

SEEN FROM THE COUCH: FILM COMEDIES WITH A TWIST

As all of us are adjusting to the grim reality of COVID-19, so must the Hill Rag. With movie houses closed at the time of this writing, we can hardly provide reviews of new films whose venues have shut down. Thus, we will shift gears to give Rag readers a selection of recent movies to watch while sequestered at home.

The theme of this month's mini-reviews is "Comedies with a Twist," an assortment of very worthy—if lesser-known--comic films from the last ten years that bring laughs along with dramatic elements that deepen their impact. Readers can find these titles on disc (rental or purchase) or on streaming services. So, settle down on your couch and try out these (mostly) feel-good flicks.

Up in the Air (2009) -- A comedy-drama by Jason Reitman of the highest quality and pertinence. Reitman's clever script is enhanced by solid performances. It follows a sleek, unattached corporate downsizer (George Clooney) as he travels the country to tell employees that they are fired. The film's humor is nicely understated and smartly insinuating, with an adult repartee which recalls, at best, the great 1930's comedies. The movie also has a timely thoughtfulness about business downsizing and its firing mini-dramas which offer an unexpected gravitas alongside the comic touches.

Win Win (2011) – Director Tom McCarthy offers a wonderful, droll drama outlining the world of a harassed New Jersey lawyer who is trying to keep his financial head above water while coaching a hapless high school wrestling team. Paul Giamatti, unsurpassed in roles like this conflicted, mildly desperate figure, is the lawyer, a role that fits him like an old suit. For McCarthy, who also wrote the crafty script, this was probably a labor of love, depicting a world he knows by heart and offering it to us as a gift.

The Skeleton Twins (2014) -- Leads Kristen Wigg and Bill Hader (old SNL colleagues) offer an exemplar of acting symbiosis in this touching comedy-drama, playing twins who are somewhat estranged yet who still harbor unique insights into each other's psyches. The thrill of the film is to watch two actors so thoroughly in sync: you agonize with them as they lie and prevaricate to each other yet exalt and guffaw when they reconnect with a common memory. The film, deftly written and directed by Craig Johnson, doesn't move to an easy, "feel-good" ending but does show an ending with feeling.

Love and Friendship (2016) -- A bracing re-imagining of a Jane Austen bagatelle (adapted from an unpublished early novel) by American writer-director Whit Stillman. He has beautifully re-created the flavor of Regency England (mostly shot in Dublin) but

with contemporary panache. A radiant Kate Beckinsale heads a sparkling cast as the ambitious widow Lady Susan Vernon, a ruthless she-devil under period plumage, who will do anything to advance the marriage prospects of her penniless daughter. The brittle and brilliant dialogue by Stillman sounds like “Masterpiece Theater” on steroids. Pay attention.

The Death of Stalin (2017) -- British writer-director Armando Iannucci has reimaged a piece of USSR history in this pitch-black farce, tangentially based on events after the death of the dictator. The Anglo-American cast speaks a mash-up of accents: cockney, Brooklynese, semi-tosh Britspeak, Yorkshire, etc. Iannucci’s depiction of the bizarre struggle among Central Committee members seems at times like a zany update of the Marx(ist) Brothers, with the pratfalls and one-liners contrasted with the darkest shades of Stalin’s legacy. The film treads a delicate line, ready giggles tempered by chilly winces—sometimes in the same scene! In all, it makes for a heady bowl of borscht.

The Big Sick (2017) -- Co-writers Kumail Nanjani and his then-fiancé Emily V. Gordon (now married) offer a thinly veiled outline of their life together and turn it into an hilarious, heart-warming, yet daunting comedy of clashing cultures. Self-deprecating comedian Kumail wins the buoyant Emily, but when she falls into a mysterious coma, he must contend with her lovable, if slightly nutty parents. The whole cast is superb (Ray Romano and Holly Hunter are wonderful as Emily’s comical but decent parents), and the cunning script balances on a thin line between tones of wit and poignancy.

Eighth Grade (2018) -- This film convinces because of its lead, 15-year-old Elsie Fisher as Kayla. Maybe she is just playing herself--a prototype American teenager--but she makes the character her own. Her round, accepting face and her moony eyes seem just right for this puzzled, poignant young girl, as is her placid, hesitant voice aching for affirmation. She is moody and muddled but still emits bursts of courage as she navigates the next stage of her life. Writer/director Bo Burnham makes his feature film debut and reveals tremendous promise with this comic achievement, appearing to possess total recall of middle school and its multifarious humiliations.

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