

FINALLY, SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF

By Michael Ventura

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I walked out of *Far From Heaven* after a little over an hour, feeling bad for Dennis Quaid. His excellent performance ricocheted off the polished surfaces of a film false at its core. Director Todd Haynes apparently thinks that upwardly mobile Americans of the 1950s *believed* in their era's forms and manners, relating to each other primly across vast distances of inner isolation. But watch the same class of people in well-done films of the time: the husband-wife relationship of Arthur Kennedy and Nancy Gates in Vincente Minnelli's *Some Came Running* (1959); the acting (*not* the writing) of Mark Robson's *Peyton Place* (1957); the gradations of family relationships in Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1957) and *Imitation of Life* (1959) and in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Those films use dialogue as a mere framework for coded signals acknowledged silently; the characters are painfully aware of the fragility and falsity inherent in their social forms, but are determined to deny what they know at all costs. In these psychologically accurate portraits of that era, the drama consists of peeling away hypocrisies.

The middle-class wife in *Far From Heaven* is supposedly intelligent, yet has managed to climb the social ladder with no doubts and nothing to deny. The truth of her life comes as unexpectedly as a UFO landing on her lawn. With nothing to build a character upon, the superb Julianne Moore is left with little to do but emote. By contrast, *Some Came Running*'s Nancy Gates is all too aware of the fragility of appearances; like any smart wife she knows her husband's lacks all too well, and is furious not so much at his betrayal as for how very much harder it will now be for her to maintain the all-important façade. The social style of that era was a hypocrisy that was not at all innocent; missing that, Haynes mistook the essence (though not the trappings) of everything else.

Also after a little over an hour, I walked out of *About Schmidt*. *Far From Heaven* is an honest work made false by an honest mistake. *About Schmidt* is a flat-out lie. It took courage for Jack Nicholson to play a small-minded man pushing 70 (no other star of his caliber would dare that); but his courage is undercut by director and co-writer Alexander Payne's decision to present Nicholson's family, friends, and acquaintances as shameless caricatures. Nicholson is acting with props, not people -- which reduces what might have been a great performance to skillful schtick.

The most perfectly realized film I saw in 2002 was Phillip Noyce's depiction of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, set in 1950s Vietnam, when the United States cynically sponsored blatant terrorism in its attempt to control Southeast Asia. Greene was a master at portraying how the personal, psychological story intersects with the collective, historical story. Nothing in this film is taken for granted and no situations evade moral ambivalence. Every major character is part right, part wrong. Every choice for the good invokes an evil, every evil claims a moral motivation. With supreme acting intelligence, Michael Caine registers the paradoxes of each choice (and Brendan Fraser, as the quiet American, keeps pace with him). Completed last year, shelved in the wake of 9/11, and released for Academy consideration only due to Caine's persistence, America will no doubt avert its eyes from *The Quiet American*'s mirror. But strictly in terms of cinematic completeness, this is a film that holds nothing back in its portrayal of how

history arises from the heart while the heart, in turn, is both confined and defined by its moment in history.

Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* is Shakespearean in its breadth, depth, and audacity. Most Shakespearean of all is Daniel Day-Lewis' character and performance: Part Iago, part Lear, part Falstaff, Day-Lewis' Butcher is capable of love and atrocity, loyalty and betrayal, profundity and triviality -- sometimes in the same breath. Scorsese's re-creation of 19th-century New York City is as breathtaking as it is disturbing: He sees that great American cliché, "the melting pot," as a witch's cauldron of transformation in which everyone is doomed to be shaped and defined by his or her opposite. The film is flawed by assuming rather than delineating intricacies of character; and Leonardo DiCaprio, in a fine performance, is cleverly made to seem innocent of the bigotry of his tribe. Still, this is unforgettable cinema. *The Quiet American* is perfect; *Gangs of New York* is great. The difference is one of indelibility. Like *Apocalypse Now Redux*, *Gangs of New York* tears apart every complacency in sight with visuals that have the potency of dreams.

Twenty-first-century, post-9/11 New York is the ground zero of Spike Lee's *25th Hour*. Lee still can't comprehend that women lead lives as complex as men's -- a lack that carves a hole into the center of this film. But Lee's understanding of men is as brilliant as his vision of women is shallow. The street-Irish New Yorkers portrayed by Edward Norton and Barry Pepper are, like Scorsese's Butcher, Shakespearean in their inclusion of all levels of psyche. *25th Hour* is a tragedy in the classical sense: Doom is its only possible outcome. But, also classically, the vitality of the characters transcends the fate that the story refuses to avoid.

Rebecca Miller broke new ground scripting and directing a depiction of her novel, *Personal Velocity* -- the stories of three women connected (barely) by a traffic accident. The structure is daring: three separate stories, heavily narrated in a film as dependent on words as on images. But like *Gangs of New York* and *25th Hour*, *Personal Velocity* isn't shy of America's unadmitted and strict class and gender distinctions. Kyra Sedgwick (trailer trash), Parker Posey (yuppie), and Fairuza Balk (mixed-race bohemian), portray savvy women utterly on their own who must make choices that leave essential parts of themselves behind while opening the way for new parts of themselves to emerge. Caught between the brutal and the tender, in their hearts and in their surroundings, each decides to be herself. And it costs. This is the one film of 2002 that I'd unequivocally urge my high school students to see. The guys would learn something about the complexity of women; the gals would learn something about the price of being free.

Atom Egoyan is a Canadian of Armenian descent. His *Ararat* is a 100-million-dollar concept shot on a shoestring. That hurts. In scene after scene you wish Egoyan had the budget his concept required. Then you suspend your disbelief and try to keep track of the film's unfolding complexities. Egoyan's portrayal of the genocide inflicted upon the Armenians by the Turks early in the last century tells of two things: Truth *is*, so history lives in our dreams and our gestures; but facts are hard, sometimes impossible, to determine. The netherworld between fact and truth is *Ararat's* great theme. Egoyan has achieved a deeply intellectual film, but has done so on the emotional level of the difficult choices each character must make; and his story dissolves the barrier between screen and viewer. Though hobbled by his budget, Egoyan's refusal to settle for less than his complete conception shows a courage that ditties like *About Schmidt* know nothing of.

Michael Moore's film essay *Bowling for Columbine* will probably be 78-year-old Charlton Heston's last appearance on the big screen. Watching that old man's halting gait

as he flees Moore's questions says it all about the concept of "star": Heston shills for the NRA because that's the last applause he'll ever know; yet this Moses can't answer a simple question. Moore's film is about why Americans are so frightened, and his answers are original and backed by fact.

Very quickly: *Frida* was festive but serious, didn't flinch at the politics of its subject, and Salma Hayek embodied her character with guts and skill. *One Hour Photo* needed a rewrite but Robin Williams was brilliant. *Spider-Man* and *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* were excellent on their own limited terms. The originality of *Signs* sticks in the mind more than its limitations. Goldie Hawn deserves the Academy Award for turning what could have been a mere romp in *The Banger Sisters* into a delicate, poignant portrayal. I watched *Minority Report* twice just to see that superb musician of behavior, Lois Smith, subvert the entire movie with her one scene of many-layered psychological force. The movies I regret not yet seeing are *The Hours*, *Adaptation*, *8 Mile*, *Analyze That*, *Antwone Fisher*, *Talk to Her*, and *White Oleander* -- but it's a grand year when one hasn't enough time to see all the movies that seem worth the effort.

What a surprise: In 2002, cinema was the healthiest of our arts. Which is why I've restricted this list to films. Their range and variety relieve what has otherwise been a bleak time for our culture and our Constitution. America still has something to be proud of at the movies.

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