

THE FILMS

The Assassination of

Richard Nixon

Directed by Niels Mueller; written by Kevin Kennedy and Mueller
USA-Mexico, drama, 2004, Rated R, 95 minutes

REVIEW:

Dark and eerily resonant, Niels Mueller's "The Assassination of Richard Nixon," partly based on a true story, crawls under your skin and amps up the agitation until you want to jump out of it. A portrait of a particular kind of workaday American angst at its most perturbed, "Nixon" is something far more distressing than a horror movie — it's a worry movie.

"The Assassination of Richard Nixon" is a film not only about fear of failure but about bewilderment at failure, a distinctly American terror. As Sam Bicke, a depressed, divorced salesman who in 1974 attempts to hijack a plane in order to crash it into the White House, Sean Penn shrinks and covers down to Sam's size, then lets us watch his already emaciated sense of self-worth waste away to nothing. (Penn's character was based on Samuel Byck, a name filmmakers changed to Sam Bicke for legal reasons.)

Sam's despair at having lost his family — his wife Marie (Naomi Watts) isn't interested in a reconciliation, and his kids seem as turned off by his nervous attempts at ingratiation as everyone else — is compounded by his inability to thrive at work. Spectacularly ill-equipped for a career in sales, Sam nonetheless goes from his brother's successful tire shop to an office supply company, all the while dreaming of opening his own mobile tire sales business with his partner, Bonny (Don Cheadle).

With every interaction, Sam seems to become more diminished and beseeching, until even the camera seems to gaze upon him warily, as if repelled and slightly afraid of his estrangement. It's a deeply affecting performance, and it drives this quietly powerful, unrelenting film.

—Los Angeles Times

The Ax

From Academy Award-winning director Costa-Gavras; novel by Donald E. Westlake; screenplay by Costa-Gavras and Jean-Claude Grumberg

France, comedy, 2005, Not Rated, 122 minutes
2005 Tribeca Film Festival

The papermill where Bruno (Jose Garcia) works merges, and he gets the proverbial ax. Two years later, Bruno is still unemployed. When the perfect job opens up, Bruno decides to do his own "downsizing," systematically eliminating his competition.

"Shot through with the darkest of dark humor, 'The Ax' juggles elements of fable, social comedy and thriller."

—Hollywood Reporter

Balzac and the Little

Chinese Seamstress

Directed and written by Sijie Dai; novel by Sijie Dai
France-China, biography, 2002, Not Rated, 110 minutes
Nominee Best Foreign Language Film 2003 Golden Globes



In the early 1970s during China's Cultural Revolution, two young men, Mai and Luo, get sent to a remote mountain commune for "re-education." They meet a simple, beautiful village girl who can't read or write, and set out to educate her using a box of banned French novels. The Party can teach them what to think. But it can never teach them what to feel.

"Delightful fable about the enduring value of literature."

—Toronto Star

The Baxter

Directed and written by Michael Showalter
USA, comedy, 2005, Rated PG-13, 91 minutes

You're at the altar with your bride-to-be (Elizabeth Banks). The church door bursts open. Her ex-beau (Justin Theroux) runs down the aisle, professing his love. She races into his arms. Everyone cheers wildly, including your own parents and your gay wedding planner (Peter Dinklage). What

does it all mean? You're a "Baxter," a loser, the guy who never gets the girl — especially if you let the perfect girl (Dawson Creek's Michelle Williams) drive away.



"Broken Flowers"

Broken Flowers

Directed and written by Jim Jarmusch
USA, comedy, 2005, Not Rated, 105 minutes
Winner Grand Prix 2005 Cannes International Film Festival

An anonymous pink letter propels perennial ladies' man Don (Bill Murray) on a cross-country trip in search of a son he possibly fathered. Aided by amateur sleuth Winston (Jeffrey Wright), Don becomes a "stalker in a Taurus," surprising a string of old lovers (Sharon Stone, Frances Conway, Jessica Lange and Tilda Swinton) in order to find the letter's mysterious author.

"As funny, lively, and sustained as anything in his (Jarmusch's) career."

—Village Voice

Czech Dream

Directed and written by Vit Klusak and Filip Remunda
Czech Republic, documentary, 2004, Not Rated, 90 minutes
Winner Best Documentary Feature 2005 Golden Gate Awards

Grand Opening: "The Czech Dream Hypermarket!" The greatest promotional blitz ever announces the spectacular grand opening of the superstore to end all superstores, right in the heart of Prague. Find out what happens when 4,000 compulsive Czech capitalists are lured to an empty field by two young, savvy filmmakers.

"Subversive parable about idiosyncrasy and consumerism in the modern age."

—The Guardian

Downfall

Directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel; screenplay by Bernd Eichinger; book by Traudi Junge and Melissa Miller
Germany-Italy, drama, 2004, Rated R, 156 minutes
Nominee Best Foreign Language Film 2005 Academy Awards

REVIEW:

Even during his last 12 days on Earth, despite being isolated in a claustrophobic bunker 15 feet below the rubble-strewn streets of Berlin, Adolf Hitler remained someone whose will compelled obedience in both a despairing entourage and a defeated nation. "Downfall," a German film that painstakingly details that period, similarly demands our attention despite its drawbacks. Nominated among the five best-foreign-language Oscar nominees, the reality it confronts is so gripping, we can't turn away.

Surreal is a mild word for what went down in the days after Hitler's 56th birthday on April 20, 1945. The dimly lit bunker and its cramped corridors made up a madhouse in the midst of the charnel house that was Berlin during the end of days.

Although it is based on historical accounts, "Downfall's" soul is pure Hollywood. This is a film where the drama is inevitably right on the nose, with generals shouting into telephones, shells going off at predictable intervals and people saying things like, "Fritz, pull yourself together."

Combating these tendencies are several powerful factors, including great effort expended on physical verisimilitude. Production designer Bernd Lepel said he constructed the bunker wanting to make viewers "feel the fetid claustrophobia" of it. Also a force for good are the film's very chewy, watchable performances.

One of "Downfall's" most disturbing elements is its portrayal of how nominally intelligent people so put themselves under Hitler's sway that they believed, as Goebbels' wife Magda (a very strong Corinna Harfouch) puts it, "a world without National Socialism is not worth living in."

—Los Angeles Times

The Edukators

Directed by Hans Weingartner; written by Katharina Held and Weingartner

Germany, drama, 2004, Rated R, 127 minutes
Golden Palm 2004 Cannes International Film Festival

You arrive at your beautiful home in your expensive car. As you walk inside, you notice all your furniture has been piled artistically in the middle of the floor. Everything's been moved. Yet nothing's been destroyed or stolen. The Edukators have come to call. It's a perfectly harmless stunt by a trio of 20-something political activists, until ...

"That rare beast, a terrific movie that boasts intelligent wit, expert storytelling, delightful characters ... plus suspense."

—Hollywood Reporter



"Enron"

Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room

Directed and written by Alex Gibney; book by Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind

USA, documentary, 2005, Not Rated, 110 minutes
Nominee Grand Jury Prize 2005 Sundance

REVIEW:

With "Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room," writer-director Alex Gibney takes a notorious tale of corporate greed and plays it as Greek tragedy, Texas-style.

Gibney takes a potentially dry, daunting topic and turns it into something eminently compelling. Working from the book, "The Smartest Guys in the Room" by Fortune magazine reporters Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind, he turns his attention to the human and inhumane aspects of Enron Corp.'s 2001 collapse. Gibney gives us corporate cowboys like Jeff Skilling, Enron's former CEO, who instilled in his employees a Darwinian culture of testosterone and one-upmanship.

There are pathetic figures like Lou Pai, an ex-executive with a proclivity for lap dances who left his wife for his stripper girlfriend who had his baby (though with his Enron fortune, he also became one of the biggest landowners in Colorado).

There are the trader drones who, drunk with their own misguided sense of power, toyed with California's energy supplies for profit and sport. (And the tape recordings of their phone conversations with each other are stunning for their brazenness. "Burn, baby, burn," one guy laughs as swaths of the state are engulfed in wildfires.)

Leader Ken Lay comes off as completely disingenuous when he suggests he couldn't have known every little detail about the company he founded, the motto of which, ironically, was, "Ask Why."

At the heart of the film, though, are the employees and investors who trusted the Houston-based energy company and were left in ruin, while many honchos walked away with millions. One electrical lineman had \$348,000 in his 401(k) and company stock, and ended up cashing out with just \$1,200.

—Associated Press

A Good Woman

Directed by Mike Barker; play by Oscar Wilde; screenplay by Howard Himelstein

International, comedy, 2004, Rated PG, 93 minutes

Seduction leads to scandal on the gorgeous Amalfi Coast in the decadent 1930s. Golden couple Meg and Robert Windermere (Scarlett Johansson, Mark Umbers) relax and enjoy the views. Then seductress Mrs. Erlynne (Helen Hunt) arrives and immediately sets her gold-digging sights on Robert. But not to worry, the devastated Meg has several suitors (Tom Wilkinson, Stephen Campbell Moore) who are more than ready to help her move on.

"As a pure comedy, this is as good as it gets."

—Mirror.com.uk



"Grizzly Man"

Grizzly Man

Directed by Werner Herzog
USA, documentary, 2005, Rated R, 103 minutes

Winner Alfred P. Sloan Festival Film Prize 2005 Sundance

REVIEW:

Timothy Treadwell, an animal lover who spent 13 summers living among Alaska's grizzly bears, emerges as a lost soul in Werner Herzog's sly and captivating documentary "Grizzly Man."

Based on Treadwell's own video footage made during annual sojourns in Alaska's Katmai National Park and Reserve, "Grizzly Man" documents his infantile affection for the bears, his seething anger at society, his raging narcissism, his paranoid fantasy life and, finally, the ridiculously sad deaths of Treadwell and his girlfriend in October 2003 — by wild grizzly.

It is the tale of a marginal hero on a quixotic journey, struggling with romantic passion against both the human and natural worlds. Treadwell's time among the bears, the appalling risks he took and his gorgeous video of them in their natural habitat made him a minor celebrity. He broke National Park Service rules that required visitors to keep their distance from the animals, and his very presence among them may have altered their behavior.

Herzog's film argues that this self-styled expert on the wild grizzly conceived of them as pets — a dangerous mistake that earned him the ire and contempt of experts interviewed for this film.

Herzog crafts a full and compelling character out of Treadwell's footage.

When it comes to his nemesis, the National Park Service, Treadwell's anger is so incandescent he seems capable of real violence. Herzog, in the end, wraps it all up with some rhetorical ideas about Treadwell's legacy. There's the joy of the images he left behind, and although the argument about his impact, for good or not, will go on, the Treadwell story gives "an insight into ourselves, our nature." And that, for Herzog, "gives meaning to his life and his death." Perhaps he's parodying bad documentary writing here, because the film is much better than that.

—The Washington Post

Gunner Palace

Directed by Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker

USA, documentary, Rated PG-13, 85 minutes

REVIEW:

"Gunner Palace" is a striking documentary that shows the war in Iraq in a way it's not been seen before: from the ground up.

The gunners are the 400 or so members of a stationed-in-Baghdad U.S. Army artillery brigade that Michael Tucker spent two one-month periods with in 2003 and 2004. The palace in which the gunners are housed is the former pleasure dome of Saddam's son Odai Hussein.

Unlike the usual documentary, "Gunner Palace" doesn't single out one or two soldiers to follow. What it aims for and achieves instead is a group portrait of today's volunteer army, what it's up to and up against in Iraq.

We see the grittiness and the tedium, the heightened unreality and the ever-present danger that make up day-to-day life in this peculiar war zone. As one of the soldiers laconically puts it, "For y'all this is just a show, but we live in this movie."

We meet a whole range of soldiers, from the reflective to the self-absorbed. There are goofballs who enjoy "scaring the natives" and one man who says simply, "I don't feel like I'm defending my country anymore."

"Gunner Palace" unexpectedly makes you understand that, despite how unpromising it can all seem, it's due to something positive and determined in the spirit of these soldiers that things are not worse in Iraq than they are.

—Los Angeles Times

Home of the Brave

Directed by Paola di Florio

USA, documentary, 2004, Not Rated, 75 minutes
Winner Grand Jury Prize (Documentary) 2004 Sundance Film Festival

In 1965, Detroit's Viola Gregg Liuzzo, 39-year-old mother of five and wife of a Teamster boss, traveled to Montgomery, Ala. to participate in a Voters' Rights March. She was brutally murdered. The accused KKK members were acquitted. Di Florio re-examines the events that led up to Viola's death, exposes the FBI's role and introduces us to Viola's family, who is still demanding answers — after 40 years.

"A powerful film worthy of a truly extraordinary American."

—Film Threats

Human Resources

Directed by Laurent Cantet; written by Cantet and Gilles Marchand

France, drama, 1999, Not Rated, 100 minutes

Winner Best First Film 2000 Cezar

Frank (Jalil Lespert) returns to his hometown after graduating from business school. He's hired as a management trainee at the same factory where his father (Jean-Claude Vallod) has worked for 30 years. Young Frank's plan to get input from the workers jeopardizes jobs in this class-conscious drama with the message that human resources are not necessarily valuable resources in a world ruled by bottom lines.

"A valuable, heartbreaking film."

—Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times

Italian for Beginners

Directed by Lone Scherfig (uncredited); written by Scherfig

Denmark-Sweden, comedy, 2000, Rated R, 118 minutes

Jury Prize (Silver Berlin Bear) 2001 Berlin International Film Festival

REVIEW:

"Italian for Beginners" may just be the bleakest romantic comedy ever made.

The movie was made in the minimalist Dogma 95 style, which a group of Danish filmmakers established as a reactionary return to pure cinema. Its rigid rules require all hand-held camera and no artificial effects, lighting, sound or music.

This would seem to be the completely wrong approach for making a romantic comedy. But that's what gives "Italian for Beginners" an awkward charm. Writer-director Lone Scherfig simply introduces a group of singles, who are a bit lost but find their way by finding each other.

Andreas (Anders W. Berthelsen) is a recently widowed pastor who arrives in town to fill in at a church where the pastor has been suspended. Figuring he won't be there long, he stays at a hotel, where bumbling Jorgen Mortensen (Peter Gantzler) is the manager. Jorgen has a crush on Giulia (Sara Indrio Jensen), an Italian cook who's also interested in him, but they're both too shy to do anything about it.

Hal-Finn (Lars Kaalund), the manager of the restaurant where Giulia works, is fired after repeatedly berating his customers. Imagine a Danish version of the "Seinfeld" Soup Nazi. He screams at nearly everyone, including Olympia (Anette Stovelbaek), the skittish woman who works at a bakery by day and returns home at night to her ailing, abusive father.

All these people end up taking Italian lessons together. Devastating things happen to all of them en route to their happy ending, which really is an uneasy ending.

—Associated Press

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"Gunner Palace"

FILMS

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“Land of Plenty”

Land of Plenty
Directed by Wim Wenders; story by Scott Derrickson and Wenders; screenplay by Michael Meredith and Wenders

USA-Germany, drama, 2004, Not Rated, 123 minutes
Winner UNESCO Award 2004 Venice Film Festival

Security-obsessed vigilante Paul (John Diehl) has a cause. A former Green Beret, Paul drives around downtown L.A. anxiously looking for terrorists, collecting evidence and talking on a headset. Back after 10 years abroad, Lana (Michelle Williams) also has a cause and takes a job at a homeless shelter. They are two people trying to do something real in a land of disillusionment and paranoia.

Les Miserables
Directed by Claude Lelouch; novel by Victor Hugo; written by Lelouch

France, drama, 1995, Rated R, 175 minutes
Winner Best Foreign Language Film 1996 Golden Globe

Rich Jewish lawyer Ziman and family flee Nazi-occupied France with help of illiterate ex-boxer Henri Fortin (Jean Paul Belmondo) and his truck. On the run, the Zimans read aloud from Victor Hugo's 1862 novel. Similarities between their situation and the book's are poignant and immediate. Moved by this book he can't even read, Fortin searches for the strength to become the hero he never was.

“Part dream, part nightmare...shimmers with moral urgency.”
— Washington Post



“Mad Hot Ballroom”

Mad Hot Ballroom
Directed by Marilyn Agrelo; written by Amy Sewell

USA, documentary, 2005, Rated PG, 105 minutes

REVIEW:

The incongruous combination of gritty New York City public school kids and the rarefied, privileged world of ballroom dancing makes “Mad Hot” a documentary experience to savor. It will make you want to laugh, cry and do a little dancing yourself, maybe all at the same time.

Directed by Marilyn Agrelo, “Mad Hot Ballroom” couldn't exist without a program, run by the American Ballroom Institute, that has brought trained teachers to what at last count was some 7,000 fourth- and fifth-graders in 68 elementary schools across the five boroughs.

More than that, the kids take part in an annual citywide competition that culminates in an emotional dance-off with a trophy to the top dance team.

“Mad Hot” cuts back and forth among three public schools in different parts of the city, each with a distinct personality.

Still a few years from the mad hormones of adolescence, the film's fourth- and fifth-graders, glimpsed on the dance floor and in candid moments outside school, seem hardly likely to embrace the physical touch and constant eye contact dancing demands. But the wonder of “Mad Hot Ballroom” is that these kids embrace dance and get to love it.

We can literally see these young people start to feel better about themselves as their dancing skills improve. Though the kids who don't do well in the citywide contest often end up in tears, the film makes you believe they are all winners. They just don't see it yet.
—Los Angeles Times

Me and You and Everyone We Know
Directed and written by Miranda July

USA-UK, drama, 2005, Rated R, 90 minutes
Winner Best Feature Film-Prix Regards Jeune Cannes 2005; winner Special Jury Prize-Originality of Vision 2005 Sundance

REVIEW:

Oh, the sheer oogy discomfort of “Me and You and Everyone We Know,” as 7-year-old Robby (Brandon Ratcliff) and his 14-year-old brother, Peter (Miles Thompson), find themselves caught in an intimate e-mail encounter with a stranger.

The boys, sitting side by side in front of the computer at home, have been sending out mischievous instant messages. Now they have reached someone considerably older.

As the going gets more risqué, little Robby searches his brain for something appropriately edgy to post. He turns to his brother, and suggests something that incorporates a body function with a sort of New Age-like invitation.

It is one oddball statement. Peter looks at his kid brother in disbelief. Does Robby really want to say that? Robby is adamant. Yep. Uh-oh. The response comes: “You are crazy and you are making me very hot.”

Instead of becoming more sordid and scary, the scene is getting funnier. Those boys are really rather innocent, so sweet. Now they've got a problem.

This is just one of many screwy but whimsically enchanting surprises in Miranda July's feature debut. But as you get used to her quirky, ingenious rhythms, you thrill to the experience. July also acts in the film.

The story's too complex and precious to render here. But it hums with compassion for its outlandish, lonely but always sweet characters.

—The Washington Post

Mondovino
Directed and written by Jonathan Nossiter

International, documentary, 2004, Rated PG-13, 135 minutes
Nominee Golden Palm 2004 Cannes Film Festival

REVIEW:

Filmmaker Jonathan Nossiter has managed to craft an entertaining film that is neither stuffy nor pretentious. “Mondovino” lives up to its “World o' Wine” title, but it's ultimately about a lot of other things — globalization, cultural imperialism, the plight of the artist — as well as being a metaphor-maker's paradise.

Combining his two careers as sommelier and director, Nossiter brings a passion and knowledge to the project that raises it above what might have been a mere state-of-the-grape travelogue. He shot the film on five continents over three years using small, lightweight digital equipment and taking only a crew of two friends.

The intimacy allowed by the small crew is evident in the openness of their subjects. Nossiter gets wine consultants and winemakers to debate potentially controversial subjects with vigor and candor.

If the film is any indicator, the wine world is full of interesting characters. Michel Rolland is a jet-setting consultant who expounds on the benefits of modernity in production and seems to know (and be known) everywhere. He's the link between the New World, Napa-based Mondavi empire and more traditional vintners in Europe.

Although there's a feeling of inevitability as the Mondavis spread their brand-friendly, marketing-drive style around the globe, Nossiter isn't necessarily buying into it as he explores centuries-old wineries forging alliances with the Mondavis as well as small independents with only a few acres or less in places as far-flung as Brazil and Argentina.

Although he makes no claim of objectivity, Nossiter also doesn't ambush his subjects. The interviews are presented in a straightforward and relatively uninflected manner, with tiny but interesting details revealed in his shooting technique.

—Los Angeles Times

My Summer of Love
Directed by Paul Pavlikovsky; novel by Helen Cross; screenplay by Paul Pavlikovsky

United Kingdom, drama, 2004, Rated R, 86 minutes
Winner Best New British Feature 2004 Edinburgh International Film Festival

REVIEW:

“My Summer of Love” is an intimate tale of female friendship, told through hand-held camera-work and soft, natural lighting.

The intensity of the unlikely bond that forms between teenagers Mona (Natalie Press) and Tamsin (Emily Blunt) feels immediate and relevant. This is the first film for these actresses, both of whom give performances that exude such confidence and realism, you'd swear at times that you're watching a documentary. Director Pawel Pawlikowski also wrote the script based on Helen Cross' novel of the same name.

Mona and Tamsin do fall in love — which could have been gratuitously titillating, but in Pawlikowski's hands feels appropriate.

When they meet in the sun-scorched countryside of Yorkshire, England, they already know they're complete opposites. Mona lives above a pub with her older brother. She dresses and speaks in a hard, slangy way.

Enter Tamsin, who literally rides up to Mona on a white horse, invites her over to her ivy-covered estate and announces she's been suspended from boarding school.

Tamsin quotes Nietzsche and plays Edith Piaf records for Mona. They spend their afternoons conspiratorially smoking cigarettes and drinking red wine before moving on to make-out sessions and magic mushrooms.

Before the summer is over the two girls are declaring their undying love by the light of a campfire — and threatening to kill each other if either of them leaves, among the initial signs that this giddy relationship is going to turn ugly.

Until then, everything about their summer together is completely believable, and a joy to watch unfurl.

—Associated Press

11 de Septiembre

Directed by Youssef Chahine, Egypt; Amos Gitai, Israel; Alejandro González Iñárritu, Mexico; Shohei Imamura, Japan; Claude Lelouch, France; Ken Loach, UK; Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran; Mira Nair, India; Idrissa Ouedraogo, Burkina Faso; Sean Penn, USA; Danis Tanovic, Bosnia International, compilation, 2002, Not Rated, 134 minutes
Winner UNESCO Award 2002 Venice Film Festival

One film, 11 directors and 11 reactions. Ranking directors from around the world were each asked to make a film 11 minutes/9 seconds/1 frame long giving perspective to the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. These diverse and personal shorts range from the emotional to the political.

“Often brilliant, always revelatory, deeply interesting omnibus film.”

—Chicago Tribune

The Talent Given Us
Directed and written by Andrew Wagner

USA, comedy-drama, 2004, Not Rated, 98 minutes
Winner Grand Jury Prize CineVegas 2004; Official Selection 2005 Sundance

REVIEW:

For “The Talent Given Us,” writer-director Andrew Wagner persuaded his parents, Judy and Allen Wagner, and his actress sisters, Maggie and Emily, to play themselves pretty much, and there can be no doubt that the film means much to him as a means of expressing affection and strengthening family bonds.

It's difficult, though, to see how this picture could mean much to anyone but the Wagners and their friends and relatives.

The setup is this: Wagner's four relatives are on an outing but abruptly take off from Manhattan to Los Angeles because Judy wants to reconnect with Andrew, from whom she feels a distance greater than miles. This spur-of-the-moment premise is hard to swallow and is rather too clearly a device for the Wagners to air all

manner of grievances and idiosyncrasies during their long journey by car.

The family is occasionally amusing but doesn't wear well as cross-country traveling companions. A bear of a man, Allen, a retired Wall Street veteran, is a likable guy, gamely standing down increasing infirmities that affect his speech and balance — and libido.

Judy, a blond dumpling, however, is given to considerable kvetching and unconvincingly threatens to leave Allen; the loving bond between the two strikes the film's one convincingly authentic note.

Emily comes across as a self-absorbed full throttle neurotic seemingly unaware of how swiftly boring she becomes — or is she just giving a less-than-engaging performance? Maggie, in a wise move, all but disappears from the screen.

Wagner blurs the line between fiction and reality but not so adroitly as to tantalize. “The Talent Given Us” illustrates that a picture sometimes can be too personal.

This film was made for \$30,000 with a two-man crew.

—Los Angeles Times

Tarnation
Directed and written by Jonathan Caouette

USA, documentary, 2003, Not Rated, 88 minutes
Best Documentary 2004 Los Angeles IFF West Film Festival

REVIEW:

By any rational standard, “Tarnation” ought to be unwatchable, the kind of self-indulgent, erratic mess that sends sensible people fleeing in the opposite direction. But it's not.

For film-making is hardly a rational endeavor — it's about emotional connection, creativity and raw talent. And it's the intuitive cinematic gifts of 31-year-old director Jonathan Caouette, who made the film out of a lifetime of home movies for \$218.32, thank you very much, that have turned “Tarnation” into a remarkable and remarkably compelling document.

This is nothing less than a one-of-a-kind film autobiography, a snapshot of a childhood hell from someone who used his own imagination and dreams to make it out alive. In a brief 88 minutes, Caouette gives us the kind of wrenching American story that doesn't get told as often as it happens. It's about growing up gay and fatherless in suburban Texas with grandparents who could not cope and a mother who was subjected to so much shock therapy it changed her personality and divorced her from reality.

But much more than the wrenching nature of Caouette's story, it's the literally phantasmagorical way he tells it that holds our attention. “Tarnation” throws a dizzying variety of visual stimulation at us from an overflowing cornucopia of images: old home movies and performance tapes, contemporary cinema verite, clips from vintage TV shows and films. There's also a flood of non-moving images. The result is an accessible dream state that puts us inside Caouette's mind in a way that can't help but be affecting.

Another key to the filmmaker's success is his facility as an editor. Working initially on Apple's iMovie editing software, he has an innate sense of what is worth holding onto.

—Los Angeles Times

Time Out
Directed by Laurent Cantet; written by Robin Campillo and Cantet

France, drama, 2001, Rated PG-13, 128 minutes
Winner Don Quixote Award 2001 Venice Film Festival

Afraid to tell his family he's been fired, Vincent (Aurelian Recoing) heads off to work. His days and nights are spent on the road around the French countryside bordering Switzerland. He constantly checks in with wife Muriel (Karin Viard), telling her of non-existent meetings and visits with clients. When questioned, Vincent tells his suspicious family about his new job. But he needs money to keep his pretense going, so he gets friends to invest in a fake company. Then someone who can use a man like Vincent recognizes him for what he is.

“A smoldering fireball of anguish and fury beneath its grave, chill facade.”

—Village Voice



“The Woodsman”

The Woodsman

Directed by Nicole Kassell; written by Steven Fechter and Kassell

USA, drama, 2005, Rated R, 87 minutes
Nominee Grand Jury Prize 2005 Sundance

REVIEW:

“I am not a monster,” the man says.

It's not a statement, it's a challenge, delivered with the knowledge that everyone who knows his story will think he is.

His name is Walter, and he's introduced at the beginning of “The Woodsman” as he starts supervised parole after 12 years in prison. We see him move into an apartment, reacquire his old job at a lumberyard and get reacquainted with family, the usual things for someone returning to society.

But Walter (exceptionally played by Kevin Bacon) is not the standard returnee. He is a convicted pedophile, put away for sexual offenses with preadolescent girls. He's not someone misunderstood or arrested by mistake, as he might have been in a Hollywood version of this story. He is the real deal.

It is the ambition of “The Woodsman” to take us inside the mind and experience of someone like Walter. It does not flinch from who he is, in no way shape or form makes excuses for him, but at the same time it absolutely insists on Walter's humanity, and with good reason.

If we are to have any kind of success in dealing with this horror, we must understand that it is not monsters who do it, it is people.

This is quite a challenge for a first-time filmmaker like director Nicole Kassell, but “The Woodsman” by and large meets it successfully. There are some weak moments as well as sections in which the film's theatrical origins (Kassell co-wrote the screenplay with playwright Steven Fechter) are too visible. But the film's core, anchored by a fine ensemble cast and a controlled, focused performance by Bacon, is completely solid.

Closed off and deeply self-protective, Bacon's withdrawn Walter keeps his personal reactions minimal, as if he knows (as in fact he mostly does) what the world has in store for him once it un.masks his secret.

More than that, Bacon brings to life Walter's sense of being trapped in his own life, of being troubled on the most profound level by who he is, by his fears that he cannot be otherwise. Desperate to be cured, he asks his therapist, and more than once, the question no one can answer: “When will I be normal?”

“The Woodsman” is structured as a series of one-on-one contacts Walter has with the people in his life. Some are more successful than others, with his relationship with Vickie (Kyra Sedgwick) being the strongest of the lot.

Sedgwick and Bacon are married in real life, which is not necessarily an advantage in playing a couple on screen, but it works to the film's advantage here. Sedgwick gives one of her best, most relaxed performances, and a kind of innate intimacy can be felt between them that makes their relationship credible.

—Los Angeles Times

At the Open Space: Free Films on the Bay

- Jaws (July 28)**
- Princess Bride (July 29)**
- Ferris Bueller's Day Off (July 30)**
- Casablanca (July 31)**