

## A Second Look – 1994

This time of the year is as appropriate as any to look back at some films released in Washington during 1994 which may not have been big successes when they came out but which contained some elements that merit a second (or even first) look on video. This sampling does not thus include the widely seen or clearly successful films, but that flick you decided just wasn't worth your seven bucks. These somewhat bypassed films may not represent fully successful works of art or paragons of entertainment, but--for the price of a rental--they may contain something worth considering...

Such as a film's look. While it may lose a lot on the TV quadrangle, the western vistas of a film such as *Geronimo*, for example, are certainly handsome. Shot principally in picturesque New Mexico, the movie offers as backdrop the soft curves of rust-colored hills--images replicating Georgia O'Keefe paintings. They make up for some rather wooden characters the film displays. Landscape is also one of the better performers in *Wyatt Earp*, another ambitious western whose settings can be splendid, even if the story never quite jells.

Even richer in its production design and cinematography is Bernardo Bertolucci's film *Little Buddha*, lovingly shot by the great Italian veteran cameraman, Vittorio Storaro. The story divides itself between contemporary settings in Seattle and a fantastic fairy tale version of the legend of the young Buddha, Siddhartha, set in a lush South Asia. I would suggest you fast forward the tape past the Seattle stuff and concentrate on Siddhartha's story, which is both fresh and reverent. And the picture of this world is well worth a rental: a world splendidly concocted of every warm color of the spectrum--a world steeped in saffron.

Production values, too, are a reason to check out a small cult movie called *Cronos*. A Mexican vampire movie may sound like a bad joke, but what is interesting about *Cronos* is how it achieves decent, convincing effects with efficiency and little expense. For a horror movie, it shows laudable restraint, much of it personified in its lead role, played by veteran Argentine actor Federico Luppi.

Another too-little seen foreign film, *Blue*, directed by the Polish Krzysztof Kieslowski, is as handsome in its way as *Little Buddha*, and while its color scheme logically favors blue, the color symbolism is muted and disciplined, if still always gorgeous. The real triumph of this art film, however, is the compelling countenance of French actress Juliette Binoche, which dominates the film. One critic has aptly noted Binoche's ability to switch between two French archetypes: the *gamine* and the *femme fatale*, and here she is able to embody them both with intelligence and style.

Binoche's triumph in *Blue* is perhaps more presence than method, but there were other film performances this past year that stood out in relief from otherwise unsuccessful and mediocre pictures and which perhaps deserve a second look in video.

There is, for example, Dennis Quaid as Doc Holliday in this summer's umpteenth remake of the *Wyatt Earp* story. Standing out as character and comic relief in an overlong and too somber attempt at a western epic, Quaid blasts TB coughs and one-liners equally effectively. Physically transformed into a skeletal form and a light year or so from the contemporary wise guys he often plays, he brings the picture vitality every time he appears.

Another character part worth noting in a very different kind of film was that created by Clarence Williams III in the ghetto blaster *Sugar Hill*. Overall, a profoundly degrading slice of urban life, *Sugar Hill* starred Wesley Snipes, acting super-cool, but Williams (best known as the Afro-headed member of TV's "Mod Squad") is the best reason to check out the video. As ex-jazz pianist A.R., his impersonation of a man as a ghetto shell, hollowed out by thwarted life and the need for drugs, attains perfect pitch. His scenes are few, but they have a resonance beyond anything else in the movie.

Quite different in its vision of black American life was the relatively little noticed *Crooklyn*, Spike Lee's look back at his 1970's growing up years. The film didn't always work, the mood was often too fidgety, but it tried to honestly depict a world rarely seen on film, the world of the striving black family in an urban ethnic mix (rather than dysfunctional ghettoites amid the urban dreck). Its strength came in good ensemble acting, especially among the child actors, including the delightful young Zelda Harris as Troy, the central character of the drama. Another child actor who outshone her adult counterparts was little Tina Majorino, the best thing in the weepy drama *When a Man Loves a Woman*. Bracketed by an alcoholic mother (Meg Ryan) and a super-controlling father (Andy Garcia), Tina is the most adult presence in the movie, a sad-faced kid who senses her parents' moods better than they can themselves.

Among female performances lost in the shuffle this year was that of the enchanting Madeline Stowe in *Blink*, a muddled thriller which rings changes on the tired women-in-jeopardy theme. Stowe, hitherto known almost strictly as an exquisite beauty, gets a denser role as a blind musician who dimly sees a murderer who begins stalking her. Gorgeous she remains, but independent, gutsy, and temperamental, too, expressions of character that bode well for Stowe in future roles.

Another example of a creditable performance in an only middling movie was Nicholas Cage as a long-suffering head of a Secret Service detail which is *Guarding Tess*. Playing off the termagant wife of an ex-president played by Shirley MacLaine, Cage--often an over-the-top actor--creates a wholly sympathetic straight arrow, a tough combination to bring off. You come to believe more in his personal sense of duty than in the Service's rigidities. Cage evinces a similar sense of earnest fair play in a very different milieu in *Red Rock West*, a grim little film noir that went from pay TV into theaters this year--and is worth catching now on video. A regular guy just trying to get along, Cage becomes gradually ensnared in an elaborate murder-assassination plot, but he coolly maintains his hang-dog expression--and his dignity, too.

Sympathetic in a different way is Nick Nolte, who stood out in *I'll Do Anything*, James Brooks' comedy-drama about making it in Hollywood which had a troubled production history and never really found its audience. Nolte is Matt Hobbs, a struggling actor who happens to be a nascent father. He makes you believe how tough it is to be a professional actor, to both hone your craft and to handle its steady dose of rejection without folding. Shifting from his usual hunkish, tough guy persona, Nolte is resourceful and rich in delineating both his character's drive and decency.

All of the films cited above are currently available at local video rental stores. These are hardly recommendations that will change your life, but they may guide you to some unexpected enjoyment as you stroll your way down the aisles in search of a decent videotape for the weekend....

