

AMBUSHES, ECHS AND DELIGHTS

by Michael Ventura

Austin Chronicle – January 5, 2007

When your novel crawls along at about a paragraph per night and your apartment is tired of your company and wishes some time to itself, then hooray for Hollywood and trans-fat popcorn. I've seen lots of movies lately but I doubt more than two or three of the Ten Best played Lubbock (where I see most movies). So here's an Everything-I-Saw list -- with awards bestowed, I trust, in the spirit of pomposity appropriate to the bestowal of awards.

Most Forgettable: *Superman Returns*. I can't remember anything about this picture. Can't remember faces, mise-en-scene, not one damn thing. Somebody flew, right? And I recall now that the remarkable Peta Wilson had a bit role she'd never be reduced to in a just world.

Best Glamorization Of A Very Dull Person: *The Queen*. Helen Mirren is a very sexy lady and despite all attempts at restraint she bestows a patina of sex appeal upon Elizabeth II. Which makes this movie a species of science fiction. Beautifully played, though, and subtly written.

Silliest Pleasurable Fantasy: *V for Vendetta*. Oh for one righteous genetically altered hero to do it all for me! The revolution will come, injustice will be put to flight, and all I need do is show up downtown in a mask. I needn't even buy my mask. My mask will arrive in the mail. Revolution, X-gen style.

Worst Movie Seen In Albuquerque: *The Da Vinci Code*. But I guess it would have been just as lifeless anywhere.

Most Over-Employed Super-Villain: John Hurt. When the same terrific actor plays pretty much the same terribly bad guy in *The Da Vinci Code*, *V. for Vendetta*, and an X-Men retread, there's cause to suspect a far-right Hollywood anti-Queen conspiracy to make the gullible forever associate ultimate evil with gay Englishmen.

Most Ludicrous Movie Shot In New Orleans: *Déjà Vu*. Good for the local economy though.

Most Interesting Movie Seen In Santa Fe: *Marie Antoinette*. The film's true star -- History -- doesn't appear until the end. That takes guts. Raise a glass to Sophia Coppola. Poor Marie has no clue to what's really going on until her world topples. Remind you of any fellow-citizens?

Best Instrument of Self-Torture: *The Fountain*. I didn't walk out because of a compulsion to discover if this mystic mish-mash could possibly get worse while frame by frame it got worse and worse and I still didn't walk out, I'm so ashamed of myself.

Best Example Of How Many College Graduates Can Be Suckered By Cinematic Technique Into Swallowing The Plainly Ludicrous: *Babel*.

Most Disappointing: *The Departed*. Leonardo DiCaprio is tough, subtle, tortured -- who'd have thought he could reincarnate John Garfield? Fine performances and direction until all mysteries of character are avoided at the point of a gun and everybody dies just when their hearts might be bared. Final shot: Scorsese dollies into a close-up of a rat on a railing -- a florid flourish you'd expect from a film-school sophomore.

Time to quote the best passage of film criticism ever, James Agee, 1944: "In thoroughly good pieces of work there is an aesthetic and moral discipline which, however richly it indulges in certain kinds of illusion, strictly forbids itself others. It never fakes or dodges a motive, a character, an emotion, or an idea. And it never uses its power to entertain as an ace-in-the-hole against one's objection to that sort of faking."

Most Unexpected: *Flyboys*. Who thought a movie about the First World War would sell? Only these filmmakers, as box office receipts proved. But they recreated the biplanes and the era pretty well, with one caveat: I object to period pictures in which characters don't smoke enough. First World War fighter-pilots smoked like chimneys. (Watch for actress Jennifer Decker, she's got something special.)

Best Surprise: *The Return*. Sarah Michelle Geller and Sam Shepherd engage in an old-timey suspense melodrama with not-unbelievable metaphysical speculations. Geller is one damned

underrated actress. She plays each moment with calibrated precision, never cajoling an audience's sympathy and never equating a capacity to charm with the ability to act.

Best Made-for-TV Movie On the Big Screen: *Bobby*. Another period picture in which people don't smoke enough. That roomful of folks watching election returns? Half would have been smoking (not just one or two). Worth seeing for fine, gutsy performances by Sharon Stone and (to my surprise) Demi Moore. Stone and Moore play smart women who are losing their beauty, and if you don't think that takes moxie you don't know Hollywood.

Second Unexpected Reincarnation of John Garfield: *Casino Royale*. If you're too young to know who John Garfield is, right now rent *Force of Evil*, *Humoresque*, and *Body and Soul*. Daniel Craig is excellent as a working-class cat out of his league who learns how to be cool without sacrificing his street stuff. Fun film, great stunts (albeit with too many Energizer Bunny marathons), but Craig also doesn't smoke enough, doesn't smoke at all. Sean Connery knew his way around a cigarette lighter.

Best Movie About An Exceptional Young Couple: *The Nativity Story*. These filmmakers did their homework. The archeological authenticity of their set-design is impressive. And praise be to whatever god you worship that after centuries of pictorial denial Christians are presented with a Mary and Joseph who are more or less credible First Century peasant Jews.

Final Defeat of Verisimilitude As An Aesthetic Criterion for Serious Work: *Apocalypto*. Jungle hunter-warriors encounter frightened folks running from something terrible and fail to ask, "What are you running from and how close is it?" And a guy gets speared *through his body*, pulls out the spear, and immediately (for two days, with no sleep and no loss of blood) out-runs a half-dozen unwounded guys who have longer legs. For this, a Golden Globe?

Best Lark In Which A Star Smokes Cigarettes: *Stranger Than Fiction*. The idea comes from Pirandello, but this character-in-search-of-an-author tale riffs on Luigi well. We expect Emma Thompson to be superb because she always is, but that's not fair; her constant excellence takes equally constant work. All excellence does. And Maggie Gyllenhaal -- if actors were baseball cards I'd trade 10 Kristen Dunsts, 6 Scarlet Johannsens, and 2 you-name-its for one Maggie Gyllenhaal, who like Thompson combines keen perception with everything else she's got.

Best Adventure In Which A Star Smokes Cigarettes: *Blood Diamond*. A yarn in the Golden Hollywood tradition, believable, exciting, poignant, cogent, and technically expert. Leonardo DiCaprio (in still another modulation of John Garfield) once again proves himself the finest male actor of his generation, with a range far beyond his contemporaries.

Best Vocalizing: *Dream Girls*. Engaging acting, terrific singing. Too bad the songs can't hold a candle to the Motown and Muscle Shoals numbers they imitate. Somebody should write Eddie Murphy a drama; he shows power and depth here. And surely Jennifer Hudson must star in *The Aretha Franklin Story*.

Two Movies People Will Still Take Seriously In Fifty Years:

Flags of Our Fathers. Clint Eastwood was 15 at the end of the Second World War, but his eyes were sharp and he remembers. He will be the last witness of that era to tell its story on film. As a witness, he de-mystifies "the great generation" and "the good war," giving us an all-too-human generation and a horrible war. (That it was necessary didn't make it good.) He presents his characters with empathy and respect, gently but without sentimentality, honestly but without judgment. Eastwood's wise sense of proportion is rare in any art, but especially the movies.

The Good Shepherd. Robert DeNiro emerges, somewhat suddenly, as a master director. He tells a complicated story gracefully, seamlessly, with a camera that never calls attention to itself and always serves the tale. Matt Damon gives a delicately understated portrayal of a good man corrupted by his sense of what's right. (Interesting aside: dialogue- and scene-snippets in the trailer were absent from the print screened in Lubbock.)

True, not nearly enough people smoke in either film. We blare our other vices but are shy of that one -- protecting the children, no doubt, though we show them every manner of perverse violence. You'll have to watch movies of the Forties to see when a certain amount of self-

destruction was taken as inevitable and we protected our children from the gruesome.

Copyright by Michael Ventura