

Two Decades and Still Going... (Top Ten of the Past Decade)

By Mike Canning

Ten years ago I prepared a column for the *Hill Rag* in which I listed the best movie I saw during each “filmic” year--defined as the period from September to August to match when I first wrote a review for the *Rag*. One film was listed for 1993-94, 1994-95, and so on. This month now marks 20 years of my column “At the Movies,” and, I still insist, one of the best gigs a film buff could have. Thanks once again to Jean-Keith Fagon and Melissa Ashabranner, who brought me onto the *Hill Rag* masthead in 1993, I have been able to thoroughly indulge a desire I have held since I was a kid: to go to the movies *free* and write about those I favor for my friends and neighbors.

This anniversary has led me to musing on all the movies I’ve seen (some 3,200) and all those reviews I’ve written (more than 700) over the 20-year span. That’s about 160 movies a year, roughly one every other day. From the beginning, I had always shied away from some standard movie reviewer devices, such as star ratings, thumb indicators, and top ten lists. I did this not out of arrogance but rather because I honestly felt such assessments required comparisons that stretched credulity (how can you “compare” an Iranian feature film with a Canadian documentary?). Still, my tenth anniversary seemed to call out for some kind of summing up. So I filed a Top Ten of the Decade in my essay. “One Decade and Counting...” Well, I have continued to count and now have emerged with a second “ten best” for the last decade.).

Selecting one per year was difficult. Let me state again my basic credo for worthy 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 cinematic values. The other elements of a film--cinematography, production design, lighting, music, effects, etc.--all of which enhance a motion picture, of course, but, to this reviewer, they are finally secondary to good scripts, acting, and direction. With that credo in mind, let me count down Canning’s Best of the Best over the last decade.

2003-2004 American Splendor

A singular and perhaps *sui generis* effort, combining live action drama, documentary interviews, and graphic animation--all telling the (amazingly entertaining) story of a down-and-out schlub from Cleveland--name of Harvey Pekar--who worked as a file clerk at the Veteran’s Administration and wrote smart and self-deprecating adult comics about his miserable life! Terrific work by leads Paul Giamatti and Hope Davis as Harvey and his girl friend.

2004-2005 Sideways

A very funny, very human, very true comedy by director Alexander Payne of an Odd Couple of guys, going nowhere but wandering the wine country of Santa Barbara and encountering two willful and attractive single women. The performances (of all four

leads) are brilliant, and the script is full of insight into the details and foibles of its closely-drawn characters. Paul Giamatti as Miles, a failed writer and ineffectual wine snob, is the standout as this flawed but heartfelt character.

2005-2006 The Best of Youth

A six-hour Italian epic (originally made for TV) about two brothers--and their family and friends and lovers—whose lives intersect with Italian history from 1966 to the present day. The two men's very different lives (one becomes a doctor, the other goes into law enforcement) coil and intertwine in wonderfully intricate and real ways. A film with the weight and variety of a great novel, and one that, even after *six* hours, you don't want to end.

2006-2007 Little Children

An intricate comedy-drama of suburban life limns a potent affair with compelling, believable performances and complex narrative strands that keep you guessing till the end. Tops in the quality of its script, the vigor and subtleties of its acting, and its almost serene direction (by Todd Fields), it strikes no false notes. It keeps coming at you so naturally, just like real life. Kate Winslet is exquisite as a dissatisfied wife, and Jackie Earle Haley is a revelation as a struggling sex offender.

2007-2008 Away From Her

A film that beautifully illuminates the transition towards the end of life as one devoted couple confronts mental incapacity. This sensitive, yet unflinching, look at what will befall many of us is the splendid filmmaking debut of Sarah Polley, who, at 28, shows directorial class right out of the box. She also obtains impressive performances from actors more than twice her age, in particular, the luminous Julie Christie, in an enthralling and heartbreaking performance as the wife slipping into dementia.

2008-2009 The Visitor

A subtle, yet compelling, human drama about the awakening of a deadened soul, played beautifully by Richard Jenkins. Written and directed by Tom McCarthy, who exhibits taste, intelligence, and casting acumen in this cross-cultural story which translates issues of national security and immigration into personal, credible drama. He narrates in lapidary, measured scenes whose very modesty makes the eventual traumas that his characters endure that much more telling. McCarthy also avoids all clichés to place believable people in believable dilemmas, and the movie resonates the more for it.

2009-2010 The Hurt Locker

To my mind, the best movie with the Iraqi War as context, "The Hurt Locker" is an in-depth, searching character study of a man in extremis, working in a bomb demolition

squad under excruciating tension. Director Kathryn Bigelow's command of her material is so compelling and lead actor Jeremy Renner's characterization is so persuasive that the picture rivets one. Further, the film achieves a full, pulsing documentary feel with agile hand-held cameras. Whether you want to or not, you will feel—along with these men—the desert dust in your nostrils and the clammy secretions inside your helmet.

2010-2011 The King's Speech

A superbly convincing “heritage picture” crowned by two crowning lead performances: Colin Firth, marvelously apprehensive and staunchly pompous yet wholly sympathetic as the decent but frustrated Duke of York (and King), and Geoffrey Rush, the canny, down-to-earth fixer who refuses to cow tow to the monarch. The film deftly mixes the touching with the gloriously funny, the decorous and the profane, and includes one riveting confession. The finale, where George makes a crucial wartime address to the nation, will have you wanting to sing “God Save The King.”

2011-2012 The Descendants

Perhaps more than any other current director of American comedy, Alexander Payne offers convincing, sweet-and-sour examinations of the contemporary soul. Here he delivers smart, revealing character studies and believable, nuanced emotions—together with an organic, never forced, humor. The entire cast is splendid in their distinctiveness and idiosyncratic personalities, led by George Clooney, playing the scion of an Hawaiian family. Under Payne's guidance, Clooney, befuddled yet earnest, makes you believe the logic of what his character does because you've come to know him so well. While not a “showy” performance, it is a splendid one.

2012-2013 Lincoln

With this film, Steven Spielberg has crafted a landmark piece of historic cinema and a triumph in the re-creation of an historical period. Rarely, if ever, has a legislative struggle had such resonance on the screen and rarely have politics, as a mix of the shady and the noble, been shown with such dramatic conviction. With a superlative Daniel Day-Lewis as the 16th president, Spielberg creates a Lincoln that will stand for many from now on as the definitive film portrayal. Day-Lewis is seconded by a splendid array of acting talent led by Tommy Lee Jones as Thaddeus Stevens and Sally Field as Mary Todd Lincoln.

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