

One Decade and Counting...

by Mike Canning

This column marks ten years of “At the Movies,” and, I must admit, one of the best gigs a film buff could have. Thanks to Jean-Keith Fagon and Melissa Ashabranner, who brought me onto the HILL RAG masthead in 1993, I have been able to indulge a desire I have held since I was six: to go to the movies *free* and write about those I care about. No movie-lover could ask for more. One is hardly born a movie reviewer, of course, one starts as that movie-lover...

As one of the last pre-television kids (b.1941), my youthful entertainment was radio--and the pictures. Later, I was captured by the exoticism of “foreign” films, a desire heightened by overseas study and, then, by a career in the Foreign Service. In that latter capacity, I was a press or cultural officer, a job that both required lots of writing and permitted me to indulge my film bent. Since I presented *all* aspects of American culture to foreigners, I found ways to include movies and, thus, led film discussions, fashioned film festivals, and wrote about films of all types. I even did a stint in procurement of film and television product for showing to foreign audiences. My overseas life also allowed me to discover the cinemas of other countries--and to compare them with our own. Movies were a life-long passion that persisted after my retirement from the Service, when I fortuitously answered a RAG classified ad pitching for a movie reviewer. Fortunately for me, I was hired. It’s been a gas ever since...

This anniversary has led me to musing on all the movies I’ve seen (some 1,500) and all those reviews I’ve written (more than 350). I have always avoided some standard reviewer devices, such as star ratings, thumb directions, and top ten lists. I did this not out of superciliousness, but rather because I honestly felt such measures left out nuance and variation and required comparisons that stretched credulity (how can you “rank,” e.g., an Eskimo epic like *The Fast Runner* with an indie comedy like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*?). My musings, however, led me to propose to my editors that I write an anniversary column to honor my personal *favorite* films over the decade, one for each year of film reviewing (note: since I began reviewing in autumn 1993, I have divided the “years” from September to September).

Selecting one per year was difficult. Let me state up front my basic criteria for “quality” in filmmaking: I favor literate, believable scripts fashioned into coherent, compelling stories, peopled by competent, credible actors who are directed with pace and weight appropriate to the material. These are my core values. The other accouterment--cinematography, production design, lighting, music, effects, etc.--all are important, all enhance a motion picture, but, to this reviewer, they are finally secondary to good scripts, acting, and direction. With these tenets firmly in mind, let me signal the ten best on my watch.

1993-94 **Eat Drink Man Woman**

Ang Lee--way before *The Hulk*--cooks up a human stir-fry with four characters as his ingredients, and his taste and touch is impeccable. This tracing of those lives--a widower Chinese chef and his three independent-minded daughters--attains a lovely cadence as the daily business--and romances--of these attractive Taiwanese are played out with surprising twists or turns. And the ending closes a circle, tenderly and rightly, at a family dinner. Almost serving as another cast member is the food displayed in *Eat Drink*. The magnificent credit sequence, during which chef Chu puts together his gourmet Sunday repast, gets you right in the mood. Knives fly over veggies, fingers shape dumplings, meat cubes explode in skillet sauce. As the camera roams over the numerous meals in the film...you can almost smell emanations from the screen.

1994-95 **Il Postino (The Postman)**

Set on a Neapolitan island wherein a word-starved ex-fisherman turned mailman bonds with world-famous poet Pablo Neruda, *Il Postino* (The Postman) is graced by a strong sense of place, natural and nuanced acting, tender humor, and tact. It shows again the ability of Italian films to display a delicacy of sentiment without the curse of sentimentality, to show sweetness laced with sorrow. The film's real sensibility comes from Massimo Troisi, the star who co-wrote the script and who died, at 41, just after the film wrapped. The fact that the actor struggled through shooting with a failing heart only to die just after principal photography can be seen as almost unbearably poignant--or grotesquely voyeuristic. I found it much closer to the former and felt that the figure Mr. Troisi left on celluloid, gaunt and cavern-eyed but life-affirming, was a fitting final legacy.

1995-96 **Lone Star**

Lone Star offers a small town on the Tex-Mex border as a microcosm of Southwest history and culture. Anglos run the place, though Hispanics are clearly in the majority, while African-Americans comprise a restless minority. This ethnic mix can be volatile, and a new wrinkle is introduced with the discovery of a decades-old skeleton. The current sheriff (laconic Chris Cooper) pieces together what looks like a murder that could lead to his own father. *Lone Star* contains, above all, an imposing ensemble, with each actor able to convey a distinctive character in just a few scenes. The murder mystery is a pretext for writer-director John Sayles to develop a rich mosaic of border life and to depict how both personal histories and local history form that mosaic. In so doing, Mr. Sayles turns one fabled Texas history lesson on its head, providing for the film's great--and surprising--last line.

1996-97 **L.A. Confidential**

There have been many memorable films about Los Angeles, but none better than Curtis Hanson's *L.A. Confidential*, which vividly captures the city's 1950's seamy side but does it with 1990's power and panache. Taken from a novel by James Ellroy, this tale of crooked and straight cops mucking in the L.A. underworld possesses propulsive momentum, a razor-sharp script (co-written by Hanson), and a pack of fine performances. The crowning performances are the two leads, played by Russell Crowe

and Guy Pearce, two Aussies who beautifully impersonate two disparate American types. Crowe (who became an international star with this picture) is the sublimely raw “bad cop” while Pearce is the sleekly ambitious “good cop”; the first exudes a menace which hides a sensitive soul, while the second’s assured intelligence is matched by his steely strength.

1997-98 **Shall we Dance?**

This Japanese import is a warm-hearted winner with surprising layers of social commentary. A Japanese “salaryman” acts on a dare to take up ballroom dancing, which becomes his passion, a passion he hides from his family. What makes *Shall We Dance ?* different from its American counterparts is its attitude towards desire and its cultural presumptions about social dancing itself. In a U.S. flick on the same theme, there would be an obvious payoff once the lead attains his “love object.” Here, the man’s inchoate passion for a woman is transmogrified into passion for the enterprise and discipline it takes to fashion a skill. Very Japanese this. The film also assumes a cultural fact not obvious to a U.S. audience: ballroom dancing in Japan is deemed vulgar, something for lecherous men and loose women. This cultural baggage is discreetly displayed in *Shall We Dance?*, adding another dimension to an exquisitely sensitive and supple film.

1998-99 **Election**

Though set in high school, *Election* is utterly grown up in its wry eye and sardonic wit. Director Alexander Payne (who co-wrote the screenplay) neatly balances the cold shower of tough satire with the warmer flows of real human beings. The result is both very funny and will ring true to anyone who attended a public high school. The election of the title is for senior class president in Omaha’s George Washington Carver High, where a super-perky student contends with her teacher who wants her to have some opposition. Mr. Payne gets it: the student body, the hallways, the assemblies--the very *feel* of Carver High is spot on. All the acting is superb, but the real kick is Reese Witherspoon, who triumphs as Tracy Flick, the kid who will do anything to win. She’s a girl with a too-tight perm whose pout will freeze-dry you and whose victory smile can give you hives!

1999-2000 **East Is East**

East is East features the mixed marriage Khans, Muslim George and English Ella, running a fish-and-chips shop in Manchester in 1974 with their rambunctious brood of six boys and one girl. George aims to get his kids good marriages within his faith, but the kids, typically English in every way but how they look, have no sense of Islam and less respect for its ways. The movie’s cross cultural family issues are serious, but in the hands of director Damien O’Donnell and scripter Ayub Khan-Din, they play out hilariously. The acting is wonderful, led by the great Om Puri, the immigrant at sea in befuddling England, and featuring a dazzling cast of Anglo-Indian kids. They are able--in mere bits of business or a few lines--to embody fully realized individuals as well as

displaying a genuine melding of their mixed heritage. They bounce off each other, just like a real family.

2000-01 **Traffic**

Directed by ultra-versatile Stephen Soderbergh, *Traffic* is a high-energy pulse-pounder, tightly interlacing three strands of the drug trade. One strand follows an Tijuana policeman (Benicio Del Toro) struggling to stay straight amidst corruption, a second follows a new national drug czar (Michael Douglas) facing his own daughter's habit, while a third finds two San Diego DEA agents pursuing a drug pusher and his ambitious wife (Catherine Zeta-Jones). The story lines are woven with seamless, riveting interconnections, aided by strong, cogent performances from all the players as well as by cinema color-coding: hot amber for the Mexican sequences, a cool blue for the czar's story, and sunny, full color for the San Diego segments. That stunning camera work was done by Mr. Soderbergh himself, who, though he borrowed the concept of the film from a 1990 British mini-series, has made it distinctly his own.

2001-02 **In the Bedroom**

In the Bedroom marked the sensational directorial debut of Todd Field. It takes us to Camden, Maine, where the respectable Fowlers (Tom Wilkinson and Sissy Spacek), devastated by the loss of their only son, suffer from both a need for vengeance and spasms of guilt. The entire cast of *In the Bedroom* is stellar, but the film is dominated by the towering performances of Spacek and Wilkinson, who pass from settled domesticity through devastating sorrow to a mix of resignation and resolve. Both actors offer sublimely calibrated work, always in tune with reality. Ms. Spacek embodies her character's life with great sensitivity and nuance, punctuated with dramatic fireworks. Tom Wilkinson, in the less showy role, plays off Spacek unerringly and reveals most through cast of eye or turn of shoulder. Todd Field has created (he co-wrote the screenplay) a wonderfully modulated film with scenes that rip the heart, seismic in their emotional impact--and yet are so *beautiful*. Film humanism at its best.

2002-03 **Bend It Like Beckham**

This still-running Anglo-Indian comedy/drama is my current choice as the most entertaining movie around. A spunky Punjabi girl from Southwest London, Jess, loves soccer but knows her passion for the game is frowned upon by her traditional parents. How she balances playing with a girls' team and her domestic life provides the context for a film that also aims at portraying the empowerment of girls, stretching themselves towards new roles. This is not done pedantically; it is suggested through the fully rounded depictions of two friends, Jess and Jules, so eager to prove their personal and physical skills. Director Gurinder Chadha, who has used elements of her own life in this film she co-wrote, handles a myriad of characters and types with grace and wit. She mixes up a bright, tart, and lively dish of Anglo-Indian ingredients--call it fish-and-chips on chapatis.

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