer Mike Angelo, the explosives expert who also likes to dance. Also along is The Prince, played by the producer of the film, Rami Jaber, who works from the United Arab Emirates but is also based in Finland, the home country of the director, Renny Harlin, who directed one of the Nightmare in Elm Street films as well as Die Hard 2, an up-and-down career with directing action films, generally, for over 30 years.

Also cast is a calmly bewildered -looking Tim Roth who was responsible for the safety of the gold.

All kinds of shenanigans for the theft, disguises, distractions (a car exploding at the same time as the basement bought explodes), misdirection in terms of where the gold is, escape routes...

But, is a kind of film where Pierce Brosnan outwits them all, stealing the gold – but, ultimately, preserving it for a donation to UNESCO.

Rather slight – and generally not well reviewed.

NINE DAYS

US, 2021, 124 minutes, Colour.

Winston Duke, Zazie Beetz, Benedict Wong, Bill Skarsgaard, Tony Hale, David Rysdahl, Arianna Ortiz.

Directed by Edson Oda.



A thumbnail review: 'existential God-figure searches for his own redemption'. Someone else might write a different thumbnail: 'characters, hoping for new life, undergo challenges for nine days'. In fact, both have quite some truth in them. And one might add, not a spoiler, this is a film which ends with an intensely dramatic recitation of Walt Whitman's Song of Myself.

Nine Days was sponsored by the Sundance Institute and, one does not have to journey very long into the running time to appreciate that this is very much a Film Festival Film. It is demanding, requires concentration (especially to puzzle out what is actually happening and why), has an esoteric setting, an isolated house out in the Utah planes. In a sense, this is pre-time and we are not always realising that another of the nine days has passed until one of the characters alerts us.

There is a towering performance at the centre of this film, holding our attention, holding our admiration despite the ranges of moods, the judgements he makes on some people, the tasks he set them, and his involvement in his own life and problems. He is Will, played by Winston Duke (seen in the Black Panther films). Will is in charge of the centre where he interviews the candidates for new life, sets them tasks over the nine days, asks them to focus on important moments for them,

challenges them in their sometimes erratic behaviour. There is only one of the candidates who will proceed to be born.

And, all the time, he is surrounded by large screens, a huge video collection, memories of the young violinist, whom he had chosen for life, and her death which continually torment him-watching on the screen the films of her life, videos as backgrounds for some of the people he is interviewing, videos which can recreate precious memories or an exhilarating experience of the candidate's choice (a walk on the beach, particularly a bike ride through the Latin American town and out into the countryside).

And, at his side, is Kyo (English actor with Chinese Background, Wong in the Marvel Universe from the Dr Strange movies), adviser, supervisor, challenging friend, a kind of guardian angel to Will, a blend of the genial and the raucous. There are intriguing performances, given their characters and what is required of them, by Tony Hale, smug and resentful though insecure, Bill Skarsgaard, younger and more serious, Arianna Ortiz a sensible middle-aged woman.

But, also at the core of the film, is a young woman, Emma, played by is Zazie Beetz, seriously observing Will, discussions, continually puzzling, charming Will, probably the obvious candidate for the audience to approve her being born. But, that would be too easy a decision for this kind of film.

Some commentators remarked how original the ideas and the screenplay of Nine Days are – but, it is worth noting that in the 2020 Oscar-winning Pixar film, Soul, this was one of the key ideas, the souls preparing themselves to be born.

[Variety journalist, Peter de Bruge, noted in his review that this film was limbo-like but, with its moral dilemmas for the candidates before they were born, it could be called a Pregatory.]

MISS

France, 2020, 107 minutes, Colour.

Alexandre Wetter, Pascal Arbillot, Isabelle Nanty, Thibault de Montalambert, Stefi Celma, Quentin Faure.

Directed by Ruben Alves.



This is an imaginative tale, almost contemporary fairytale, about a young boy whose ambition was to be Miss France. It is a film about gender identity, a boy with female and feminine sensibilities, self-

discovery, self-assertion. At the end, when asked about his bid to become Miss France, Alexandre replies that he wanted to be in touch with his female side.

The central character, Alexandre, is played by Alexandre Wetter, quite persuasively. The actor has the advantage of his build (although the competition personnel comment on his rugby shoulders and his large shoe size), his appearance, so that he can pass without too much difficulty as female.

The fairytale has a background of a commune in Paris, a home, streets, the local gym where Alexandre works as a cleaner, a very ordinary background and, with the characters who live in the commune, multicultural. They are presided over by an older woman, tough spoken, Yolande, who is something of a surrogate mother. There is also something of a surrogate mother in a cross-dressing elderly prostitute who lives in the commune, Lola, who gives sympathetic support and, at times, wise advice.

When Alexandre decides that he wants to be Miss France, he auditions successfully, is able to transform himself into Alexandra, and gets the advice of a school friend who is now a champion boxer, trains physically, self-assertion, Lola getting advice from an older woman about Alexandra's presentation as female, so that when the competition for the local Miss Ile de France takes place, Alexandra wins, becoming eligible to move forward to the Miss France competition.

There is a lot of background about many of the candidates for the competition, especially Miss Corsica, who shares a room with Alexandra, discovers her secret but does not divulge the truth. Then there is Amanda who presides over the competition, who seems to have worked out Alexandra's secret and continues to challenge her as well as support her.

Many scenes of rehearsals, many fashion sequences, the contrast where it is decided that the competitors should take on a conservation theme and they go to work, and photo opportunities, on collecting rubbish on Belgian beaches.

There are some emotional crises, Alexandra's nervousness, TV interviews with the family and her exclusion of Lola and then apologising, Yolande's collapse which means that the commune friends have to watch the final competition from the hospital.

It is no surprise or spoiler to know that Alexandra wins – but it is standing on the stage, her speech, self-revelation, boos and applause which make a final impact.

More interesting and enjoyable than might have been anticipated.

OLD

US, 2021, 108 minutes, Colour.

Gael Garcia Bernal, Vicki Krieps, Rufus Sewell, Alex Wolff, Thomasin McKenzie, Abby Lee, Nikki Amurka-Bird, Ken Leung, Eliza Scanlen, Aaron Pierre, Embeth Davidtz, Emun Elliot, Alexa Swinton,

Gustaf Hammerstein, Kathleen Chalfont, Francesca Eastwood, Nolan River, Luca Faustino Rodriguez, M. Night Shyamalan.
Directed by M. Night Shyamalan.



We're all familiar with those lovely exotic beaches, tropical, seen often in television series like *Lost*, let alone *Fantasy Island*. And we are familiar with those lovely, exotic beach resorts, tropical, seen more recently in *The White Lotus*.

And, while this film is actually a day at a resort, a day at an exotic beach, it is not that kind of day at the beach even though that is what all the characters are expecting.

Since this is a film directed by M Night Shyamalan, we know that it is not going to be straightforward. We know that there will have to be twists. We know that there will be touches of horror. (And there is the director himself, doing one of his usual cameos, driving the soon-to-be hapless characters to the beach, standing on a cliff and filming them.)

The screenplay is based on a graphic novel, called *Sandcastle*. However, given the development of the plot, *Old* seems a much better title. Mysterious things happen on the beach, anyone going into a cave or thinking of leaving is suddenly propelled back to the shore. And then, wounds start to heal suddenly. Characters appear differently... We can't vouch for sanity. What is happening? *Old*!

Perhaps one of the difficulties of the plot is that the central group of characters is not all that sympathetic. Gael Garcia Bernal plays an actuary obsessed with statistics and percentages, a rather stiff character. His wife, Vicki Krieps, is a museum supervisor with a touch of knowledge of excavations. (And, at times, their performances come across as awkwardly dubbed rather than natural.) There is a doctor, Rufus Sewell, accompanied by his mother and with the glamorous wife, Abby Lee. The first couple have two children, aged 11 and six. The doctor and his wife have a daughter aged six. And, rounding out the characters on the beach are a mysterious singer whose girlfriend's body washes up on the shore and a psychiatrist and her nurse-partner, she prone to severe epileptic fits.

The point of a review of a film like this is that the plot remaining shrouded in mystery so that audiences might be enticed to go to find out what happens. And, there are plenty of surprises, and the addition of a number of actors as the film goes on for characters on the beach.

But, one of the clues given, is that with each of the groups someone has a serious illness.

The screenplay is something like that old mystery story, *And Then There Were None...* But, of course, not quite!

To be fair, explanations are given (though scientifically questionable) about what happens on the beach. And, to be fair, proper explanations are given about the resort and its treatments of guests.

Some of M. Night Shyamalan's thrillers have been excellent, especially *The Second Sense*. *The Last Airbender* and *After Earth*, not so good. May be *Old* is somewhere in the middle.

ROSA'S WEDDING/ LA BODA DE ROSA

Spain, 2020, 97 minutes, Colour.

Candela Peña, Sergi Lopez, Nathalie Posa, Paula Usero, Ramon Barea.

Directed by Iciar Bollain.



Rosa (Candela Peña) is seen running in a marathon through the city of Valencia, urged on by all and sundry, everybody seeming to know her and encouraging her – running until she collapses out in an open field. Real? A dream? In fact, Rosa is 45 years old, no husband, a daughter with twins, a successful and skilful dressmaker, with this prospect for the rest of her life.

At this stage, to test how one might enjoy the rest of the film, the audience should ask itself the question: are you the type of person that imposes on everyone else or are you the type of person that everyone else imposes on? Yes, Rosa is completely imposed on, her widowed father, still grieving, but not accepting his wife's death wants to move in with her. Her brother, Armando (veteran Sergi Lopez) runs a school but it is not successful, especially in money matters, has clashed with his wife who wants to divorce him. He is always phoning Rosa to come and put his children to bed. Her sister, Violeta (Nathalie Posa), speaking three languages, is employed as a translator at conferences has a drinking problem. And, she worries about her daughter, Lydia, who has moved to

Manchester, has given up her job. At work, there are continually extra work to be done, cloth to be chosen, alterations to dresses, last-minute emergencies...

Rosa visits the shop her mother ran, dressmaking, in the seaside town of Bencassim. And here she makes a decision, to reopen the shop, to make a new start.

For the rest of the film, the audience, in light of the initial answers to the question posed, will identify with Armando and Violeta, with Lydia and her frustrations, and decide, like them, that they have been far too demanding on Rosa, not acknowledging that she needs a life of her own. For those who identify with Rosa, empathising, possibly quite wearily, with how people make their demands on her, will appreciate that Rosa thinks it's about time. She has to do something for herself.

She has made wedding dresses and the idea comes for a wedding. But the key is, as the trailer and the advertisements eagerly point out, she wants to marry herself. She wants a quiet ritual on the beach, an opportunity to commit herself to herself and to a constructive future.

Of course, it all gets out of hand. Armando wants to take over and organises the town hall, a band, a banquet. Her father invites all the cousins from Pamplona. Violeta, fired from her job because of her drinking, actually has a fine change of heart, listening to Rosa, discussing with her, realising how they have taken advantage of Rosa. And, her daughter, initially surprised, is also a means of reconciliation.

This is Spain. This is the land of colour and music. This is a land of exuberance. And, so, we might expect that there will be a wedding ceremony, on the sunny beach, and Rosa making a strong declaration about how she will be in the future, not neglecting her relatives and friends and her friend, Rafa, who is astonished at the news that she might be marrying another man. Rosa will help others, be an enabler, but she will be herself.

Individualism – not selfishly, but creatively.

THE ROSE MAKER

France, 2020, 95 minutes, Colour.

Catherine Frot, Manel Foulgoc, Fatsah Bouyahmed, Olivia Cote, Marie Petiot, Vincent Dedienne.

Directed by Pierre Pinaud.



A must for Gardeners Anonymous! A delight for those gardeners who are not anonymous! And for those, like this reviewer, who are not gardeners at all, a very pleasant entertainment.

There is something about the status of the rose amongst all the flowers of creation. There is beauty, there is colour, there are the colours and blends, there are petals and shapes... And, they are certainly to the forefront in this story of the cultivation of roses, the creation of beautiful hybrids, fields of roses, greenhouses specialties, and the drama of exhibitions and competitions.

In the 2019 film, *Perfumes*, there was an emphasis on the wonders of scents – and a rather prim expert and her dependence on her chauffeur. *Perfumes* could be something of a cousin to *The Rose Maker*.

However, there is nothing prim about the characters here. Actually, they are rather rough diamonds, emphasis on diamond emerging from the rough. Again, the central character is a middle-aged woman, Eve (Catherine Frot), no husband, no children, only the heritage from her beloved father of cultivating roses. And she has a devoted assistant, Vera (actress-writer Olivia Cote), who has really sacrificed herself to try to keep the Rose cultivation market financially afloat.

There is a villain of the piece, a rose entrepreneur, who is in it for the business side, the prestige at continually winning competitions, relying on his assistants for their creativity in producing a new rose year by year. He has his eye on Eve's business and would like to buy her out. He offers a position for her to work for him.

But Vera makes contact with a company who place workers who are looking for jobs. So, three different types arrive to work in the fields and the greenhouses, a 50-year-old man who is certainly looking for security, a young woman who is rather slow but delights in creativity in the roses, a young man, surly, abandoned by his parents when he was a child, in and out of jail for burglary.

We know they are going to bond – and the young man is going to discover that he has expert olfactory abilities, knows his scents and is able to remember the details.

However, Eve does rely on them for a bit of their criminal talent in order to upstage the entrepreneur.

So, delight in looking at the roses, the process of hybridisation (now there's a word to add to vocabulary!), the changes over the seasons of the year (including a dramatic hailstorm), ingenuity to go out into the market to sell roses to boost the finances.

We hope that all will work out well – and it is quite a pleasing experience to watch the roses in this company. And some wonderful close-ups of the flowers during the final credits.

SNAKE EYES – GI JOE, ORIGINS

2021, 121 minutes, Colour.

Henry Golding, Andrew Koji, Haruka Abe, Peter Mensah, Ursula Corbero, Samara Weaving.

Directed by Robert Schwentke.



Best to familiarise oneself with the Hasbro characters and stories, the previous films, GI Joe, Rise of Cobra and Retaliation, so that one is on the wavelength of what is happening in this rather complicated plot.

While there are sequences in the United States, especially at the Port of Los Angeles at the opening of the film, the main action takes place in Japan, sequences of urban Tokyo and high-rise, countryside sequences at an elaborate Japanese mansion. In fact, it plays more like a Japanese action film than an American production.

As regards Hasbro and GI Joe, the focus this time is on a young boy, bonded with his father, then witnessing his death at the hands of Cobra – only at the end to get to know that his father is one of the GI Joe special squad. The boy has grown up consumed with the desire for revenge on his father's killer. We first see him as Snake Eyes, an adult playing in vicious cage fights, then approached by a Japanese businessman to work for him, persuading the young man that he will be able to find his father's killer.

As mentioned, there are the Los Angeles wharves and the young man working in the fish market, smuggling weapons inside the gutted fish for export. He tangles with a bearded young worker who is then threatened by toughs, but defended by the hero, bonding with him, discovering that he is the head of a family household, invited to stay when they arrive in Japan, meeting the grandmother who is head of the clan, a young woman who is the security chief and other staff. He is offered the opportunity to become part of the clan if he successfully meets three challenges.

But, it is much more complicated than that, the hero actually ambiguous in his loyalties, ready to betray if he gets more information about his father's killer, surviving various challenges (including giant snakes and a pit – which will play an important role, of course, in a final confrontation with the arch-villain)? And, despite a blood pledge, he steals the family jewel which has extraordinary powers of igniting fires which destroy buildings and foes.

And all this offers the opportunity for many, many, fights along the way, fists, swords – and, when it seems too hard, the Indiana Jones' gun solution. And, there are car chases, bike chases, gymnastics over the cars.

And, since this is a story of origins, the end builds up a conflict between the two alleged friends, Snake Eyes not killing his father's murderer, trying to become more pure in heart, invited by the GI Joe representative (Samara Weaving), but the hero turned villain choosing to call himself Storm Shadow, both of whom appeared as characters in the previous films.

Mainly for those who like this kind of action show and those who are wondering about the origins of Snake Eyes and Storm Shadow.

SOME KIND OF HEAVEN

US, 2020, 81 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Lance Oppenheimer.



Director, Lance Oppenheimer, is from Florida, did film studies interstate but was interested in the story of The Villages, the large retirement enclave, its lifestyle, the residents. He takes his audience inside The Villages, initially given the impression that it was partying seven days a week, some of the residents saying there they came to live not to pass away, that they were to live the dream, and, very specifically, the American dream. And, it seems very much the white American dream (one African-American giving a favourable comment on the place, the Hispanic-Americans seeming to be only on the staff).

The film opens energetically, kinetically, hyper- kinetically, in fact, elderly men and women in rowing teams, all kinds of dancing, all kinds of exercise, everyone seemingly on the go. It seems rather exhausting, especially for those of us sitting comfortably in our seats watching.

And then someone remarks that it is a Disneyworld for retirees, lots of fountain of youth language.

But, we then taken behind these exuberant scenes, being introduced to a number of the residents, one of whom, Ann Kincer, with whom we become more and more sympathetic as the film goes on, reminds us that this is not the real world, that it is not vacation every day, and that it is something of a bubble. And, in the vast area, it seems there are 130,000 residents.

As we go behind the cheery activities, we are introduced to real issues. One focus is on a very unsympathetic 81-year-old drifter, Dean, living in his van, trying to sponge on friends and relatives, going to The Villages to find a female companion, preferably with money. He does. She seems to know what he is after but she enjoys his company. We could have done with less of Dean throughout the film.

In contrast to Dean is Barbara, not long widowed, wandering rather forlornly through everything, an acting class, getting her nails done, getting her hair done, attending a session where everyone has a

tambourine to hit in rhythm. Eventually, she gets a lift from the margarita man in his wagon, chats, dances, likes margaritas, seems to be finding some happiness.

However, the main narrative concerns a couple, Reg and Ann Kincer, 47 years married. He is an eccentric, not afraid of relying on some drugs, even cocaine, erratic behaviour, leading to his arrest, being charged, defending himself in the court despite the judge continually telling him he was the rudest defendant he had ever encountered. But Ann reminds us that she took vows, for better or worse, and she continues to support her husband. She is sympathetic in herself – but even more so in her support for her husband who would try even the most tolerant of cinema audiences!

So, would we like to go to The Villages and enjoy the lifestyle? The very extroverted lifestyle? Probably many of us would prefer to find some kind of quieter alternative.

An interesting exercise is to read the bloggers on the IMDb, many interested in the portrait of The Villages and the lifestyle as well as the portrait of the residents. Others, targeting The New York Times, one of the producing companies, suggesting that this is a hatchet job. And, a number of the actual residents in high dudgeon, considering this an unwarranted attack on the lives and lifestyle of those who live in The Villages.

SPACE JAM: A NEW LEGACY

US, 2021, 115 minutes, Colour.

LeBron James, Don Cheadle, Cedric Joe, Khris Davis, Ernie Johnson, Lil Rel Howery – and Bugs Bunny, Elmer Fudd, Lola Bunny, Roadrunner, Wiley E. Coyote, T. Porky Pig, Tweety Bird, Granny... Directed by Malcolm D. Lee.



Once upon a time, in 1996 to be precise, young audiences around the world were exhilarated by a basketball film featuring then hero, Michael Jordan, in a basketball match – with a team made up of

the well-known and beloved characters from Loony Tunes. And, in succeeding years, it was watched over and over again, fostering happy memories, wonderful childhood memories. Children who were 10 at the time of the film's release are now in their mid-30s! What will they think of a new, more elaborate retelling of this story? And, will the now 10-year-olds treasure this version in the way that their parents did?

This is quite an exuberant show. It runs for almost 2 hours, 30 minutes or so more than the original. And, the basketball star for the present is Le Bron James (who has had an extra career beyond sport in movie and television production). There is a joke throughout the basketball match when some of the Toons call for Michael Jordan and popular actor, Michael B. Jordan turns up (and is rejected). We see the young Bron being urged by his basketball father to concentrate, give himself to the game.

And then, in the present, Bron has his own family, pressurising his young son, Dom, to go to basketball camp, somewhat severe in his discipline, overlooking Dom's talent in creating, at age 12, his own computer game, and wanting to go to a camp for digital experts. Bron's wife urges him to be a more caring and understanding father.

Off they go to Warner Brothers, Burbank, and go into the digital archives. Little do they know, but we know, that there is a dastardly character there, Al G. Rithm, yes algorithm, played with some sinister chuckles by Don Cheadle, who feels that his digital talents have been overlooked and who wants to achieve some kind of immortality, controlling the super service at Warners, and eliminating the Loony Tunes characters!

Long story short, most of the action is a basketball match, like the first film, all in the digital world, Bron sometimes himself, sometimes an animated character, having the Toons in his team, against Al G. Rithm's giants and monsters – and, fans behind him from so many of the Warner Brothers films like Robin Hood, The Mask, Batman and Robin, a cameo by King Kong (and a wild -looking nun who looks as if she has strayed from The Devil's). Al G.ithm has invited Dom into his team – and the only way Bron can get him back is to defeat Al G's team.

Parents and children will enjoy all the shenanigans of the familiar characters, led, of course, by a lively Bugs Bunny, with Elmer Fudd, Wiley E. Coyote, the Road runner, the little pig – and Lola Bunny, voiced by Zendaya. And, there is also Gan, fond of a cocktail but, when she goes into action twirling on her walking frame, look out.

Defeated moments, triumphant moments, some cheating on the part of the enemy, morale boosting talks, and, of course, Dom appreciating his father, his father coming to appreciate his son – and, urging him to be himself and taking him to a weekend camp, not the basketball but the digital!

So, sports action, sports heroes, plenty to entertain younger audiences from the digital age, and, even after all these decades, the Loony Tunes still making us laugh.

THE SUICIDE SQUAD

US, 2021, 132 minutes, Colour.

Margot Robbie, Idris Elba, Viola Davis, Joel Kinnaman, John Cena, David Dastmalchian, Daniela Melchior, Peter Capaldi, Sylvester Stallone, Nathan Fillion, Jai Courtney, Pete Davidson, Alice Braga, Taika Waititi.

Directed by James Gunn.



We are invited into the DC world, familiar from the Superman or Batman or Wonder Woman action shows. The comparison, of course, is with the Marvel Universe and its huge range of superheroes and super films.

This one is for the fans and, judging by comments afterwards, for younger fans. It opens with what might be called an extravaganza of mayhem. Then it moves into the main action, one extravaganza after another, more mayhem and then more mayhem.

There is a prologue where we are introduced to the control, Amanda Waller, played with hard as nails (or whatever is harder) determination and control (Viola Davis, who appeared in the original film in this role). However, the prologue has a group of the Suicide Squad sent out on a special mission – and, generally, they are complete failures! (And they played by a group of character actors who then disappear after their explosive deaths, Michael Rooker, Pete Davidson, Jai Courtney...).

So, it is time to start again, a new Suicide Squad, all prisoners, all hardened, all with idiosyncratic superpowers, led by Idris Elba, crack shooter but afraid of rats, John Cena, big and brawny, The Peacemaker (no matter what the cost), Chloe who keeps falling asleep but is able to conjure up rats (which might make the Pied Piper envious), madman who wears a polka dots suit, the polka dots

glowing, enlarging and becoming weapons (especially when he imagines the target as the mother he has hated and who appears larger than life), and a huge shark with a penchant for human meat and learning to pronounce his words. Sylvester Stallone appears in the cast list – and, as it turns out, he is this shark.

But, captured after the first expedition, Flagg and Harley Quinn, from the first film (Joel Kinnaman and Margot Robbie – who does receive top billing) reappear to add to the mayhem. Flagg is the serious hero. Harley Quinn steals the show, of course, being both daffy and lethal, often simultaneously.

The plot concerns a Caribbean island, the revolution, counterrevolutionaries (Alice Braga as the leader, taking it very seriously as if she were in a different film), a tyrant, a mad scientist (Peter Capaldi beyond Dr Who), a vast scheme to foster an alien monster, Starro, a giant starfish, who controls everyone, an experiment secretly fostered by the US... Which leads then to a grand finale with rivalry, Godzilla in mind, mayhem in abundance.

The film was written and directed by James Gunn, responsible for the Guardians of the Galaxy films, those fantasies which combined superheroes, human characters, and strange creatures. It is said of him that he made films when he was very young, full of what is referred to as “comic splatter”. There is plenty of that here, a lot of it gleefully brutal, aided by bloodily-creative special effects, a lot of it just brutal. Actually, it would be interesting to do a case study on James Gunn’s psyche, his imagination, the creative directions in which this goes, his target audiences and how he perceives their desire for this kind of entertainment.

THE TOLL

UK/Wales, 2021, 83 minutes, Colour.

Michael Smiley, Annes Elwy, Iwan Rheon, Paul Kaye, Gary Beadle, Steve Oram, Gwyneth Keyworth, Dewi Morris, Julian Glover.
Directed by Ryan Edward Hooper.



Would you like a cinema visit to Wales? To Pembrokeshire, to be precise? Lots of open fields, wonderful vistas of the sea, cliffs and sand... But, the graffiti on the sign of Welcome to Pembrokeshire says “the English come here to die”. In fact, some English characters do come and they do die. But, in a spirit of equality, so do many of the Welsh characters!

Isn't English a strange and ambiguous language! For whom the bell tolls. The toll from the disaster... Courts where Paying your toll... Actually, the toll of the title is a small remote cabin on the road down to the port where we can get a ferry to Ireland. It costs 40p for the toll-keeper to press his button and let you through. Actually, when a group of masked triplets from the town hold him up, he has only £1.20 to give them.

You may be perceiving the vein of this comic thriller with the previous observations. But, to really appreciate the vein, one has to draw on that frequently used phrase, a kind of cover-all for this kind of caper, Tarantino-esque. Well, as far as you can have Tarantino-esque in Pembrokeshire. And, to reinforce an impression, the music behind the final credits is Morricone-esque. (Somebody has already commented, of course, Rarebit-Western!).

Michael Smiley has been in a lot of dramas (the cowardly doctor in the Gunpowder Milkshake). He wasn't cast in the role as the toll-keeper because of his surname. He looks perfectly ordinary, reserved, taciturn, living for 29 years in his tollbooth, reading his books, definitely never smiling. (An enjoyable smaller spoiler, he does smile in the last 30 seconds of the film!).

The other main character is Catrin (Annes Elwy), running this part of the county's police force almost single-handed, with her driving around in a van and answering calls for a terrorist raid on a local business (actually, it is only those masked triplets again!), holding up her radar on an almost deserted road, she is the person of integrity in the film (but, there's that final minute).

The writer, Matt Redd, is from Pembrokeshire so knows his people and locations. But he has a creative tongue-in-cheek way of introducing characters, a suave gentleman who turns out to be a gangster, too rather idiotic criminals, she bulky and black with a seeming American accent and he, scrawny, unable to speak, simply squeaking and mumbling out his ideas, the locals, especially the father of the triplets, a young smarmy conscienceless gangster on ready call to do any odd jobs, murder not excepted, and a grisly old truck driver involved in smuggling. (And there is a joke about the smuggling when those taking delivery discover they have a truckload of eye-pads instead of iPads!)

At one stage the toll keeper says the chronology is hard to remember as he recounts the events of the day to the young policewoman. And, there are various twists, betrayals, some gruesome vendettas, a spaghetti-Western (sorry, Rarebit-Western) final shootout. The title, the toll, could have referred in fact to the final body count!

If you're in the mood for this kind of generally quiet satiric look at crime and criminals in Pembrokeshire, it becomes less quiet – but an enjoyable pastime.

STREAMING SERVICES

BLUE MIRACLE

US, 2021, 95 minutes, Colour.

Dennis Quaid, Jimmy Gonzalez, Fernanda Urrejola, Bruce Mc Gill, Dana Wheeler- Nicholson, Miguel Angel Garcia, Isaac Arellanes, Nathan Arenas, Steve Gutierrez.

Directed by Julio Quintana.



This is a Mexican story. It is also a deep sea fishing story, a competition to bring in the biggest blue marlin. It is also a story about an orphanage. And, with the title focusing on miracle, the audience knows right from the start that there is going to be a happy ending. No suspense concerning who will win the competition – the suspense comes in how this will be achieved.

And, this is a true story, the blue miracle and all. In fact, as with so many films nowadays, there are photos of the actual characters, the fishing episode and the achievement during the final credits.

At the centre of the film is Jimmy Gonzalez as Omar, director of the orphanage, Casa Hogar (Home). It is noted that Jimmy Gonzalez himself had a rather tough upbringing as an orphan, involved with gangsters, drug dealing, a lookout for the gangs. But, with determination, he overcame his background and became an actor. He brings his own background to this story, made emotional by nightmare flashbacks to his character as a boy, fishing with his father, swept overboard, surviving, his father drowned.

Dennis Quaid has top billing. Here he is again as a crusty, very crusty, old man, veteran fisherman for 25 years in the town, winning the competition twice, but with an old boat, very few prospects – and his wife and son having left him to go back to Dallas.

There is quite a dramatic storm, flooding of the orphanage, but the organisers of the annual competition, the Bisbees (Bruce McGill and Dana Wheeler Nicholson) determine that the competition must go on and fees will be lifted. Sympathetic to the orphanage, less sympathetic to Wade, they insist that he take on Omar and some of the boys as the crew.

So, three days of competition, frustration in hooking seaweed, a second day and the possible victory but tension on the boat with two of the boys fighting and falling overboard, the temptation to cheat, conscience issues, and then the blue miracle.

There is quite some energy in the film, the kind of film that is called “inspirational”.

CONCRETE COWBOY

US, 2020, 111 minutes, Colour.

Idris Elba, Caleb McLaughlin, Lorraine Toussaint, Method Man, Jharrell Jerome, Byron Bowers, Ivannah-Mercedes, Jamil Prattis.

Directed by Ricky Staub.



The title from the original novel is Ghetto Cowboy. And, the story is based on actual characters, on Fletcher Street in North Philadelphia, a group of mainly African-American men and women who care for horses and train them. Hence the concrete cowboys.

As a social document, the film is quite interesting in showing the life of the various characters, the comparatively poor neighbourhood in which they work, park lands for the horses, stables, various sequences for care of the horses, training them, riding them, races. And, it emerges that some of the central characters in the film are actually ghetto cowboys playing variations on their own life stories.

However, this is also a film about family, and, especially, about father-son relationships.

The story focuses on a teenage young man, Cole, played very effectively by Caleb McLaughlin. His parents are separated, he is living with his mother, causing trouble, being expelled from school, her becoming desperate and bringing him to Philadelphia to stay with his estranged father, played by a Idris Elba.

The father is quite casual in his relationship with his son, the son wanting to run away but his father making demands of him if he stays in his house (where there is also a horse in residence!). As we might expect, the young man is rebellious and meets up with friends who are involved in drug dealing, guns and violence, pursued by the police. But, while he is asked to do the most menial of tasks in the stable, one of the ghetto cowboys, confined to a wheelchair, takes him under his wing, training him to ride, even later facing a challenge to tame one of the wilder horses.

So, a coming-of-age story, but one that is very difficult, in strange circumstances, but illustrating that the possibility of reconciliation between father and son, of the father opening up to the relationship, of the son desperately needing a father-figure.

Local government also intervenes at various times, critical of the stables, wanting the area to be made available for development – and the concrete cowboys at the end have to move on and find another place to live in care for the horses.

FATHERHOOD

US, 2021, 90 minutes, Colour.

Kevin Hart, Alfre Woodard, Lil Rel Howery, DeWanda Wise, Melody Hurd, Paul Reiser, Anthony Carrigan, Frankie Faison.

Directed by Paul Weitz.



Usually, we expect to find Kevin Hart in a raucous comedy (think the Ride Along films, The Wedding Ringer), sometimes teaming up with Dwayne Johnson. And, he is usually frantic. He is in Fatherhood, but this is a far more serious film than usual.

He plays Matt, a successful businessman, on the up and up in New York City. His wife is about to give birth – and does so, a daughter, Maddie, but the immediate sadness of his wife's death.

This is a film, particularly for fathers, particularly of young children, and daughters.

Much of the advice of his mother and mother-in-law (a very forceful performance from Alfre Woodard), refusing to go back to Michigan where his family came from, he decides that he will rear his little girl by himself – or, at least, with his friend from work, Oscar, and attending some mothers' groups... And, more or less, he succeeds, not without great demands on his work and his personal life... those sleepless nights...

Father and daughter grow up nicely bonding. Five years pass. The crisis of the film is whether he should follow through possible promotions at work, including international travel, having his daughter go to stay with the family in Michigan. And, there is a complication. He meets an attractive woman, but the possible conflict between her and Maddie is not part of the drama of the film. They bond beautifully.

So, a shift of seen to Michigan, Maddie staying in her mother's room, the fuss of the family, Matt and his re-living the past, having to make decisions about the future.

Not a groundbreaking scenario – but, with Kevin Hart more sympathetic, with Alfre Woodard unsympathetic (most of the time), and Maddie a likeable little girl and very perky, this is a drama, with humour, to remind audiences of the responsibility of fatherhood, of devoted parenting.

STOWAWAY

US, 2021, 116 minutes, Colour.

Anna Kendrick, Tony Collette, Daniel Dae Kim, Shamier Anderson.

Directed by Joe Penna.



The title indicates a dramatic crisis. However, this is a space exploration film and a spacecraft, on its way to Mars, is not exactly the place to find a stowaway.

On the one hand, *Stowaway* continues in the tradition of the space exploration films, a focus on the technical aspects of the takeoff, the training of the crew, the situation on board, the ever-present possibility of difficulties as seen in the blast off. The group is on a special mission to Mars, material for the establishment of a centre for scientific research having been sent in an unmanned vehicle. The experts are now on this craft.

Toni Collette, speaking with her Australian accent, is the commander of the craft, faced with technical decisions as well as moral issues. Anna Kendrick is the young medical expert, glad to have an opportunity, surprise that she has been chosen. Daniel Dae Kim is a scientist, in charge of a project on which he has been working for years, possibilities for plant life and development.

After the takeoff, all seems well. The personnel have been trained. They seem to work well and collaborate with each other.

Suddenly, the drama changes with the discovery of some blood drops, an unconscious technician, trapped in the spacecraft before it took off. He is played by Shamier Anderson.

On the one hand, the stowaway has technical knowledge and is able to help with various issues in the running of the craft. On the other hand, the practical issues of oxygen supply, precisely calculated before takeoff face the crew, possibilities of supplementing oxygen, experiments with the plants, travelling outside the spacecraft to cylinders to bring in more oxygen.

Which means then that the film is a blend of moral issues, the possibility of killing the stowaway to save the oxygen for the other members of the crew and their mission. There are also the technical problems as the members, especially the young doctor, goes out of the craft to retrieve the cylinders and the tension in the process.

Some bloggers have complained that the ending is ambiguous. However, given the stance of the doctor, and the final images we see of her, it would seem that she has made a decision concerning herself and the possibilities for the crew to complete their mission.

THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW

US, 2021, 100 minutes, Colour.

Amy Adams, Fred Hechinger, Gary Oldman, Julianne Moore, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Wyatt Russell, Brian Tyree Henry, Anthony Mackie.

Directed by Joe Wright.



There are substantial ambitions for the success of *The Woman in the Window*, directed by veteran Joe Wright (*Atonement*, *Pride and Prejudice*) from a screenplay by actor-director, Tracy Letts (who appears as the doctor in this film).

However, audience tests were not successful and there was a reworking of some sequences of the film. The covid 19 pandemic prevented cinema release and the film went to streaming services.

The film has a very strong and very able cast, led by Amy Adams as a child psychologist who suffers from agoraphobia, is separated from her family. Oscar-winners Gary Oldman and Julianne Moore appear as a couple. Fred Hechinger appears as their son.

However, all is not as it seems. Early in the film, there is specific reference to Hitchcock's *Rear Window* on which the screenplay is obviously based and pays homage to. There are also visual references to the classic thrillers *Laura* and Hitchcock's *Spellbound*.

There is quite some complicated background, the psychologist involved in a car accident with deaths, her supporting a mysterious border in the house (Wyatt Russell), the pressure of her psychological state, contemplating suicide. There is also a visit from the couple whom she observes from her window, who act mysteriously, and her witnessing the murder of the wife. There is some attachment to the teenage son and his freely coming in and out of her apartment.

There is a police investigation. There are some of the deaths. There are various clues to a mystery, and the revelation of a serial killer murderer.

It seems a pity that with such good ingredients, that the film does not have the impact that it might.

FILM REVIEWS, SEPTEMBER 2021

CINEMA RELEASE

ANNETTE

BOWRAVILLE MURDERS, The

COMING HOME IN THE DARK

STREAMLINE

STREAMING SERVICES

BECKETT/Netflix

COLOUR OF LOVE/Foxtel

INCARCERATION NATION/ SBS

IN THE SAME BREATH/ FOXTEL

NEW YORK CHRISTMAS WEDDING, A/Netflix

RADIOACTIVE/ Foxtel

QUARRY, The. Foxtel

SWEET GIRL/Netflix

TOO CLOSE/ BBC Foxtel

VIVO/Netflix

WORTH/ Netflix

HARLAN COBEN SERIES/ Netflix

CINEMA RELEASE

ANNETTE

France, 2021, 141 minutes, Colour.

Adam Driver, Marion Cotillard, Simon Helberg, Devyn McDowell, Ron Mael, Russell Mael.

Directed by Leos Carax.



Some advice points before the review. This is a film for a specialist audience. And, a definite recommendation, that the film should be seen in a dark theatre, on a big screen, with no surrounding distractions. It has been directed by idiosyncratic French director, Leos Carax, and, for those not familiar with his films, it might be helpful to watch one or other before watching *Annette* (*Lovers on the Pond Neuf*, *Holy Motors*). And the screenplay is based on a musical story by the renowned Ron Mael and Russell Mael, *The Sparks Brothers* (recently portrayed in Edgar Wright's documentary, *The Sparks Brothers*). Over the decades they have produced many videos of their music.

Perhaps *Annette* can be called a musical. Or, perhaps, a drama with many songs. The narrative is not entirely unfamiliar, a successful performance artist, a successful opera singer, their marriage, their daughter, *Annette* of the title, his reputation sliding, those on the ascent, memories of *A Star is Born*. However, there are some rather grim variations on that familiar story.

The film opens with the stars singing a film about starting, followed by crowds, exuberantly walking through the city – and most of the central action takes place in Los Angeles. And this sets the tone for the film, the songs expressing the feelings of the central couple, becoming more dramatic as the story progresses, even tragic. One of the characteristics of the songs is that the lyrics are very plain, sometimes mundane, and repeated and repeated. Rather recitatif.

And it stars Adam Driver as a performance artist, called *The Ape of God*, playing to large crowds in theatres, eccentric behaviour, postures, declaiming to the audience, twirling the microphone... And encouraging response from the audiences who then become part of the singing chorus. And it also stars Marion Cotillard as Ann, a successful opera singer. She drives in a limousine. He dons a helmet and rides a motorbike. And, interspersed, are some satiric TV news sequences, SBS (*Show Business Special*) commenting on the stars, courtship, marriage, the birth of *Annette*.

As the artist's fortunes slide after a very serious performance in Las Vegas, condemned as unfunny, he takes to drink. And the film becomes quite dark and grim.

With the title focusing on *Annette*, there is a very striking sequence of her birth, nurses and doctor singing a repetitive theme of "Come out...". And the film uses the device of a puppet playing *Annette* – who, in fact, has a powerful singing voice, from her mother.

Which means then that the film is highly stylised, enticing audiences who enjoy the challenge of stylising, but may well alienate (rather quickly) those who are not on its wavelength or feel no desire to be on its wavelength. There are themes of performance and the effect on stars, courtship and marriage and sexuality, domestic violence (and Ann having a dream sequence where six women raise *Me#Too* accusations).

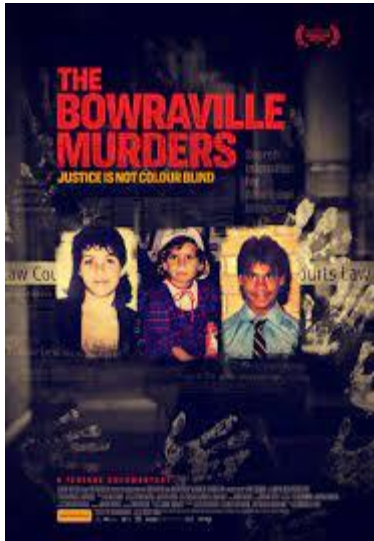
Ultimately, the film focuses on *Annette*, her singing, the effect on her father, the pass catching up on him, law and prison, said sequence where *Annette* farewells her father singing and lamenting that he has no one to love.

The film opened the 2021 Cannes Film Festival and one for characters the Best Dir award. There is a tantalising quality about it.

THE BOWRAVILLE MURDERS

2021, 86 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Allan Clark.



The title sounds most factual and sensational – and the film is both. This is a significant Australian documentary, a reminder that in Australian Black Lives Should Matter.

There is quite an appetite in filmgoers and television watchers in recent times for Crime Investigation programs. Here are crimes that have been investigated over a period of 30 years, from 1990. This film takes us through the ensuing years, investigations, police inadequacies, child protection visits, re-examinations, the move towards justice issues in the New South Wales police department and the New South Wales government. Those familiar with the story will know the outcomes, or lack of outcomes. Those not familiar with the story will be amazed at how this process has played out over the three decades and be dismayed with the ending. It can be said that justice has not been done or seen to be done – but, in terms of action, solidarity, protest, the Bowraville murders, their victims, have become a significant cause.

Bowraville is a small town in northern New South Wales. We enter the film into with two young aborigines driving in, down the main street, pass the cinema (where there were two entries, aborigines having to come in by a side door and sit on the ground in the front of the cinema), and to The Mission, an aboriginal settlement. We see the locations, a lot of natural beauty, and the homes of the families.

One of the dramatic advantages for this documentary is that there is quite a lot of footage from the 1990s as well as the processes during the decades, pictures of members of the family, parents, siblings, aunties, their reactions and then, seeing them over the years, getting older, up to the 2010s, hearing them, sharing their feelings, sadness, frustrations, being both encouraged and discouraged.

Throughout the film, journalist Stan Grant sits in the cinema, watches scenes of aboriginal history, listens to townspeople interviewed about the aborigines, little girls at school saying they don't mix with them. Grant, as always, offers a perspective on long aboriginal history, of the presence of white settlers, invasion, killings – “the killings never stop”.

The police were not particularly interested, generally dismissing the aborigines, their lifestyle. Investigation was highly inadequate. A local man was accused, tried, acquitted – and is seen at various times throughout the film. An official was sent but he was a child protection officer. Later, enter Gary Jubilan, something of a hero, initially unwelcome, but learning from the people, championing them, furthering the investigations. (There is some amusement as later we see Gary Jubilan as a fighter, nicknamed The Gatekeeper, involved in a bout with the Bowraville community cheering him on.) New South Wales politician David Shoebridge takes up the cause, moves the investigation towards changing double jeopardy legislation. This is achieved. But the consequences for the murder trials take years, hearings, visits to Parliament, judicial inquiries, months to provide final statements.

The Bowraville Murders, earlier the subject of documentaries as well as television explorations, serves as a documentation of a sorry experience of Australian justice, of racism, of courage of spirit – a film which all Australians should see.

COMING HOME IN THE DARK

New Zealand, 2021, 93 minutes, Colour.
Daniel Gillies, Erik Thomson, Mariana McDowell, Matthias Luafutu.
Directed by James Ashcroft.



The title has two important themes indicated. The obvious one is the emphasis on the dark, this film being a very long, literal, journey into night. The expectations of coming home, especially with the introduction to the family, would be to their own home. But it is not.

This is a terror film. Some have categorised it as horror but it is, more accurately, menace and terror. And it is very effective in portraying menace and terror on the screen but also eliciting quite some terror and fear in the audience as it watches the characters and what befalls them. The film has received very good reviews and screenings at festivals. It is very effective in its creation of atmosphere, working on the conventions of the road movie, and, ultimately, raising significant issues for the audience to ponder.

The film was shot in the area around the New Zealand capital, Wellington. As it opens, we are in a car, an ordinary family going for an outing, mother and father (Erik Thomson and Mariana McDowell) and their relationship, boys squabbling in the back in the usual manner, stopping at the service station, passing through beautifully rugged countryside, ultimately arriving at the destination, going hiking, and enjoying a picnic on the riverside.

What could go wrong? And the film is the answer to that question.

Unexpectedly, in this remote area, two strangers wander in, one bearded, somewhat sinister (a sometimes quietly fierce performance from Daniel Gillies), the other, Tubs, thin and silent, Maori background (Matthias Luafutu). The sinister man introduces himself as Mandrake, a magician able to ring changes. Then some shock moments, so unexpected, dreadful, and the tone of the narrative of the film is changed.

Some commentators on the film remember *A Clockwork Orange* and the menacing and then violent intrusion of the thuggish Droogs. Others remember the story filmrd twice, a story of home invasion, menace to a family, *The Desperate Hours* (1955 and 1990). This is sustained menace to the family.

As the night advances and Mandrake and Tubs drive away with their captives, there are confrontations, attempted escapes, visit to the service station again, the husband using his wits, brutality towards his wife, what might be expected in this kind of threatening journey.

However, what is important in the screenplay and the portrayal of characters is Mandrake's motivation in pursuing the husband. As they drive, there are interrogations, revelations about the husband's past as a teacher – opening up more about the 1980s, a home for boys, the dreadful treatment that they received, the building of resentment, the growing angers as they grew older, vengeance preoccupying their attitude towards life.

As the tension grows, Mandrake decides to drive to the site of the home itself, eliciting some flashbacks, the audience understanding more and more what has happened in the past, and the challenge to the husband, a young man in those days on the staff of the institution, witnessing the sadistic behaviour of the teachers, challenged as to what he might have done, should have done?

Which is what is left for the audience to react to, to think about – and, in these days of the aftermath of Royal Commissions, investigations into physical and sexual abuse, *Coming Home in the Dark* is a film that dramatises what many of the abused have felt, feel, have survived but need some kind of acknowledgement, compensation, healing.

STREAMLINE

Australia, 2021, 86 minutes, Colour.

Levi Miller, Laura Gordon, Jason Isaacs, Jake Ryan, Tasia Zala, Robert Morgan, Hunter Page-Lochard, Steve Bass Tony, Sam Parsonson, Isaac Drandic.

Directed by Tyson Wade Johnston.



A strong, very strong, drama about a young athlete, 15 turning 16, a swimmer, Olympic talent and possibilities. But, there is his family and the burdens he is carrying from the past. A Queensland setting.

For the first 15 minutes, the focus is on swimming and training, close-up, intense, coach demanding, shouting. The exercises, the massage, the strict regimen, up early hours, his mother driving him to the pool, watching, careful, discipline. If an audience wanted to know what it is like to be a contender for competition swimming and the demands that it makes, this 15 minutes certainly demonstrates it powerfully.

But, this is also the story of a boy growing up in a dysfunctional family. The boy, Ben, has tormenting memories, nightmares, his father attempting to drown him in the bath, his older half-brothers, No wonder he does not smile, generally a stoic expressionless face. He goes to school, has a strong friendship with Patty, fellow-student, daughter of his teacher (who is heard giving a class on Jung, the conscious, repression and suppression, the unconscious). He lives with his mother who is always supportive.

The point about athletes and competitiveness is that they need to want to be a champion. If not, stop, pull out. And, to the dismay of his mother, the coach, Patty, he does. And not only does he pull out, he packs his bags, his mother upset and badmouthing him, going off to live with his brothers who work in the mill, a reckless life of drinking and fights. The key element is that his father has been released from jail. And it is clear, whatever the repression, whatever the bitterness towards his father, Ben needs a father presence in his life.

The film has a comparatively brief running time and packs a lot into this picture of the dysfunctional family into violent episodes, including the sons confronting their released father, whom they despise, at the diner where he works in the kitchen. But, there is some hope in the screenplay, Patty being always a strong challenging presence to Ben, his mother trying to make amends, and a powerful scene in a frank confrontation with his father.

We know in our hearts that Ben will return to the pool but we need to see how he gets back, why he gets back, the consequences for him. With those powerful 15 minutes at the opening of the film, there is no need for us to go through the rigorous training again, but just to see where his talent might lead him. We hope.

The film is well written, well directed, a first-time film from Tyson Wade Johnston. We hope that this is the beginning of a strong film career. Levi Miller, already a film star with such films as Pan, Better Watch Out, Red Dog: True Blue, Jasper Jones, creates a challengingly enigmatic character in Ben. Laura Gordon is his mother, and Jason Isaacs quite compelling as his father. Tasia Zular is Patty. There is quite a gallery of well-written supporting characters with persuasive performances.

Olympic gold-metal swimming champion, Ian Thorpe, serves as an executive producer and spent time with Levi Miller coaching him in the finer points of swimming performance.

STREAMING SERVICES

BECKETT

Greece, 2021, 108 minutes, Colour.
John David Washington, Alicia Vikander, Boyd Holbrook, Vicki Krieps.
Directed by Fernando Cito Filomarino.



Many decades ago, popular author of action adventures, John Buchan, wrote a novel about a Chase across the country, *The 39 steps*. And, in the 1930s, Alfred Hitchcock filmed it with Robert Donat. For those who enjoy action shows, this can be quite a popular formula.

And, it is the formula for this 21st-century pursuit. When one thinks about it, the action is probably far-fetched, a mysterious conspiracy, someone in the wrong place at the wrong time, the use of wits to elude those in pursuit, ever-present dangers. And this is definitely the case with *Beckett*. And, as we watch many seemingly-improbable dangers and escapes, we realise that, like life, we are victims of bad luck and appreciators of good luck.

One of the main advantages of *Beckett* is that it has been filmed on location in northern Greece, some spectacular photography, some landscape with grandeur, mountains, villages. There is tracking down mountains, over cliffs, through rivers, encountering local workmen, beekeepers, going to a local town, a train ride, travel by car to the outskirts of Athens, chases through the streets of Athens. No complaint about the locations and settings.

At the centre is an American businessman, *Beckett*, on holiday with his girlfriend, April – played by John David Washington and Alysia Vick and. The first 10 minutes has us sharing the holiday, getting to know them – and a car accident with consequences he (and we) could not have guessed. As *Beckett* recovers from his accident injuries (to rapidly and with not the consequences we might imagine), he revisits the site of the accident, is shot at and so begins the chase.

John David Washington is in every sequence, the success of the film depending on audiences identifying with him, his credibility in the role, his personality (which tends to be rather stern but, in the circumstances, how else might he be?

It takes some time for the audience to get to know what is happening, sharing the questioning of the American outsider who does not have the language. There is the kidnapping of a young boy. There is protest against the government and financial issues. There is a contender for the presidency. There are demonstrations.

Beckett is making for the American Embassy and, it is amazing how he eventually arrives there, having to work with one of the officials, Tynan (Boyd Holbrook) – and, by this stage, we are sharing *Beckett*'s paranoia even suspicious of Tynan. However, *Beckett* has had a lift from two activists, one played by Vicki creeps who participates in the final confrontation, a pursuit in a high-rise parking lot, a car crash, confrontation with the initial shooters back in northern Greece, the resolution of the protest, the finding of the kidnapped boy.

Prominent Australian reviewer, Paul Burns, described the film as ludicrous. In many ways, it is. But, with its action-driving momentum, the landscapes and Athens, we might put that aside for two hours and go with the flow of the pursuit.

COLOR OF LOVE

US, 2021, 88 minutes, Colour.

Deborah Joy Winans, Michael Brown, Sarah Abbott, Rachel Wilson, Duane Murray, Leo Orgil, Shechinah Mpumlwana.

Directed by Don McBrearty.



This film is introduced as being based on a true story. It has a Pennsylvania setting, the city of Pittsburgh which features quite attractively throughout the film.

The issue is foster care, and possibilities for adoption. While there are many difficulties with finding appropriate foster care for orphaned children, there are many successes. And the possibilities for relationships to develop and lead to adoption. And this is the case here.

However, the title of the film indicates a difficulty which some see as insurmountable: mixed race adoption.

The central character is an exuberant woman, Monica (Deborah Joy Winans), five years widowed when her police officer husband was shot in action, mother of two children, a teacher, now deputy principal of the school. She has participated with the adoption agency by taking in foster children temporarily. She has taken in a brother and sister twice before, Rachel and Peter, and, when they run away from foster care, the carer asks Monica to take them in again.

Monica is a happy, loving and life-giving woman. There is also the possibility of marrying again, Theo (Michael Brown). But, with Rachel and Peter returning, and her children bonding with them so well, she decides on adoption.

The head of the adoption agency is particularly severe, against the adoption, ready to find any fault that will prevent it. On the other hand, the carer is supportive and suggests a lawyer. Theo, who has had a hard experience and his own childhood, does not warm to the situation and is also conscious of the mixed race difficulties. Both sets of children are in favour of the adoption.

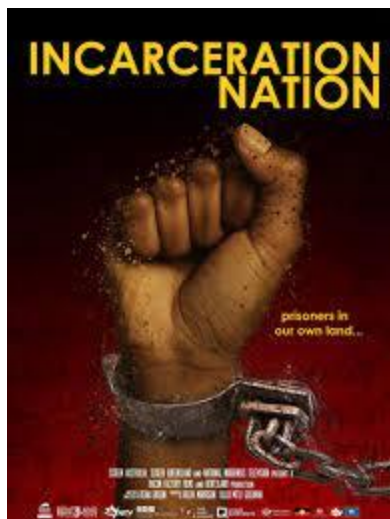
With some difficulties at school for Rachel, the head of the agency orders the children withdrawn from Monica's care. She is religious, churchgoing, the local pastor advises her and put you in contact with a parishioner who is a television compere. Monica appears, states her case with force and emotion, many people watching, including Theo who is moved by it.

The end of the film has the court case, please stated by Monica as well as the children, hostility from the aged care authority.

This is a film which makes its appeal through attractive characters, through sentiment, sentimental perhaps, but with an important cause.

INCARCERATION NATION

Australia, 2021, 90 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Dean Gibson.



Yes, it can be said that Australia has had a history of incarceration, from the arrival of the First Fleet and the subjugation of the long-standing indigenous peoples of the land, the arrival of incarcerated convicts on the initial fleets, of stories of criminals over the last two centuries, there are a lot of prisons in Australia, a lot of incarceration.

However, one of the key issues is that of aboriginal deaths in custody. This documentary takes up this theme, looking back to the enquiry into black deaths of the early 1990s, the recommendations, the recommendations not being followed, further judicial investigations, the investigation into Don Dale Youth Detention Centre in the Northern Territory. And, there are the dreadful statistics of the number of deaths, out of all proportions compared with white deaths in custody even in recent years.

From the NITV site: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are amongst the most incarcerated people in the world. Whilst representing 3.3 per cent of the Australian population, Indigenous men make up 27 per cent of prisoners and women constitute 34 per cent. Approximately 65 per cent of incarcerated children aged between 10 and 13 in Australia are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Indigenous youth make up 55 per cent of Australia's youth prison population. There have been at least 478 Indigenous deaths in custody in Australia from 1991 to 2021 — and no criminal convictions for the accused. Incarceration Nation puts First Nations voices front and centre, as they fight for change, visibility and equality.

This is a documentary that should be seen by all Australians.

The advantage of documentary is that it can draw on film and television footage from the last three decades, reminding audiences of the progress, and lack of progress, the nature of the deaths in custody, the reasons, the often seeming apathy of those in charge and responsible, and alarming moments of cruelty and indifference. The main episodes featured, especially through surveillance footage on the actual events, are a challenge to any sense of decency.

While these sequences are highly emotional, especially some of the treatment of children, hours of detention, solitary, physical cruelty and brutality by guards, the documentary is very strong on statistics. They are difficult to take in as they flash up on the screen, so many of them, so overwhelming, always alarming.

Most documentaries depend on the impact that the "talking heads" make. There is a wide variety of men and women who have been invited to contribute, from all walks of life, including Commissioner Mick Gooda, former Redfern boy, Keenan Mundine, who served time, all challenging in their observations, and there pleas for betterment.

Which means that for those who want to use the film for education purposes, something which can be highly recommended, for schools, for discussion groups, for those involved in social welfare, for those involved in legislation for change... It is good to have a copy, to be able to stop and start, to take in the facts, to have time to ponder the implications.

This is a documentary that covers the long past, but, particularly, the last 30 years, a rising of the status quo as we begin the 2020s.

IN THE SAME BREATH

US, 2021, 95 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Nanfu Wang.



During 2021, documentary filmmakers produced feature length films exploring the background of the coronavirus epidemic. This is one of the earliest documentaries – and worth seeing, as it goes back into Chinese origins and initial American reactions in 2020.

The director was born in China, journalist, moving to the United States, starting a family, making documentaries on the US. She returned to China for a visit with her husband and son early in 2020, went back to the US just as news of the epidemic was revealed. While she looked on from the United States, she made contact with a number of friends in China, urging them to film as much as possible, in any way possible and get the material to her. She has drawn on a vast amount of footage to illustrate the history of Covid 19 in 2020 China.

She comes back to the New Year's Day announcement that eight doctors were being punished for rumours about a virus. She then develops the gradual stages during January, the emergence of illness, the deaths, hospital crises, the government admission that there was an epidemic, but the firm government restrictions on what news could be announced, with various sequences of newsreaders repeating the government line on what was happening with the epidemic, sequences in Wuhan, details of hospital crowding, illness and deaths, and revelations about the number of deaths, burials and cremations.

All the time, there are speeches from the president, huge party rallies, the singing of the national anthem by an enormous range of singers, interviews with local people who believe that the government had done its best to protect them during the pandemic.

In the meantime, the director also chronicles the initial American hesitations, the early protests demanding freedoms, quotations from Donald Trump and other leaders, playing down the pandemic, initial cases in New York City, then the gradual spread, the repetition of illness, hospital crowding, deaths.

The director makes the important contrast between reactions of the strictly controlled Chinese media response, the restriction of information and facts, compared with the reactions of protesters and freedoms in the United States, out in the streets, placards and yelling, violent promotion of “our” rights – but both systems succumbing to large numbers of infected.

While the film offers some revelation into the Chinese experience, a great deal of local sequences, including information that correspondents were arrested and punished, interviews with ordinary people both critical of the government and supportive, the contrast with the US reaction is strong. And the question of which system benefits its citizens more.

A NEW YORK CHRISTMAS WEDDING

US, 2020, 88 minutes, Colour.

Nia Fairweather, Adriana DeMeo, Chris Noth, Otoja Abit, David Anzuelo.

Directed by Otoja Abit.



At first a familiar romance (2021, d. Otoja Abit) but then a move into alternate world and a same-sex marriage drama. Two middle-aged women, friends since childhood, intend to marry and visit the parish priest of 23 years who has known them well. They discuss the possibility of marrying in the church. He is hesitant, conscious of traditions. However, at Mass, reading from I Corinthians 6 (and its severity on depraved behaviour), the congregation standing as if it were the gospel, he then invites him to sit, invites the two women and other parishioners who are in same-sex relationships on to the sanctuary. He decries condemnations and emphasises the universality of love. Some parishioners walk out. However, as a symbol, he decides to give communion to each of those on the sanctuary as a sign of love.

The priest, Father Kelly, played by Chris Noth who executive-produced the film, listens to quotations from Pope Francis on the issue, and, especially, a television clip of Pope Francis meeting one of the young men from Chile who was abused by the church and the Pope saying that his sexual orientation was the way he was born. And the priest is present for an exuberant wedding party afterwards and enthusiastic speeches.

When the central character returns to the present, she visits the Church to find Fr Kelly but is told that he was retired long since after officiating privately at same-sex weddings. It is also revealed that Father Kelly took care of the young pregnant girl, persuaded her against an abortion, assisted her in getting help. It is interesting that there are 48 comments on the IMDb blog, only two of them making reference to the Catholic church, one just noting, as an atheist, there is a Catholic context. The church and same-sex issues are not mentioned by the bloggers.

THE QUARRY

US, 2020, 98 minutes, Colour.

Shea Whigham, Michael Shannon, Catalina Sandino Moreno, Bobby Soto, Bruno Bichir, Alvaro Martinez, Jimmy Gonzales.

Directed by Scott Teems.



The Quarry is a small but intriguing drama. It also has a religious theme, an escaped prisoner taking the identity of a pastor in and taking his place in the small Texas town. (Cinemagoers may remember the Polish film, Corpus Christie, where a young worker is mistaken for the parish priest and he assumes the role with quite an effect on the congregation.)

The film opens with the pastor driving to a new parish after his sexual relationship that led to his condemnation. He gives a lift to a man on the side of the road, feeds him, stops at the quarry, confesses to him, urging the stranger also to confess. Instead, the man, revealed as a former prisoner who has escaped, police and helicopter search for him, kills him.

There is quite some drama in the small town as the alleged pastor settles in, looked after by a Hispanic housekeeper, his luggage stolen from the van, discussions with the local sheriff, his taking up the ministry, speaking by way of translated to a small congregation, congregation gradually increasing, his having to conduct a baptism in the river by immersion, officiate at a funeral...

The film has a strong cast. It is a star vehicle for character actor, Shea Whigham, as the escaped convict. Michael Shannon as the sheriff. Catalina Sandino Moreno is the housekeeper, Bobby Soto is her cousin, a drug dealer who is accused of stealing the pastor's goods, along with his younger brother, then of the murder of the pastor when his skeleton is discovered. He continues to protest his innocence and blames the new pastor.

The film is a psychological study – of all of the characters and their complexities in the small town. However, it is also a story about the need to confess, to be free of guilt, and even to atone.

RADIOACTIVE

UK/France, 2019, 109 minutes, Colour.

Rosamund Pike, Sam Riley, Simon Russell Beale, Aneurin Barnard, Anya Taylor-Joy, Sian Brooke.

Directed by Marjane Satrapi.



It can be noted that the film is not solely a biography/portrait of Marie Curie. It is, sometimes, a visual portrait, fantasy sequences and dreams, suggestions of Madame Curie's subconscious, the contrast between her very stern manner and underlying deep emotions. This style may reflect the strong Iranian background and sensibilities of the director, Marjane Satrapi.

Rather, the film's title indicates that it is in fact, something of a biography/portrait of radioactivity itself. Throughout the film (rather interrupting the dramatic impact of Madame Curie's life, love for her husband and their working together, his untimely death in a street accident), there are sequences which illustrate the consequences of radioactivity – flash-forwards, interrupting the drama, including the dropping of the atomic bomb, visually vivid and shocking, on Hiroshima 1945, the observing of nuclear tests in the Nevada desert in 1961, the meltdown at Chernobyl in 1986 – but also anticipation of practical applications of radiotherapy in the 1950s.

The film is also a portrait inviting speculation about the workings of the scientific mind. Perhaps it is the inner Intuition, theories, hypotheses, lateral thinking, offering definition, clarity. There is always the reliance on laboratory verification, applications of reasoning and logic. Which, of course, is not to say that scientists are not emotional. It is that their judgements and decisions are objective, that their personal investment in science is objective.

And that is how Rosamund Pike's interpretation of Marie Curie comes across. Her mind is working all the time. She wants to investigate but also to get things done. Which, in her case, led to the pioneering work in discoveries of radium and polonium (named after her native Poland, dear to her), that the radium did not react as anticipated, leading to important applications, the discovery of x-rays and processes of radiotherapy, especially for cancer.

In the film, she comes across as quite impersonal, arrogant, to say the least – which academics and authorities declared her to be. She has no patience in interviews, demands to be accepted, for instance as first female professor in a university in France, on her own merits. She was prevented in

accompanying her husband, Pierre, to Stockholm for the awarding of the Nobel Prize in 1903 because she had just given birth. This reinforced her self-assertion, scenes of dismissive attitude by male academics and government officials.

Her relationship with Pierre Curie started off rather frostily, he a much more warm personality than she. The film shows a mellowing in her relationship with her husband – but, on the whole, not as much as one might expect or hope for. It is the same in her relationship with her daughters. An amusing sequence illustrates this – her daughter, Irene, later to be a Nobel prizewinner herself, brings her fiancé for her mother's approval. Mother is interested solely in the young man's PhD studies, quickly remarking that they can take the relationship for granted and then moving on to the scientific interrogation.

It is interesting to note that the first film about Madame Curie was made within 10 years of her death in 1934. It starred the popular screen pair of the time, Greer Garson and Walton Pidgeon as the couple. It focused on her work, the publicly edifying aspects of her character. This version does not shun the scandal of her relationship, after her husband's tragic death, with one of her associates, he prepared to leave his wife. The media made ugly play of the scandal. The public were rabble-roused in demonstrations against her. She handles the situation in Thinking fashion, breaking it off.

But, her daughter, Irene (Anya Taylor-Joy) offers her an opportunity to move towards some kind of personal integration. Marie Curie resisted entering hospitals because, as in flashbacks, it was in the hospital when as a young girl that she had to say goodbye to her loving mother. In the context of World War I, Irene shows her mother some amputee soldiers – indicating that the use of x-rays would have diagnosed injuries more accurately and avoided the drastic surgery. Marie Curie challenges the authorities for funding – threatening to go to the media to highlight the government meanness. But, being on the battlefield focuses her attention on the real, the here and now, challenging her Feeling decisions about how to treat the wounded.

The range of flashforwards to Hiroshima, the Nevada desert, Chernobyl, are a significant part of the screenplay even if, at times, they seem dramatic intrusions into the portrait of Marie Curie. The Curies' discoveries, and she was awarded two Nobel prizes, had world-changing consequences. But, they were for good and for ill.

In his speech at the Nobel prize awards in 2003, Pierre Curie reminded his audience that Alfred Nobel invented dynamite and produced weapons and armaments (consequently persuading Nobel to establish the awards with his fortune). There were significant positive consequences but, he warned, there were dangerous consequences to their work in radioactivity.

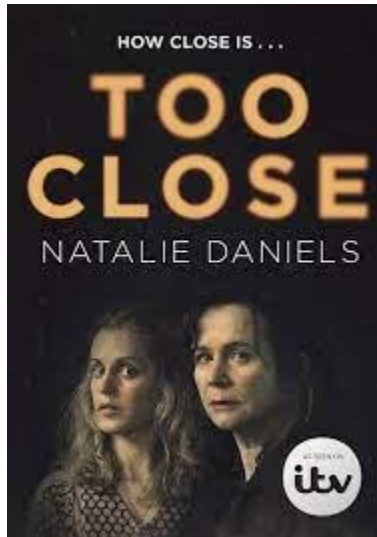
And so, *Radioactive* highlights both, Marie Curie herself, a claim for her work but suffering the effects of radiation until her death in 1934. The film offers a strong portrait of a pioneer woman scientist.

TOO CLOSE

UK, 2021, 3X 45 minute, Colour.

Emily Watson, Denise Gough, Thalissa Teiseira, Karl Johnson, Jamie Sives, Risteard Cooper.

Directed by Susan Tully.



Too Close is a three-part BBC miniseries. It is basically an interaction between two women and the consequences for each of them.

Emily Watson plays Emma, a psychiatrist, middle-aged, having experienced the accidental death of a difficult child, tentative in her marriage, some suspicions about her husband. She is often depressed, drinks.

Denise Gough is Connie, a mother of two who is seen at the beginning of the film driving, two children in the back of the car, and plunging into a river. She and the children are rescued. However, she is in police care and because of her mental condition is required to have sessions with the psychiatrist.

At first, Connie is sardonic, asking Emma are very personal questions which have an effect on Emma in her own life. Connie responds to questions, and the past is seen in dramatised flashbacks. And, it is the opportunity to see Connie as her real self rather than the injured and battered woman in police custody.

One of the key elements that Emma works on is medication and its effect – and, especially, withdrawing from medication without proper supervision and the possibly psychotic consequences.

Connie is able to be healed and reunited with her children. Emma also has some healing because of her championing Connie's cause, even in court – and discovering that her suspicions about her husband were completely misplaced.

A small miniseries compared with other spectacles but an important portrait of women's interactions and issues of mental health and medication.

VIVO

US, 2021, 95 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Lin-Manuel Miranda, Ynairaly Simo, Zoe Saldana, Juan de Marcos Gonzalez, Brian Tyree Henry, Gloria Estefan, Michael Rooker.

Directed by Kirk DiMicco, Brendan Jeffords.



Looking for something colourful and bright, Latin American music, rhythms and beats? Looking for an animation film that might intrigue the children and give an entertainment for adults? Perhaps Vivo is the answer.

It is definitely very colourful. The setting is Cuba, the city of Havana, details of the city, especially the public squares where an old man, Andres, sings and plays, people gathering to listen, and he opens his trolley and what happens?... Vivo emerges.

The important credit for the film is that the songs were written by Lin-Manuel Miranda who sings all of Vivo's songs. Lin-Manuel Miranda has made quite a name for himself over the last 15 years, the staging of his New York musical, In the Heights, released as a film in 2021, but, most famous, for the stage success of his American history musical, Hamilton, and its being filmed for television and streaming release. Miranda's recitative style in the lyrics is certainly to the fore here, lively, rhythmic, a strong beat.

Vivo is certainly a cartoon character. The notes explained that he is a kinkajou - which will baffle most of us until we hear that this is the name for a one-of-a-kind forest honey bear. He is small, obviously cuddly if he slowed down, but he sings, dances, enchants the people (who put money in the hat as it is passed around).

Amongst those who watch is Rosa and her daughter, Rose, who will later form a partnership with Vivo in song and performance.

There is a serious plotline as well. Andres is used to perform with Marta, long ago, but she departed for Florida and they have been long separated. News comes with Marta in Florida and the hope that Andres might go there and sing with her. That is not to be and so Vivo becomes something of an ambassador for Andres, with a letter that he wrote way back when.

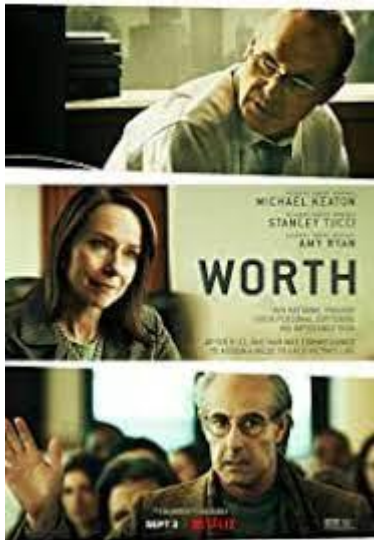
Marta (voiced by Gloria Estefan) is older, has been successful, is a noted singer. Vivo goes on his mission to Florida. But, since this is a happy, lively show, there is a happy ending.

WORTH

US, 2020, 118 minutes, Colour.

Michael Keaton, Amy Ryan, Stanley Tucci, Tate Donovan, Shunori Ramanathan, Talia Balsam, Laura Benanti, Chris Tardio, Ato Blankson-Wood.

Directed by Sarah Colangelo.



Worth is a good word, a solid word. It takes us into the realm of values. In fact, the original title for this film is What Is Life Worth. In fact, as we watch the film and its exploration of characters, we are continually being asked “What is a life worth?”. And how is this question to be answered? In monetary terms, a financial figure? Or beyond that?

The question was asked in the United States after 9/11 and this film is receiving its release, at the Sundance Film Festival and, then, on Netflix, on the 20th anniversary of those planes crashing into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. At the time, the world was preoccupied with the immediate loss of life, the consequences, grief, amazement, continuing health problems, as well as the broader aspects of what became the war on terror and the invasion of Afghanistan (sadly and ironically coming to a close on the 20th anniversary).

But, there were financial questions asked, issues of insurance, the air companies lobby, compensation by the American government, issues in Congress. With *Worth*, we are taken into this particular aspect of 9/11, a process from 2001 to 2003, the 9/11 Victim Compensation Fund, with prominent legal mediator, Kenneth Feinberg, accepting the role.

Soon into watching the film, it seemed a good idea to go to Wikipedia and find out something about Kenneth Feinberg, his background, his legal history, his role with the Compensation Fund, as principles. This exercise was enabling, for watching the film and appreciating what Feinberg hoped for, what he did, the challenges, his achievement (and, rather jaw-dropping, the final credits listing of situations in American history in the last 20 years, disasters, compensations, Catholic Church abuse cases... That he and his colleague, Camille Biros have been asked to mediate).

Michael Keaton, a wonderful comedian in the past, has been taking on more and more serious roles, men of integrity. Amy Ryan gives solid support as Camille. And a range of character actors takes on supporting roles convincingly. But, as the film progresses, there are numerous interview sequences, survivors telling their stories, some angry, some still grieving, some bewildered. These are so convincing – and, one hopes, that the short segments serve as audition material for future roles by these character actors.

The other chief character in the film is Charles Wolf, played by Stanley Tucci, an actual character, who lost his wife in the World Trade Centre collapse. Wolf was highly critical of Feinberg’s model for the fund, starting a counter-movement “Fix the Fund”, offering advice, offering a different perspective on contact with survivors and their relatives, meeting with Feinberg and his associates, influencing Feinberg and his approach, ultimately with the declaration, “The Fund is Fixed”, finally ensuring that the Victim Compensation Fund requirements for registration were filled in time for the project to go into action.

For those of a Jungian frame of mind, this is a powerfully dramatised presentation of objective structures for funding compensation relying on the letter of the law, accuracy and precision, setting limits,

eschewing exceptions. Charles Wolf's approach and, was highly personal, much more subjective in respect of and respect for those who grieved and suffered, listening to stories, realising that categories could be constricting and that there were interpretations to be made. Two particular stories come to the fore to illustrate this, a fireman killed and his loyal wife's discovery that he had another family who are in financial need, a gay man who lost his partner (whose parents deny his sexual orientation),

It is rather saddening to read some bloggers dismissing the film as boring. Others declared that they were engrossed, moved, sharing an experience of realising what a life is worth. Yes.

HARLAN COBEN SERIES



Harlan Coben is one of the most popular American crime writers. He has been publishing novels since 1991. His novel, *Tell No One*, was adapted for the screen, the action transferred to France.

In recent years, there have been quite a number of miniseries adaptations of Harlan Coben novels. Interestingly, they have not been made in the United States. Harlan Coben each series himself has acted as one of the executive producers of each series. They are adaptations of stand alone novels although one in production, is an adaptation of one of his Myron Bolitar stories *Stay Close*.

Devotees of the novels will have no difficulty in enjoying the series.

Five series are available on Netflix: in chronological order –

Safe, eight episodes, British production, cast led by Michael C. Hall.

The Stranger, eight episodes, British production, cast led by Richard Armitage.

The Woods, six episodes, Polish production.

The Innocent, eight episodes, Spanish production.

Gone for Good, five episodes, a French production.

The Internet movie database notes that two more series are in production,

Stay Close, eight episodes, British production,

Hold Tight, eight episodes, Polish production.

Reviews October 2021

CINEMA RELEASE

ALPINIST, The

COLONY, The

DIANA'S WEDDING

DONUT KING, The

LAMB

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RIDERS OF JUSTICE

RIDE THE EAGLE

STREAMING RELEASE

BAC NORD/ THE STRONGHOLD

Netflix

GUILTY, The

Netflix

HOLLYWOOD BULLDOGS: THE RISE AND FALLS OF THE GREAT BRITISH STUNTMEN Foxtel

KATE

Netflix

MIDNIGHT MASS

Netflix

OBAMA: IN SEARCH OF A MORE PERFECT UNION Foxtel

RAINY DAY IN NEW YORK, A

Foxtel

STARLING, The

Netflix

STILL HERE

SBS

CINEMA RELEASE

THE ALPINIST

US, 2021, 93 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Peter Mortimer, Nick Rosen.



Three years ago there was a test for audience endurance as they accompanied mountain climber, Alex Honnold, in the award-winning film, *Free Solo*, on his - for him ordinary but for us, edge-of seat – mountain climbing endeavours.

He is one of the talking heads in this same-vein documentary, praising a younger and even more adventurous and enterprising climber from British Columbia, Mark-Andre Leclerc.

Climbers will find this film a must. The scenery is mountains, magnificent, from British Columbia itself to the Rockies, to Patagonia. (And, ironically with the official title given to the climbers, Alpinists, no climbing in the actual Alps!). Not only the scenery, but the up-close as well as sweeping photography is spectacular. The film is a tribute to the two directors, Peter Mortimer and Nick Rosen who followed Mark Andre Leclerc and his climbing for two years. There are a lot of close-ups, even extreme close-ups, making the audience feel that we were there.

Marc Andre was the basic climber, minimal equipment, spiked shoes, ice axes, haversack, when necessary, with tent and food. There is a great deal of his climbing, illustrating his techniques, finding crevices, testing rock strength, checking ice solidity, alertness for avalanches, possibilities of danger.

When he is introduced, his 23 years of age, and already an achiever, with an emerging reputation amongst the climbers many of whom appear throughout the film, quite some testimonies.

He could have ruined his prospects with partying in his early adult years, drugs, alcohol, but getting hold of himself. He is also found a girlfriend, Brette Harrington, not just support but also a skilled climber herself, sharing so much with him.

By the end, with a lot of video footage, we feel that we have come to know Marc-Andre, have climbed the mountains, especially in Patagonia where he did not succeed the first time out he went tried again, succeeded (and some happily joyful scenes with the locals).

Which means that at the end of the film, we have come to know Marc-Andre. The ending is unexpected – we join in tributes to Marc-Andre.

THE COLONY

Switzerland/Germany, 2021, 104 minutes, Colour.

Nora Arnezeder, Iain Glenn, Sarah-Sofie Boussnina, Sope Dirisu, Sebastian Roche, Joel Basman, Kotti Yun, Eden Gough.

Directed by Tim Fehlbaum.



There seems to be a large contingent of fans for films about outer space. There are films about space exploration. There are films about space colonisation. There are films that aim at reality. There are many more that have the elements of science fiction, even science-fantasy.

The Colony (aka Tides, acknowledging the watery surface of the planet and so much of the action taking place on small boats and wrecks of large ships) is somewhat different. As expected, Earth has been devastated by climate change and other catastrophes, and inhabitants have fled to a distant planet, Keppler. But, this time it is the inhabitants from Keppler who are planning to return to Earth. There has been a failed mission. The film opens as we accompany the second mission, the small space team approaching earth and crash landing.

At the centre of the action is the astronaut with technical and medical expertise, Louise, a very strong action-hero of this kind of film, played by Nora Arnezeder. The early part of the film is quite eerie, the discovery of some human beings still on earth, living in squalor and destitution, highly suspicious of the intruders from space, imprisoning them. While the audience is wondering where this can all go, the small colony is attacked by what look like vicious pirates, a number of them taken prisoner, including a little girl who has been kind to Louise. Leadership in the colony is

exercised by the little girl's mother, fierce in her attitude, setting out to rescue her daughter and the others, Louise following.

What follows consists of revelations about the previous expedition, some success, the rounding up of young girls – with the revelation that the inhabitants of Keppler are unable to conceive children, the settlement on Keppler is about to die out, there is a need to transport these young girls from Earth back to the planet.

There are also some flashbacks to Louise as a little girl, her relationship with her scientist father, his ambitions for Keppler and going on the expedition, his mantra instilled into his daughter, not to be selfish, but everything to be “For the many”.

Louise is welcomed by the head of the mission, Gibson (Iain Glen), treated with some suspicion by his military associate, cheered by her meeting with the young girls being prepared to go to Keppler. There is also a little boy, his Chinese mother, part of the new generation on Earth.

Of course, there will be some revelations about double dealings, power grabs, the dilemma for Louise, her concern for the girl who helped her who has now become part of the group for Keppler, issues as to where her loyalties lie.

Which means that there are some fight scenes and confrontations at the end. Just as the final credits begin, there is a momentary scene indicating what the future might be.

Which also means that this is probably a film only for the space film fans.

DIANA'S WEDDING/ DIANAS BRYLLUP

Norway, 2020, 86 minutes, Colour.

Marie Blokhus, Pal Sverre Hagen, Jannike Cruz, Olav Waastad. Ine Marie Wilmann, John emil Jorgensrud.

Directed by Charlotte Blom.



For many audiences who are not as young as they used to be, the title *Diana's Wedding* would immediately bring to mind the 1981 Westminster Abbey ceremony where Diana Spencer married Prince Charles. Not sure whether *Diana's Wedding* means very much to those under 40 since it is 40 years since that wedding. However, it is this wedding that is the point of reference for this comedy/drama about marriage.

The film opens in 1981, an exuberantly happy atmosphere as Liv and Terje are married. The wedding is important for them when they name all their daughter, born 1981, Diana. Actually, as the film progresses, there are continued references to Diana and Prince Charles, happiness leading into unhappiness, Charles's behaviour with Camilla, the separation, Diana and Dodi Al Fayed, and expressions of great grief at the news of her death.

It would be interesting to hear the Royal family's response to the use of the wedding for this film, for British reactions. (Perhaps displeasure.) However, for the rest of the world, and in Europe, and throughout the Commonwealth, there are many mixed feelings about Diana and Charles.

But, of course, the focus is on Liv and Terje, the birth of their daughter, the young son, Cato. Liv and Terje tend to be a very happy-go-lucky couple, he at work with his mates, she at home with verve, at a holiday camp where the little Diana actually follows her father as he goes with the blokes to a strip club – and later draws photos of the pole-dancers to her mother's dismay and anger against her husband. So, this is what marriages are like! Love, sometimes over the top, huge mistakes, eventual forgiveness, love again.

But this is by contrast with the couple across the street, Olav and Unni, welcoming the newcomers, revealing a contrasting marriage, he rather self-contained, concerned about his health, sometimes with a roving eye, she also a touch prim but gradually, with her drinking, loosening up – and even more loosening up. They have a daughter, Irene, and Diana and Irene are the best of friends.

Then, shock. It is 2020. Diana and Irene are still friends. It was big, bearded, burly, and a genial mediator in the family as well as the disc jockey. Diana is about to be married. And what about the couples? Liv and Terje are just the same but the

often-embarrassed and angry Diana doesn't really want them at her wedding. Olav and Unni are much the same except that he is still self-preoccupied and Unni has become more desperately unhappy, taking it out on Irene and criticising her figure and weight.

Any resolution? You will have to see. However, the film's overall tone is less like the unhappy marriage of Charles and Diana but the belief that, no matter what the ups and downs, no matter what the squabbles and tantrums, the underlying love is most important.

THE DONUT KING

US, 2020, 90 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Alice Gu.



A documentary about the American dream – but which, through a variety of episodes and moods, shows us the dream and the wonders of fulfilment, there is the ever-present danger of the dream turning to nightmare.

Film reviewers sometimes have to offer a caution, that they are personally involved in the narrative, or in the issues. In this case, the present reviewer has to confess to never having liked donuts! And, to say the least, here are 90 minutes of hundreds and hundreds of donuts, of all varieties – and more! So, these words from the rather detached point of view, at least from the perspective towards the donuts themselves.

We are in no doubt from the first 10 minutes of this documentary about the place of donuts in the American menu, sugar, icings and sweetness, and for the American psyche. Dunkin' Donuts, Winchells, all kinds of donut shops and takeaway. But, there is the fascinating piece of information that it is Cambodian refugees since the 1970s who own and staff so many of these donut stores.

And, from icing exuberance suddenly to the history of Cambodia in the first half of the 1970s, the Vietnam war, its extension into Cambodia, Nixon and the extensive bombings, stopped by Congress, the rise of the Khmer Rouge, the massacre of

populations, the enormous migration out of Cambodia, the status of the country by 1976 and the devastation of Phnom Penh. All presented powerfully and with a great deal of contemporary news footage.

So, this is not just a sweetness and tasty documentary.

We are introduced to a significant refugee and his family, wife and many children, extended family. He is uncle Ted, Ted Ngoy, who served in the Cambodian military in Bangkok, who is offered a flight by an American colleague, for refugee status in the United States. Throughout the film, uncle Ted, 77 at the time of filming, is interviewed, giving the background as to what happened, his extraordinary success with donuts, training, franchises, involving his whole family, and his ability to be a sponsor for so many Cambodians taking refuge in the United States, extending their work in providing donuts and being increasingly creative with recipes, cooking styles, decoration. The Cambodians, like the Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon, are nothing if not industrious (which might not give true acknowledgement to their seven-day a week, no holiday, commitment to their work and to the saving of money for the benefits of their family).

One of the commentators is a food and recipes' journalist, a young man, who is able to comment on this phenomenon of Cambodians and donuts, especially in California. There are also interviews with the executives of Dunkin' Donuts, Winchells, and other franchises. Which turns the documentary into something of a story of American enterprise within the American dream, the making of money, the investing of money, financial success. And other members from the Cambodian community are also interviewed. And, prominent among the interviewees is Uncle Ted's wife, Christy, quite a vivacious personality, reminiscing about fleeing Cambodia, the flight, the camp, and her horror at being fed mashed potato and pasta!

One of the key features of the documentary as it looked back at the 1970s is the contribution of President Gerald Ford and his welcoming the refugees, despite the apprehensions of California Governor Jerry Brown about jobs and workers, the quick establishing of Camp Pendleton and facilities for the refugees, Betty Ford going to the camp and addressing and welcoming them. (The implication, sometimes explicit, is that Americans in those times, despite fears and some xenophobia, were actually more welcoming than present America is to refugees.) Uncle Ted and his family were sponsored by a Lutheran parish reminding audiences of welfare groups, churches, and welcoming migrants, remembering that the United States was built on migrants.

One of the shocks of the film – and, therefore, not to be included as a spoiler here – is that everything did not go smoothly for some of the migrants, especially problems with money, including heavy gambling, destruction of relationships... Which makes the story of The Donut King, a rather complex tale, not simply a fairytale interpretation of the American dream.

Donut fans will be glad to know that there have been extraordinary adaptation since the 1970s, Americans eating billions of donuts per year, an increasing range of designer donuts – and the visuals do not let up until the final credits!

LAMB

Iceland, 2021, 106 minutes, Colour.

Noomi Rapace, Hilmer Snær Guðnason, Björn, Hlynur Haraldsson.

Directed by Valdimar Jóhannsson.



The title, *Lamb*, sounds innocent enough. Lambs, especially those who do not have to work on farms, seem nice and cuddly. However, there is a Biblical tradition of the sacrificial lamb. And what of the presence of lambs in fairy tales, folklore, in particular countries? Here is an Icelandic variation – not as might be expected.

In fact, the narrative of *Lamb* is certainly unpredictable. And, audiences will be wondering how to respond as the story unfolds, goes in those unexpected directions.

Probably a word of warning is necessary at the beginning of a review. This is not a film for impatient viewers. They will be turning off very quickly as the film becomes more and more reflective, a film that immerses its audience in the atmosphere of the story, of the settings, of the behaviour of the characters.

This is an Iceland familiar from many of the intriguing films from that country (producing more films than its small population might be expected to make). There are quite a number of films set on farms – and audiences will remember *Rams*. This is a farm out in the remote countryside, a road in and out, glimpses of cars, and a local bus at the end. However, remote is a key word.

As with so many Icelandic films, out in the countryside, the scenery and the photography of the scenery are quite spectacular, the mountains, the valleys...

There is an ominous opening sequence a herd of horses lost in a snowdrift. And that in great deal of attention to the flocks, in winter, the radio indicating that it is Christmas time, all the sheep in pens inside buildings, crowded together, all turning in the one direction when the farmer comes in, eagerly chewing when hay is strewn along the pathways and they all line up in unison, contentedly chomping. (Perhaps this is where the impatient viewers stop watching!). But we are also introduced to the farmer and his wife, Ingvar and Maria, young middle-aged, bonding together, more silent than talking, working with the sheep. And, as the weather improves, seeing them both out

with the tractor, ploughing the ground, planting seeds. (Swedish actress Noomi Rapace spent childhood years in Iceland and speaks the language.)

The only thing which interrupts them is the farmer's brother, ditched by a group in the countryside, seemingly with money problems, given hospitality by the couple, and working for his keep.

So far, so ordinary. But a highlight of the farmer's work is the birthing of some lambs. There is a particular lamb that has a difficult birth, and the farmers distance the lamb from its mother. They nurture it, feed it, bringing it into the house, calling it Ada. And Ada is, of course, the lamb of the title.

As mentioned, the plotline is quite unpredictable, first with visual suggestions, then audience surprise at what is happening, the effect of the lamb on Maria, on Ingvar, and the reaction of the brother. And, since spoilers would be inappropriate, this has to be the end of a review with a final comment, tantalising, it is hoped, that what occurs is arresting, sometimes quaint, and, at moments, alarming. As said, this is a film which immerses its audience in life in this Icelandic farm.

MS WHITE LIGHT

US, 2019, 97 minutes, Colour.

Roberta Colindrez, Zachary Spicer, John Ortiz, Judith Light, Carson Meyer.

Directed by Paul Shoulberg.



White light? Light at the end of the tunnel? Death experiences? The answer is, yes, but not in the way we might have expected.

This drama introduces us to a care industry (perhaps that sounds like an oxymoron). It seems a particularly American thing – it would be interesting to know whether other countries employ members of a company to be present for the dying of a family member, the members of the family unwilling or unable to accompany the dying

person. We are left in no doubt with the opening of the film, Lex Cordova (a striking and sometimes bewildering Roberta Colindrez) sitting by the bedside of an dying elderly lady. The family sit by, sad. Then Lex vehemently criticises the members of the family for their lack of care and empathy – and she is punched out for her trouble. Where is this going?

Lex Cordova is certainly an interesting character to watch. At times, she seems to be on the spectrum, so objective and detached she seems in her manner, way of blunt speaking. We guess that there has been a trauma in her life – which comes to the surface towards the end of the film. Lex works with her father, John Ortiz, in an office which has a spare desk and the father wonders whether they should have a secretary. Father and daughter dress in the same kind of suit. They have their takeaway meals watching television. Clients are somewhat scarce.

Lex is challenged by having to accompany a 17-year-old dying from a blood disorder, Nora (Carson Meyer). With her great faith in samurai traditions and weapons, Nora matches Lex's bluntness with bluntness. Nora will appear again, taking over the management of the office, continually challenging Lex.

However, the core of the film is Lex attending an elderly woman, Val, who has led rather a wildlife, never bound down, drugs, a free spirit, played with intensity by Judith Light, the audience really believing that they are seeing this dying woman rather than an actress. Val is a great challenge to Lex who has some moments of bewilderment. And this is complicated when she encounters Spencer (Zachary Spicer) who also attends the dying, claiming to be some kind of a medium putting the dying person in touch with characters from the past. Actually Val employs quite a number of assistants to her dying, even some of the staff who play cards with her. So, serious moments, comic moments. And situations becoming more and more complicated with Spencer.

It is healthy to see a film dealing with some of the realities of death, hospitals, professional staff, the reactions/superficial reactions of family, challenges to family and their care and lack of care. And, the experiences of death, the loneliness, and the effect of the presence of someone close.

Lex is such a complicated character, bewildering the audience at times, but drawing us deeper into her own responses, her own life and questions, the realities of being alive, and the realities of dying.

(The writer-director of this film, Paul Shoulberg, made the very interesting, little seen, *The Good Catholic*, a blend of comedy and drama about life in the rectory, three priests and their ministry as well as personal crises.)

PERSIAN LESSONS

Russia/Germany/Belarus, 2020, 126 minutes, Colour.

Nahuel Peres Biscayart, Lars Eidinger.

Directed by Vadim Perelman.



Persian Lessons is an unusual or unexpected title for a film about Nazis, Jews, concentration camps during World War II. It states that it is based on a true story.

While the story is intriguing in itself, the film is very strong on showing the callousness of the ordinary German soldiers, men and women, doing their duty with loyalty to Hitler, killing without any strong sense of destroying another human being, going off to be entertained as they dominate the prisoners.

Argentinian actor, Nahuel Peres Biscayart, plays Gilles, son of a rabbi, imprisoned in Belgium, allegedly to be transported but actually to be shot. In the back of the truck, he encounters another prisoner who is starving who begs him for his sandwich. He does give it and receives in return a book in Farsi that the other prisoner had picked up after a Persian family had been taken.

Gilles is shrewd and is able to survive for some time in the camp, producing the book, claiming that it was his, and that he had Persian ancestry. As happens, one of the officers commanding (a mixture of the cruel and the foolish), Koch (Lars Eidinger), remembers his brother who refused joining the Nazi party and went to open a restaurant in Teheran. He now wants to learn Farsi in order to be ready to go to Teheran after the war. Gilles offers a

wonderful opportunity for him to learn the language.

On the one hand, there is a lot of farce as Gilles, sometimes with difficulty, especially in remembering the language and words he is creating, agrees to teach Koch Farsi, a few words at a time, then many words. Koch has sacked the female officer who was copying the names of prisoners into the register and Gilles gets the job, working part-time in the kitchen as well, living in the barracks.

This means that the audience sees the range of life in the concentration camp from the point of view of the officials, from the point of view of the workers, life in the barracks as well as in the quarries and the hardships of rock breaking.

Needless to say, there are some close moments at times but Gilles devises a clever way of inventing words by taking the first part of the surname of the prisoners and nominating a meaning!

With ups and downs, this continues for several years until the allies advance on the camp, Gilles finally taking on his Jewish identity and marching away with the condemned, Koch disguising himself and there are some very funny sequences, as might be anticipated, as he tries to talk to Allied officials with his years of learning Farsi vocabulary!

There must always be stories of World War II, of the Holocaust – this one is certainly arresting and rather different.

PIG

US, 2021, 91 minutes, Colour.
Nicolas Cage, Alex Wolfe, Adam Arkin.
Directed by Michael Sarnoski.



Pig is certainly an arresting title. It may also be off-putting. Which would be a pity because, while there is a pig in the central role, there is so much more in this personal drama.

We are introduced to a rather bedraggled recluse, Robin, living out in the sticks for about 10 years, withdrawn from the world, surviving on basics, going out into the woods searching for truffles, relying on his peak. Robin has great affection for the peak – and is distraught when, early in the film, the pig it is stolen and disappears.

Even that might not be an enticing film opening. But, there is Nicolas cage is Robin, long unwashed hair, the oldest of clothes, living a basic life, in the company of his peak. He does have one outside contact, a young man, A mere (Alex Wolfe) who comes every Thursday to pick up the trouble is to take them to Portland restaurants.

The food motif continues right throughout the film, three chapters with headings describing meals, the discovery of Robin's past life as a master chef, visits to restaurants and discussions about cooking... And, the final chapter, a particularly fine meal where Robin draws on his chef's talent.

Which means then that this is a portrait of Robin, one of Nicolas Cage's most serious and best performances. Robin determines to find his pig and enlists Amir's help. This involves a number of visits to strange characters in Portland, including a former associate who runs brutal competitions in a basement under the town square, a Motley group of men betting on the capacity for endurance we are willing victims are timed as they are sadistically brutalised. Which happens to Robin, willingly. He was injured in the occasion when the pig was stolen but now he has a bashed face, looking unwashed (and he does go throughout the film without washing his face until the end). He is a vagrant bedraggled victim.

There are quite a number of sequences, seemingly incidental but revealing Robin, especially when he and you go to a fashionable restaurant, encounter the chef who recognises him, claims acquaintance from the past, but Robin, as in many cases, seems to have a photographic memory and unmask the chef and his humble and inefficient origins.

But, the main drama is Robin's meeting up with Amir's father, friends from the past, revelations about their families, the death of wives, Robin and his grief. And, so, the final dinner is meant to be an opportunity, not of vengeance, but of honesty, possibilities for pardon, possibilities for hope.

As Robin goes through this process, his pig stolen, his being brutalised, his having to read-live his past, he is finally able to accept his life's experience, his wife's death, and listening to her on a cassette that for 10 years he has not been able to listen to, even as he puts it in the player.

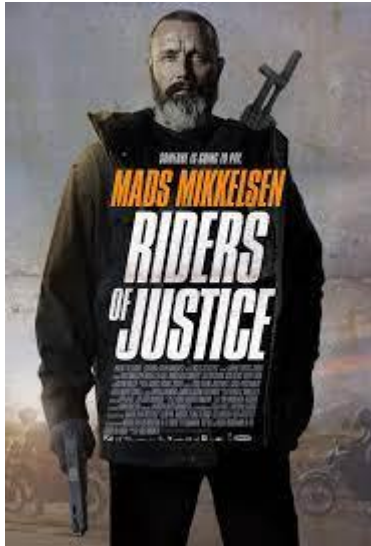
Pig is one of the most interesting films of 2021.

RIDERS OF JUSTICE

Denmark, 2021, 115 minutes, Colour.

Mads Mikkelsen, Nikolaj Lie Kaas, Lars Brygmann, Nicolas Bro, Andrea Heick Gadeborg.

Directed by Anders Thomas Jensen.



Riders of Justice is quite an experience. No, that is something of an understatement. In its way, it is quite exhilarating. But, of course there are cautions.

The credits say that the screenplay, by the director. Anders Thomas Jensen and his associate, Nikolaj Arcel (himself a prolific writer and director) is attributed to "After an idea of...". It would have been most interesting to be a fly on the wall as the two kept on getting more and more ideas, tossing them, tangling them, seeing how far they could go. In fact, if there were to be an award for screenplay which was completely unpredictable from moment to moment, sequence to sequence, Riders of Justice would be a top contender.

It might be possible to write a synopsis of the film, though that would be a challenge, but very difficult to communicate (and the same goes for a reviewer) the changes of mood, the eccentricities of the characters, the funny repartee, the eruptions of violence. It probably should be mentioned that one of the main characters has continual Tourette's outbursts, no holds barred, and his syndrome seems to be infectious for most of the other characters. They do look graphic up there in the subtitles rather than simply hearing them. And, there are some shootouts and shoot ups (with the continual challenge as to whose side we are on).

The introduction to the characters is arresting, Mathilde, a young girl, wanting a bicycle for Christmas; her military father phoning to say he cannot return for three months; a

boardroom meeting with two eccentric characters who are putting a proposal about using statistics for predictions – they are fired! But, mother and daughter and one of the eccentrics find themselves together on a train, an explosion, the mother killed. And the statistician noting the suspicious behaviour of a passenger, going to the police with this information, but not really believed. Actually, looking at the characters and listening to them, who would believe that? But, each of them in his own way is quite obsessive, caught up in theory, but also one of them being an absolute expert in hacking, and their having another friend whose life is absorbed by hacking, collating information, extraordinary resources – so that the three are able to identify the suspicious man on the train.

In the meantime, the military man comes home, tries to relate to his daughter, failing. She is also interested in the chain of events, the unpredictable happenings that led to the tragedy, a series of post-its on her bedroom wall. Later in the film, the statistician and Mathilde will have a long conversation about the nature of events, happenings, coincidences, the various strands of life that lead to an event in the human mind unable to comprehend it all.

If this sounds intriguing, then the film itself and the development of the screenplay are much, much more intriguing. The three experts, looking and acting like a variation on the Three Stooges, team up with the military man, identifying the criminals, a man on the train with his lawyer, about to testify against the bikie gang, Riders of Justice. It all seems logical, given the technology, and the three move into the military man's barn, a huge headquarters to probe the case. Actually, the plan keeps going skewiff, including deaths, shooting, the rescuing of a male escort from Ukraine who ends up doing the equivalent of au pair work with the daughter. Also in the act is her boyfriend, a smart cook whose recipes appear online – which ultimately has dangerous consequences.

Some mention should be made of grief, therapy, counselling, one of the eccentrics having to take over as a therapist (with the mention that in his own life he had had several thousand hours of therapy so knew what he was doing) – and some of the sessions both effective and funny.

Not sure whether this review is doing justice to Riders of Justice, but it is an experience of deadly serious episodes combined with ironic farce, shudder one moment, smile and laugh the next. And, the final shootout could be in serious competition with The Wild Bunch. But, at the end, some smiles, but it is Christmas, each receiving a gift, a French horn rendering of The Drummer Boy, Mathilde on her bike in the snow, and some tears forming in the eyes of the audience.

The cast is excellent. Mads Mikkelsen as the soldier, his frequent collaborator, Nicolas Bro, comically capitalising on how large he is, as the computer expert, and a word for Andrea Heick Gadeborg as Mathilde, holding her own well with the adults.

RIDE THE EAGLE

US, 2021, 88 minutes, Colour.

Jake Johnston, D'Arcy Carden, Susan Sarandon, J.K. Simmons.

Directed by Trent O'Donnell.



An unusual film, made during the Covid epidemic, very few sequences where actors are together, rather ways found for communication between characters, phone calls, a bequest by video... It is a work of Australian writer-director, Trent O'Donnell, who worked with comedian actor, Jake Johnston for television and they have collaborated on this particular story.

It is a star vehicle for Jake Johnston who portrays a middle-aged man, Leif. He doesn't exactly undergo a midlife crisis but rather is given the opportunity for a mid-life reassessment.

He has had something of an ambling life, playing in a band, skills in music and performance. He had been abandoned by his mother at the age of 12 when she had joined a cult. He has not had communication with her. Suddenly, his life is changed when a friend arrives with news that his mother has died and that she has left him her chalet – with some conditions.

The main drama/comedy of the film is his going to the chalet, looking at the video from his mother – who is played in her familiar style by Susan Sarandon. She offers him a particular bucket list which she thinks is important for him. He has to put a note on the pillow of a local, Carl, who reacts very badly, stalking Leif, covered in a hood, putting dead rabbits on the windscreen of his car, finally angrily confronting him. He has been Leif's mother's lover and suspected Leif as his replacement. That matter is resolved!

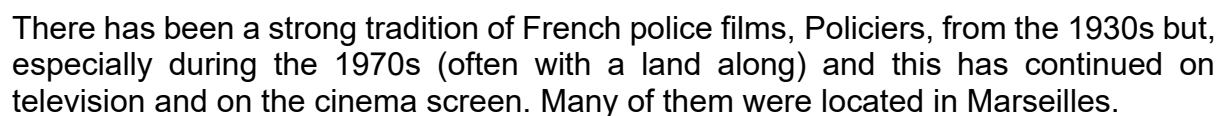
The film takes advantage of some of the local scenery where leaf has to go to kill his own food and goes fishing in a lake with mixed results. He has also to make a trek out into the mountains to

Mother congratulates her son from the video as he finishes his tasks. She is satisfied that he has tried whether you succeeded or not – and the chalet is his. D’Arcy Cardin, who also produced the film, bring some mischievous energy to Audrey.

And the title, explained at the end, is a verse which indicates from his mother that Leif has ventured out, shown in a sketch, Riding the Eagle.

BAC NORD/THE STRONGHOLD

Gilles Lellouche, François Civil, Karim Leklou, Adele Exarchopoulos, Kenza Fortas.
Directed by Cedric Jimenez.



This is a Marseilles story, especially the northern district of the city, an area with a strong reputation for crime, for drug dealing. A particular area is nominated as The Ghetto, tough guards, multi-racial, checking who was coming in and going out.

This film is based on a true story, on the demands by police authorities for offices to measure up to a quota of drug busts and arrests, taking in drugs. However, a number of the police used some of the drugs taken as a way of payment to informants. In 2012, a number were arrested and charged with criminal offences, shaking up administration with political repercussions. In this film, the focus is on three of these offices.

There are three strong and very different performances, especially from veteran Gilles Lellouche, 20 years on the force, extraordinarily tough, a loner in his own life, but, surprisingly, prone to mental collapse after his arrest. François Civil is the young policeman, rather happy-go-lucky in his attitude towards his work, to his friends. And it is he who has the young addict as his informant and pays her off in drugs. Karim Leklou is the married officer, his police officer wife expecting a child.

The three are seen in action, confronting the toughs in the Ghetto, deciding not to give themselves away in going to the rescue of a parallel squad. However, under the supervision of their deskbound commander, a huge operation is planned and carried out in the Ghetto. This action is expertly choreographed and edited, tracking suspects, changing trackers, finding the main stash, the confrontation, shootouts.

This might have been enough for such a film but in the second part, the tone changes considerably as the three men are arrested (although there has been an indication of this at the very opening of the film, treated very harshly, severely interrogated, secluded, limited phone calls... The pressure is on the young policeman to give up the name of his informant. Given the pressures on his other two, he does give up the name and the men are released.

So, two films in one, a police action thriller and a psychological drama of the internment of the officers.

THE GUILTY

US, 2021, 90 minutes, Colour.

Jake Gyllenhaal, Christine Vidal, voices of: Ethan Hawke, Peter Sarsgaard, Christiana Montoya, Riley Keogh, Paul Dano.

Directed by Antoine Fuqua.



The original, *The Guilty*, was Denmark's official nomination for the 2018 Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film. It won many awards and was critically praised – and bloggers seem to be unanimous in their appreciation for the film. It has now been remade in the United States, accessible to audiences who are unable to or reluctant to read subtitles. This version has been directed by Antoine Fuqua, director of many action films as well as sports documentaries.

As often happens with American remakes of European films, there was general condemnation, that this version was unnecessary, that people should read subtitles, that this was exploitative of the original, that was not as good as the original. But, the issue is, that any film should be taken on its own merits without immediate comparisons with the original.

On paper, the film looks fairly straightforward, a police story, cases that they have to handle. At first, this is confirmed with a man ringing in complaining of being mugged – and it turning out that he had picked up a prostitute who mocked him. There is also a drunk who does not know where he is. In this way we are introduced to the 911 Emergency Service in Los Angeles, and the work of the man on duty, Joe.

Joe is played with extreme intensity by Jake Gill and heart of, the film focusing completely on him and his reactions, and string the phone, listening to the calls, becoming personally involved, the audience becoming more aware of his own angers and desperation, phone calls to his wife and wanting to his talk to his daughter even in the middle of the night.

In fact, the film is not quite as we expected at all. The action does not leave the Emergency Services rooms, concentrating completely on Jo, some interactions with the other members of the staff at the office, his communications by phone with other officials in order to get

action going, some communication with a friend (which has serious repercussions by the end of the film). The phone call and his reactions become more and more frantic and emotional.

A number of commentators have been reminded of the film, *Locke*, with Tom Hardy, the action which takes place completely in a car as the central character drives. Then there is *Buried*, with Ryan Reynolds, the action taking place in a coffin which has been buried. Quite a challenge for a writer and director to keep audiences interested. But, *The Guilty*, certainly retains the interest.

The main part of the film, which is a comparatively short film, concerns a woman phoning in, gradually revealing that she has been abducted, is ringing the police but pretending to be talking to her young daughter. Joe keeps her on the phone, gets what information he can, communicates it to other officers. He also uses his wits, finding the address of the abducted woman, phoning and talking to her little daughter, gaining more information about the father and the parents' separation, his visit to the house, his violent outburst, the little girl caring about her little brother and concerned about her mother.

Without revealing any more of the plot, it can be said that there is quite a twist in this episode, audiences asking themselves how they responded to the interrogations, the evidence, the behaviour of the mother, the behaviour of the father, the repercussions on the little girl, especially when Joe is able to advise police to go to the house.

This development makes the film more involving for the audience, interested in how Asger is handling the situation, the relative behaviours of the mother and the father.

Throughout the film, Joe has been phoning a friend who is to give testimony the next day in a court case – the friend has testified to firing a gun but the revelation is that Joe fired the gun. In a moving conversation at the end, Joe, broken down and weeping admits. There is some final voice-over as to what decisions Joe makes.

HOLLYWOOD BULLDOGS: THE RISE AND FALLS OF THE GREAT BRITISH STUNTMEN

UK, 2021, 110 minutes, Colour.

Vic Armstrong, Ray Austin, Jim Dowdle, Richard Hammett, Frank Henson, Greg Powell, Rocky Taylor, Paul Weston. Narrated by Ray Winstone.

Directed by John Spira.



Here is a treat for dedicated moviegoers. The IMDb description indicates the content and tone of this documentary.

Hollywood Bulldogs tells the rough-and-tumble story of the small community of British stunt performers who went on to dominate Hollywood in the 1970s and 80s. Growing out of the ragtag community of bouncers, gangsters and de-mobbed soldiers who were prepared to take a punch or chuck themselves down a flight of stairs for a few quid, the next generation went on to turn stunt work into a legitimate profession. They created and performed the iconic action sequences of 007, Indiana Jones, Superman, Rambo, Star Wars, Conan, the Alien films and pretty much everything since. They crashed cars, jumped from burning buildings, shot, stabbed, kicked and punched their way into cinema history. This is the first feature documentary to unite this legendary community in telling their story and as you'll see, there's life in the old dogs yet.

When we look back at the action films of the 1970s and 1980s, think James Bond, think Indiana Jones, think Star Wars... We appreciate the enormous amount of stunt work that brought those films into enjoyable action. It was the pre-computer graphics era.

The names listed above may not be familiar, although Vic Armstrong, the anchor commentator for this documentary, has had a long career including directing himself. However, each of the stuntmen has a particular personality, interesting to hear of their origins, army, stand ins... And their observations on what this has meant for their lives, some of them even sustaining severe injuries. But, they are proud of their work and enthusiastic as they talk about their life and work (except for comments and sequences showing the British director Michael Winner, generally considered obnoxious and badly demanding, risking accidents).

There are plenty of sequences from the films throughout, evoking many happy memories. And the stories about Steven Spielberg, Harrison Ford, Sean Connery, Dolph Lundgren and many others.

However, it is the look behind the action sequences that are intriguing, the meticulous detail in setting up the stunts, the camera meticulous planning for shooting the sequences, the stand ins and

the skill in editing the stars with the stand-ins in action.

The men themselves are particularly articulate – perhaps we had a presupposition that they might not be as intelligent and well-spoken as we thought. They really tell their stories very interestingly, we enjoy their company, and, now that they are older, it is very hard to imagine them as young and doing all the feats that are shown in the film.

There is a narration by Ray Winstone in his familiar gangster tones – enthusiastic but rather out of place considering the pleasing and enjoyable tones of the stuntmen themselves.

KATE

US, 2021, 106 minutes, Colour.

Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Woody Harrelson, Miku Patricia Martineau, Jun Kunimura, Michiel Huisman.

Directed by Cedric Nicolas-Troyan.



In more recent decades, there have been films about female assassins, like La Femme Nikita American version with Bridget Fonda,. And, given the popularity of superhero movies, audiences can begin to take female assassins for granted, especially the two sisters, the women and their training, in Marvels Black Widow.

This action thriller is in that vein – which means asking the audience to put some of the values in abeyance as well is to test their tolerance for grim sequences, a touch of the gruesome, a touch of blood and gore.

This film doesn't waste any time, showing us Kate, a more than vigorous Mary Elizabeth Winstead who is both attractive and unattractive in herself and her work. But, in the episode, she fails to reach her target, alarming the teenage niece of the target.

And the setting is Japan (though some filming in Thailand). The target was a wealthy gangster boss travelling with his entourage. The hit was in Osaka – and some attractive and fine views of the city. The action transfers to Tokyo, again some fine

views but, this time, going into the various neighbourhoods and the touch of the sinister.

But, who is Kate? She is a survivor, a young girl, victim of violence, and taken on by a mastermind, master-organiser, Varick (played by Woody Harrelson in his familiar style). Kate discusses matters with Varick who is a kind of father-figure. She exercises. She trains. She has a steady of a with a rifle. She is handy with knives.

In a moment of relaxation, she buys a new dress, dresses glamorously, goes to a bar, encounters a young man and goes home with him. But, like the old captain DOA drama of 1949, she is poisoned (this time with radiation) and determines to find who was responsible.

Kate is nothing if not determined and thorough, getting medication from the pharmacy to sustain her through her deteriorating condition. She tracks down the young man, gets help from his girlfriend, confirms that the gangster chief is after her. She also tracks down the niece, spirited leave disagreeable, get information from her, gets some of the thugs to come to rescue – with some expected mayhem sequences, a bit more than expected.

Despite her condition, she pursues her quest, getting the help of the niece, finding the gangster – and the Revelation of some twists (which, by this time, we were probably expecting). And, what is the role of Varrick and Mark

And, just as the film seems to end, with Kate's succumbing, she revives there is another substantial part of the film to go. It's as if there was in the filmmakers mind, there was to be a Kate 2, and now here it is as an epilogue, new alliances, new deceits and twists,

With all the grim stuff, Kate is ultimately for the fans only.

MIDNIGHT MASS

US, 2021, 7X 60 minutes, Colour.

Hamish Linklater, Katie Siegel, Zach Gilford, Samantha Sloan, Kristin Lehman, Henry Thomas, Igby Rigney, Rahul Kohli, Annabeth Gish, Alex Essoe, Annarah Cymone, Rahul Abburi, Matt Biedel, Michael Trucco, Quinton Boisclair, Robert Longstreet.

Directed by Mike Flanagan.



Midnight Mass was a very popular 2021 limited series for Netflix. It was written and directed by Mike Flanagan, who has specialised in horror stories including Oculus, The Haunting of Bly Manor, The Haunting of Hill House and the Stephen King adaptation, Gerald's Game. He often collaborates, as he does here, with his wife, Katie Siegel.

Concerning the characters and themes, Mike Flanagan has said,

“All of those versions of me are in conversation with each other on this show – the altar boy, the atheist, the scientist, the believer, the moderate, the student, the parent, the child, the alcoholic – and I am grateful for all of them. There was so much I wanted to say, every time I sat down to type about the people of Crockett Island; so much I thought I knew, so much I didn't know.

The setting is Crockett Island, off the American coast, a small close-knit community, the community held together by veteran Monsignor who has travelled on a pilgrimage to Israel but taken ill and hospitalised. The sheriff of the town is a Muslim. A substitute priest arrives, Father Paul, young, enthusiastic, saying all the right religious and spiritual things, wearing a gold chasuble in the liturgy's Ordinary Time, noted by the parish assistant, Beth, who emerges as a holier-than-thou, humorless controller, Bev.

The first part of the series fills in the background of key characters from the island, starting with the young man, Riley, who has left the island, has been involved in a drunk-driving accident and has served a jail term, now returning home. His mother is portrayed as the typical and traditional devout Catholic mother. The father, rather more quiet, upset by his son's behaviour, is a local fisherman. The younger son, teenager at school, altar boy at the church, but who sneaks out with friends, including the sheriff's son, to do drug deals.

Other key characters on the island include the teacher, Erin, who has returned to the

island after experiencing a pregnancy. There is also the local doctor, glimpsed at one stage with a lesbian friend, who serves the people of the island but looks after her ageing mother who has touches of dementia. There are also a number of big and burly men around the island, one who has accidentally shot a young girl and crippled her, her father being the Mayor.

There are many scenes of liturgy, generally with sound technical advice, giving a feeling of authenticity. While there is some strictness in practice, there is also an acceptance of more recent changes such as communion in the hand, communion from the chalice, lay readers, there being a female communion minister, Bev.

At the time of Father Paul's arrival, there seem to be some extraordinary events, and the word miraculous is used. Father Paul urges the crippled girl to stand and come forward to receive communion. She is healed. The doctor's mother begins to revert, becoming younger. On the other hand, there are some deaths, cats, some poison associated with rats, kept in a cupboard locked by the controller.

One of the features of the series which alienated audiences who simply want action and horror is that there are many long speeches, seeming monologues, tackling the issues of life and death, God, the transcendent, issues of sin and evil, many of them between Riley and Erin. Paul also persuades Riley to join in an AA session, which involves a lot of discussion about guilt, responsibility, faith. And the shooter of the young girl is also persuaded to join.

At an early stage, there is a flashback to the monsignor's journey, especially to Damascus, with the overtones of Paul's conversion experience, the monsignor taking refuge in a cave, encountering a large mysterious creature (interpreted by him and others as an angel, for the audience it looks rather more demonic), it also has vampire qualities, and its blood is stored and mysteriously transported in a chest to the island.

About halfway through, there is a highly violent sequence, changing the tone of the whole series, moving it into some of the realms of religious horror. The Angel/demonic creature will continually appear, threatening the congregation, killing, vampire blood.

Religious issues are to the fore with the presentation of Catholic tradition, Catholic doctrine. There is an interesting challenge with the presence of the Muslim sheriff, his stories about his police career, prejudice against him after 9/11, his presence on the island, his observing the rituals of prayer during the day, wanting his son to follow his footsteps, the son wanting to be part of the island life, friends with his peers, joining them, wanting to go to the church.

Most of the action of the film takes place during Lent, quite a ritual ceremony and explanation for the ashes on Ash Wednesday (and a strange custom of a local fair and feast on that day, everybody with their ashes on their forehead). The action progresses through Lent until Holy Week, the advertisement for a Mass on Good Friday (which is where the action veers from the orthodox) leading to the preparation for the Easter Vigil, the Midnight Mass, which is something altogether different, a culmination of the changes in the life of the island, the miracles, Father Paul advocating a different kind of baptismal ceremony, more a vampiric experience, the congregation killing each other, drinking the blood, reviving into a bizarre resuscitation, resurrection.

In the meantime, it has been revealed that Father Paul is actually the rejuvenated monsignor, coming to do good for the island, but caught up in the bizarre Damascus experience, able to speak authentically about the gospel and spirituality, but wanting to transform the island, the end justifying the brutal means. The consequences have Riley understanding what was going on, his warning Erin, his confronting Father Paul and revealing the truth, his death.

The last episode has the mayhem of the Easter Vigil, the mass killings, revivals, zombies, Father Paul regretting what was happening, his being shot by the rejuvenated mother of the doctor – with the revelation that they had an affair in the past and the doctor as their daughter.

As regards the future, the various sequences characters have their death experiences, Riley's parents, Erin herself, the doctor and her mother. However, in the confrontation with the Angel/Demon, Erin is able to snip the wings so that when it flies, it crashes.

The only survivors are the family's young son and the girl who was cured but who now reverts to her disabled state.

The series was very popular leading to a great deal of discussion.

OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION

US, 2021, 3X105, Colour.

Directed by Peter W. Kunhardt.



This is a three-part HBO documentary from August 2021. It is well worth seeing and reflecting on, the significance of the first black American president, and in the light of the four years of the subsequent Trump administration. And, especially with the election of President Biden, seen at the side of Obama during his campaign and the eight years of presidency.

The film has a subtitle: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union. And, this is the thrust of the documentary. It is not an analysis of Obama's presidency, details of American legislation (though an emphasis on Obamacare), practically nothing on foreign policy and relationships of the United States to countries around the world. Rather, the emphasis is on bringing all Americans together, the experience of racism, Obama's vision and attempts to bring races together. "We can."

The series has three parts: the first part showing Obama's origin and background, his growing up, family issues, his education, his talents, organising, politics. The second part focuses on the 2008 campaign. The third part is an overview of his presidency in the light of the more perfect union theme.

The documentary has the advantage of huge range of archival footage to draw on. There are many photos of Obama when young, with his intellectual father from Kenya and is leaving his family, his white mother, many tributes to her, and, especially, his white grandmother. Later he has the opportunity to meet his relatives in Kenya. The first part traces in some detail his growing up, education, time in Indonesia, university studies, Harvard and his achievement and positions, his writing, his move to Chicago, church connections, moving into organising and, eventually, into politics.

John Kerry invited Obama to speak at the 2004 Democrat Convention and his visionary speech made quite an impression, making him a credible candidate for the presidency in 2008. The film shows the range of responses to his candidature, the African-American support, the white racism and, a range of dirty tricks and embarrassment and his dignified handling of these situations. We travel to the various Primaries, the competition from Hillary Clinton, the influence of Bill Clinton. And, the extraordinary experience of the election night and his winning the presidency.

The producers have been able to document all this visually with wide and substantial television footage.

And, there is quite a range of talking heads throughout the series, black leaders, especially Al Sharpton, and with Jesse Jackson. There are also significant white commentators but, most especially, Obama's political adviser, David Axelrod who is a wise and steadying influence throughout all these years. There are also interesting comments from the editor of the New Yorker, David Remnick.

The third part shows the years of the presidency, the drama of the financial crisis of 2008-2009, Obamacare (and what seems to outsiders the irrational opposition, "socialist manoeuvrings", by those who would benefit from the legislation), continuing race issues.

But, all the time, the series focuses on Obama's outreach to both black and white, combating, with some humour at Donald Trump's expense, the conspiracy theories about his being Muslim, not an American... And, all the time, especially with deaths of black men at the hands of the police, trying to bring everyone together, with some lapses which he acknowledges, but, amongst others, his moving presence, along with the vice president, at the funeral of the eight women who were shot by the young racist in the synagogue.

There is no mention that Hillary Clinton became his Sec Gen, but she appears in many sequences. There is no explicit mention of Joe Biden although the film was released during the first year of his presidency. His continued presence with Obama indicates Obama's influence on Biden.

At first in the background, there is Michelle and the couple's two daughters, then the campaigns, the years in the White House, Michelle Obama emerging more and more as a public figure.

(The general response to this series has been strongly positive – but, as indication of the opposition to Barack Obama's vision, here are to bloggers comments from the IMDb, to hostile, along with 13 enthusiastic bloggers.

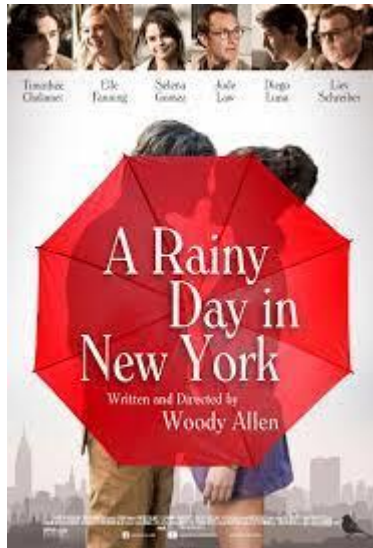
This is the biggest grade A lies I've seen, it's a joke. How this man got a TV show is not beyond me as we all know the Nexus these people run. This series is embarrassing & hard to watch. Rather watch lamestream News. Actually don't.

Inaccurate nonsense presented as facts. This whole thing is a terrible joke, like it's a big lie with the straightest face.. Just terrible, time will play it's role.. wait n watch.)

A RAINY DAY IN NEW YORK

US, 2019, 93 minutes, Colour.

Timothee Chalamet, Elle Fanning, Liev Schreiber, Jude Law, Diego Luna, Selena Gomez, Will Rogers, Rebecca Hall, Griffin Newman, Ben Warheit, Cherry Jones.
Directed by Woody Allen.



The release of Woody Allen's 2019 film was delayed by controversies about the director with consequent restricted release.

It is extraordinary to think, while watching the film and its typical Woody Allen dialogue and quips, that it is the work of a man in his early 80s. And, having made a film almost every year for 40 years, there is great respect for his body of work.

Yes, this is a day in New York and there is quite an amount of rain and people getting wet. The focus, surprising for the elderly writer director, is that the central characters are aged 20 or so. Timothee Chalamet plays Gatsby (do affluent New Yorkers actually call their sons Gatsby!), a dropout from prestigious colleges, slumming it so to speak in a minor school, pressurised all his life to be a culture vulture by his ambitious mother, mainly successful at winning large sums of money at poker. But he is infatuated with a bright young thing, winner of Miss competitions, from Tucson, Arizona, Ashleigh, played with verve by Elle Fanning (probably reminding audiences of a young Diane Keaton, la di da). Actually, Ashleigh is a combination of earnest student journalist and easy airhead (and when asked by the director during an interview whether she would like a scoop, she replies "of what?").

While the couple intend to spend the day together in New York that is not how it works out. She goes off to the interview with the moody director played by Liev Schreiber. His associate is played by Jude Law (whose wife, Rebecca Hall, is conducting an affair with his best friend). Ashleigh's day, with Gatsby's encouragement, is going to the interview, watching the film, getting tangled with the director's emotions, looking for him, trying to calm him down, then finding a fickle and stereotypical Hispanic film hero (Diego Luna), who is her dream star, going to a

party, drinking too much, prepared to be seduced, but, finally walking in the rain to find Gatsby.

Meanwhile Gatsby has had a day of encountering friends, some of whom mock him, another who asks him to do a cameo in the film he is making, a kiss with Chan (Selena Gomez), the sister of one of his former flames. He visits his brother who is having second thoughts about getting married to his fiancée who has a horrendous cackle when she laughs. He goes to a gallery with Chan, is discovered by an uncle and aunt – and shamed into going his mother's social evening which he intended to avoid. Depressed, he still wins an enormous amount of money at poker, pays an escort \$5000 to impersonate Ashleigh at the party, and is unmasked by his mother.

Which means then that in 90 minutes, there is a lot going on. There is a series of vignettes, excellently played, full of Woody Allen situations, ironies, farcical moments, wisecracking dialogue. And, quite an unexpected vignette towards the end involving Cherry Jones as Gatsby's mother.

Gatsby, we realise from the beginning, has a young Woody Allen look, something of a world-weary stoop, delivers his lines in the old Woody Allen manner and intonation and pacing. And, as the film continues, Gatsby becomes more like Woody Allen and a Woody Allen-like character from the past. Is the director reinterpreting his life?

As with most Woody Allen films, they are brief, light, a stepping stone in the annual event of a Woody Allen film. But, with Allen in his mid-80s, is this coming to a close?

THE STARLING

US, 2021, 102 minutes, Colour.

Melissa McCarthy, Chris O'Dowd, Kevin Kline, Timothy Olyphant, Daveed Diggs, Skyler Gisondo, Laura Harrier, Rosalind Chao, Kimberly Quinn, Loretta Devine, Ravi Kapoor.

Directed by Theodore Melfi.



We know that Melissa McCarthy is a successful hand at kinds of comedy. She has nothing to prove. However, with *St Vincent* and with *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, She proved that she can do serious roles as well. This is basically a serious role with some comic touches. She is matched by Chris O'Dowd, also an effective screen presence both comic and serious.

There is an added pleasure in seeing Kevin Kline as the therapist who has retired and become a vet. There are quite a number of character actors in small supporting roles. The *Dir*, Theodore Melfi (*St Vincent*) coproducers with his wife, Kimberly Quinn, who plays Regina working at the institution.

And the starling? This is a bird whom we initially see preparing its nest with sweet wrappers and a baby is booty, a rather territorial bird who perches on the branch and dived bomb frequently at Melissa McCarthy's Ability, working in her garden – a kind of war is declared, Lily wearing a helmet but nevertheless being attacked, buying the statue of an owl as a kind of scare-starling, getting some poison but killing the wrong bird, eventually chucking a rock at the starling and having to take it to the vet. The starling is in agent provocateur, perhaps a symbol of the complicated emotional conflicts emotional conflicts in Lily's life.

Actually, the film is about the loss of a child, grief, depression, suicidal feelings, mental illness, therapy... Many audiences will be able to identify with the mother and father who have lost their child, the father blaming himself, in an institution, resisting therapy, finding a difficulty to relate to his wife, not recognising her bewilderment but her determination to cope, no matter what.

There are many scenes at the institution, couples therapy (their being seated at school desks rather than in a circle), visited family day, pottery therapy, weaving therapy. In the meantime, only works at the local supermarket, is distracted, finds some kind of relaxation in working in the garden, despite the starling, and has to drive an hour their impact to visit her husband who sometimes finds her but does not speak.

And there is interesting complexity also when the nurse at the institution suggests that Lilly get in touch with Dr Fine, now a vet (skilful but not always patient with the

pet owners!). And it is a pleasure to see Kevin Kline, his enabling Lily to open out to him, offering some wise advice, visiting her husband. And, tending the starling after it is hit by the stone. And, spoiler, yes it does feel and flies off.

The film ends on an upbeat note, a farcical moment (and, yes, with the starling again).

STILL HERE

US, 2020, 99 minutes, Colour.

Johnny Whitworth, Maurice McRae, Ashton Williamson, Jared Kemp, Zazie Beetz, Ashton Williamson, Larry Pyne, Jeremy Holm, Stephen Hauck, Danny Johnson, Justiin A Davies.

Directed by Vlad Feier.



Still Here is based on a true story, with a focus on the disappearance of children all over the United States, abductions, abuse, murders.

The film was written and directed by Romanian-born director who moved to the US, Vlad Feier. While it plays as a drama, it also has strong overtones of popular crime-investigation programs.

There are three focuses of the narrative, opening with an African-American worker, delighting in playing with his young daughter, then experiencing the mystery of her disappearance, the actor Maurice McRae able to communicate an extraordinary amount of grief, incessant search for his daughter, going for days putting up notices and handing out photos of his daughter to the local inhabitants. And, he and his wife, with their distraught teenage son, feel of the police are not doing anything.

The second focus of the narrative is on a young journalist, Johnny Whitworth, criticised by his editor for failing standards, his determination to write better, being given the case to investigate, interrogating (and paying) some of the local youth, getting a lead which he follows, publishing the article, which stirs the police into making an arrest,

which proves to be a false arrest and the suspect killing himself.

The third focus is that on the police themselves, more like documentary material, much less like the police we see in popular television shows. They are hard men. We see their brutal treatment in the interrogation of the suspect, and the demands of the chief to get a result, no matter what. He is also quite racist in his demands and comments. One of the detectives is disturbed by the course of events but is supported by the tough stances of his African-American partner.

The family are resistant to the investigations by the reporter but eventually open up – but with a harrowing sequence when the body of a young girl is found in a dumpster. The journalist gets another lead which leads to an arrest, the suspect living on the same floor as the family, an interrogation sequence with his confession, dramatised for the audience, and the final rescue of the daughter.

The film is a complex emotional experience, sharing the grief of the family, the energy and the bewilderment of the journalist, the dilemmas of the detectives and their personal lives and the demands of their duties.

REVIEWS NOVEMBER 2021

BECOMING COUSTEAU

CAVE, The

EIFFEL

FREE GUY

HALLOWEEN KILLS

JOE BELL

JULIA

LAST DUEL, The

MANY SAINTS OF NEWARK

NITRAM

NO TIME TO DIE

PALAU

PALAZZO DI COZZO

PASSING

RED NOTICE

RESPECT

RON'S GONE WRONG

SHANG CHI AND THE LEGEND OF THE TEN RINGS

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PADRENOSTRO

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ARMY OF THIEVES, The

GUILTY, The

BECOMING COUSTEAU

US, 2021, 93 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Liz Garbus.



Before his death in 1997 at the age of 80, French diver, Jacques-Yves Cousteau, was an international figure, honoured by national leaders around the world. This is a documentary tracing his career as a diver, his contribution science and innovation, especially the aqualung (leading to scuba developments), his expeditions, his films and television series, his growing realisation about the destruction of the oceans, his becoming a universal campaigner and crusader.

This film was made for National Geographic and has that audience strongly in mind, an audience who appreciates films about the wonders of nature, especially in underwater life, but also audiences who are committed to the preservation of world heritage to falling s. It is not a biography of Cousteau although there are some personal elements of his life throughout the film. For those who want a feature film version of his life, the French film, *The Odyssey* (2016), stars Lambert Wilson as Cousteau, Audrey Tautou as his wife, Simone, and Pierre Ninny any as his son, Philippe. (Although some aspects of Cousteau's personal life, especially his second family and his second wife are alluded to in *The Odyssey* but made quite explicit in *Becoming Cousteau*.) The Dir of this documentary, Liz Garber's, has a very strong and long list of documentary achievements, especially documentaries about Marilyn Monroe, Gloria Vanderbilt and Nina Simone.

There are many scenes with Philippe Cousteau who worked with his father on the boat, for the television programs, scenes of bonding with his father – and the sad accident of his death.

Cousteau is a genial screen presence. There are many interviews, television appearances, addresses to international organisations. The filmmakers have the advantage of the Cousteau archives, a great range of photographs starting with his childhood, a great range of home video material, of black-and-white footage, colour material, and excerpts from his films and documentaries. They give quite a round picture of Cousteau and his achievements.

The film pays tribute to his early life, an accident and having to swim to overcome it, his exhilaration in the discoveries of diving, his work in the Navy – and his forever afterwards being referred to as Captain Cousteau, his development of the aqualung during the 1940s (the film not mentioning his work in the Resistance), the collaboration with friends enabling divers to spend longer times underwater and go deeper. He wrote a book, *The Silent World*, 1954, filmed and Oscar-winning in 1956. This began a long career of film and television making, awards, popularity in the US, and beyond.

However, Cousteau went through something of a conversion experience. Early film shows some brutality in landing sharks and battering them. Cousteau and his team, with his re-conditioned boat, *Calypso*, were invited to help in the underwater search for oil. Cousteau says in the 1970s that he watched *The Silent World* again and repudiated much that was in it. He then became an international crusader for the preservation of the oceans, showing sequences of coral reef devastation (an alert to Australians about the Great Barrier Reef), contamination, pollution, refuse and garbage in the sea.

He was the leading speaker at the United Nations Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, gaining pledges of countries around the world (including glimpses of a very affable Fidel Castro), and the development of his Cousteau Foundation.

Cousteau's long life was completely in the 20th century – but, his work and inspiration are more relevant than ever in the 21st-century.

BOILING POINT

UK, 2021, 93 minutes, Colour.

Stephen Graham, Vinette Robinson, Jason Flemyng, Alice Feetham, Hannah Walters, Malachi Kirby, Izuka Hoyle, Taz Skylar, Lauryn Ajufo, Ray Panthaki, Lurdes Fabares, Daniel Larkai, Robbie O'Neill, Aine Rose Daly.

Directed by Philip Barantini.



Boiling Point is quite a film! A brief synopsis would not make it stand out: an night at an outer London restaurant, staff and their work, diners. In fact, that is what it is about, but the synopsis does not indicate what impact this will all make. With the title, Boiling Point, there is something of an indication of tension, frustrations and anger. (Alternate titles might include Kitchen Tenterhooks, Desperation behind the Menu, Continually Frazzled Nerves!)

There is a mysterious opening, a man hurrying through the streets, his mobile phone, arriving at the restaurant – and the audience discovering that this is Andy, owner of the restaurant, the chef. We see that he is played by Stephen Graham, stalwart of British drama, a presence in Scorsese films, more recently in British television miniseries.

The film is directed and co-written by Philip Barantini, an actor who has moved to film direction, here employing the single take technique for immediacy and continuity. The audience moves very quickly into the life of the restaurant, the activities in the kitchen, the busyness with the diners.

There is continual activity throughout the film, from the initial sequences where an inspector is looking at the work of each of the kitchen staff, challenging Andy on his bookkeeping, demoting the status of the restaurant to three from five – but indicating that there could be a recovery. And then it is in the kitchen, some of the staff already at work, others arriving late, Andy having to deal with a whole range of personalities and touches of temperament. And, the staff is quite multi-racial (something which will emerge from bigoted diners).

As the kitchen staff move into a faster pace, Andy at the counter with his associate, Carly (Vinnette Robinson), a very sympathetic character in her valiant efforts to keep everything on track, losing her cool with the floor manager, an extraordinary emotional outburst. The various other personalities, whom we get to know very quickly and personally, the skill of the writing as well as some effective dramatic improvising, Tony with the oysters, Freeman cooking the meat (a touch of the prima donna especially when lamb is returned and he explains how lamb should be cooked), the French Camille who does not understand Andy's accent so well, the pastry cook and her associate, the exasperated woman who does the washing up and her rather laid-back assistant who turns up late. We also get to know some of the front of house characters, though not so well with detail, mainly Emily who runs things in a bossy way and who is the target of Carly's outburst, and the waitresses, Andrea who suffers the racial taunts, Robyn, free and easy who is late because she has gone to an acting audition.

And, there are successful vignettes with the diners, the bigoted father buying expensive wine and dominating his family as well as racially targeting Andrea, the young man whose girlfriend has a nuts allergy and who suffers a dramatic turn at the end of the meal, a group of girls who flirt with the waiter, some young men who want instagram photos. And, there is the television restaurant critic, Jason Flemyng, with an elegant fellow-reviewer. And we discover he has more interest in the restaurant itself than reviewing, putting financial pressure on Andy.

And all this happens in 90 minutes. Drama and tension, well delineated characters, effective small glimpses of work in the kitchen, of the diners.

At the end, it all has quite an effect on Andy as it does on us. Arresting British filmmaking.

THE CAVE

Thailand/Ireland, 2019, 104 minutes, Colour.

Jim Worny.

Directed by Tom Waller.



The trouble with time for so many of us is that it passes so quickly. It is over three years since the world watched on, anxious, eager, ultimately rejoicing, when the young Thai football team and its coach were rescued after being trapped in a cave for almost 2 weeks.

Here is a dramatisation of those events, an opportunity for us to remember, to admire.

This is a fairly straightforward film as might be expected. We are introduced to the boys, playing football, the coach, the eagerness of riding their bikes, leaving them at the entry of the cave, going in to explore. In fact, while the screenplay goes back to the boys and the coach trapped in the cave, in the darkness, it does not spend a lot of time with them nor identify them strongly for the audience sympathy and understanding. They are the group. They have been trapped. They need to be rescued.

Most of the film concerns the rescue effort. All around the world there was constant reporting in that June-July of 2018 (and this is illustrated by several journalists reporting here). And, of course, constant news, constant images, constant speculation on social media.

However, it is helpful to remember that this was an extraordinary task, extraordinary logistics, extraordinary effort required from so many people. While there is an emphasis on the Thai authorities, there is also quite some implied criticism of the fussy bureaucracy that some of the officials demanded, holding up those who had volunteered to come and help, even those with drainage equipment, not letting them in until they had government authorisation. A reminder that there is always the danger of petty bureaucracy and hold up.

However, there is also great emphasis on the international collaboration, from the Americans with their organisational skills. But, also a significant emphasis on the cave divers who came in from around the world. This is dramatised especially in the figure of Jim Warny, cave expert, living in Ireland, urged to go to Thailand. Which means then that this often documentary-like narrative has the human element, the human story, Jim leaving his fiancée, keeping in touch with her, her encouragement. It means also that we identify with him as he worries about the situation, does various dives and tests, becomes heavily involved in the transporting the children from the deep cave, their being medicated and unconscious, carried through the waters, saved.

For those who remember the events and felt concerned at the time, this film is a solid reminder of the crisis, the boys and their coach, the need for rescue, the wonder of world collaboration for the rescue.

EIFFEL

France, 2021, 108 minutes, Colour.

Romain Duris, Emma Mackey, Pierre Deladonchamps, Armande Boulanger.

Directed by Martin Bourboulon.



There was a time when Paris was not dominated by the Eiffel Tower. This portrait of its engineer and builder, Gustave Eiffel, takes us back to that time, the 1880s. It is the story of the planning and the building of the Tower, but it also emphasises, almost equally, a romance story between Eiffel and the love of his life, Adrienne, 20 years earlier, how it was broken by her family, and her reappearance of the time of the building of the tower.

Romain Duris has become a significant figure in French cinema and fits the role of Eiffel perfectly. French actress, with British background, Emma Mackay, is a striking presence as his love, Adrienne. At this time, Eiffel was a widower with three children, constantly supported throughout his work by his eldest daughter, Claire.

The early part of the film establishes Eiffel's credential as a civil engineer, a sequence at the dedication of The Statue of Liberty, the tribute to the French, Eiffel receiving an award from the American government. To further illustrate his credentials, there are flashbacks to his work as a bridge designer and builder in the 1860s, especially a bridge over the river Garonne, his working in metal, even writing a handbook on the topic.

With this established, a French government situation arises as to the choice of a significant landmark for the 1889 Universal Exhibition. Eiffel and his company win the commission and we see the workings of Eiffel's mind, his imagination, working on a model of the tower, altering it, planning for it to go 300 feet above Paris. One of the advantages of the film is that there are quite a number of sequences, quite elaborate in detail, of the digging of the foundations, of the work of the artisans, of the building up of the metal base, the challenge to reach the first stage, Eiffel and his involvement, his financial assistant, public opinion beginning to move against the tower, protests and demonstrations, vilification is, political interventions.

And, in the meantime, Adrienne, the love of the past, now a married woman, arrives in Paris and meets Eiffel again. The meeting, the various occasions of encounter, regrets from the past,

explanations of what it happened, the hostility of Adrienne's husband, are all presented in the French romantic traditional style.

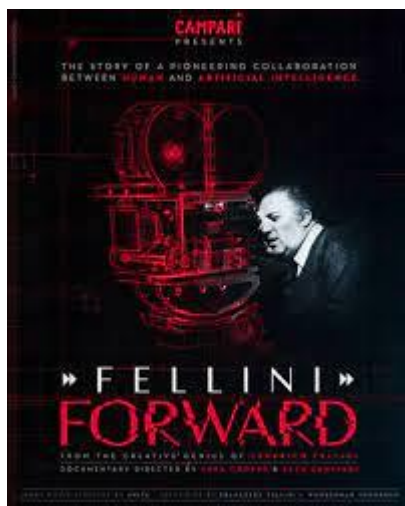
Which means then that this can be called a romantic portrait, romanticising, in some ways but deservedly, the ingenuity and skills of Eiffel, especially with the achievement of the tower, but also romantic in the love, self-sacrifice, humanity and passion of love and disappointment.

Tres francais.

FELLINI FORWARD

Italy, 2021, 45 minutes, Colour.

Maximillian Niemann, Zackary, Canepari, Drea Cooper.



2020 saw the centenary of the birth of celebrated Italian director, Federico Fellini. He was featured at various festivals around the world, revivals of his films, documentaries and interviews.

2021 saw this 45 minute documentary at the Venice Film Festival.

In many ways it is a tribute to Fellini, admiration for his films, admiration for his genius, his directorial eye, his perceptions of the world, serious and comic. And the question arises, can artificial intelligence re-create, re-interpret the Fellini genius and come up with a new film.

Which raises the question of computer technology, algorithms, the downloading of data, preservation of data, experiments to draw on the data and produce something new.

There are many talking heads in the film, experts on Fellini, professors of cinema, reviewers, interviews with some of those who worked with Fellini, especially production designer, Dante Ferretti. Significant and authoritative is the voice of Fellini's niece, Federica Fabbri Fellini.

There are many roundtable discussions, especially with the designated director of the film, his perspectives and hopes. There is an actor who will take the place of Fellini as Well Is an actress who will be a woman in red. There is also an admiral, Japanese.

In fact, the group produces a 10 minute film in the Fellini 8 ½ mode. It does look and sound like a Fellini film – something of an imitation, something of a tribute. It means that AI can be creative.

But, ultimately, many of the speakers point out that while the films themselves had many collaborators, screenwriters, improvisations on set, unexpected contributions which could parallel the interventions by AI, there is the individuality of the director, the particular aspects of genius, personal touches, that AI can reproduce, imitate, but, we might say, are not the real thing.

Certainly, an interesting documentary and a reminder of so many aspects of Fellini's genius.

FREE GUY

US, 2021, 115 minutes, Colour.

Ryan Reynolds, Jodie Comer, Taika Waititi, Lil Rel Howery, Joe Keery, Utkarsh Ambudkar, Aaron W Reed.

Directed by Shawn Levy.



This reviewer is not a gamer (though seeing many films of games and gamers), so expectations of watching and enjoying were not particularly high, but advertisements were around for a very long time during lockdown, Ryan Reynolds bemused face looking out at us, so some hopes for comedy. And, apart from thinking about the equivalent of Truman in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*, Truman unwittingly and cheerfully locked in a popular television show all his life), ready to enter the gaming world. And, there was Guy, 20 years after Truman, cheerful and unwittingly ("don't have a good day – have a great day!"), Going through his daily routines, cereal for breakfast, bank robbery in the afternoon, all these strange bespectacled avatars, a nice guy.

Being of a generation where a tutorial on how computer games work is essential for appreciating the creativity of the minds behind them, the imaginations, of what the effect is on the gamers – and an explanation of the gamers and the visualising of their avatars on screen – I was not so caught up in the technology but the emerging themes. Free Guy! Free City! Freedom? (After the final credits I glanced at the IMDb and began to scan the many

bloggers to find how many mentioned themes of the quality of human life, human choice, freedoms – and found two (all the rest gleefully commenting on what a fun movie you are) and one of the theme commenters thought your screenplay was too preachy!

A word is in order to praise the technological ingenuity of bringing a computer game world to the screen, the characters, dialogue, behaviour, adventures and dangers, the inventiveness of the CGI. But, I am more prone to notice and investigate themes.

So, Guy turns out to be a technicological breakthrough, a games' character with artificial intelligence, on the edge of moving to decision-making. Guy puts on avatar sunglasses and sees aspects of the game he never dreamt of.. And he sees Molotovgirl (Jodie Comer) and is attracted. She turns out to be part of Millie, one of the creators of the game, working with her friend, Keys.

So, we have something of an online romance, poor old Keys (young Keys, pining in the background for Millie, but committed to developing Guy and letting him, as Jesus had said, have life and have it to the full. Obviously philosophical issues and, by implication, religious. People always complain that God should intervene in times of suffering. However, here is Free City, the inhabitants all happy, no matter what, living a kind of happy fatefulness. And then the discovery of freedom, choice, free will – and most of them initially reluctant. There are moments of great joy as we follow Guy and Millie in discoveries from bubblegum ice cream to the implications of Guy's first kiss. I especially enjoyed the appearance of Dude, Guy's inner self, inner alter ego, big, tall, musclebound, and the moment when the laser sword appears in Guy's hand, the *Star Wars* ' theme commences and, intimations of transcendence, The Force is with him.

But, if the games creators are the equivalent of God, there is also a devil-figure. He is CEO, Antwan Taika Waiti's New Zealand accent always enjoyable. He is jealous of the creations as Lucifer had been. Profit is his goal. Any thwarting leads to destruction.

Antwan is too clever for himself, greed his downfall and self-deception. Millie and Keys realise that the games characters were computer incarnations of themselves and find love, Guy able to tell Molotovgirl that, despite her love, she could not live in his world. And he and Dude, along with Buddy his security guard close friend and the various characters in Free City, now have lives of their own.

And one has the perennial hope that life and behaviour for Guy and his friends in Free City will not fall into the traps and temptations to people that are part of real life.

GLASSBOY

Matt 2020, 93 minutes, Colour.

Andrea Arru, Loretta Goggi, Rosa Barbolini, Stefano Trapuzzano, Mia Pomelari, Gabriel Manonnozzi De Cristoforo, Luca Cagnetti, Massimo De Lorenzo, David Paryla, Giorgia Wurth.

Directed by Samuele Rossi.



Glassboy is the story of a boy with haemophilia, the story designed for young audiences, the same age as Pino, the boy, and the friends he makes in the town. Pino is in 11.

The young audience will identify immediately with the credit sequences, Pino does sketches, creates comic book stories. Then we are introduced to the real life of Pino, safe in his house, wearing his cycle helmet and superhero cape, watching the children outside his window, attracted especially to the young girl, Mavi, who is a top cyclist, rivalling one of the older boys of the town. She sees Pino watching and comes into the house making demands on him, discovering the truth.

She belongs to a group of friends called the SNERDS. One is a boy with touches of blue hair who loves music. Another is a bespectacled young girl with the touch of the expert on many subjects. The other is a fat boy, Tubs, frequently the butt of jokes, continually wolfing down food – and, perhaps, the screenplay targeting him with too much mocking. A touch of bullying.

Pino has parents who are loving and protective. However, his grandmother, a Countess, dominates a room whenever she enters, has plans to take Pino to Stockholm for a cure. She is also employed a teacher for many years for private tuition for Pino – and he turns out to be a stock comic character as well, a touch of the comic villain.

But, Pino's parents welcome the group and they bond. Eventually Pino being allowed to go to school.

Too good to be true! Enter grandmother again, abducting Pino with the help of the teacher, interning him at her Castle in Austria (the Italian town is near the border of Austria), with a plane charter for the flight to Sweden. But the children get the information, get the train to Austria, cycle to the Castle – and it turns into quite a quest, a kind of variation on the Fab Four or any other group of adventures for kids.

They are able to help Pino to escape, pursued by the teacher, some comic chases and crashes, arrival at the railway station where the grandmother collapses – and repentance. Eventually, all the parents arrive, all the reconciliations, Pino able to gather all these adventures into drawing his comic strips again.

Ideal for a children's audience who would share the adventures and identify with the characters – and parents of these children would enjoy it as well. Perhaps a caution for grandmothers!

HALLOWEEN KILLS

US, 2021, 107 minutes, Colour.

Jamie Lee Curtis, Judy Greer, Andi Matichak, James Jude Courtenay, Will Patton, Thomas Mann, Jim Cummings, Robert Longstreet, Anthony Michael Hall.

Directed by David Gordon Green.



Heavens! (Or should that be Hell!?) It is 43 years since October 1978 when we reviewed the first Halloween film. Forty three years later, we have lost count of all the sequels and variations capitalising on sinister character, Michael Myers. So, here he is again, the same menacing threat, the same embodiment of evil, frequently referred to as the Bogeyman, not a suggestion of a redeeming feature, programmed to kill, programmed to kill in grisly, gory, cruel variations and close-ups.

David Gordon Green directed Halloween in 2018, focusing on the original central character, Laurie, Jamie Lee Curtis, her daughter, played by Judy Greer, her granddaughter, played by Andi Matichak. They thought they had destroyed Michael Myers by fire – and this episode takes up the theme from there, 2018, 40th anniversary of the first attacks by Michael Myers.

In fact, we don't see all that much of Laurie, brought to hospital, rather cantankerous. In fact, the climax will be a confrontation between her daughter and granddaughter in the Myers house. But, on the way, there is a succession of characters, seemingly lining up to be brutally disposed of.

In the meantime, for those who don't remember, there are some flashbacks to 1978, explaining how Michael Myers had killed his sister in 1963, had wrought mayhem in 1978 and had been institutionalised. (But, over the 40 years, he has managed to escape more times than we ever imagined.)

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of this Halloween story is the mob mentality, out for vengeance, "evil is to die this night". We are introduced to a number of people who remember the past, who remember confrontations, who are consumed with vindictiveness (led by Anthony Michael Hall, far different from his John Hughes comedy days, almost unrecognisable).

The key scene occurs when people take refuge in the local hospital, crammed together, fearful, roused by the leaders, chanting the slogan, setting their eyes on a poor old patient, assuming he is Michael Myers, pursuing him, shouting, forcing him to an upper storey ledge and his falling to his death. Ordinary people becoming mob-violent.

At the end, there is a voice-over commentary by Laurie herself explaining the nature of evil, how it cannot be extinguished, how it transfers from person to person. And, although David Gordon Green has notified that the next episode will be called Halloween Ends, the final image of Michael Myers seems to indicate – Halloween Forever.

JOE BELL

US, 2020, 93 minutes, Colour.

Mark Wahlberg, Reid Miller, Connie Britton, Maxwell Jenkins, Gary Sinise, Morgan Lily.
Directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green.



One could hardly find a plainer name for the central character of this biographical film. However, the screenplay is based on actual events, an Oregon worker, Joe Bell.

Most audiences will not know Joe Bell story, and so it will be something of a journey of discovery, as we find him involved in a walk across the United States from west to east. He has only himself, a backpack (although well-wishers along the way give him a trolley). And, he is played by Mark Wahlberg, so he seems to be what one might call a 21st century American Everyman.

But, as he walks, he is accompanied by his son, Jadin (Reid Miller), teenage, supporting his father, arguing with his father, appearing and disappearing. This reviewer was rather slower than many audiences in a dawning as to the true nature of Jadin accompanying his father. Something of a

shock, in fact, especially in the context of where we realise what is happening, Joe venturing into a gay bar.

Yes, the theme of the film and of Joe Bell's walk in 2013 is homophobia and bullying. As might be expected, Joe is often too quick off the mark with his emotional reactions, not always understanding well what is going on. Jadin is gay, is bullied at school, takes his life (and the device of his being seen to accompany Joe on the walk, have conversations, challenge his father about his own behaviour, her eventually seeing a bullying episode, means that we are much more aware of and sympathetic to Jadin and understanding his father's walk).

But, as he walks, Joe takes opportunities to address groups, school children, alerting them to the realities of sexual orientation, a campaign against bullying. While is not the most articulate of speakers, his message is listened to. In the meantime, he is in continual contact with his wife (Connie Britton) and the younger son, Joseph (Maxwell Jenkins), who is also a challenge to his father.

A number of people on the way are puzzled by Joe, engaging conversation with him, learn something about him – and audiences will appreciate a later part of the film where Joe meets a local policeman, played by Gary Sinise, where the screenplay gives them an opportunity for more personal and deeper discussion.

The film invites audiences, especially fathers, to identify with Joe Bell and his experiences, the steps to appreciating his son, challenge to parental expectations, especially in sexual orientation.

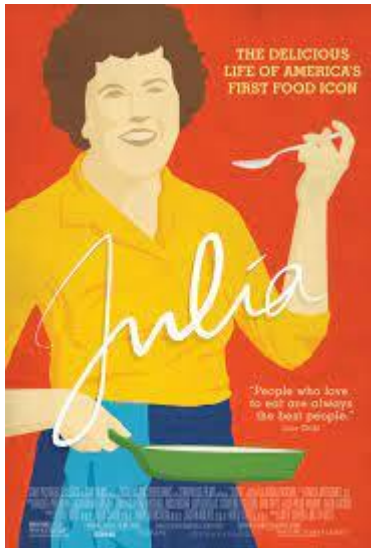
American audiences who know the story of this walk will be anticipating the ending. Most audiences, unfamiliar with the story, will find an emotional challenge at the end of the film.

It is interesting to see Mark Wahlberg moving from an action film to a more sympathetic role, a chance to show more humanity. And, also interesting, are the writing and directing credits. The screenplay was written by veteran Larry McMurtry (Lonesome Dove and many westerns) and a long time associate, Diana Ossana (winning screenwriting Oscar with Larry McMurtry for Broke back Mountain). The director, Reinaldo Marcus Green, directed a strong drama about crime in American city streets, Monsters and Men (where those accused of police killings are denounced as monsters whether the case was proven or not). It is well worth seeking out. Green is also the director of the forthcoming King Richard, the story of Richard Williams, father of Venus and Serena Williams.

JULIA

US, 2021, 95 minutes, Colour, black and white.

Directed by Julie Cohen, Betsy West.



There have been quite a number of famous people in recent history called Julia. However, the contention of this documentary is that for many Americans, as well as for cooking fans throughout the world, simply naming Julia meant that the reference was to Julia Child. For those who have no idea who Julia Child is, whose realm is not that of the kitchen and cooking, here is an opportunity to get to know her and why she became so famous.

For filmgoers, especially those not adept at cooking, there was the opportunity in 2009 for a cinema introduction to Julia Child where she was played, so strikingly of course, by Meryl Streep in *Julie and Julia* (even to the impersonation of Julia Child's idiosyncratic voice).

While there is some background about Julia Child's earlier life, her presence in France and love for France, her marriage to Paul Child, a very long and devoted marriage, this film takes as its starting point Julia's love for French cooking, enraptured by it, writing about it, working with a range of French cooks and experts (many of them here being interviewed).

Julia Child was a television personality, one of the original, perhaps the original, chef on television. She did not look like an immediate candidate – she was in her 50s, she was a tall, bigish woman, she had a strangely high-pitched voice and accompanying delivery, she had no previous experience. However, in the 1960s, with the emerging of public television, she was offered a place, found a niche, consolidated that niche with her screen presence, her direct addressing of her public, confiding in them as if we were standing on the other side of the table in the kitchen listening to her, watching her. No re-takes so, if something did not turn out too well, something spilt, it was simply a whoops situation, pick up the mess, carry on.

For those who enjoyed seeing Julia Child on television, seeing her at work, admiring her, learning from her, being inspired by her, there is an abundance of clips throughout the film.

But, as with all television personalities (and here she is seen being interviewed by the hosts of the TV night shows, Johnny Carson, David Letterman, Dick Cavitt, Jay Leno...), There comes a time. But, in her 70s, on she went, appearing on *Good Morning, America*, continuing in the same vein, into the 80s, into the 90s. In fact, she died in 2004 (born in 1912).

Two other aspects emerge from this documentary, her relationship with her husband. A number of those interviewed found Paul Child too enigmatic for their taste and friendship. However, with footage from the past, with many photos, we realise that Paul Child was devoted to Julia, helping her in practical ways, management, encouragement, and stepping back from the limelight. There are some sad moments towards the end with his stroke, debilitated health, dementia.

The other aspect is the role of Julia Child played in the feminism awareness of the second half of the 20th century. She did become involved in some social issues, especially Planned Parenthood (she and Paul were unable to have children themselves), and became targeted at times by Pro-Life campaigners. The other area that the film highlights is that of sexual orientation, Julia being a person of her times and discovering so many gay men in the cooking world, perhaps a bit flippant at first, but with the emergence of AIDS, discovering more compassion, campaigning, cooking festivals in support, stating that preparing food is a wonderful expression of love.

For audiences who, perhaps, prefer to shun the kitchen and cooking, the film is an introduction to quite a character. For those who love cooking programs and chefs, of course...

THE LAST BUS

UK, 2021, 86 minutes, Colour.

Timothy Spall, Phyllis Logan, Natalie Mitson, Ben Ewing.

Directed by Gillies MacKinnon.



Perhaps the older you are, perhaps the more you will enjoy this film. At the centre is Timothy Spall as Tom Harper, old man, 90ish. We see him in his home at John O'Groats and his decision to go to the other extreme of Britain, to Land's End where, we eventually learn, he originally came from with his young wife, Mary. He now wants to journey back, studies the map, traces his route, has his ticket, has his folder and notebook with details of the buses, the routes, B&B stopovers. He is prepared but he is old, physically unwell, but determined.

Most audiences have identified with Tom and his journey, with his genial personality and the way that people respond to him during his journey – not only in personal encounters, but with everybody having a camera, instagram photos, selfies, sharing them all on social media which, of course, he does not realise.

Some responses have said that the story is boring, just following an old man on many, many buses. Others, this reviewer included, identify well with Tom, want to be with him on his journey, want to know what the purposes of the journey are, how he will manage, how we will succeed, and what is the goal.

The audience does spend a lot of time inside buses, sitting with Tom, observing him, looking out the window at the range of Scottish and British countrysides, small towns, cities, the sea.

Timothy Spall is in every sequence and is so persuasive, elderly, a bit lined, jutting bottom lip making him look forbidding, teeth, a certain severity – but able to move into the most genial and friendly of smiles.

The plot, in fact, is made up of a whole range of vignettes, some very brief in running time but effective, many of the memorable. On the whole, people are very warm in their response to Tom (becoming a touch more hostile the further south he goes). There are, eventually, pompous bureaucratic British bus drivers who won't acknowledge his ticket, counterbalanced by others who, as he becomes better known, offering free rides. There is a very telling sequence where a bigoted man, Liverpool, taunts a Muslim woman in her burqa, she having offered Tom a seat. Tom intervenes, the man violent, Tom responding but falling, but the public on the bus, filming of course, are very supportive and the man is ejected.

However, there is a whole range of delightful sequences, Tom making a paper frog for a little girl at the bus stop, a woman snatching his bag and a pursuit, Tom giving her some money for her needs, retrieving the bag which he keeps close to him, wandering on a dark city street at night but helped by a mixed-race couple, inviting him home, their daughter returning from a performance of *My Fair Lady*, the family singing and waltzing; Tom sitting at the back of a bus with schoolgirls, many cheerleaders, him tapping to the rhythms of their songs; football fans at a bus stop, taunting and flirting with the women, an old drunk man urging Tom to sing and eventually eliciting *Amazing Grace* with everybody hushed and listening; he injures his finger as he pushes a stalled van early in the journey, helps a bus driver to ignite the broken down bus, drawing on his life in mechanics; there is an accident and he has to go to hospital; his being stranded on the road and picked up by bus full of Ukrainians going to a party; he is disappointed at the old B&B and not being able to have his room of 70 years earlier; which means that by the time he reaches Land's End, after a visit to his daughter's grave, he is welcomed.

Throughout the bus trip, there have been many flashbacks to Tom and Mary, marriage, initial sexual reticence, pregnancy, the birth of their daughter, her death, the move from Cornwall to Scotland, her life at home, Mary is cancer diagnosed.

Mary is played by Phyllis Logan who appeared with Timothy Spall as his wife in the acclaimed *Secrets and Lies*.

A great deal of humour, a great deal of emotion, and tears of sadness and joy. The film was directed by veteran Gillies MacKinnon who has always had a humane touch in his films.

THE LAST DUEL

UK/US, 2021, 152 minutes, Colour.

Matt Damon, Adam Driver, Jody Comer, Harriet Walter, Ben Affleck, Alex Lawther, Martin Cokas, Nathaniel Parker, Zeljko Ivanek.

Directed by Ridley Scott.



The first film in Ridley Scott's distinguished career (from *Alien* to *Thelma and Louise* to *Gladiator* and so many more films) was *The Duelists*. He began with a story of rivalries, honour, slights, vengeance, duels. And, almost 45 years later, he has gone back to these themes.

The film opens in 1386, France, during the Hundred Years War. The crowds are assembled, the rival Lords are putting on their battle dress, the duel is announced. But then, the screenplay (written by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, who had great Oscar success in 1997 with *Good Will Hunting*, and now working with Nicole Holofcener) goes into flashback, three chapters, the events seen from the point of view of the three central characters. (Some commentators have referred to Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* with its telling of the same events from different perspectives, but, by and large, here everyone is agreed on the facts of what happened, despite the central offender in public denial – even though we see him going to confession and admitting his sin).

The action goes back 16 years, grim battle sequences, and the hero of this story, Jean de Carrouges (Matt Damon) being saved by the squire, Jacques Legris (Adam Driver). But, the audience is wary, because they have seen that Jean and Jacques part of the two protagonists of the duel. What has happened?

Jean is a strong and blunt man, financial difficulties, Jacques, now the tax collector for the local count, Pierre (and distracting Ben Affleck with blonde hair and goatee beard), a rather profligate man who welcomes Jacques into his household. In the meantime, Jean encounters the daughter of a Lord who had previously cited with the English but is now trying to reinstate himself. The daughter is Marguerite (Jodie Comer, *Killing Eve*, *Free Guy*). They marry – but, disappointingly, no children.

The central crisis is an attack by Jacques, presuming the affections of Marguerite, raping her.

This is told in the second chapter, the memories of Jacques. We see more of the background of his tax collecting, his being welcomed into the court of Pierre, discovering that he is a promiscuous man despite the initial dignified demeanour. And, the rape scene is brutal. He presumes that Marguerite has willingly participated and does not listen to her protests or felt her resistance. He does go to confession but the tendency is to give any benefits of doubt to the male, comment about the status of women as their husband's property and so not a sexual issue. But, Jean, returning from battles in Scotland, listens to Marguerite, although he does tend to interpret the offence as challenging his own honour. There is a court case, Jean challenging Jacques to a duel.

Then it is time for the third chapter, Marguerite's version of what happened, much the same except that we learn much about her strength of character and quality when her husband goes to war in Scotland and she successfully takes over the management of the farm. We see again her telling her husband, his reactions, her standing by her statements, the court case and her being badgered by the ecclesiastical prosecutor, the king (young, giddy, immature personality) deciding that the duel should go ahead.

As with the battle scenes, the long duel is visualised highlighting the brutality.

Many have noted that this is a mediaeval story but with 20th 21st-century themes, especially about the abuse of women, the automatic presumptions by the male offenders, more emerging court cases, exposes and punishment. (The scene where the body of Jacques is dragged along the ground and then strung up by the feet, naked, is a reminder of the dire consequences of a sort when the case comes to justice.)

THE MANY SAINTS OF NEWARK

US, 2021, 120 minutes, Colour.

Alessandro Nivola, Leslie Odom Jr, Vera Farmiga, Jon Bernthal, Corey Stoll, Ray Liotta, Michaela De Rossi, Michael Gandolfini, Billy Magnusson, John Magaro, Michael Imperioli, Talia Balsam, Ed Marinaro.

Directed by Alan Taylor.



Here is a review without the benefit of the reviewer having seen The Sopranos. It is a look at this prequel on its own merits without the possibilities of making connections. And, in times to come, this is how the film will be seen, in its own right, perhaps encouraging audiences to venture into the television series.

The film was written and produced by the creator of The Sopranos, David Chase. An initial guarantee of authenticity. Promotion of the film has highlighted the fact that Michael Gandolfini plays the young Anthony, who will grow into the main protagonist of The Sopranos, Tony Soprano, played by his father, James Gandolfini. Very interesting casting, the audience looking at the young man, possibly trying to see the grown man in him (although, his facial expressions and look are more reminiscent of John Cusack).

So, a prequel in Newark, New Jersey. This is the context for young Anthony growing up, the family and connections, the Mafia background. The principal focus here is on a Mafia boss (with a profitable numbers set-up but very local rather than national), Dick Moltisanti (which translates from the pious Italian as Many Saints), a central character role for Alessandro Nivola who normally does not get such strong principal parts. He has a charming look, even a charming manner, moments of sympathy for many of his associates, and encouraging of the young Anthony. But, as we know from many Mafia

films, especially thinking back to the early years of Michael Corleone, Dick can have vicious and violent moments that shock us.

And it is 1967. And there is a reference to the summer of love. Not so much of that in Newark. But the times were-changing, the old Corleone a Mafia style, even the Vito Genovese style was passing. The old rackets were still there, but drugs were coming in, there was a certain petty limitedness in these Mafia families and their activities.

And, the race issues. There had been violent riots in Watts, Los Angeles the year before. Now they are in Newark, some of the African-Americans working as collectors, even hitmen, for the Mafia, but wanting to set themselves up, rivals to the Mafia, prepared to risk violent confrontations. (And, the screenplay highlights the automatic racism and bigotry of the Mafia Italian background, presumptions of supremacy, towards the black population.)

As with many Mafia stories, there are lots of sequences of family, parties (with the parish priest there), a number of funerals, stories of Confirmation ceremonies, the men and their playing cards, the stories of migrant women coming to the US, their hopes, breaking from the restrictive rules of women in Italy, parish school problems...

So, there is quite a lot going on in this film, creating, as has been said, the family context, the social context from which Tony Soprano will emerge (and a continued voice-over of someone who explains that he has been killed by Tony Soprano).

Quite a strong cast as well, Leslie Odom Jr representing the emerging African Americans, Vera Furd as Tony Soprano's neurotic mother, John Byrne as his father, Corey Stoll as his uncle. Ray Liotta, 30 years after Goodfellas, plays Dick's father, a brutal man, but has a second role as Dick's uncle, serving a life sentence in prison, seen only sitting on the visiting room, but presenting a more objective, even more moral perspective on Mafia life.

And, a sinister ending, assassination, audience assumptions as to who ordered it, but the realities...

MY FATHER AND ME

UK, 2019, 97 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Nick Broomfield.



Nick Broomfield began making documentaries in 1971. He has had a distinguished career for half a century, taking on a wide variety of projects, international settings, social justice issues, portraits of significant characters, questioning. And, often he has been a strong presence in his films.

While there are sequences from some of his films in this documentary, especially his early collaborations on justice issues with his then-wife Joan Churchill, the main sequences are from his documentary on serial killer, Aileen Wuornos, and his film on Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love, especially the ending where he wanted to speak out and was escorted from the rostrum of a meeting of the American civil rights union.

However, as the title indicates, this is the story of his father, Maurice Broomfield, and his relationship with his father who died at the age of 94.

Maurice Broomfield was an extraordinary photographer, still photographs. His area, especially with the revival of British industry after World War II, was in photographing workers, plant, constructions, inventions. The photographs are extraordinarily striking – compositions, lighting... and this film is something of a heaven for photographers! We are shown many of the photographs throughout the film. Later in his life, he moved away from photography and his photos were stored away. Fortunately, there was a revival of interest, the cataloguing of his photos, and, in his older age, a series of exhibitions and lecture tours. They are certainly part of the heritage of Britain in the 20th century.

Nick Broomfield says that he didn't have the precision of his father, much preferred making films, the continuity, narrative, perspectives.

The film fills in interesting background to the family, especially the origins in Derbyshire, Derby as the centre of industrial development, especially with Rolls-Royce, and other factories. Maurice

married Sonia, a Jewish refugee after World War II. There is quite some comment throughout the film about Maurice's mother, Daisy, xenophobic and very suspicious of Sonia, the consequence of which was that Nick did not know his grandparents until later in life, especially with Daisy coming to stay in her old age. But, it is a reminder of British attitudes and the English Channel being a barrier preserving England.

There is a great deal of personal story in this film, many home movies, photos, Nick with his sister and their parents. But, his father did not entirely approve of Nick's vocation to cinema. And this was complicated by Maurice's more traditional values and perspectives compared with the rather more left-wing views of his refugee wife. Nick explains that he was more in contact with his mother concerning his work and his views.

Nick is interviewed for the film by his former wife and collaborator interaction, Joan Churchill, interesting perspectives and memories about that time.

After the death of Sonia, Maurice seemed to close down. But, he encountered a woman at an art class, after having taken up painting, Suzy, and there was a bond, his companion for the last years of his life, travelling together, a new range of photos...

There is also a series of photos of Maurice with his son on one side and his grandson, Barney, on the other, over a period of years.

Of interest for fans of documentary biography, for those who admire the films of Nick Broomfield, for lovers of photography, and a British portrait from the 20th century.

NITRAM

Australia, 2021, 112 minutes, Colour.
Caleb Landry Jones, Judy Davis, Anthony la Paglia, Essie Davis, Phoebe Taylor, Sean Keenan.
Directed by Justin Kurzel.



The Port Arthur massacre of 1996.

There have been a number of films about massacres, Michael Moore's documentary, Bowling for Columbine, Gus van Sant's fictionalising of this in Elephant, the two films about the Norwegian massacres of 2011, one from Norway, one from the US.

The decision was made for the Norwegian not to state the name of the killer, not to give him any kind of public acknowledgement (as was done with the Christchurch mosque killings). While Nitram was in production, there were a number of protests that this film should not be made (the same happening for a projected film about Christchurch). Should such a film be made? Sensitivities to the victims and their relatives? The danger of sensationalising?

Once the film was made, screened in competition at Cannes 2021, with actor Caleb Landry Jones winning the Best Actor award, and audiences seeing the film, Nitram was generally praised. And, while Nitram is Martin spelt backwards, there was no specific naming of the Port Arthur perpetrator.

Rather, this is a cinematic exploration of a character, trying to dramatise motivations, giving a context for the events and the consequences. This is how the film is trying to challenge the audience. It is not an entertainment. It is a drama, a sad drama about a loner, a tragic drama for the consequences. This is Tasmania, the 1990s, a sense of place, the context in society, community and family for Nitram and his perspectives on life.

Which means that the screenplay observes his behaviour, listening to what he says, observing what he does, placing great emphasis on his appearance, his body language and interactions, his idiosyncrasies, and via this portrayal to enter into a disturbed mind, the mind of a loner and, as a number of people eventually say, a weirdo. And the continual question for the audience: how are we responding?

Caleb Landry Jones is originally from Texas but somehow he is able to insert himself into Tasmania. He is young, has not been particularly successful at school, does not relate so well with his peers (attracted to a girl later claiming her as a girlfriend, attached to a surfer trying to insinuate himself as a

friend) is a loner, in his room at home, out on jobs working on lawns, not a relational person. There are many important sequences at home, with his cold, dominating yet loving, demanding mother, concerned about his personality, his health, his medication. Judy Davis is, as usual, excellent in the role. By contrast, his father seems to be a weak man, loving his son, not intervening, acceding to his wife's opinions, ultimately sick, suicidal. A different role for Anthony la Paglia.

The father has a dream of buying a property, going to visit it with his son, implanting this kind of vision in Nitram's mind – which, when he goes to claim the property, will have devastating consequences, introducing him to killing.

The other influence in his life is a retired Opera singer (and there is frequent Gilbert and Sullivan music as background, especially from *The Mikado*). She is Helen. Living alone in a mansion. Wealthy, initially intrigued by Nitram and giving him a job, bonding with him, going shopping together, he flattering her, warming to her, she giving him an expensive car, giving him dreams of travel and luxury. And, with her untimely death, her money going to Nitram enabling him to do what he likes, even to extensive sequences where he buys and stores weapons. Helen is very well played by Essie Davis (the director's wife).

There are some glimpses of mass shootings on television. However, while Nitram does go to Port Arthur with his weapons, sits and enjoys a quiet afternoon tea as he watches the tourists, families, children, all enjoying themselves, the shootings at Port Arthur are never explicitly shown.

The Port Arthur massacre was a significant episode in Australian history, making Australians aware of the potential for violence, the role of guns and the need for reform of gun law, the role of tragedy in Australian history.

The film was written by Shaun Grant, *The Snowtown Murders*, *The True History of the Kelly Gang* (and, pleasantly contrast, *Penguin Bloom*) for director Justin Kurtzel, who lives in Tasmania. His film career has focused on these themes, *Snowtown*, a version of *Macbeth*, graphic novel, *Assassins' Creed*, *The True History of the Kelly Gang* and now *Nitram*

NO TIME TO DIE

UK, 2021, 263 minutes, Colour.

Daniel Craig, Lea Seydoux, Rami Malek, Lashana Lynch, Ralph Fiennes, Ben Whishaw, Naomie Harris, Rory Kinnear, Jeffrey Wright, Billy Magnusson, Christoph Waltz, David Densik, Ana de Armas. Directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga.



Ready for release when covid struck in 2020. Then there were continuing changes of dates in release, hoping for return to cinemas. After more than a year and a half, confidence returned and here we have No Time to Die at the end of 2021.

A lot of anticipation? Worth the wait? Yes.

As usual, there is a 20 minute segment prior to the title coming on screen, the old introduction to James Bond shooting, the familiar theme (almost 60 years old), but, rather than go into action there are some domestic sequences, the focusing on a little girl, Madeleine, and talk about her killer father. And the action begins, a home invasion, a mysterious masked and pock-26 faced killer pursuing Madeleine on the ice – and then the transition to more recent times, and Madeleine and Bond together in a beautiful Italian mediaeval city, mountainside. Is this the James Bond we know? Yes, older, quieter, happy with Madeleine? But... action comes into play, car chases, explosions, fears and villains, Bond's car revealing its automatic weapons... Has there been betrayal? And then the credits come!

This film, Daniel Craig's last as Bond, has all the right buttons. And then some! And then some more!! And keeps a twist or two until the final moments. The posters have a catchy injunction: No Time for Spoilers!

Actually, the action takes place five years after the opening credits, Bond, living like Ian Fleming himself, in Jamaica. But, even though he is no longer 007 (and Lashana Lynch, tough, no holds barred, now has his designated number), M and Company (Ralph Fiennes, Naomie Harris as Money Penny, no longer secretary but active agent, Q – who gets quite a lot of screen time and action – Ben Whishaw, and Rory Kinnear as the hesitating Tanner) all become involved.

As does Felix Leiter and the CIA (Jeffrey Wright as Leiter for the third time), with a giggling assistant, Billy Magnusson, who will have much more to do with the plot).

In the meantime, we have seen a mad scientist, David Densik, with elaborate DNA experiments and technology, his lab invaded, his being taken prisoner, transfer to Cuba – and, both the UK and the US want him taken. So, off from Jamaica to Cuba – and to several action fields beyond.

The Bond films have always been wonderfully in their range of locations and scenery. Same here.

Christoph Waltz turns up as Blofeld in Belmarsh prison but still up to no good – and some interesting plot twists here... But, this time he is not the main villain, he is literally unmasked as Luyitsifer Safin (should there be an Oscar nomination for inventive character names!), Rami Malek after his Oscar-winning turn as Freddie Mercury.

So, rescue operations, the menacing Safran and his hold on Madeleine, challenging Bond, defying him – and a buildup, as in so many of the earlier Bond films to a mysteriously elaborate plant on a remote island with a desperate countdown to explosion.

Daniel Craig has done a credit to James Bond – not suave like Sean Connery or Pierce Brosnan, not jocose like Roger Moore, his own man, straightforward, serious, not necessarily realising the humorous content of the quips that are part of his screenplay dialogue, but tough, committed, and, still master of the fight. Once more the world is saved – and we are promised that James Bond will return. And pages and social media sites forever speculating on who it will be.

THE OBSCURE LIFE OF THE GRAND DUKE OF CORSICA

UK, 2021, 93 minutes, Colour.

Timothy Spall, Peter Stormare, Matt Hookings, Alicia Agneson, Noeleen Comiskey, Lucy Martin, James Mackie.

Directed by Daniel Graham.



For the 2021 distribution of this film, the word “obscure” was dropped from the title. But, “obscure” is certainly relevant. Perhaps a warning for those who do not like obscurity. Perhaps an invitation to those who enjoy it.

The film was written and directed by Australian director, Daniel Graham, his early career involved film distribution and links with a whole range of European and international directors. And this serves as a background for this sometimes obscure film, located in Malta and photographed there, set in 2021, life going on as normal (with quite some introductions to not so normal life), but with an increasing presence of mosquitoes and, by the end, something of a malaria pandemic.

However, the film does open in 1221. It is the period of St Francis of Assisi, the saint with his friends discussing something about life, the unity of creation – with some touches about the earthiness of human existence. Later, it would emerge that this is a film about St Francis, his love of poverty, his quest for holiness, his love for creation and the song of the birds, but his deep desire for humility and compassion, to meet a leper and to kiss the leper. And this does happen in the film, a sick woman, astounded by the experience and the saint literally unmasking her to see her real self (and the pathos of her return home to her loving mother who is initially overjoyed but then suspect that this is the work of the devil and her daughter is contaminated and to be rejected).

At one stage, the central character of this film, a blunt and obnoxious world renowned architect, Alfred Rott, played in his usual arresting, though this time alienating, manner by Timothy Spall, goes to see the film of St Francis. He is in Malta, in consultation with local councils, offering designs (criticised for their explicit sexual content), invited to a weird party (echoes of Eyes Wide Shut), summoned to the house of a billionaire, the Grand Duke of Corsica. The Duke is played by versatile character actor of more than 100 films, Peter Stormare. The Duke has ambitions, wants to employ Alfred Rott, but with his illness and impending death, he settles for the building of a mausoleum.

Alfred Rott becomes friendly with the Duke and, ultimately, completes quite an esoteric mausoleum, where the decaying body material can descend into a canal leading to a tree, peach tree, so that it can recycle life. And, there is an epitaph on the mausoleum from St Francis, about the unity of everything but in different forms.

What is happening is that mosquitoes are increasing in numbers on the island, biting people, creating a malaria plague. At the end, inhabitants are warned to escape from the island by any means possible. Which is where we see the last of Alfred Rott.

This has been a strange encounter, to say the least, touches of weirdness and the bizarre, but tantalisingly arresting our attention.

OFF THE RAILS

UK, 2021, 94 minutes, Colour.

Jenny Seagrove, Sally Phillips, Kelly Preston, Elizabeth Dormer-Phillips, Judi Dench, Peter Bowles, Ben Miller, Martin Shaw, Franco Nero.

Directed by Jules Williamson.



The title indicates where this film is going – off the rails! However, it could have just as well been called Girls Trip, Girls (Many) Nights Out. The target audience, very quickly established, is female, of an indeterminate age. There are various clues early in the piece: the explanation for the soundtrack, more than a dozen songs by Blondie, their favourite when they were young – and they are now at grandmother age, menopause discussions.

It is fair to add a comment from an IMDb blogger that challenges male perspectives on the film: 'I also secretly love that middle aged male critics don't get it. This one is for us!'

This is one of those stories where women friends from the past who have grown rather apart, have some secrets, also some resentments, are brought together on the occasion of the death of one of their friends. The film has some sobriety at the beginning with Judi Dench offering a eulogy at the funeral of her daughter, some moments of Peter Bowles as the vicar. And, at the ceremony, the deceased woman's daughter, Maddie, 18, plays the organ and a song which the three friends are able to sing.

There is a credit for the "original story" which seems rather a stretch. We have seen this kind of film before, the dead woman leaving tickets for her three friends to take her daughter to relive one of the trips of the past, the goal in Palma Cathedral.

It is a long time since the three were friends, back in the travelling days, back in the Blondie days, drinking, kicking over the traces. They are not quite like that now. Kate, Jenny Seagrove, is rather serious and solemn. Cassie, an American, is the longtime star of a television show, moody and peremptory when she wants to. She is played by Kelly Preston in her last role and the film is dedicated to her. There is some enjoyment with Sally Phillips who was settled down to marriage and ordinary life (but about to be shocked by her husband). Maddie is played by newcomer, Elizabeth Dormer-Phillips.

So, some random adventures with comic touches, especially when they miss quite a number of trains, when a train breaks down, when they miss the ferry to Palma... And sequences in Paris, especially a potential spree in a fashionable dress shop, nightclubs, the encounter with a British guitarist, and then a train into Italy, the one that breaks down. On board there is a young man who attracts Maddie's

attention, more than attention. And there is a pregnant woman, the passengers all trek along the train lines and out into the field, helping her give birth, Liz acting as midwife. Consequent rejoicing, a huge party, outdoors, in the town, where the mayor turns out to be Franco Nero.

More adventures, more missed trains, and the missing of the ferry, Franco Nero coming to the rescue with a World War II plane flying them to Spain, the guitarist turning up with his motorbike so that they get to the Cathedral.

And, the sun shining and reflecting through the rose window of the Cathedral is a beautiful site.

Seems a slight entertainment. However, it would also seem that for those who identify with the characters, a good show.

PADRENOSTRO

Italy, 2020, 121 minutes, Colour.

Pierfrancesco Favino, Barbara Ronchi, Mattia Garaci, Francesco Ghoghi, Giordano de Plano, Paki Meduri.

Directed by Claudio Noce.



The setting is 1976. The atmosphere in Rome is dangerous. It is the period of terrorist groups, the Red Brigade and others, assassination attempts and abductions.

However, the events and the characters are here shown through the eyes of an 11-year-old boy, Vale, in a loving family, especially devoted to his father. While we are introduced to Vale at school, initially with a medical checkup because he is rather small, a touch of the puny, yet eager to play football, then, shots fired in the street, Vale and his mother going to the balcony, his father shot, terrorists escaping on their motorbikes, one wounded on the street, removing his balaclava, dying.

It is important for the audience, while not ignoring their knowledge of the times and their adult response to these events, to see everything through the eyes of the 11-year-old boy. He doesn't quite understand. His mother turns off the television coverage. His little sister is bewildered. However, eventually his father does come home, to have Vale's eyes, not the worse for wear. Life seems to go on, especially with his father giving him the gift of a football.

Vale goes to school, the teaching nun supportive, a lot of the fellow students against him. (We have to deduce although it is spelt out later that his father belongs to the government in some way.)

However, the important thing is the appearance of a 14-year-old who befriends Vale, Christian. He comes and goes mysteriously. He shows Vale how he lives in the woods. The two become firm

friends, Christian an expert with the soccer ball. When it seems safer for the family to travel south to join the father's family, Christian suddenly turns up there. The audience is probably trying to deal with whether Christian is real or not, a figment of Vale's imagination, an imaginary friend or something of an alter ego. When it does appear that he is real in his visit to the south, it helps to see him from Vale's point of view, suddenly appearing, disappearing, friendly encounters, a blood oath of friendship.

When Vale's parents meet Christian, a touch of suspicion, but then he is welcomed, into the house, for meals, at the big family picnic, a football game where he plays on the side of the father, winning, to Vale's obvious displeasure. Which is aggravated when they go to the father's favourite fishing spot and the father seems to be favouring Christian again, Vale pushing him into the water, Christian unable to swim and having to be rescued.

It is a challenging time for Vale. How he has treated Christian, going to a cliff where Vale had told the story of a criminal and friend who jumped off the cliff. But, the father is there to rescue again.

Probably most of the audience will have appreciated early on who Christian really is, it finally being confirmed by Vale looking in Christian's bag and finding the photo of him with his parents (the father the dead terrorist) and the newspaper reports.

In fact, at the beginning and the end, there is a contemporary scene, Vale is a middle-aged man, on a train in Rome, thinking he sees the adult Christian – and he does.

The film is said to be based on a true story. In fact, the director's father had the experience of the father in the film so this is the director's attempt to go back to his childhood to relive, re-see, experience the significant events in his early life.

PALAU

US, 2019, 116 minutes, Colour.

Gaston Pauls, Santiago Achaga, Augustin Amoedo, Alexia Moyano, Alexandra Bard, Darren Dowler, Manuel Ramos, Daniel Roebuck,
Directed by Kevin Knoblock.



Evangelical preacher, Luis Palau, was not on this reviewer's radar. This was a reminder that those who belong to particular churches are very much involved in the life of those churches and not aware of what happens in other religious groups, their religious leaders, different aspects of faith, approaches to the Scriptures, Gospel injunctions, confessions of faith. And there is the difference between Christians who emphasise the word of God, listening to the proclaimed word, preaching, and Christians who also have a more sacramental approach, religious rituals and celebrations.

Which means that this film is important for Evangelical Christians who know and know of Luis Palau, and that it is an opportunity for those unfamiliar with Evangelical Christianity to observe and to learn. It can be noted that this strong perspective on Evangelical Christianity is in no way aggressive towards others, no criticisms, no suggestions of any rivalries. Where it can be of interest to Catholic communities is that it highlights the growing presence of Evangelical Christianity in Latin America, inviting the audience to accompany Palau and his faith and preaching journey, its style, its impact.

The film is straightforward in its style of storytelling (not arthouse cinema style), making it immediately accessible to its intended audience. It is biography, admiring of its subject, showing his abilities as well as difficulties, not a hagiography. Rather, an acknowledgement and tribute.

Luis Palau was born in Argentina, the film showing glimpses of his early years, the conversion of his father, his father's reading the book of Proverbs, a chapter a day, his father's sudden death from pneumonia because medical supplies were limited because of the war. It is 1944. The young Luis is devoted to his warmly caring mother. And he does hear a radio broadcasts by Billy Graham which stirs his imagination about preaching.

The film shows him 10 years later as a young man, working in an office, but motivated by preaching the word, organising brief radio programs, supported by his co-work in the office, drawing the attention of visiting American evangelical authorities who suggest moving to the United States for theological education and training.

The film then moves ahead another 10 years with Luis in Portland, Oregon, now married to local teacher, Pat, beginning a family (the film not showing anything of courtship, marriage). There is a happiness of his mother's visit. While their situation is difficult, there is help from the local church authorities, and the proposal that they go to Colombia for mission work, which they do, and with the help of Luis's co-worker from the past, Jorge. One of the main activities in Colombia, 1966, is the organisation of a mass rally in Bogota, an invitation to all the church to participate, initial suspicion from the authorities, but Luis preaching to an assembly of 20,000 people, urging a new life and conversion.

There is a small significant sequence with Luis in the United States, he and Pat going to a Billy Graham rally, Billy Graham himself sitting with them at a lunch break, friendly, encouraging. The sequence is very short but Billy Graham makes a very strong impression – and then invites Luis to stand on the stage with him translating, with the same intense enthusiasm, Billy Graham's words for the Hispanic community.

There is also a sequence, in the Presbyterian Church, where Luis is preaching and it has an effect on a member of the congregation who stands and confesses what is wrong with his life – leading to family reconciliation and people further confessing.

The sequences are very reminiscent of African-American evangelical churches and the congregations, very much alive, singing, praising, confessing. Luise's services are not quite so emotional, more low-key.

And that is where the narrative of the film finishes. What follows is information about Luis Palau's ministry, a 60 year ministry, his dying in early 2021. He was considered something of a second Billy Graham. He preached with energy over the next decades, glimpses of rallies included from all over the world. He wrote books. He was very prominent in a radio ministry. The screenplay of the film, written by its director, Kevin Knoblock, who has made many documentaries (ranging from a study of George Washington to Pope John Paul II's nine days visit to Poland) stays with the faith ministry and does not include any of the social issues, sexuality issues, that preoccupy militant Evangelicals.

At the end, there is a clip of a television interview with Luis Palau himself. He has quite some verve in his old age, something of a twinkle in his eye, energetic gestures – which made this reviewer realise the limitations in the performance and the direction of the actor, Argentinian Gaston Pauls, in communicating the early life of Luis Palau. The actor is very serious, sometimes rather dour, and, in retrospect, not particularly charismatic at all. So, it was something of a relief to get the moments of the actual Luis Palau.

This is a significant film for evangelical Christians. It is a film of interest for non-evangelical Christians, a reminder of the presence and power of these faith-based communities.

PALAZZO DI COZZO

Australia, 2021, 85 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Madaleine Martiniello.



Franco Cozzo is a Melbourne icon, a self-made man, seller of furniture over many decades, furniture in the baroque style. Clearly, this is a film for Melbourne, for Melbournites who are not as young as they used to be and who remember the flamboyant salesman from his television commercials. They may have forgotten a lot of the detail, but this documentary will revive the memories.

But, Palazzo Di Cozzo is not a documentary simply for the inhabitants of Melbourne. It is extremely relevant for Australians. And it offers much of interest to international audiences.

The reason for saying this is that Franco Cozzo's story is almost an archetypal migrant story, from any culture to any other culture, difficult beginnings, determination and enterprise, success. And, since so many migrants came from Italy to Australia (as they formerly did to the United States), this is the study of the meaning of migration, the implications for what it was for the migrants to adapt to their new country.

While Franco Cozzo, 83 at the time of making the film, 85 at the time of its release, is certainly at the centre, self-promotion was definitely his forte, enjoyably so for himself and for the public, there are also quite a number of talking heads discussing the immigration issues.

There are photos and footage from the past. And the filmmakers have been very diligent in finding a great deal of film material from the 40s and 50s illustrating the arrival of migrants, their initial jobs, community support... And, this kind of footage is very creatively used in a significant part of the film where one of Cozzo's sons goes to prison for drug dealing and word goes round, suspicious of Cozzo himself and involvement in drugs. There is a visual collage, extensive, illustrating whispering, gossip, suspicions, accusations.

But, Franco Cozzo himself has sailed through life, marriage and children, separation and divorce, second marriage and children, an extraordinary success in business. In fact, the film includes visits to several homes, visual tours of houses to look at the furniture in situ.

But, we all, this reviewer included, remember the commercials. And they are repeated here – though initially he seems to be able to pronounce Footscray accurately enough but as time went on, there was the inserted that vowel sound (this reviewer remembering it as Foot-a-scray), seen on screen now many times as Footisgrai. Franco Cozzo so relished the Ads in Italian, even extending some of them into Greek. And there was the continual reminder, genially urgent, "Grand Sale". And there he was on television shows, being interviewed by Don Lane and dramatising his sales pitch, his daughter

appearing on Young Talent Time and a callout from Johnny Young, newsreaders to giving stories about him, like Mike Willesee.

So, while there is plenty of footage from the past, there is also plenty of footage of the man himself aged 80, still full of life, contemplating selling his Footisgrai store, discussions with agents, his changing his mind, reviewing all the furniture that is still there and probably unsellable (although there are some sequences with incoming Asian and African potential clients).

So, Australia has been called the lucky country – and, for Franco, for this migrant from Sicily, bringing out his parents, starting from scratch, Australia was lucky (but we must never underestimate Franco Cozzo and his business shrewdness, ingenuity, boundless energy).

PASSING

US, 2021, 98 minutes, Black-and-white.

Tessa Thompson, Ruth Negga, Andre Holland, Bill Camp, Alexander Skarsgaard.

Directed by Rebecca Hall.



By now, the word “Passing” in connection with African-American people of light-coloured tone to be identified with white people and share their life and style, undetected, sounds rather quaint. It is a word from the past. And, in the last half century or more of American history, it seems a retrograde step., especially in discussions about identity.

However, it is part of American black history that leads to a great deal of reflection about race, race attitudes, prejudice and bigotry, and the effect on the people who were passing. (There are several films in the latter part of the 1940s taking up these themes, Lost Boundaries and prominent 20th Century Fox star, Jeanne Crane, passing in Pinky.)

With no specific indication at the opening of the film as to what year it is set, we might be speculating with the fashions, the cars, indications of prohibition, perhaps the 1930s. In fact, the setting is 1929, New York City, the contrast between Uptown at Harlem, and is based on a novel published that year by author Neva Larson. So, this is a story based on real experience.

For those who follow acting careers, it comes as a surprise (as it did to this reviewer) to find that it has been written and directed by British actress, Rebecca Hall (versatile presence in such films as Vicky

Christina Barcelona and Christine). It was well known that she was the director of British doyen of theatre, Sir Peter all. But, information about this film indicates that her mother was American and that her father and grandfather was black. So, not a screenplay by a detached outside observer but by somebody who is exploring African-American experience and roots.

At the centre is the ladylike, beautifully dressed in mannered, affluent wife of a doctor in Harlem, noted for her charity work, Irene (Tessa Thompson). On a hot day, in a fashionable restaurant, she encounters a school friend whom she has not met for years, Claire (Ruth Negga). There is an awkwardness, Irene discovering clear passing for white, compounded by the arrival of her husband John (Alexander Starsky and), devoted to clear but expressing hateful and contemptible racism.

The drama of the film is Irene's trying to cope with clears decisions, life, wanting her friendship, her continual presence in Harlem and feeling at home there, attentions from Iran's Dr husband, Brian (Andre Holland). So, drama for Irene, her own identity and racial pride, dealing with the realities of passing, touches of jealousy for Claire's quest to re-discover her black origins, quite tormenting for Irene. But, Claire seems to bloom in Harlem, continually re-visiting, enjoying the night life, the dancing, socialising, the men, her feeling at home in Harlem an increasing distance from her husband (she had witnessed his bigoted outburst to Irene).

A great deal to reflect on for all audiences, what kind of passing do we act on in our own lives, the surface, the deeper feelings, questions of where we really feel at home in our culture, in our traditions, in ourselves. If we pass, what privileges are we expecting? And this is dramatically brought to the fore when John comes to Harlem, angry, vicious, incomprehensible, feeling deceived by Claire...

The film was shot, not in colour, but in black and white, highlighting the cultural differences and with a contemporary jazz score..

RED NOTICE

US, 2021, 118 minutes, Colour.

Dwayne Johnson, Ryan Reynolds, Gal Gadot, Rita Arya, Chris Diamantopoulos.

Directed by Rawson Marshall Thurber.



Looking for pacy action entertainment? Try Red Notice.

Most of us enjoy, at least sometimes, some escapist entertainment. Escape and escapism are key to Red Notice. The three central characters, either individually or in pairs or in the trio itself, spent a lot of their time escaping – and in attractively exotic locations, starting with Rome and the Castel San Angelo and its Museum, transitioning to Bali and a jungle hideaway, an episode in a remote Russian prison in the mountains, then to Valencia, even including an escape from a bull in an arena, and a trek through the Argentinian jungle to a Nazi hideaway in a deserted copper mine with extensive abandoned tunnels ready for a car chase including a 1931 Mercedes-Benz with gold plate! There is also a visit to a lavish social wedding in Cairo where Ed Sheeran as his singing self has to escape the mayhem. One is inclined to add, “who could ask for anything more?”.

This kind of film used to be called a heist caper. Perhaps that’s what they are still called – and this one fulfils the definition, elaborate heist, comedy action and caper.

And the red notice? We are told at once that it is a mark from Interpol, signalling the chief suspect they are pursuing. This time it is an art thief, Nolan Booth, who prides himself on being the best in the world. And he is played by Ryan Reynolds in his affable, sometimes aw-shucks persona, quite self-centred (explaining his resentment against his police officer father), but shrewd and well-organised in his thefts and escapes. In pursuit is an FBI agent, John Hartley, interesting to see Dwayne Johnson in an authority role. But, the mysterious character who claims to be the best art thief in the world is The Bishop, revealed to be a female with ecclesiastical nomination, played by Wonder Woman herself, Gal Gadot (who has not lost any of the skills she acquired way back in her Amazon days!).

The target of the thefts is a group of three eggs, alleged to belong to Cleopatra.

Booth and Hartley have to spend a long time together, sometime in hard labour in the Russian prison, other times being tortured by a diminutive greedy Spanish entrepreneur with a distinctive voice, his character called Sotto Voce, trekking through the jungle and finding the art cache, Booth whistling the Indiana Jones theme as they arrive!

The screenplay is often very witty, all kinds of quips and jokes and the writer-director, Rawson Marshall Thurber, who enjoys working with Dwayne Johnson, Central Intelligence, Skyscraper, might have called this film Bromancing the Egg. And entertaining references to a range of films, including mixing up David Attenborough’s documentaries and Richard Attenborough the palaeontologist in Jurassic Park!

Since the characters are specialists in fraud, are expert in, artistry, the screenplay has lots of misdirection of attention for the audience and plenty of twists and turns.

Entertaining.

RESPECT

US, 2021, 145 minutes, Colour.

Jennifer Hudson, Forest Whitaker, Marlon Wayans, Tituss Burgess, Audra McDonald, Marc Maron, Kimberly Scott, Albert Jones, Tate Donovan, Mary J. Blige.

Directed by Liesl Tommy.



Two years ago, the documentary, *Amazing Grace*, which serves as the finale for this portrait of Aretha Franklin, was released after disappearing from distribution for several decades. And, in more recent times, there has been television series, *Genius*, starring Cynthia Erivo as Aretha Franklin.

This film, which takes its title from one of her most well-known songs, the spelling out of respect as RE – SP – ECT, is really a portrait of the singer, the equivalent of a concert of many of her songs and performances, and some basic biography. (And it is interesting to note that this year, Singer, Billie Holliday, had her own screen treatment, *The US Versus Billie Holliday*, covering the period in song and social concerns/racism in the decades preceding Aretha Franklin.)

While this is something of a warts and all portrait at moments, we keep remembering that Aretha Franklin had an extraordinary number of public honours, from US presidents, to posthumous Pulitzer Prize, to singing at the inauguration of Barack Obama. So, the film asks, who was Aretha Franklin and where did she come from?

10-year-old Aretha is first seen being woken up, brought out by her father to sing for visitors, then guided back to bed. Momentarily, we glimpse a demure little girl, in are taken aback at the vocal range of the performance, the intensity of the sound of her voice, her sense of rhythm. And she

continued, under the guidance of her father, under his frequent dominating control, to sing in his church. This was the 1950s.

Her ambitious father (played by Forest Whitaker) wanted her to have singing career and fame, taking her to New York, interviews with record producers, making a strong impression, cutting records, issuing albums – but not quite the success she had hoped for, not having the hits.

While she emerges as a strong personality, a powerful performance from Jennifer Hudson who was handpicked by Aretha Franklin herself to portray her, she also has a number of insecurities, some sexual abuse in her past, measuring up to her father's expectations and wanting to break through, to have the courage, buoyed by memories of her mother encouraging her to sing and saddened by her mother's separation from her father and then her death. Aretha also makes some bad choices, especially concerning Ted White (Marlon Wayans), moody, entrepreneur, ambitious. (Particularly striking is an early sequence when Aretha sings in a New York nightclub, paying tribute to Dinah Washington who is there (Mary J Blige) who humiliates her in public but then privately gives her advice and encouragement).

During the 1960s, Aretha Franklin was friendly with Martin Luther King, supporting him, singing at his funeral. There was great commercial success, signing up with a new producer, a band from Alabama, European tour. However, Aretha was on edge, drinking, clashing with her father...

This film ends in 1972, Aretha having gone into the depths, her alcohol dependence, her low self-esteem, but a religious experience, and experience of amazing grace, and the beginning of an ascent out of the depths to an almost 50 year career of soul music, social justice and concern.

(And, for the fans, there is a still from The Blues Brothers in the final credits!)

RON'S GONE WRONG

UK/US, 2021, 104 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Jack Dylan Grazer, Zach Galifianakis, Ed Helms, Olivia Colman, Rob Delaney, Justice Smith, Kylie Cantrell, Ricardo Hurtado, Ruby Wax.

Directed by Sarah Smith, Jean-Philippe Vine, Octavio E. Rodriguez.



Ron's Gone Wrong is the first animation feature from the British studios, Locksmith Animation. But, the setting is, it would seem, California. The voice talent, quite varied, is both British and American, with Jack Dylan Grazer (the 2 It films) as the central young character, Barney, and comedian Zach Galifianakis as the entertaining voice of the rather crazy at times robot, B*Bot, Ron. And it is a surprise to find that Olivia Coleman voiced the rather strong-minded plump Polish grandmother.

This is an animated entertainment for a 2020s audience, youngsters who are at home with all kinds of technology, in a US where every child has its own personal AI B*Bot, (visually akin in some ways to R2D2). They come in assorted colours and personalities, friends, playthings, companions at school, in games. So, that is the kind of technical world we will come to expect.

But the story is of Barney, his widowed father who makes rather useless novelty toys, his dominant grandmother. Barney wants his own robot and father and grandmother find one that has fallen off the back of a truck and bring him home to the delighted Barney. But, he does not work properly, which leads to all kinds of jokes, mistakes, even some riots at school.

In the meantime, there is Mark, the young creator of the B*Bots (African-American, voiced by Justice Smith) and the dastardly, profit-criminally ambitious to be CEO, Andrew (Rob Delaney), who continually reminds us how unscrupulous and greedy big business is (or can be). Which means then that Ron has to be recalled, crushed, but rescued by Barney and taken into the woods, and then an excursion into the enormity of the Cloud, to rectify Ron's workings.

There are also a number of children from the school, once Barney's friends, now either ignoring or bullying him. We can see where this is going towards a happy ending.

For adults watching this film, it offers a lot of time to think about our technological age, the growing dependence of everyone, and now children, on their own robots, on their own AI. Which may teach them a lot about relationships and companionship. But, the question lurks, why is it that the film is showing us how youngsters relate better to robots than they do to one another, the film belatedly urging some friendliness between the children themselves, but more on the with the robots. Already, children spend so much time in front of their screens. While the robots might get them out of the house, it is still a technological dependence rather than developing human relationships. While that may not have been the intention of the filmmakers, the question is do emerge.

The creator is called Mark, echoes of Mr Zuckerberg – and, was it in the filmmakers intentions to have Andrew, the profit-engineering CEO, to be the business after ego of Mark Zuckerberg? A thought!

SHANG CHI AND THE LEGEND OF THE TEN RINGS

US, 2021, 132 minutes, Colour.

Simu Liu, Tony Chiu-Wai Leung, Awkwafina, Ben Kingsley, Michelle Yeoh, Meng'er Zhang, Florian Munteanu, Jayden ZhangJane, Elodie Fong.

Directed by Destin Daniel Cretin.



Here is a different world of the Marvel Universe, a kind of world we have not seen before (although, come to think of it, with the appearance of Benedict Wong, there are some links with Dr Strange). But, this is a magic world, a world of myths, of warriors, of dragons, of combat... But, to our surprise, it is also the world of 21st-century San Francisco!

Those familiar with the Marvel comics will have no difficulty in entering into this world, of being introduced to the thousand year plus reign of Xu Wenwu, the unscrupulous power-hungry, no holds barred, Xu Wenwu (featuring Chinese actor of the Infernal Affairs series and Wong Kar Wai dramas, Tony Chiu Wai Leung). He is a commanding presence, leading his troops in a series of adventures throughout the centuries, but ultimately falling in love with a young woman who has powers and physical prowess equal to his. They marry and have two children, training them both in the martial arts, but the mother being taken prisoner and Xu Wenwu, grieving, but making too harsh demands on his children who escape his domination.

Which means that we do end up in San Francisco where the son, Shang-Chi (going by the name of Shaun) has found a career as a car valet at a hotel, working with the rather feisty Katie (Awkwafina doing her cheeky and feisty performance once again, moving comparatively easy from speed driving a runaway bus through the San Francisco streets (cars have done it so often) to becoming a warrior along with Shang-Chi to confront his father). There are also some sequences in the casino bright-lit areas of Macau and a fight club.

Canadian actor, Simy Liu, seems rather unprepossessing in his San Francisco life and appearance, but, as Shang Chi, in the fight club, as well as other occasions has enormous, and frequent, opportunities to show his martial arts skills, against all kinds of comers – especially a giant Romanian bodyguard who has only one hand!

But, most of the action takes place in the build up to the confrontation with Xu Wenwu, Shang Chi finding his sister again, experiencing her resentment in his escape and promise to return which he had not. And this kind of adventure could not be without Michelle Yeoh.

The rest of the action is as expected, Shang Chi, his sister and Katie tracing their way through a mysterious forest, discovering the land where his mother came from, bonding with the inhabitants, training, ready for the final confrontation – which will, in fact, also have confrontations between two giant dragons.

For audiences not familiar with this kind of martial arts storytelling and mythologies, suddenly there is a character who will delight them – a British actor who had been conned into thinking he was playing a terrorist when, in fact, he was being used by Xu Wenwu, had served his time in prison but had been interned, finding compassion in the faceless roly-poly creature with whom he could communicate! But the delight is that he is played by Ben Kingsley, enjoying the role immensely, partly hamming it up, partly shrewd comedy, especially in his communications with his strange friend.

The final credits are very long, as always for the Marvel Universe, and there is some aftermath activity during the credits – but, for those who are patient, there is, as usual, a post-credits sequence which indicates that this is not the last we shall see of Shang Chi.

WAITING FOR ANYA

UK, 2020, 104 minutes, Colour.

Noah Schnapp, Thomas Kretschmann, Frederick Schmidt, Tomas Lemarquis, Gilles Marini, Elsa Zylberstein, Angelica Huston, Jean Reno, Sadie Frost, Declan Cole.

Directed by Ben Cookson.



Anya is a young Jewish girl, seen with her father at a Paris railway station, the invading German supervising, the rounding up of the Jews and putting them in the rail transports for the concentration camps. Her father pushes Anya under the train carriage, is able to get a sympathetic passenger to take her into a local train to safety. Her father lives in hope that he will see her again.

Over the 70 years since these events took place, there have been many films about France, the German occupation, the Vichy government, the rounding up of the Jews and their being transported to the camps. Here is another similar story, a reminder that these events should not be forgotten.

Many of the film is about France during World War II are grim, stark and violent, stories of harsh treatment of the Jews, oppression in occupation, the Resistance, the many French people in towns and villages who sheltered the Jews or who organised their crossing from France into Switzerland over the Alps or crossing from France into Spain over the Pyrenees. This is a Pyrenees story.

This film is, we might say, more PG-rated. It is geared towards a younger audience, a film for teenagers, for instance, to learn about these events. It is also a film that many audiences who say they do not want to see too much violence on the screen, can watch, discomfited and saddened with the story and the characters, but not upset by visual violence.

After the prologue in Paris, all the action takes place in the Pyrenees village, village characters, a focus on a young boy, Jo, who looks after the sheep as well as going to school, at home with his mother because his father is in a prisoner of war camp, and the patriarchal grandfather. There is an episode where Jo encounters a huge, menacing bear and alerts the townspeople who kill it. But Benjamin, a stranger who is in hiding with the local widow, caring for children and getting them across the Pyrenees, befriends Jo who then works for some years as the delivery boy for the widow, bringing food and necessities from the village for the children (who eventually have to hide in the cave).

The Germans arrive, occupy the town as we have seen in so many films. The officer in charge rather younger, looks sinister, bald, glasses – and, initially, executing three hostages (offscreen). However, there is The Corporal, an older officer, more benign, who befriends Jo and his friend, Hubert, who is mentally impaired. The Corporal takes them to the mountains to watch the Eagles.

The high drama of the film is the plan to get the children across the border, the device of having the spring celebration of the sheep, herding the sheep to the mountaintop, the children going with them. And everyone at a concert, the Germans included, so the children can come down from the cave to be ready to go with the sheep. This has the participation of the local parish priest, a genial presence and helper.

Ultimately, the Germans have to leave, there are some moments of tragedy but peace comes again to the Pyrenees.

The film has a strong cast including Jean Reno is the grandfather, Angelica Huston is the widow, Noah Schnap (Stranger Things) is Jo and Thomas Kretschmann is The Corporal. The Dir's Swiss, Ben Cookson.

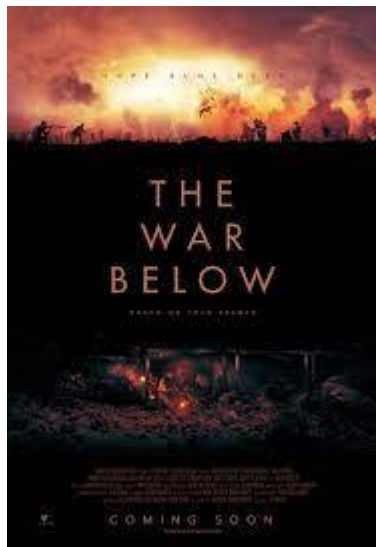
Audiences who want strong dramas of occupied France may find this too mild. But, *Waiting for Anya* can be a film which introduces younger audiences to these historical events, war, occupation, persecution of the Jews, suffering.

THE WAR BELOW

UK, 2021, 96 minutes, Colour.

Sam Hazeldine, Tom Goodman-Hall, Kris Hitchen, Elliot James Langridge, Sam Clem,ett, Joseph Steyne, Anna Maguire, Andrew Scarborough, Douglas Reith.

Directed by J.P.Watts.



The War Below is a piece of history of World War I trench warfare. It focuses on a group of industrial tunnel diggers who are seconded to the war effort, going to the Somme, going to Flanders, digging under no man's land, planting explosives to destroy German gun strongholds. (A parallel story about Australian tunnel diggers can be seen in Beneath Hill 60).

The film initially recreates the atmosphere of recruitment for the war, British patriotism, the men lined up to enlist. It also shows those who rejected on health grounds. Included in these is William Hawkin, an expert digger for local industry.

However, there are sequences with General Haig, the desperation at the conduct of the war in 1916, the battle of the Somme, the number of casualties. One of his colonels, nicknamed Hellfire Jack, suggests the digging of tunnels under no man's land, the idea rejected by Haig who is old school in his conduct of warfare, rejected by Colonel Fielding, superior, looking down on the working classes. However, the decision is made and Jack goes to the factory where William Hawkin works, discusses the matter, initial scepticism, but a group of five going to France. They discover the hardships of dirt and filth in the trenches, are looked down on by the regular soldiers, insulted by Fielding.

The film shows the camaraderie between the diggers, the details of the first tunnel, the explosion and success of the mission. The film also shows the discussion between the men about returning home, continue with their work, the military authorities keen that they dig another tunnel in Flanders. William Hawkin is pigheaded and obsessive, tensions within the group. Fielding charges Hawkin and his associate, Harry, with insubordination and they spend the night as a penalty their hands strung up, reminding audiences of the harsh attitudes of the authorities towards the soldiers during the war.

The next mission is fraught with danger, the Germans now digging tunnels, fights and interactions with the Germans, time and deadlines, a dramatic conclusion.

The film is a tribute to the ordinary citizens who contributed to the war effort.

LASCIAMI ANDARE/ YOU CAME BACK

Italy, 2020, 98 minutes, Colour.

Stefano Accorsi, Valeria Golino, Maya Sansa, Serena Rossi, Antonio Truppo, Lino Musella.

Directed by Stefano Mordini.



For audiences who have happy memories of Venice, this is a strong reason for seeing this film. Throughout the drama, there are wonderful views of the canals, the buildings, San Marco underwater, travelling on the canals...

On the one hand, there is a realism thread throughout the drama, the opening with a couple and their young child, buying a house in Venice, establishing themselves. Then the action moves on eight years, indicating the accidental death of the young boy and the consequences for each of the parents. The father, Marco, deeply upset, blaming himself, married again, his wife expecting a child. On the other hand, the mother, Clara, has been deeply affected emotionally, has moved to a new relationship

but is brittle. Marco is a successful engineer, visiting his building sites. And he consults his father, an academic.

On the other hand, there is a mysterious thread throughout the drama, introduced by a divorcee, Perla, who pursues Marco to tell him that they have bought the old house, that her son encounters the spirit of his son, is disturbed. There has been a suggestion initially, with the estate agent highlighting the light from the canals reflected on a white wall of a room, beauty, but ghostly. Marco also discusses issues with his father who is an expert on Eastern philosophies, life and continuity of life, life after death.

Perla continues to approach Marco, also goes to his wife, indicating that she would like to sell the house and that they might like to buy it back again.

Again, on the realistic level, Marco is angry with Perla, investigates her, finds he has a dubious financial background, fraud accusations, not to be trusted. On the mysterious level, Clara persuades him to consult a psychic who has a reputation for putting parents in touch with dead children. The psychic seems to succeed but Marco breaks it off.

For sceptics, there seem to be quite rational explanations as to what has gone on, reality, harsh feelings of blame and sorrow, consequences. For those who appreciate something beyond the natural, there are indications as the film develops that there might be some truth in the appearances of the little boy in the house.

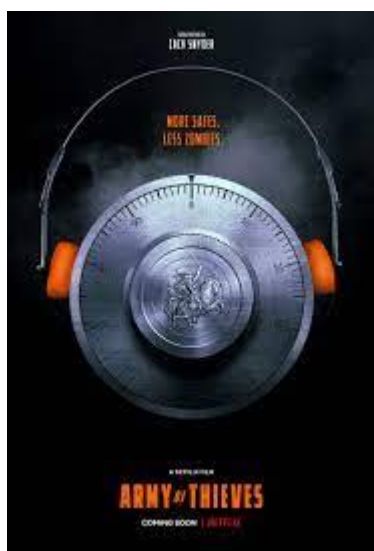
The strong cast is led by Stefano Accorsi as Marco with international star, Valeria Golina as Perla.

STREAMING

ARMY OF THIEVES

US/Germany, 2021, 127 minutes, Colour.

Matthias Schweighofer, Nathalie Emmanuel, Ruby O. Fee, Stuart Martin, Guz Khan, Jonathan Cohen.
Directed by Matthias Schweighofer.



With *The Army of the Dead* in the title, it is a quick reminder that this is a prequel to the zombie battle in Las Vegas actioner, *Army of the Dead*. This prequel is a story of origins, focusing on the character of the safe cracker, Dieter Ludwig, the attention-drawing Matthias Schweighöfer, who had his moment of glory in breaking into the crack-defying safe, *Gottterdammerung*.

But, this time he is not only the central character of the action, it is very much his film. And, instead of originator, Zack Snyder, is also the director.

In many ways, this prequel is far more simple in its plotting than for *Army of the Dead*. It is basically Sebastian (Dieter Ludwig is only a game name), a fairly simple banker with an uneventful routine daily life in Germany, making a little video online and immediately being contacted, mysteriously, for an underground sports event. No, not martial arts. Safe cracking experts are assembled for a knockout competition, eager crowds betting. And, before you know it – and before he knows it – he is the champion and recruited again but this time for a larger, illegal venture.

We know this because Sebastian has told us a story at the opening of the film, about a genius safe maker who created four incredible safes and named them after Richard Wagner's operas. But, sadly, the disillusioned inventor made a huge safe, went inside, locked himself in and died. The legacy is of the challenge to crack the Wagnerian safes.

Which is really what this film is about. Sebastian is recruited by a mysterious young woman, with a wealthy background, but wanting more excitement and having a flair for pickpocketing and thievery (Nathalie Emmanuel as Gwendoline). Also in the team are various nondescript experts, Korina (Ruby O.Fee) who was able to illicitly download *Pirates of the Caribbean* to when she was 12! Then there is Rolf (Guz Khan) the getaway driver who could take a guest limousine from the hotel, travel around town and have it back instantly on demand. Then there is Alexis, a weedy little boy who decides to body build and become a martial arts champion in superhero, admiring the films of Nicolas Cage, and coming up with his pseudonym, Brad Cage!

The cracking of each of the safes is enjoyable, lots of editing and pace, slow, quick, ingenious getting into the various banks, Korina activating all kinds of doors and entries, Brad Cage having to intervene with Plan B, a masked diversionary robbery (mask: Richard Nixon), with the touch of violence, in love with Gwendoline but moved by some jealousy – even jettisoning poor Sebastian in the street who has to steal a pushbike and, instead of a car chase (well the car chases him) an extraordinary feat through Prague of bike riding.

In the background are the Interpol experts – though their leader, continually frustrated, could be a relative of Inspector Clouseau.

Those who want zombie action (and the film cleverly inserts anticipatory sequences from *Army of the Dead* as well as directly linking it in the final sequence) have complained about how slow it is. Maybe

that is the European sensibility and pace. However, and this reviewer agrees, quite a number of people like the tongue-in-cheek irony of so much of the dialogue and the blending of Sebastian as an innocent abroad gradually taking more delight in his skills and notoriety, with heist conventions.

THE GUILTY

US, 2021, 90 minutes, Colour.

Jake Gyllenhaal, Christine Vidal, voices of: Ethan Hawke, Peter Sarsgaard, Christiana Montoya, Riley Keogh, Paul Dano.

Directed by Antoine Fuqua.



The original, *The Guilty*, was Denmark's official nomination for the 2018 Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film. It won many awards and was critically praised – and bloggers seem to be unanimous in their appreciation for the film. It has now been remade in the United States, accessible to audiences who are unable to or reluctant to read subtitles. This version has been directed by Antoine Fuqua, director of many action films as well as sports documentaries.

As often happens with American remakes of European films, there was general condemnation, that this version was unnecessary, that people should read subtitles, that this was exploitative of the original, that was not as good as the original. But, the issue is, that any film should be taken on its own merits without immediate comparisons with the original.

On paper, the film looks fairly straightforward, a police story, cases that they have to handle. At first, this is confirmed with a man ringing in complaining of being mugged – and it turning out that he had picked up a prostitute who mocked him. There is also a drunk who does not know where he is. In this way we are introduced to the 911 Emergency Service in Los Angeles, and the work of the man on duty, Joe.

Joe is played with extreme intensity by Jake Gill and heart of, the film focusing completely on him and his reactions, and string the phone, listening to the calls, becoming personally involved, the audience becoming more aware of his own angers and desperation, phone calls to his wife and wanting to his talk to his daughter even in the middle of the night.

In fact, the film is not quite as we expected at all. The action does not leave the Emergency Services rooms, concentrating completely on Jo, some interactions with the other members of the staff at the office, his communications by phone with other officials in order to get action going, some communication with a friend (which has serious repercussions by the end of the film). The phone call and his reactions become more and more frantic and emotional.

A number of commentators have been reminded of the film, Locke, with Tom Hardy, the action which takes place completely in a car as the central character drives. Then there is Buried, with Ryan Reynolds, the action taking place in a coffin which has been buried. Quite a challenge for a writer and director to keep audiences interested. But, The Guilty, certainly retains the interest.

The main part of the film, which is a comparatively short film, concerns a woman phoning in, gradually revealing that she has been abducted, is ringing the police but pretending to be talking to her young daughter. Joe keeps her on the phone, gets what information he can, communicates it to other officers. He also uses his wits, finding the address of the abducted woman, phoning and talking to her little daughter, gaining more information about the father and the parents' separation, his visit to the house, his violent outburst, the little girl caring about her little brother and concerned about her mother.

Without revealing any more of the plot, it can be said that there is quite a twist in this episode, audiences asking themselves how they responded to the interrogations, the evidence, the behaviour of the mother, the behaviour of the father, the repercussions on the little girl, especially when Joe is able to advise police to go to the house.

This development makes the film more involving for the audience, interested in how Asger is handling the situation, the relative behaviours of the mother and the father.

Throughout the film, Joe has been phoning a friend who is to give testimony the next day in a court case – the friend has testified to firing a gun but the revelation is that Joe fired the gun. In a moving conversation at the end, Joe, broken down and weeping admits. There is some final voice-over as to what decisions Joe makes.

REVIEWS DECEMBER 2021

BAD LUCK BANGING LOONEY PORN

BEST SELLERS

BLUE BAYOU

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CANDYMAN

CARD COUNTER, The

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PRISONERS OF THE GHOSTLAND

STRAYS

TITANE

TICK... TICK... BOOM

UNFORGIVEABLE, The

VENOM, LET THERE BE CARNAGE

@ZOLA

STREAMING

ADRIENNE

BRUISED

7 PRISONIEROS/ 7 PRISONERS

HATING PETER TATCHEL

BAD LUCK BANGING LOONY PORN

Romania, 2021, 106 minutes, Colour.
Katia Pascariu, Claudia Ieremia.
Directed by Radu Jude.



You certainly have to look twice at this title. And what could it mean? And, of course, the final word in the title gets initial attention – which it does in the film.

This is a Romanian satire, winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlinale, 2021. It provoked controversial comment at the time of its winning the award. And has continued to court controversy. For a general release in the United States, 20 minutes of footage were cut from the film – which means that this review, of the full film, is not for American audiences.

The film opens, few holds barred, with an explicit sex scene. It involves a teacher and her husband. They are filming their sexual experiences, for an adult website, but the material finds itself on the Internet.

We are left with that initial experience and spend a considerable amount of time in the next minutes and more with the teacher, going to a meeting, walking around Bucharest, quite a tour of the inner city, the streets, the shops, special attention with the roving camera to the facades of the old buildings, our puzzling about the teacher herself and the relevance of these long sequences to what we saw at the opening of the film.

And then we move to Part Two, a different kind of film altogether. We see a heading about Dictionaries and popular sayings and images and are treated to a very fast collection, selection, of sayings, idioms, images, some of them very witty in wordplay, some of them puzzling – but then we are on to the next without time and space to assess what we have just seen. And, this is where American cuts come in again, no holds barred glimpses of genitalia among the wordplay, satire.

In itself, this would have made quite an effective short film and a critique of Romanian culture, with acknowledgement of the harsh past, the Communist regime, the Ceasceau regime, the 1989 revolution.

But, then there is a third part. The principal of the school where the teacher is employed has called a meeting of parents to discuss the consequences of the filming and its appearing on the Internet, especially with the effect on their children and their appreciation/fears of sexual behaviour. There is a realism in the meeting and the range of views expressed. But, there is a lot of parody in some of these characters, especially the self-righteous types. So the argument goes back and forth, and the film audience responding depending on how they regard censorship and freedom of expression. (And there is a priest in the audience as well who gives his views – and is mocked in the final image during the final credits.)

The director keeps his tongue in cheek right until the final sequences, offering three possible solutions as to how the teacher was treated, how the principal of the school handled the situation, the various reactions of the parents.

Not for the mainstream...

BEST SELLERS

UK/Canada, 2021, 102 minutes, Colour.

Michael Caine, Aubrey Plaza, Scott Speedman, Ellen Wong, Cary Elwes, Luc Morissette, Veronica Ferres.

Directed by Lina Roessler.



Best Sellers tend to be big, popular, often obvious, but delighting in twists. This is not that kind of film!

Rather, this is a story about publishing, publishers' desires (as Well Is being driven) to find the next bestseller, to get the author under contract, to promote the book. And, the screenplay is fairly serious about it – except that it also takes a critical look, a satirical look, entails.

But the best thing to say, of course, is that this is a Michael Caine film. And, there he is, 55 years after Zulu still getting top billing. And, at time of filming in 2019, he was 86. And there he is, the familiar face if older, the familiar voice, just the same. And a cheeky attitude towards life.

We see him at the opening thumping his typewriter, finally writing The End to a manuscript. He is Harris Shaw, famous, but his only novel having been published 40 years earlier. He is old, cantankerous, dependent on the bottle.

We are then introduced to Lucy (a complex performance by Aubrey Plaza), a publisher who has inherited her respected father's company, working with her assistant, Rachel (Evelyn Wong). Crisis. Their latest bestseller has lost the status of best, removed from store windows, being pulped! What is Lucy to do.

The answer, of course, is Harris Shaw. But, an encounter with him at home which, to say the least, is unpropitious! Lucy is poised in the very moment of signing away her company when Harris arrives.

We are witness to all the complications of contracts, authors' demands, publishers' desperations, questions of editing, Harris reluctant to do the promotion tours but consenting. But, with intention of sabotage. His main weapon, rather British, is a nine letter word which is repeated, repeated, repeated, taken up as a chant, taken up as a mantra by those who attend the launches, "Bullshite". What follows is something of a catalogue of disasters that can erupt during a promotion tour when the author is unwilling, who has some contempt for his audiences let alone the publishers.

You know that something good is going to happen – or at least we hope so. And Lucy does get a brainwave, a tip for publishers in a social media age, having a range of ordinary people filmed for Youtube clips reading sections of the book. Some effective promotion. But, we are reminded that fewer people read books these days and that audiences go for trends rather than quality.

As always, some unwelcome truths are revealed, a quiet peace is possible. Lucy has to take stock of her life and her future. For Harris, of course, there is very little time and future.

But, there is a nice twist ending that we could not have anticipated, meaning that we finish the film and the final credits smiling.

BLUE BAYOU

US, 2021, 117 minutes, Colour.

Justin Chon, Alicia Vikander, Mark O'Brien, Linh Dan Pham, Sydney Kowlaske, Vondie Curtis-Hall, Emory Cohen, Susan McPhail.
Directed by Justin Chon.



This is strong drama, very strong and powerful – and recommended for audiences who appreciate the dramatic raising of social issues. Some people have said that the film pulled no punches. Rather, for this reviewer, it was rather like being put through the wringer. And, during the final credits, we are still being squeezed in the wringer.

Even as we watch, we are hoping that everything would be resolved, for a happy ending, after all, is this an American film and that's what we might expect. But, no, with the final image and all through the credits, there is no let up, no simplistic solutions.

And why are we so involved. The central character, Antonio LeBlanc, is a Korean orphan, migrating to the US at the age of three in the 1980s, adopted, abused, discarded, stealing felonies. But, nevertheless he is a most engaging character, a credit to Justin Chon (who has written the screenplay, directs and acts), American born but with his own Korean heritage. He creates such a likeable man, joyful father delightfully playing with his stepdaughter, a caring husband to his pregnant American wife, eliciting sympathy despite his limitations. Of course, it is the migrant issues, especially the dramatic highlighting of deportations that gripped us.

This means that we watch with Australian eyes, memories of the post-World War II migrations, acceptance of the British, the Poms, but wariness of the Italians and Greeks, dagos, Poles and migrants from other countries of Europe. It means memories of the experience of the acceptance of refugees from Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s, much more acceptance here. And, then, 20 years of boat people, of turn backs, of engagement against people smugglers, harsher and harsher legislation, refusal of entry to boat people, calling them illegal even though they had rights to refugee status, Muslims, Middle East, isolation on Nauru, on PNG's Manus Island, years and years of harshness, stagnation, futures denied.

And, more to the point, the years of the experience of the Sri Lankan family in Queensland's Biloela, accepted by the community and welcomed, yet their being taken, isolated on Christmas Island, kept in custody, years and years of legal wrangles about the refugee status, imminent threats of

deportation, but the issues of the nationality of their children, the possibilities for compassionate intervention by politicians – but none forthcoming.

Perhaps we were ready to be put through the wringer even before we go into the cinema.

It is a surprise to discover the number of Korean and Asian children, apart from the Vietnamese, who had been adopted in the US. It is difficult to follow all the details of legislation about adoptions, rights, citizenship, times and dates on which residency and deportation depended. All very complicated, bureaucratic.

But, here is the story of Antonio, sympathetic, supported by his pregnant wife and loved by her little daughter. But, prejudice and racism forever hovering. His mother-in-law unwilling to speak to him, ready to snatch her granddaughter away from him. His wife's former husband, police and angry, and the aggressive hostility, of his partner, even to getting his buddies to bash Antonio, preventing him from getting to the court in time for his hearing. And there is the back story of his adopting parents, his unwillingness to make contact with his mother, eventually going to see her, his and our being puzzled at her behaviour towards him during his pleading visit.

The screenplay does not make Antonio out to be a saint. Not only has he stolen in the past, his felonies and race preventing him in the opening interview from being given a job as a mechanic, but to get the money for the lawyer for his case, he and his friends steal more motorbikes. We realise that according to the letter of the law, authorities will not easily grant him citizenship.

And, then there is Antonio's encounter with the Vietnamese refugee, Parker, her kindness at the hospital, meeting him in the street when advertising his tattoo studio, desperately in need of funds to pay for a lawyer to fight his deportation case, inviting him to her home for a Vietnamese gathering meal, her genial father, Antonio asking whether he regretted dividing his family on the boats escaping Vietnam and his replying "never", Parker's visit again for another tattoo and Antonio's harsh dismissal, her terminal cancer, their talking, the sadness of her death.

If only those against migration or those who say they are for migration but are rigid in their interpretation of laws, rules and regulations, could sit down quietly and watch this story, get to know the characters from the inside, and be moved.

THE BOSS BABY: FAMILY BUSINESS

US, 2021, 107 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Alec Baldwin, James Marsden, Amy Sedaris, Ariana Greenblatt, Jeff Goldblum, Eva Longoria, James McGrath, Jimmy Kimmel, Lisa Kudrow.

Directed by Tom McGrath.



In 2017, worldwide audiences enjoyed the animation comedy (with some bite), *The Boss Baby*. Alec Baldwin voiced Ted, the precocious adult child, jealous of his brother Tim, taking control of everything, creating all kinds of mischief. The character was offbeat and offered a tantalising comedy about a baby enjoying bossing everyone, relishing his malicious attitudes and behaviour.

Director of the first film, Tom McGrath, contributed to the story line of this sequel, four years later. Can the formula work again? Work well?

Not only does Alec Baldwin take up his character, Ted, there is a new boss baby in the next generation, Tina, voiced by Amy Sedaris, who is as bad as her uncle! And, for further complication, this time there is a mad scientist, Dr Armstrong, voiced by Jeff Goldblum, who wants to get rid of all the adults so that the world is a world of boss babies. Dr Armstrong is able to create an adult appearance, but is a mean-minded baby inside.

Obviously, lots of complications here. But, maybe, the trouble is there are too many complications. Ted has grown up and is alienated from the family. Tim, his nice brother (James Marsden) has his own family – but, with potential danger, his daughter Tina part of the takeover by baby bosses. And, Dr Armstrong has a plan to get rid of all adults in 24 hours. Poor Tim is reduced to Baby's Eyes and kept as hostage as is his nice daughter, Tabatha (Ariana Greenblatt).

Meantime, for older audiences chuckles, the grandparents turn up at various times – TVs Jimmy Kimmel and Lisa Kudrow.

Actually, the plot is quite complicated, adults having to pay attention to see who is who (and at what age) and what each is doing to whom! And where Dr Armstrong fits in. And how poor Tim is mistaken for a baby, not recognised for the doting father that he is.

And, it is all presented in lavish (one might's be tempted to say garish) bright colours sets and costumes. It is something like being offered lollies, sweets, candy, more than we can take and then being offered once more lollies, sweets, candy – all brightly coloured.

Children will probably enjoy the shenanigans even if they could not give a plot summary and analysis afterwards. Adults who enjoyed the first one – maybe!

CANDYMAN

US, 2021, 93 minutes, Colour.

Yahya Abdul-Marteen II, Tatiana Paris, Nathan Stewart-Jarrett, Colman Domingo, Kyle Kaminski, Vanessa Williams, Brian King, Miriam Moss, Rebecca Spence.
Directed by Nia DaCosta.



Candyman was a popular horror film of 1992. It was based on a story by veteran horror writer, Clive Barker. 30 years on, we now have a sequel.

The Candyman story is a particularly American horror story. It is also a particularly African-American story, the main characters being African-American, with themes of white racism. The story makes quite an impact in the United States while non-Americans are more in the position of observers.

One of the distinctive features of this story is the use of puppet outline characters to illustrate and tell a variety of stories about the Candyman legends. (They are reminiscent of the Wayang puppet outlines used so effectively long ago in Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously*.) They offer opportunities for characters to tell the story of the original persecution of a black man in the 19th century, his return to haunt. They offer opportunities for other stories about Candyman victims, as well as giving some continuity to the original film where Virginia Madsen was a research student, Helen, but whose story now is that she was caught up in the myth, becoming its victim, transformed, consumed in a fire but saving a young child.

To illustrate the story, there is an episode from the 1980s, a young child encountering a Candyman who offers candy – and the police swooping in to attack the Candyman. Now, this child has grown up to be a janitor, William Berke, in a building and a laundry, and who will have sinister action in this story.

The setting is Chicago. An area called Cabrini Green, a black neighbourhood last century, then pulled down, rebuilt and gentrified, a white presence rather than a black presence. We are introduced to the central character, Anthony McCoy (Yahya Abdul Marteen II), an artist, living with Brianna, a gallery manager. He is running out of inspiration but ambitious for a show – and listens to a story told by Brianna's brother, the story of Helen and Candyman. Which leads him to go to Cabrini Green, to find inspiration, to explore the story, and an encounter with William Burke. While there, he is stung by a bee, bees associated with the Candyman story, and his hand becomes infected, the infection growing up his arm towards his face.

The mythology of Candyman spreads, chanting his name five times in front of a mirror – with dire consequences, especially for a group of schoolgirls who experience Candyman is vengeance.

The film shows the torment of Anthony, fearful of mixing with people, the death of his art critic friend, the fear of his partner, his visit to his mother and discovering his identity (the baby saved by Helen), a visit to William Burke who wants Anthony to be the current Candyman.

As said, the appeal to it as an American audience, especially an African-American audience, but offering horror conventions to those who enjoy this kind of legendary exploration.

THE CARD COUNTER

US, 2021, 111 minutes, Colour.

Oscar Isaac, Tiffany Haddish, Tye Sheridan, Willem Dafoe, Alexander Barbara.

Directed by Paul Schrader.



The film written and directed by veteran Paul Schrader, a film about cards, blackjack – but, eventually, much more.

To offer a flavour of what will be seen is a suggestion that there is going to be a flurry of articles (even theses?) forthcoming, exploring the similarities between Schrader's characters, Travis Bickle, the Taxi Driver, and William Tillich, the Card Counter – personalities, events shaping their characters,

obsessions, motivations. And, while Travis Bickle looked into his mirror and asked “are you talking to me?”, William Tillich frequently gazes into mirrors but asking himself who he really is.

Oscar Isaac is William Tillich. Oscar Isaac has built up a substantial career over 15 years, appearing in 2021 in the television series remake of Ingmar Bergman’s *Scenes of a Marriage* as well as playing Duke Leto in *Dune*. Isaac has a serious demeanour, often quite some gravitas – and this is how he initially appears as the Card Counter.

He has quite a back story but we do not learn this for quite some time. Rather, we learn that he has spent some time in prison, found that regular prison life appealed to him more than his previous somewhat reckless life. He had played cards, learn to count cards, and offers quite an explanation of his methods of counting – which may be illuminating to poker players but is rather overwhelming for audiences who are trying to keep pace (and never could while participating in poker) with his explanations and methods.

He encounters three characters. Tiffany Haddish (not in a comic role this time) is a gambler who has created a stable of her players and found them wealthy backers, moving them from card tournament to tournament around the US. Willem Dafoe is seen as giving a lecture on security technology and identity recognition. Tye Sheridan is a young man, sitting next to William at the lecture who unburdened himself about his past – creating a link between his father and telling.

And, the audience has been prepared for some revelations by a dream sequence which William has in his hotel room (where he always covers mirrors and all furniture with protective sheets, tying them with rope). The nightmare is of torture tunnels at Abu Ghraib, so visually churning sequences of the torture that took place there, visual, brutal, humiliating, relentless).

Which means that this interesting film takes us in quite a different direction, the revelation about William’s past, the reason that he was in prison, the connection with Willem Dafoe and his masterminding and supervising so much of the torture, and the young man’s father also involved.

Schrader raises the possibilities for William Tillich – to join with the young man and follow a path of revenge or to become a mentor to the young man, urging him to make contact with his alienated mother, willing to provide finance for him and his studies, all with the approval of La Linda. In the meantime, William continues with his tournaments, battling a braggard who appears at every tournament, with his ragtag and loud supporters, Mr USA.

Has William made peace with his past life, found love and companionship with La Linda, enabling the young man to find some meaning and hope in his life? With a Paul Schrader film, this kind of happy ending seems rather unlikely – but we need to see it to the very end to appreciate the moral decisions of William Tillich.

CRY MACHO

US, 2021, 104 minutes, Colour.

Clint Eastwood, Eduardo Minett, Dwight Yoakam, Natalia Traven, Fernanda Urrejola.

Directed by Clint Eastwood.



Audiences will not be surprised when they see Macho in the title and note that the film stars Clint Eastwood as well as being directed by him. There would be many memories of Clint Eastwood as macho in so many westerns and detective and police films like the Dirty Harry series.

But, this is not really that kind of film at all. It is low-key and genial. And Macho is the name of a rooster, a champion cockfighter. And, Clint Eastwood was 90 when he was filming. He is a bit stooped. He shuffles a bit as he walks. However, he has the opportunity to drive a car from Texas to Mexico and back to the border. He is seen on horseback (and his double doing quite some work in subduing horses). His character, Mike Milo, has a ranch background, working with horses, a rodeo champion, but, as we see in a flashback, having had a literal backbreaking injury. He is in forced retirement.

This is a road film. Mike's former employer commissions him to drive to Mexico City and bring back his young son, Rafo, Eduardo Minetti. At first, this does not seem to be too difficult, Mike confronting the boy's mother who disdains him, taking the clue to look at cockfights where he sees the boy with his own champion, Macho. The police raid, hiding, the boy's suspicions, Mike going back to the boy's mother and being threatened. So, some tension – but much less than in high action dramas.

So, a road movie, on the way back to the Mexican-US border. They are pursued but get away, hiding in a small town – and the film slows down as they do and we spend some time, genial, time there. They decide to sleep in a shrine to the Virgin Mary, giving Clint Eastwood the chance to raise some of the religious themes that he has in past films (Outlaw Josey Wales, Gran Torino, Million Dollar Baby) some discussion about belief in God or not. They also make the acquaintance of a widow who runs a local café. She is friendly, bringing them breakfast to the shrine, inviting them to stay with her. Mike making the acquaintance of her granddaughters, one of them deaf-mute, and Mike having sign language as one of the things he is picked up along the way.

And another reason for staying in the town is that a horse owner has some wild horses that need training and Mike steps in. Rafo does not how to ride which would be important as he returns to his ranch-owning father. So, riding sequences – and then a twist because the townspeople note how Mike has a way with animals and bring quite a variety of them for him to touch and heal.

Thugs, on the road again, a car chase, the border.

On the final drive, talking about macho attitudes, Clint delivers a speech, touch of the homily, regrets concerning macho attitudes, downplaying them, declaring that they are overrated. At age 90, and having mellowed in the last two decades, he is entitled to Decry Macho!

While we are delayed with Mike and Rafo in the town, and we get to know Marta, the owner of the cafe, and begin to like her, sodas Mike – and the film ends with a nice, genteel, affectionate dancing couple. Yes, by this time, Clint is entitled.

DEAR EVAN HANSEN

US, 2021, 137 minutes, Colour.

Ben Platt, Julianne Moore, Kaitlyn Dever, Amy Adams, Danny Pino, Amandla Stenberg, Colton Ryan, Nik Dodani.

Directed by Stephen Chbosky.



Before production logos and film titles come up, there is a cautionary warning that this film deals with mental issues and suicide. These themes pervade the film as well as themes of grief.

Dear Evan Hansen is based on a Tony and Grammy award-winning Broadway production, the book written by Stephen Levinson who adapts for the screen. There is quite a range of songs throughout, lyrics and music by Justin Paul and Benji Pasek.

Not every audience likes musicals. This is very much a 21st-century musical, not like the musicals of Hollywood's heyday. Rather, this is a dramatic story where the music and songs are part of the character development. This reviewer was a bit wary at the opening, especially when Ben Platt's Evan Hansen begins to sing, voicing his stream of consciousness. However, Platt, who won a Tony for his Broadway performance, and despite the fact that he is in his mid-20s playing the role, seems convincing, winning over an audience.

The title comes from an exercise suggested to Evan Hansen by his therapist, to write letters to himself, expressing his feelings, his hopes for a day. This he does but has some encounters with an angry, dominating fellow-student, Connor (Colton Ryan) who signs Evan's arm cast, after a fall from a tree, later attacks Evan, snatching away the printout of his letter.

The screenplay leads in an un-anticipated direction, Evan's letter found after Connor kills himself, the assumption being that this was Connor's suicide note. What should Evan do? Tell his grieving family the truth? That he was not a friend of Connor at all, barely knew him? Though Evan was attracted from afar by Connor's sister, Zoe (Kaitlyn Dever) and there are references to her in the letter.

Evan, prone to depression, lacking self-confidence, empathising with the grieving parents (Amy Adams and Dan Pino) not only starts to make admissions about his friendship, but starts to fantasise, creating stories, getting his school friend, Jared (Nik Dodani, scepticism personified) to create fictitious emails from Connor to Evan.

As a consequence, despite Evan, many good things happen. An activist fellow student, Alana (Amandla Stenberg) organises a memorial, starts at home environmental movement to reinvigorate an orchard that Connor liked, Connor's parents becoming more and more involved, Zoe becoming more and more puzzled, attracted to Evan.

On the way so much of this is communicated by the songs, not tunes, but melodies not easily memorised, more recitative style, all the characters having their turn to sing (even to some dancing), pleasing to listen to, enabling the characters, especially Evan, to express himself more convincingly, and for audiences to appreciate the inner sentiments of the characters. This is especially true in a climactic moment at the Memorial, the nervous Evan beginning to sing – and, this being an instant social media world, his being filmed, seen, followed, ever-increasing followers.

And, all the time, we wonder how Evan will emerge from this deception, with the truth will be told, and what the consequences will be for everyone. It is a strength of the screenplay that all these aspects are fully confronted, the truth emerging. And, in this, Evan is supported by his hard-working mother, Julianne Moore, misunderstandings, exasperation is, truth and reconciliation.

While so many aspects of this story deal with depression, are disturbing for the audience, the writers of the story are not without hope, even to finding some good in Connor whom everybody, except for his doting mother, could see no good in.

So, not every audience will be drawn in by this kind of musical, but for those who do, some surprises and values.

DUNE

US, 2021, 157 minutes, Colour.

Timothy Charlemagne, Rebecca Ferguson, Oscar Isaac, Stellan Skarsgaard, Jason Momoa, Stephen McKinley Henderson, Josh Brolin, Javier Bardem, Sharon Duncan-Brewster, Chang Chen, Dave Bautista, Zendaya, Charlotte Rampling.

Directed by Denis Villeneuve.



Vast. And, having said that, it seems rather an understatement in terms of this 2 ½ hour science fantasy epic. Just on the scale of location photography (much in Jordan and Abu Dhabi), vistas of desert sands and rocky peaks, enormous sets, palaces, spice works, and a succession of special effects, Dune is vast.

And, if you have the opportunity to see it on the IMAX screen, it sometimes has an overpowering effect.

This is the world of Frank Herbert, publishing in the 1960s (before Star Wars which echoes it), with emperors and empires, trade in space, spices, galactic wars. Audiences have to pay attention to the initial information about the Empire, the different dynasties, the power plays. Readers of the novel and those whose memory of the 1984 David Lynch version is fresh enough, will be somewhat at home with the planet Arrakis and its spices, its desert population, the Fremin. And they will know that the house of Atreides is to be the central focus, especially the young Paul Atreides. He is the one to come.

So, with all the intrigues, invasions, betrayals by the Emperor, we are looking at Paul Atreides. And he is played by Timothée Chalamet, a young man of rather slender build, sometimes appearing puny, referred to as weakling, many commentators relying on 'ethereal', man of dreams, wondering how he will be, as someone eventually states, the coming Messiah. In fact, Dune is something of a coming of age film, the young Paul trusted by his dignified father, Oscar Isaac, cared for by his powerful mother, Lady Jessica, Rebecca Ferguson, blessed by the organisation of the nuns, headed by the Abbess, Charlotte Rampling, who have tested Paul and found that he is to be the one.

He trains in sword battle, is friendly with the warrior heroes who fight for his father, he discovers mystical powers of in the communication, especially with his mother.

This is a very serious spectacle. At one stage, warriors formally on guard when one of them, Josh Brolin is advised to smile. Through gritted teeth, his says he is smiling. There is no smiling in Dune. (Although the bloated emperor, Stellan Skarsgaard, who floats, eats, bathes – and treacherously betrays looks a comic villain.)

Ultimately, after some spectacular fights, invasions, aerial battles, visions of underground earthworms in the desert, Paul and his mother are forced to survive, befriending the Fremin, Paul challenged in combat to prove himself and his worth. Lady Jessica has a stronger presence than expected, influencing his decisions, sharing his destiny.

And, as they move through the desert, up come the final credits as a transition to Part Two.

ENCANTO

US, 2021, 12 minutes, Colour.

Stephanie Beatriz, Maria Cecilia Botero, John Leguizamo, Jessica Darrow, Diane Guerrero, Wilmer Valderrama, Alan Tudyk.

Directed by Jared Bush, Byron Howard.



A Disney animation set in Colombia, strong on Hispanic atmosphere, many of the voice cast with Hispanic backgrounds.

Once again, the central character is a young girl, but not really a Princess this time. In fact, something of the opposite. She is Mirabel (voiced by Stephanie Beatriz), a member of the prominent Madrigal family, presided over by the grandmother, the Abuela, with each of her children and

grandchildren having special magical gifts. Except Mirabel. She was about to receive her gift but the vision faded. And, here she is, doing a lot of the menial tasks, clashing with her perfect sister, Isabella, and she wears glasses!

There is some edge in the story. At the opening, the Abuela tells the story of how she and her husband fled their home, pursued by men on horseback. Her husband sacrifices himself and she and her children find refuge, along with a magic candle, which enchants the place where they find refuge, mountains, woods, and are welcomed by the townspeople. And their mansion, as well as the place, are enchanted, Encanto.

Hispanic. Music and songs. Lin-Manuel Miranda again. With In the Heights, with tick... Tick... Boom!, he has had a busy year – and now he contributes the songs, not so many of them, throughout the film as well as taking on one of the voice roles.

We spend a lot of the film getting to know the various characters in the family – and we probably like the big girl in the family whose special gift is that she is able to carry heavy loads. Needless to say she is, literally, put upon at times. This contrasts with the perfect daughter who is to be betrothed to a young man – and she does not want to be engaged to. Mirabel seems always to get in the mix and causes huge upset at the betrothal dinner, the prospective family walking out.

But the intriguing character is called Bruno. We see his image on a magic door – and there is a song that everybody sings that they don't want to talk about Bruno-no-no-no! When we eventually meet him, we discover that he is in hiding in the corridors and attics the mansion, more than something of a nerd (voiced by John Leguizamo), who is supposed to see visions of what is to happen to the family.

Of course, it all builds up to quite some adventures, especially with Bruno and Mirabel and some dangers on roofs and falling. But, the solution is to be love and reconciliation, between Mirabel and Isabella (and a nice song with dancing for that to be achieved) but also for Abuela to think back to her past (which we see again), questioning her treatment of Mirabel, and a theme of forgiveness. And, fortunately, this being a magical entertainment, love, reconciliation, and the wonderful rebuilding of the mansion means that we all sing along to a happy ending.

THE HAND OF GOD/ E STATO LA MANO DI DIO

Italy, 2021, 130 minutes, Colour.

Filippo Scotti, Toni Servillo, Teresa Saponangelo, Marlon Joubert, Luisa Ranieri, Renato Carpentieri, Betty Pedrazzi, Ciro Capano.

Directed by Paolo Sorrentino.



By this stage of his career, Italian writer and director, Paolo Sorrentino, has achieved high status in Italian cinema and in world cinema (many awards including an Oscar for *The Great Beauty*/ *La Grande Bellezza*). He has made distinctive films but he has also made an international impact with his television series, *The Young Pope* and *The New Pope*.

Many have asked who is Paolo Sorrentino, what is his background? Sorrentino has decided to answer these questions himself and made an autobiographical film. The main events in this film correspond to Sorrentino's early life.

We are in Naples where Sorrentino hails from. It is the mid-1980s and his character, here called Fabie, Fabietto, is in his final year at school. He shares a room at home with his brother, Marchino. They are played by Filippo Scotti and Marlon Joubert. Marchino has ambitions to be an actor but he does enjoy the easy life. Fabie, on the other hand, is rather scrawny, sometimes a bookworm, and, it would seem, wanting to be a bit like the rest of the boys. And, at his age (and the reputation of Italian libido) he has something of a quietly roving eye.

The tone is set with the opening sequence involving Fabie's Aunt Patrizia, an episode where she is visited, allegedly, by the Neapolitan St Gennaro, and taken to see *The Little Monk* (rather a little Franciscan child Friar) who promises her that she will be able to conceive a child. But, at home, her husband berates her for being a prostitute, not believing her – and her sister, Maria (Teresa Saponangelo) with her husband, Saverio (Toni Seervillo) hurry to her on the back of Fabie's motorbike.

This touch of magic realism is then offset by a long realistic sequence where the extended family go out on the boat, have a picnic, wander through the woods – Fabie having his eye on his apartment as she basks in the sun.

There is some discord in the family, Saverio and his mistress, Maria and her propensity for playing pranks (even pretending to be Franco Zeffirelli's agent ringing her neighbour to offer her a central role in his next film), Marchino and his failing at a screen audition, Fabie going to see some plays,

enraptured in theatre, encountering the Neapolitan film director, Antonio Capuano, who, later in the film, will challenge Fabie in his beliefs in himself, in his desire to be a filmmaker.

In the same house as the family is the Baroness, a haughty woman, who will later have a significant impact on Fabie and his sexuality.

The sad part of the film, and this relates to Sorrentino's parents in real life, is their moving to a country house, a fireplace, there being overcome by carbon monoxide and dying.

As with Sorrentino's other work, there are all kinds of snippets of scenes, relevant and irrelevant, but creating atmosphere – and more than a nod to Federico Fellini, his name being mentioned, and a scene of auditions for one of his films with a gallery of grotesques the Fellini himself might be envious of.

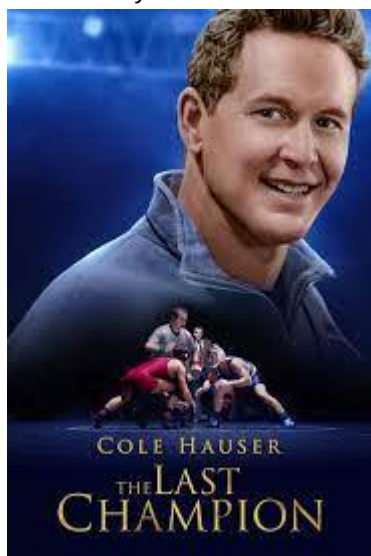
So, this is Paolo Sorrentino, the younger.

THE LAST CHAMPION

US, 2020, 122 minutes, Colour.

Cole Hauser, Sean H. Scully, Annika Marks, Randall Battinkoff, Halle Todd, Peter Onorato, Bob McCracken, Casey Moss, Michael John Madden.

Directed by Glenn Withrow.



Some responses to The Last Champion have taken the either/or approach. It has depended on interests and background. One response has been to the film as a sports film, high school students and their coach. The other response has been to the personal journey of the coach, failure, regrets, possibilities for redemption. The best response, of course, is a both/and, a personal redemption story through sports and coaching.

Wrestling fans of the past may be familiar with the winner of wrestling gold in the Olympic Games at Atlanta, 1996. His name was John Wright. He was a high school champion, highly awarded. After winning the gold medal, it was revealed that he had taken drugs and he was stripped of his metal.

This information is quickly given in the opening minutes of the film, photos, newspaper headings, highlights.

However, the action of the film takes place 20 years later, John Wright returning to his home town, Garfield, Washington State, his mother having died and his need to organise the state of his family home. He had been working on a ranch with cattle.

John Wright is played by Cole Hauser, perhaps better known for thrillers and action films. He is especially convincing in the early sequences, shunned by some of the townspeople because of his drug scandal, welcomed by others, especially his coach at high school who invites him to a meal, gets him some work at the local fire station. In the meantime, we are shown a high school student, Michael Miller (Sean H. Scully), shoplifting, helped by the coach, glimpses of his dysfunctional and sad mother (Hallie Todd, who co-wrote the screenplay with her husband, the director, Glenn Withrow, and their daughter Ivy, a family enterprise).

It is not difficult to see where the film is going – after all, it is based on an actual story. Which means that it may not appeal to an audience which is looking for more sophisticated twists. Rather, this is a story that all audiences can watch, identify with worry about, hope.

When the coach collapses and dies, it is obvious that John Wright will be approached to work with the high school team. There is some complication because Wright is in financial need and he approaches a banker, friend from the past, who does a deal with Wright to help him financially and that he coach his son to be the state champion. There is a brutal scene, which Wright observes but does not intervene in, where Michael is bashed by three of the wrestling team. And this will weigh on Wright's conscience.

This a small town America, quite folksy in many ways, would have been called homespun in earlier decades. People still go to church. They do line-dancing. The large choir sings Christmas carols. The pastor (dressed in everyday clothes rather than formal) is genial, helps with people's lives, his daughter Elizabeth (the obvious romantic interest) works in the surgery. And, people are kind and generous for the most part.

There is a church sequence, John Wright trying to come to terms with his past and his present, actually confessing to the pastor and experiencing forgiveness. And his work, thorough and professional with the boys, is part of his atonement.

On the sports level, lots of wrestling sequences, training, matches, the state competition, the buildup to the final bout between Michael and the son of the banker...

This film has been welcomed by many audiences who want good stories, stories about goodness which do not over look failings, a film which is edifying and inspiring.

LAST NIGHT IN SOHO

UK, 2021, 116 minutes, Colour.

Thomasin McKenzie, Anya Taylor Joy, Diana Rigg, Matt Smith, Terence Stamp, Rita Tushingham, Michael Ajao.

Directed by Edgar Wright.



Welcome to the imagination of Edgar Wright: for those who have been there before, Shaun of the Dead, Hot Fuzz, And of the World, Scott Pilgrim, Baby Driver, they will be eager to return. For those not familiar with Edgar Wright, they might well be puzzled – and intrigued.

Wright has co-written and directed this film but has also selected at Playlist with many of the popular songs of the mid-1960s. Those with the accessible songs from artists like Cilla Black, Petula Clark, Sandy Shaw and, of course, the Beatles. They play throughout the film, providing mood and background to the characters and the situations.

And this is important. While the main action takes place in the present, the film returns time and time again to London in the emerging swinging 60s, the streets and lights of Soho, the clubs (many euphemistically called Gentlemen's Clubs), and a huge cinema hoarding advertising Sean Connery as James Bond in Thunderball.

In the present, we are introduced to a young woman, finishing high school, going to London to become a fashion designer. She lives in Cornwall, somewhat sure of herself there, but immediately finding herself out of her depth in London, mocked for her provincial accent and dress, the Mean Girls at her accommodation and the school. She is Eloise Turner, Ellie, with a complex performance by New Zealander, Thomasin McKenzie. She does well in class. But she wants to get away from the students, answers an advertisement for a bed sitting room, encountering Miss Collins, an elderly veteran of Soho, who welcomes Ellie. Miss Collins is played by Diana Rigg in her final role, initially seeming a comparatively subordinate character but becoming key by the end. It was Diana Rigg's last film and this film is dedicated To Diana.

Diana Rigg was flourishing in the mid-1960s on stage and television screen, The Avengers. But it was also the period of stardom for Rita Tushingham (including Dr Zhivago) and Terence Stamp. Rita Tushingham plays Ellie's solicitous grandmother. Terence Stamp plays a mysterious ageing character who frequents a Soho diner.

That establishes the basis for the drama – but, Ellie’s mother was psychic and so is Ellie, never so much as in her most elaborate dreams, back to the 60s, encountering a would-be singer and dancer, Sandy, another strong performance by Anya Taylor Joy. Wright uses the device of mirrors, Ellie looking into the mirror and seeing Sandy, and many variations on this alter ego experience, Ellie becoming Sandy at times. Sandy is ambitious, auditions, song and dance, under the tutelage of Jack, Matt Smith, a manager who ultimately exploits her with the so-called gentlemen at the clubs. This builds up to conflict and confrontation.

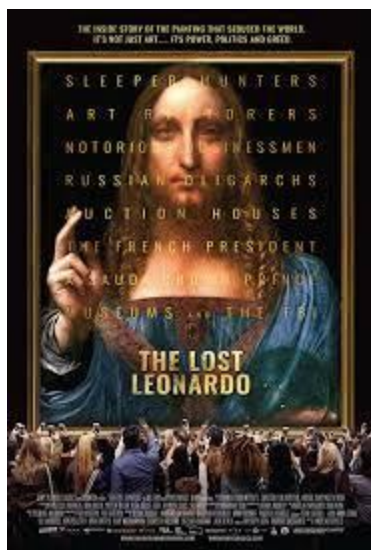
And, in fact, Wright goes back to his horror background and the zombie-like creatures from *Shaun of the Dead*, changing the tone of Ellie’s nightmares, the identification with Sandy, apprehensive about Jack murdering Sandy, and Ellie going to the police, going to libraries to research the newspapers of the period to discover what had happened... She is helped by a sympathetic fellow student in design, John, Michael Ajao, who falls foul of Miss Collins.

And with this kind of imagination, the end has to be seen to be believed, twists, horror, even conflagration. And, if this review arouses curiosity, then it is probably best to go to see *Last Night in Soho*.

THE LOST LEONARDO

Denmark/France, 2021, 96 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Andreas Koefoed.



The painting in question is *Salvator Mundi*, Saviour of the World, allegedly by Leonardo da Vinci.

For audiences who follow the art world, functions and ownership, prices paid for works of art, the information provided in this film will be familiar. However, it provides an effective summary of the events, the great range of talking heads from experts on da Vinci, experts on art restoration, seekers for “sleepers” (significant works of art that seem to have disappeared), art dealers, gallery directors, and FBI art investigation fraud experts.

For audiences who are not familiar with this story (including this reviewer), it plays like a detective story, a tangled investigation, many opinions, many conflicts, and, eventually, an entry into the world of politics, especially between France and Saudi Arabia.

A “sleeper” came across the painting in New Orleans, contacted a friend, paid for the painting \$1100 – and was struck by the similarities to da Vinci’s work. This led them to art experts, especially Diane Modestino, who, with her husband, were art restorers. She did a restoration of the painting.

The first part of the film shows us the workings of the art world. There are some who are taken by the resemblances to da Vinci’s work leading them to claim that it is his lost Saviour of the World. Needless to say there are many naysayers, one particularly obnoxious art critic, Jerry Saltz, who comes across as a loquacious mocking American with quotes ridiculing the whole enterprise. However, the director of the National Gallery in London affirms the authenticity and fosters an exhibition, drawing crowds. As with later exhibitions in New York City, a wry comment is made that the crowds came not to see the painting but to have a reputation of having seen the painting!

A second part of the film is world of business, a dizzying experience with the range of international dealers, the world of auctions, not very flattering presentation of the business interests of Christie’s auctions, wheeling and dealing, commentaries by journalists...

The third part of the film takes into the world politics, the investigation as to who paid \$450 million anonymously at a Christie’s auction for the painting, took ownership of it – and the painting disappearing. It emerges that it is the Saudi Prince, with some unfavourable comments and innuendo about his elimination of his family, his fabulous wealth – including a multi-million dollar yacht – and links with the murder of the journalist in Turkey.

There is speculation about the intentions of the Saudi Prince, his elaborate building of a tourist showpiece in the Arabian desert, negotiations with President Macron (and photos) and the possibility of the Louvre exhibiting the painting in its retrospective on da Vinci, the 600th anniversary of his death, 2019. The painting did not appear – leading to a lot of speculation about the Saudi Prince’s intentions.

So, a world beyond our everyday experience, the authenticity of art and the provenance of the painting, restoration, the increasing evaluation of the price, auctions, private ownership, exhibition. The film is an excursion into this world beyond.

MALIGNANT

US, 2021, 111 minutes, Colour.

Annabelle Wallis, Maddy Hasson, George Young, Michole Brianna White, Jean Louisa Kelly, Jake Abel, Jacqueline McKenzie.

Directed by James Wan.



Malignant is a top title for a horror film. It has evil inbuilt in the very word. Malignant is malign and malevolent. And that is to the fore in James Wan's most recent horror contribution (Wan being the director of the original Saw as well as directing two Insidious episodes and two Conjuring episodes and producing a great deal more – though varying his interests and style with DC Comics' Aquaman and its sequel.)

Malignant can refer to an unwelcome growth like cancer. Malignant can also refer to grimly hostile attitudes. Both are relevant in this story.

The film opens with Dr Weaver, played by Jacqueline McKenzie, talking to camera about the work she is doing with special children when she is interrupted by one of them having a violent outbreak. He wreaks violence, killing staff, eventually bound down. But, Gabriel does not remain bound down and makes increasingly ominous re-appearances in the present day! In Seattle (Will a lot of rain and downpours sequences).

Our focus of attention is on Madison, pregnant, arriving home from work, a clash with her alcoholic husband and a violent response for him, knocking her against the wall, hitting the back of her head – which, we will eventually realise, has some devastating consequences. Madison goes to hospital, loses the baby. But, she is disturbed by a sinister presence that she has experienced in her house. Her sister, Sidney, is supportive (Maddie Hasson). A detective, K (George Young) is earnestly sympathetic while his partner, Regina (Michole Brianna White) remains steadfastly cynical, especially as regards any theories that call in the mysterious, the psychic.

The film goes along steadily in this vein but, about halfway through, the tension rises significantly, Madison experiencing being present when Gabriel, sinister, tall, black, flowing hair, face indiscernible, wreaks vengeance on Dr Weaver. Madison is at home but, with effective special effects, walls come down and transform into the room where the killing is taking place, Madison witnessing. And this recurs several times.

We are now in the horror vein, Gabriel let loose, the detective pursuing him through the streets, into subterranean ruins of old buildings. And Gabriel shows no mercy, and a dreadful propensity for massacre, of medical staff, of police in the precinct headquarters.

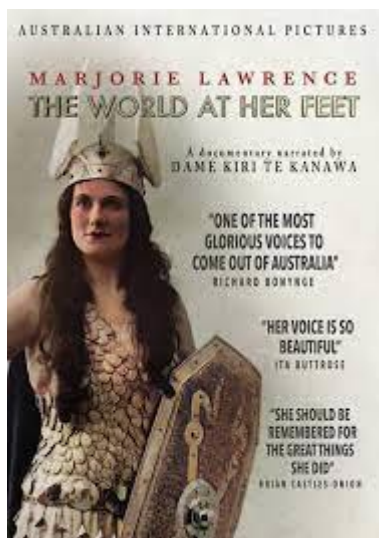
While this continues the horror conventions, the film moves back into the science field, and takes on something of science-fiction aspects while offering a great number of scientific explanations, the family and the detective researching documents, Sidney going to a most sinister abandoned building where the treatment of the children took place, finding videos with Dr Weaver spelling out what happened.

The solution has frightening elements in itself, Madison and her relationship with Gabriel, the story of her mother and her adoption, medical treatment – and the building up of a psychic and physical confrontation between Madison and Gabriel.

Here is a horror film which takes itself seriously, using the conventions but presenting them in an upmarket style, inviting a broader audience than just the fans.

MARJORIE LAWRENCE: THE WORLD AT HER FEET

Australia, 2021, 88 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Wayne Groom.



A very enjoyable documentary, a portrait of an Australian, international career and success, but unexpected events in her life: Marjorie Lawrence.

When we are asked about Australian opera singers, we probably name Dame Nellie Melba and then move on to Dame Joan Sutherland. What about Marjorie Lawrence in between them? She began her successful career in the 1930s, in her 20s, Paris, the Metropolitan in New York, entertaining and charming world audiences, a headliner.

Here is an opportunity for today's Australians to learn something about Marjorie Lawrence. For audiences who are of a certain vintage, she was well known. This reviewer remembers from school days the biographical film, *Interrupted Melody*, starring Eleanor Parker (Oscar-nominated for this performance) as Marjorie Lawrence, with Glenn Ford as her husband. This was the mid-50s, MGM production, Cinemascope, colour – and we see glimpses of the trailer in this present film.

As the film opens, Eleanor Parker meets Marjorie Lawrence on the set of the mid-50s version of television's *This Is Your Life*. It is a happy Marjorie Lawrence, aged 50, feted for her life and career.

Then the narrative goes back to a fairly straightforward chronology of her life. Marjorie Lawrence was a Victorian. She was born in Deans Marsh, west of Melbourne, and grew up in the town of Winchelsea. Fortunately, there are quite a number of photos of Marjorie and her family so that her early years are brought to life, and some footage about children growing up in the country. (Throughout the film various members of the Winchelsea community comment on life there, on Marjorie and growing up, on her father and his running a local cinema where, in 1939, she gave a concert performance.)

In many ways, Marjorie had something of a charmed life, winning the Sun-Aria Competition, recommended to Paris, expert singing teachers, audition and debut in Monte Carlo, performances in Paris, New York. In the background are quite a number of singing excerpts from her operatic career.

The talking heads in this film are very interesting, Richard Davis, her biographer, Brian Olsen-Castle an Australian opera director and, later, Ita Buttrose, a strong connection because it was her father who ghosted Marjorie Lawrence's bestselling autobiography, *Interrupted Melody*. Richard Davis calls his biography *Wotan's Daughter*, highlighting the fact that in her early years, Marjorie Lawrence specialised in roles from Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle, especially Brunnhilde (commenting that she had a robust frame) – even surprising the opera world by deciding not to lead her horse into Siegfried's fire at the end of *Götterdämmerung* but, country woman that she was, riding her horse across the stage into the fire!

Marjorie Lawrence had a triumphal return to Australia in 1939. Later she was asked to entertain the troops, Americans in the various camps, especially those wounded in action. And she went to Darwin, Adelaide River, entertaining the Australian troops. And she entertained British troops in Europe. She sang at Pres Roosevelt's fourth inauguration, a friend of the president, American honours, meeting Queen Elizabeth and her daughters, British honours, the French Legion of Honour.

Those who know what happened, unexpectedly, almost tragically, to Marjorie Lawrence will be amazed at how she coped with difficulties, responding heroically, leading a life well lived – and for others.

Those who do not know what *Interrupted Melody* means, a recommendation to see this film to learn more about the life and career of Marjorie Lawrence.

THE NIGHT HOUSE

US, 2020, 107 minutes, Colour.

Rebecca Hall, Sarah Goldberg, Vondie Curtis-Hall, Evan Jonigkeit, Stacey Martin.

Directed by David Bruckner.



With a title like *The Night House*, it is not a surprise that this is a film about haunting.

And, for audiences who like dramas about haunted houses (rather than gory thrillers), there is much to enjoy, much to mystify.

Rebecca Hall appears in every sequence. She is Beth, teacher, discovering that her husband of 15 years, Owen, has taken a boat out on the lake and shot himself. She is grieving, bewildered. But, she has a friend, Clare, Sarah Goldberg, who is very supportive. And there is the local old man, Mel, Blondie Curtis-Hall, who has been a friend of Beth and her husband for years.

But, here really, things do go bump in the night. Has Owen returned? There are suggestions of his presence. Radios go on, Gates to a jetty are open, mud footprints are seen. On the one hand, as Clare says, Beth is particularly rational and sceptical but she is caught up in the mysterious goings on in the house, even affecting her in vivid dreams, sleepwalking, dangers. At one stage, she explains to Clare that as a teenager, she had an accident, her heart stopping for four minutes, her having a near-death experience but experiencing – nothing. This also seems to be coming back to haunt her, in the suicide note left her by her husband..

And, of course, Owen had secrets. A creative architect, he has many designs for their house as well as a mysterious house being built in the woods. The books he bought from a local bookshop, as well as photos on Owen's phone, lead to a young woman who works in the bookshop, who reveals some secrets about Owen, relationships, and the mysterious new house.

As the film goes on, more mysteries for Beth, more dreams, more hauntings, ultimately her sitting in the boat was a mysterious presence, with a gun...

Some explanations are offered but, after all the detailed close-ups and time with Beth, *The Night House* ends abruptly.

THE POWER OF THE DOG

New Zealand/Australia/UK, 2021, 127 minutes, Colour.

Benedict Cumberbatch, Kirsten Dunst, Jesse Plemons, Kodi Smit-McPhee, Thomasin McKenzie, Genevieve Lemon, Keith Carradine, Frances Conroy, Peter Carroll, Adam Beach.

Directed by Jane Campion.



The title, from Wikipedia: Version, the phrase ‘power of the dog’ occurs in the 20th verse of the 22nd Psalm ‘Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog’. This bitter poem was quoted by Christ himself on the Cross, and begins ‘My God, my God, look upon me; why hast thou forsaken me and are too far from my health, and from the words of my complaint. O my God, I cry in the daytime. But thou hearest not: and in the night-season also I take no rest’. This is the King James’ Version translation. The Jerusalem Bible translates: the paw of the dog. In the film, it is found in the rite of burial.

Like Jane Campion’s 1993 award-winning *The Piano*, *The Power of the Dog* was filmed in her native New Zealand. Here it is standing in for Montana, the changing frontier, cattle breeding and sales, 1925. While most audiences will see the film through Netflix, the recommendation is that, even just for the magnificent mountain scenery, it should be seen in the cinema. And, already at the time of release, it has won awards, including the Director award for Jane Campion at the Venice film Festival.

As with *The Piano*, and the frontier locations, this is a drama of intense characters, intense interactions. And the film has a powerful cast to intensify the performances, Benedict Cumberbatch as Philip, working with the cattle and the ranch hands, giving up on education though intelligent, private but not afraid of brutal interventions in others’ lives. By contrast, Jesse Plemons is George, coat and tie, loyal to parents, the business manager of the ranch and estate. Philip is continually mocking George is fatty. Yet, George perseveres.

So, already, this is a drama of a rival brothers – and with some references, especially during a later visit, to the parents.

When everyone comes to town for cattle sales, they board with a landlady, Rose (Kirsten Dunst), a widow, who relies on her rather bookish son, Peter (Kodi Smit McPhee) who helps serving at table and, with his slender build and somewhat effeminate manner, is targeted by Philip. And this will have quite some repercussions as the film goes on, Peter returning from college, Philip taunting him and teaching him to ride, making him a lasso from the rope from the hides, and some revelations about the cowboy, Bronco Henry, that mentored Philip when he was young and whom he continually quotes.

George and Rose marry and return to the ranch, George achieving some happiness with a wife and stepson, able to stand against his brother. But, Rose is always edgy around Philip, drinking secretly, and, again a piano for Jane Campion, with Rose breaking down and unable to play when she is to perform for the visiting Governor (Keith Carradine) and his wife.

While there is action with the cattle, scenes of Philip and the cow hands, the taunting of Peter, drives through the mountainous countryside, basically, this is an interiors drama, a cry for some kind of delivery and freedom, each character wanting release from the power of their dog.

PRISONERS OF THE GHOSTLAND

US/Japan, 2021, 103 minutes, Colour.

Nicolas Cage, Sofia Boutella, Nick Cassavetes, Bill Moseley, Tak Sakaguchi, Charles Glover.

Directed by Sion Sono.



This is exotic science-fiction, science-fantasy, futuristic, apocalyptic, to say the least. It is one of those films that one could say it has to be seen to be believed.

The director is Sion Sono, a poet who became a film director, quite prolific in a variety of styles. In fact, this enterprise is an exercise in a prolific variety of styles.

It is as if we were transported to a variation on Westworld, a Western town in Japan of the future, looking like a film set, inhabited by strange mixture of Americans and Japanese, sometimes robotic in

their actions, the governor (Bill Moseley) a complacent exploitatively arrogant leader, set up with an elaborate harem of sex slaves (introduced in a dream sequence of escape) and protected by a samurai warrior. Later, audiences will probably thinking a lot about the Mad Max world, even to the song “we don’t need another hero” (remembering Tina Turner in Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome). But, in fact, they really do – and he is the most unlikely hero.

He is played by Nicolas Cage. Cage has made a later career playing hyped up manic heroes and villains – and this one is up there amongst the top! The first time we see him he is brandishing guns and shouting, along with his friend Psycho, robbing a bank. But, he is captured and imprisoned. Eventually, the governor sets him to find one of the missing women, allegedly his niece, Bernice (Sofia Boutella), dressing him in a powerful suit but with explosives in key places to control him (and some of them do explode!).

In a way this is a no-holds-barred creation, drawing on all kinds of action genres, enjoying film play with its conventions. It draws on Japanese myths. It draws on Hollywood action. It draws on the saviour hero figure, unlikely as he may seem. There are martial displays, swordfights.

The Hero makes his way to a remote and desolated community where some of the escapees have taken refuge even though they are in catatonic states. The community has quite a number of mutant characters. This is post-Apocalyptic, nuclear themes, an accident, waste and camp termination. And there is a white literate Guru advising the group, but pessimistic that they will ever escape.

The Hero, despite the explosions and injuries to his body, rescues Bernice, leads an uprising, makes his way back to confront the governor for, not exactly a high noon shootout, but a deadly confrontation and samurai sword fighting.

So, a wildly imaginative adventure, perhaps a bit much (well, not perhaps, perhaps) for the average audience but for those who enjoy going beyond conventions, and more than a touch of the weird.

THE RESCUE

UK/US, 2021, 107 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Jimmy Chin, Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi.



This is the second film out of three going back to the rescue of the young football team and their coach, trapped in Thai caves in June-July 2018. The story commanded worldwide media attention at the time, the seeming sad fate of the boys and the seeming impossibility of rescue, the days of endurance in rescuing the boys, and worldwide rejoicing that everyone was saved.

The first film to appear, in 2019, came from Thailand itself, *The Cave*. It drew on a great deal of newsreel footage from the time, interviews with Thai authority figures, a focus on one of the divers from Ireland, Jim Warny bringing a touch of the personal story to English-speaking audiences. There were some emphases on the logistics in Thailand, especially the difficulties of getting pumps to the site, bureaucracy holding up the use of the pumps. Apart from Warny, there are glimpses of other international divers but little explanation.

By way of contrast the *Rescue*, while there is focus on the Thai situation and the Thai authorities, their hesitations, politicians, the Thai Navy Seals, the sad death of one of the Seals, the pumping out of the water, a great deal of attention is given to the international divers without whom the operation could not have been carried out.

This film is the work of husband-and-wife team, Jimmy Chin, Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyu, who won an Oscar for their documentary on mountain climbing, *Free Solo*, and who have collaborated in a number of highly-awarded documentaries. Already, *The Rescue* has won a number of these awards.

With a longer running time than *The Cave*, the filmmakers are able to include a vast amount of documentary material from the cave site, within the cave, the rescue, the discussions between the Thai authorities and the divers, the crowds of people at the site, the many media journalists and their reports, and a focus on religious beliefs and Buddhist prayer (there was more more of this background in *The Cave*).

While there was great cooperation from many quarters in Thailand, and, especially from the United States, a number of American military being interviewed here, ultimately, it was experienced divers from Europe and Australia who brought the boys out.

The Rescue gives the opportunity for interviews with the key divers, British diver living in Thailand, Vernon Undsworth, got in contact with two British divers, Rick Stanton and John Volanthen, cave diving their hobby but with vast experience. It was they who found the boys. Quite some attention is given to the two men, their stories, their personalities, and extensive interviews with them throughout the film. Quite a number of other divers arrived from different countries, also interviewed for the film. The divers are giving their views and memories in retrospect, having had time to come to terms with what had happened. However, there are quite a number of sequences showing them in their work during the rescue period.

An important question was how to bring the boys out, through more than a kilometre and a half of floodwater, often underwater. An Australian surgeon, Richard Harris, was consulted about anaesthetising the boys. His initial opinion was that it could not be done. However, he continued to reflect, came to Thailand, organised the medication and the injections and how to administer them, and, because diving was his hobby, he went into the cave to the boys, coming out last. He is a genial personality and interviews well – and was named Australian of the year 2019. (He admired his father, stories about him and photos, only to find that as he came out of the cave, his father had just died.)

Many audiences may well be wondering how there are such close-ups of the divers in the cave, with the boys, the injections, the boys underwater – with the final credits giving information the some of these scenes were re-enacted by the participants. These re-enactments certainly bring the action to vivid and suspenseful life.

In 2022, Ron Howard's a drama of the rescue, Thirteen Lives, with Colin Farrell as Rick Stanton, Viggo Mortensen as John Volanthen, Joel Edgerton as Richard Harris, is scheduled for release.

SIT. STAY. LOVE

Australia, 2021, 87 minutes, Colour.

Georgia Flood, Ezekiel Simat, Anthony Phelan, Christine Amor, Kaushik Das, Charlotte Stent, Anna McGahan, Leon Cain, Ling Cooper Tang, Joshua Pyman, Mansoor Noor.

Directed by Tori Garrett.



Dogs!

And we might add: dogs, cute, cute, cutest! (And three of them, despite having no owners, look the part, act the part, perfect dogs to be adopted.)

This is a Christmas story, Christmas in Vermont, in a small town, snow, Santa Claus, Christmas trees, winter rituals... For those not in the know, as happened with this reviewer, it is something of a revelation to find that this is an Australian film, filmed in Queensland, with an all-Australian cast, with the principal actors all coming from Brisbane! (It certainly would show American filmmakers that Australians can do America and Christmas very well!).

This is the story of Annie (Georgia Flood) who is an alpha-leader, a volunteer who has worked for in Nepal for three years, setting up schools, establishing libraries. who is returning home for a Christmas break before she gets a promotion and moves to Costa Rica. She is welcomed by her family who want her to stay at home. Her Aunt Claire (Christine Amor) tempts her with the prospect of adopting homeless dogs – Annie agrees but will spend her fortnight at home looking for adoptive owners.

She is surprised when she meets up with her old school debating partner/opponent, Dylan (Ezekiel Simat). We know we will not be surprised at what happens at the end with Annie and Dylan though she is! He is tall, dark and handsome, immediately liked by us the audience (and Aunt Claire declaring him both cute and adorable!).

This is a very nice town. In fact, throughout the whole film, every character is nice. And there are no suggestions that there could be any un-nice types around – though there is an offscreen threat to the vet that the animals have to be moved before Christmas. Which means that Annie has to go into leadership mode, organise an event to raise \$10,000 for moving the animals. And we enjoy all her endeavours, rousing up people, putting on the pressure, working with Dylan, and all the time getting closer again to her father, the sad memories of her mother, and the rest of the family.

And she has been trying to get adoptive owners for the dogs, including a tough martial arts type, Stacey, and the owner of the vegetarian caravan diner, Jake. And persuading them to fill in the long ownership applications that she has written.

There is some drama towards the end when there is a power outage threatening the success of the event. But, Annie to the rescue with generators and all kinds of assistance.

The production logo states that the company's aim is to entertain and inspire. The film is G rated, very much so, which means that everyone can watch it – and it is a nice, easy and undemanding entertainment, a kind of movie Christmas gift.

STRAY

US, 2020, 72 minutes, Colour.
Zeytin, Nazar, Kartal.
Directed by Elizabeth Lo.



If it's dogs you are after, look no further. Even the dogs, named above in the credits, have their photos in the IMDb cast-list! - And are identified as "self – stray dog".

The setting is mainly is Istanbul, with some ventures into the Turkish countryside. And we are given information that from 1909, the Turkish government had made determined efforts to rid Istanbul of its myriads stray dogs – unsuccessfully, it would seem, until there was pressure to change the legislation and allow the strays the freedom to stray.

Director, Elizabeth Lo, who serves as her own cinematographer, obviously has a passion for photographing dogs. And, for an audience which enjoys looking at dogs, admiring them, sometimes amazed at their behaviour, this film is quite an indulgence. Interestingly, the star dogs always look so well-groomed even as they wander the city. And, there are close-ups, enabling the dogs to manifest their personalities.

Scattered throughout the film there are also some quotations from the Greek philosopher, Diogenes, critical of humans and their behaviour and an exhortation that we should study canine models.

Which means then that we follow the three dogs, one wandering the city, another more friendly towards humans, and a nice puppy who takes refuge with a group of workers. And, throughout the film, there is a group of children, on the streets, homeless, drugs, quite a contrast in their straying with that of the dogs.

Normally on a Sunday in the park near where this reviewer lives, a large number of dog enthusiasts gather for training and tutorials. And, during lockdown, there were many humans and dogs for their daily exercise in the park. Which probably means that there is quite a substantial audience for this film throughout the suburbs, throughout the cities, in the towns and countryside. (But, a reminder and caution that there are those who are impervious to the charms of dogs, any dogs!)

Tick... Tick... BOOM!

US, 2021, 120 minutes, Colour.

Andrew Garfield, Alexandra Shipp, Robin de Jesus, Joshua Henry, Judith Light, Vanessa Hudgens, Bradley Whitford, Joel Gray, Richard Kind.

Directed by Lin- Manuel Miranda.



Sounds of tension then an explosion! Tick... Tick... BOOM!

This was the title of a semi-autobiographical musical with lyrics and score by Jonathan Larson. In fact, this film is a tribute to Larson and his contribution to American musical theatre.

Jonathan Larson (1960-1995) is best known for writing the musical Rent which played on Broadway for 12 years and was made into a successful film. His autobiographical musical is set just before his 30th birthday, is wanting to achieve some fame quoting Stephen Sondheim having his first success at age 27, working on a musical, Superbia, while working in a diner and composing in a small apartment.

The framework of the film is a performance of his autobiography, Larson sitting at the piano, narrating, singing, accompanied by two other singers and some musicians. Larson is played by Andrew Garfield, a combination of genial friendship, frustrated genius, anxiety about growing older without success. Andrew Garfield also sings all his songs.

Which means then that this is a strong musical – and, it has been directed by Lin-Manuel Miranda after his success with *Hamilton* and *In the Heights*. And the narrative, and the performance of the songs, the recitations, are reminiscent of Miranda's own musicals.

The dynamic of the show is Larson desperate to complete *Superbia*, his first major musical, for a special presentation in front of Broadway producers, hoping that it will be taken up. Within the performance, there are scenes of work at the diner, Larson and his friendship with Michael, a gay man, and the background of AIDS. It is 1990. There is also Larson's relationship with his girlfriend, Susan, needy for his support, he being preoccupied with his work. Then there is his agent who hasn't contacted him for a year but who invites the producers for the presentation (Judith Light in another strong performance as she did in *Ms White Light*) and the glimpse of Sondheim himself (played by Bradley Whitford) sneaking into the presentation.

So, while the story is that of the eager and hopeful composer, the strain and stress of preparing for the presentation, the presentation itself is impressive – but, audiences who enjoy musicals, will be caught up in the staging and continual development of Larson's story as *Tick... Tick... Tick*. But he did not live to see the Boom that he hoped for. But, his music does live on.

TITANE

France, 2021, 107 minutes, Colour.

Vincent Linden, Agathe Rousselle.

Directed by Julia Ducornau.



Winner of the Palme D'Or at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival. Not without comment and controversy.

With controversial films, there is sometimes a focus on brief sequences, unexpected, even shocking, that command headlines, criticisms, even fears for those who have not seen the film. And this is the case with *Tatine*. Yes, there is a graphic sequence of sexual fetishism, the central character, Alexia, and cars, with the consequence, controversial, of her becoming pregnant.

But, there is much more to the film than that, not found generally in the controversy discussions.

It is true that the director, Julia Ducornau, has shown a quite idiosyncratically curious attitude towards aberrant human behaviour, violence and cannibalism in her first film, *Raw*, and now the strange adventures and misadventures of Alexia.

The film is very stylish, visually, pace and editing, colour design – on the technical side, very striking. But, while it invites the audience to appreciate the narrative as realistic, it is clearly not. We are in the area of metaphor, of symbols. And we are in the realm of the bizarre, sometimes weird.

The tone is immediate with a father driving his young daughter, her moodiness, kicking the back of his driver's seat, a swerve, a crash, her going to hospital, injuries to her head, the insertion of a titanium plate – titanium/titane. The little girl shows an attraction to and attachment to the car. And the transition to an elaborate car exhibition sale, highly sexualised, models cavorting on the cars more than provocatively, the guards warding off lewd males, urging no touching, only looking – which puts us in their position so that for the rest of the film, we are compelled to be voyeurs (or we could leave the cinema). And there is a great deal to be voyeur about.

Very quickly, we discover that Alexia is, in fact, a serial killer – and some grim close-ups of her attack on an overeager fan, a lesbian fellow-model, a group in a mansion for a sex weekend. Posters of her, wanted by the police. But, that is not how the rest of the film goes. There have been TV news episodes, posters, about the disappearance of a boy and the parents seeking him back. And this is where Alexia decides to hide, encountering the missing boy's father, played by screen veteran, Vincent Lindon, who works with the local fire brigade (and is offering quite a nuanced performance of a grieving man, an obsessed man, a puzzled man), welcomes Alexia to his home, to his workplace and colleagues, providing a refuge for her and she disguises herself. And, of course, she is pregnant, the bizarre pregnancy being noted that instead of blood flow, she has black classic gasoline flow.

Titane is in no way predictable in the unfolding of its narrative. If this review has proved intriguing, there is certainly more to be intrigued by.

The director is certainly wanting her audience to do a great deal of thinking about the themes that she is dramatising, identity, sexuality, male-female relationships, male exploitation often crass

attitudes towards women, mental conditions, propensity for violence and killing, sympathy towards the killer or not... But, because this is a visual experience, the audience is feeling these themes rather than analysing. Which makes the film often uncomfortable viewing, often bewildering viewing, emotionally testing viewing. No conclusions except an affirmation of love and relationships. Which, it would seem, is the intention of the director.

VENOM: LET THEM BE CARNAGE

US, 2021, 97 minutes, Colour.

Tom Hardy, Woody Harrelson, Michelle Williams, Naomie Harris, Reid Scott, Stephen Graham, Peggy Lu.

Directed by Andy Serkis.



While watching Venom, there was a nagging temptation to think that this was all rather silly. More than a bit silly. In fact, much more than a bit silly. However, this is the Marvel Universe and all things are possible.

A quick google to Symbiote and Wikipedia offers this information: a fictional species of [extraterrestrial symbiotes](#) appearing in [American comic books](#) published by [Marvel Comics](#), most commonly in association with [Spider-Man](#). The symbiotes form a [symbiotic](#) bond with their hosts, through which a single entity is created. They also are able to slightly alter their hosts' personalities, and/or memories by influencing their darkest desires and wants, along with amplifying their physical and emotional traits and personality, granting them super-human abilities. There are more than 40 known symbiotes in the [Marvel Universe](#). It then goes on to say that Venom is the best known!

In the original Venom film, journalist Eddie Brock (Tom Hardy) experienced a professional failure and interviews and found himself – an audience suspension of disbelief – being inhabited by the Symbiote, Venom. By this stage, they are used to each other, even having bantering conversations as Venom prepares his favourite foods, bacon, chocolate!

The original film also introduced a love interest for Eddie, Anne (Michelle Williams) but she has opted for a safer life with Dr Dan Harris (Scott Reid). In times of difficulty, Eddie relies on Ane as he does

now, she proving herself to be a carrier for Venom but also finds herself a hostage in the final ultra-drama.

The original film also introduced the mad Cletus (Woody Harrelson, his character allegedly about 17 in the opening sequence but, 24 years later, with a hairpiece, he looks certainly 50+). We see him separated from his fellow-institution inmate, Frances (Naomie Harris, rather a long way from her Miss Moneybags in the bond films) who has a special power of admitting supersonic sounds. In the present, Cletus taunts Eddie for another interview but, getting some of his blood, he develops his own Symbiote, Carnage. So, let there be carnage!

Also in the act is a policeman against whom Frances has vowed vengeance, Detective Mulligan (Stephen Graham) who has no time for Eddie.

There is a hugely elaborate climax in a vast cathedral under repair, the interruption of the wedding between Cletus and Frances, a huge buildup to a gigantic fight between Venom and Carnage.

The credits sequence where Eddie and Venom sit near a statue of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza and Eddie likens himself and Venom to them!

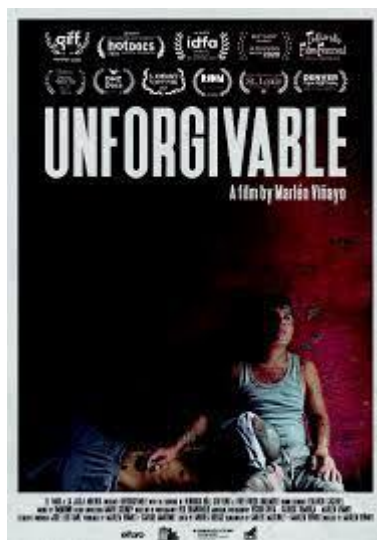
Again, the temptation is to think that this is all a bit silly. But, as must be, most of the fans are enthusiastic.

THE UNFORGIVABLE

US, 2021, 112 minutes, Colour.

Sandra Bullock, Viola Davis, Vincent D'Onofrio, Jon Bernthal, Richard Thomas, Linda Emond, Aisling Franciosa, Emma Nelson, Will Pullen, Tom Guiry, Jessica McLeod, Rob Morgan.

Directed by Nora Fingscheidt.



This is an American drama with several strong plotlines, some intense characters, interconnections and an arresting final twist.

It is based on a television series, *The Unforgiven*. *The Unforgivable* seems a better title because the person who is not being forgiven has shot a police officer on duty.

She is Ruth Slater, a strong role for Sandra Bullock in middle age. She has confessed to the crime so there seems to be no mystery at all. And she has served 20 years in prison, getting out as the film opens. She has become rather hardened by her experience, seems to have no future prospects except the search for her sister who was five years old at the time of the shooting. Ruth experiences a variety of flashbacks throughout the film, building up the situation about her family, her father's suicide, her bringing up the little sister, the resistance to moving out of the family home leading to the death of the sheriff.

Ruth is under supervision by her strong-minded but sympathetic parole officer, Rob Morgan. She has to live in a hostel, in a room with three hard women. She has refused a carpentry job (her professional talent) because of her crime. She does find work in a salmon factory, and a part-time job in carpentry constructing a centre for the homeless. But, she is intent on finding her sister even though the law has forbidden this. We have a certain sympathy for Ruth but she is off-putting because of her hard attitudes.

In the meantime, we see the sister, Katie (Aisling Franciosa from *The Nightingale*), a talented pianist, adopted by a sympathetic couple, played by Richard Thomas and Linda Emond, who have not told her the truth. We also see Katie's flashbacks, glimpses of the fatal events. Katie is good friends with the couple's daughter, Emily (Emma Nelson). Clearly, the search will be one of the main themes.

However, as suggested earlier, this is a strong drama and introduces two further themes. The first concerns the two, now-adult, sons of the deceased sheriff. The older is angry and wants vengeance, shocked that Ruth is allowed to live an ordinary life. The younger brother is resistant, contrives to meet Ruth, but becomes bitter (aggravated by domestic difficulties with his wife). The other theme opens when Ruth goes back to look at the family home, encounters a new owner, a lawyer played by Vincent D'Onofrio, whom she tries to persuade to search for her sister. There is a powerful scene when Ruth eventually meets the couple with disastrous consequences. The lawyer's wife, played by Viola Davis, has a hard and harsh attitude towards Ruth – but, in a moving sequence, is forced to listen to Ruth and think about what has happened to her.

All the themes begin to converge at the end, potential for violence, potential for Ruth to see her sister, vengeance for the sins of the deceased sheriff and an unexpected twist

Strong plot, strong cast, interesting drama – and some final tears.

@Zola

US, 2020, 86 minutes, Colour.

Taylor Paige, Riley Keough, Nasir Rahim, Colman Domingo, Nicholas Braun.

Directed by Janicza Bravo.



Not an easy film to review for a wide audience. Probably best to find out what the themes and storyline are before buying a ticket or downloading.

The film is based on a series of tweets by an American stripper, A'Ziah King, during a trip to Florida in 2015. The story was taken up by David Kushner in *Zola Tells All: The Real Story Behind the Greatest Stripper Saga Ever Tweeted*". And that's the story this film tells – but more...

We are introduced to Zola, played by Taylour Paige, who befriends Stefanie, Riley Keough, who persuades her to come on the stripper trip. In the film, Zola is quite a puzzling character, sometimes highly intelligent, thoughtful and observant, at other times quite ditzy, seemingly helpless. And, it is something the same with Stefanie, though intelligence is not her forte. She is prepared to be used. And, while there is some stripping during the trip, it is really a story about prostitutes, detailed sequences with clients, shrewd marketing online, a range of clients willing to pay.

But, with the women, is their pimp, obnoxious to them and certainly obnoxious to the audience, violent, misogynistic, no advertisement for the profession of pimp. Also on the trio is Stefanie's gangly boyfriend, Derrek, at one point his own acknowledging that he is rather stupid, on the outer, then befriending some locals who turn out to be violent thugs.

Some audiences have found the film a hoot, rather funny. While on the other hand, some have found the themes and the treatment of the women quite serious. So, @Zola, and whether you would like to see it or bypass.

STREAMING

ADRIENNE

US, 2021, 98 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Andy Ostroy.



The Adrienne of this title is the American actress, writer and director, Adrienne Shelley. She had some prominence in the 1990s and into the to 2000s, especially in central roles in films by the independent director, Hal Hartley. She also wrote and directed the dramatic success, *Waitress*, as well as acting in the film. She had some prominence in the mid-2010s with *Waitress* becoming a Broadway musical and a box office hit.

This is a film for film buffs. But, it is also the story of a tragedy. And there are some strong human elements in the story and its telling.

This film is a tribute to Adrienne Shelley by her husband, producer, Andy Ostroy. It is his tribute to his wife. And, it is also his opportunity to offer this memory and memorial to Adrienne for his daughter, Sophie.

Film buffs will know the sad end to Adrienne Shelley's life. For others it may come as something of a shock. She went to work in her office, her body was found and the judgement was made of suicide. However, it quickly emerged that she had been murdered. The murderer was a 19-year-old migrant from Ecuador who was trying to rob her, attacked her, set up the body as if it were a suicide. He was caught, tried, sentenced to a long prison term.

Andy Ostroy offers a cinema portrait of his wife. There is a great deal of home movie footage, footage of television interviews with her, quite some discussions about her writing, the performances, her intentions for the future. But, there are many sequences of her with her five-year-old child, Sophie. (In fact, Sophie appears as the baby in the film, *Waitress*.) There are glimpses of the film itself, interviews with the star, Keri Russell, as well as interviews with friends and admirers like Paul Rudd. There are also glimpses of the film she starred in.

But, there are many sequences between father and daughter, going back to the time of Adrienne's death, his attempts to communicate this sad reality to his daughter, sketches, storytelling. But, at the time of the film, Andy Ostroy talks with a number of his friends who are able to remember the details of what happened, when the news struck, and his reaction, their help, the the reaction to these suicide decision, urging the police to further investigation, the arrest of the killer.

A special feature of this film is that Andy Ostroy has decided that he wants to meet the killer, to interview him in prison. The killer is willing and, apprehensively, Andy Ostroy goes to visit. He explains his love for his wife to the prisoner, vents some anger and dismay, the prisoner, quiet and subdued, looking sad, remembers the event, what happened, his regrets.

And so, the film serves as a tribute and memorial – and, for Andy Ostroy and Sophie, some kind of closure.

BRUISED

US, 2021, 129 minutes, Colour.

Halle Berry, Aidan Canto, Danny Boyd Jr, Stephen McKinley Henderson, Sheila Atim.

Directed by Halle Berry.



While there are some strong human and humane themes in Bruised, it seems necessary to highlight the fact that the strong focus of the plot, the continued visual background to the narrative, is Women's Mixed Martial Arts. There are some vicious sequences, some no holds barred sequences, probably too strong for many audiences.

This is the first film to be directed by Halle Berry, after a long and strong career as an actress, Oscar for, a significant screen presence. And here, filming in her early to mid-50s, she plays Jackie Justice, a fighter who has fallen on hard times after a defeat. Her relationship with her partner is at times loving, at other times fraught with violence, he serving as her manager, but experiencing some jealousy. And, it is revealed that they have a young son who is being cared for by Jackie's mother.

And this is a humane theme of the film, the relationship between mother and son. There is also the strong tension and arguments between Jackie and her mother, custody of the boy, care for the boy. He is young. And he does not speak. Which means then that there are many domestic sequences, Jackie trying to relate to the boy, outings, encouragement, failing.

But, as a Martial Arts film, Jackie is challenged to go back to training, long and severe regime, supervised by a British instructor, who is into meditation and mindfulness, played by Sheila Atim. Not only is there a strong bonding between the two women, many sequences of exercise, preparation for fight, but also a sexual relationship.

The film also shows the response of sports journalists, the response to the media, the treatment of Jackie in the past and her defeat, interest in the present. And, as always in this kind of drama, there are the ups and downs of Jackie's experience, fears, issues of self-confidence, and the pressure of the relationship with her son and with her mother.

Some writers have made the connection between Bruised and Rocky. There is a certain Rocky-like similarity in the training, the underdog, the building up to the final fight which is presented in MMA graphic detail.

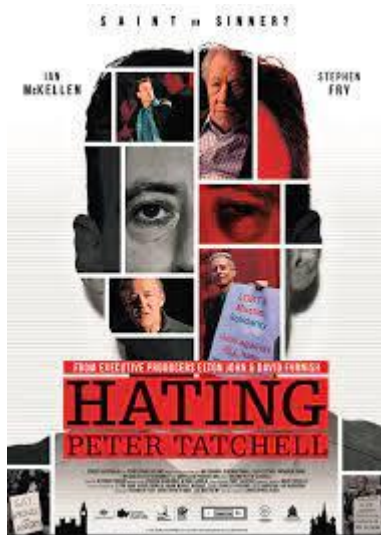
The finale is not quite the Rocky-type triumph – a strong fight, a strong opponent, acclamation by the crowd, and a gracious bonding by the opponent.

A film for sports fans, for Halle Berry fans, but a caution about the impact of the graphic fights.

HATING PETER TATCHEL

Australia/UK, 2021, 95 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Christopher Amos.



From the 1970s, Peter Tatchell was a controversial activist, establishing the organisation Outrage, a campaigner and crusader for LGBTQI+ rights. Not only was he a crusader, he was an active activist, protesting, in the public eye, promoting his cause.

Some commentators who enjoyed this documentary suggest it should be called Loving Peter Tatchell. And, there were many who did – and who will after seeing this favourable documentary though with

an emphasis on warts and all. But, there have been many who hated him over the decades and will continue. However, the film vividly brings to mind the changes in attitudes over the 50 years that Peter Tatchell was active, from legislation against homosexual activity, from prejudice stances, to changes in public attitudes in many countries, to legislation on same-sex marriage. There has been considerable change. At the end of the film, there is a quite long list of the many countries with prohibitive legislation.

Some people might be surprised to find that Peter Tatchell is Australian, from Melbourne. There are photos and home movies from the period. His mother was a devout Christian, not approving homosexual orientation or activity. However, she is interviewed throughout the film, especially conversations with Peter, his tough-minded sister, and a mellowing in his mother's attitude and her love for her son. But, his stepfather is seen as a cruel man, violent.

Like many Australian expatriates, Peter Tatchell moved to London and settled there. We see him at home, moving around London, at meetings of Outrage...

The framework of the film is a conversation he has with Ian McKellen (looking a bit like a scruffy Gandalf), but asking the personal questions, some moments of his being critical, but very sympathetic to Peter and his causes. There are other sympathetic interviews, especially with Stephen Fry.

Older audiences may remember news footage of Peter Tatchell's protests and demonstrations, his placards, his standing in public view, the reaction of the police, several times being manhandled and his being hit (and his later saying that doctors have warned him against any more head injuries because of the effect on his brain). We see him in London. We see him in Russia. He denounces Putin – and, in 2018, went with a camera crew to Moscow again at the time of the World Cup. Stephen Fry notes that Peter Tatchell is expert at performance, and knows camera angles and lighting so that he gets the best effect for the interviews, the treatment he experiences, the role of the police. This is especially the case in his encounter with Robert Mugabe, wanting to make a citizen's arrest in London, the episode shown twice, especially the physical brutality towards him.

So, the film is interesting for those who want to understand Peter Tatchell, for those who remember him. And, for those who don't agree with him or his tactics, a reminder. This is symbolised especially by his demonstration against Archbishop George Carey in Canterbury Cathedral, invading the pulpit during an Easter Sunday sermon, holding up denunciatory placards, indicating a number of Anglican bishops with homosexual orientation. George Carey was interviewed at the time, disapproving of the bullying tactics. However, he is again interviewed, 20 years later, not agreeing with all the tactics but indicating the good that Tatchell has done in raising consciousness – and even making a connection with the activity of Jesus himself and his social stirring.

The film is an Australian/BBC production, with finance from Screen Australia and various state screen organisations.

7 PRISONIEROS

Brazil, 2021, 93 minutes, Colour.
Christian Malheiros, Roderigo Santoro.
Directed by Alexandre Moratto.



Hard-hitting and challenging social drama from Brazil. It takes on issues of poor workers from the countryside tricked into coming to Sao Paulo, promise of wages, opportunities to send money back to families, but the group finding themselves trapped into hard labour in a junkyard.

The focus is on a young man, Mateus, Christian Malheiros, who leaves a loving mother and brothers and sisters, joins a group from his part of the countryside, eager, especially as they are overwhelmed by the vistas of the skyline of the city. However, joy is short lived as, immediately, they are exploited, being charged for every expense, therefore in debt to the manager of the junkyard, played by international star Roderigo Santoro.

While the film shows the detail of their hard work, punishments like being deprived of showers, a few concessions, harsh treatment from other overseers, the men bond in some ways despite difficulties and tensions. There is also a glimpse of human trafficking with young Asian women in the Brazilian city.

However, the film moves in an unexpected but also challenging direction. Luca, the boss, seems to take a shine to Mateus, inviting him to take responsibilities, even sending him outside to get food from a local canteen, relying on him more and more, eventually taking him drinking at a club, and a visit to a politician's mansion, the politician corrupt with his dealings with the junkyard and other businesses. This causes tension amongst the other men, especially Mateus seemed to betray a close friend from the country.

The film ends with Mateus' dilemma. Will he defy the authorities with the possibility of losing his job, and violent threats to his family back home as a means of controlling him? Or will he follow the path of Luca, becoming a supervisor, ensuring his future?

The question is for him to choose – but, with the audience identifying with him, it is also a deep question for the audience as well.