

A Second Look - 1999

The films signaled in this column are relatively recent (released within the last year) and have been selected principally because of worthy individual performances, standout turns by actors which are worth the price of admission--or at least the cost of a rental (all the films mentioned here are available at Capitol Hill video stores).

A good example is *Love and Death on Long Island*, a showcase for veteran character actor John Hurt, who plays a straight-laced English don named Giles D'eth who becomes inexplicably yet totally smitten by a young American hunk actor (Jason Priestley), so smitten that he tracks him down to Long Island (in his tweeds) to talk to him about "his work." Hurt's earnest, puzzling presence makes what seems a nutty infatuation an oddly understandable passion, one equal parts hilarious and poignant.

British actor Stephen Fry plays the part of Oscar Wilde to a fare-thee-well in the film of the same name (*Wilde*). From his tall, horsey look to his easy way with arch, epigrammatic speech, this seems a role this actor was born to play. As with Hurt above, Fry must show a character of considerable bearing and balance the witty with the touching--which he does superbly. Another fine lead performance by a British actor in a less-noticed film is Minnie Driver in *The Governess*. As an ambitious Jewess in Victorian times passing as a Gentile within a bizarre provincial family, she is compelling as a forceful, intelligent, and passionate woman who is able to seize what she wants out of life.

On this side of the Atlantic, standout performances enlivened some mainstream films that faded rapidly. One is comic Mike Myers in a straight role as Steve Rubell in *54*, the story of New York's most fashionable 1970's disco. Though the film wastes time tracing the barren lives of young people trying to make it at the club, Myers supplies a fascinating depiction of a small-timer turned celebrity definer, a nervy, complex character who is never quite fathomable. Likewise, in the otherwise disappointing *Living Out Loud*, Danny De Vito does a completely natural, delicately self-effacing job as a down-on-his luck elevator guy with potential. All his lines, all his moves ring true.

A most vivid acting debut is that of Saul Williams in the low budget, D.C.-based *Slam*, a film featuring the fall and rise of a local slam poet. Williams exhibits both likability and vulnerability, even a kind of Zen deadness when necessary, but he is also able to really deliver his high-flying, incantatory hip-hop rhymes, all of which he wrote for the film. Gritty looks at Southeast Washington--even inside the D.C. Jail--appear in a fiction film for the first time in *Slam*.

Hope Davis, an actress one sees regularly as a featured player in independent films, shines all on her own in *Next Stop, Wonderland*, an engaging romantic comedy shot in Boston which carries more weight and wit than this genre usually offers. Davis, as a forlorn but sagacious young woman tentatively looking for Mr. Right, manifests a restraint that you just know masks real romantic fervor. The film also rings some droll, excruciating changes on the dating game.

Among the work of child actors in current films, there is much to admire in young Jake Gyllenhaal's fine stint as a budding rocket scientist (who will ultimately be a decent man) in a 1950's mining town in the thoroughly heartwarming *October Sky*. Miles, if not worlds away is the cramped Irish town of the early 1960's shown in *The Butcher Boy*, which boasts a stupendous performance by the 12-year-old Eamonn Owens as Francie

Brady, a raging little id of a fellow who can make your hair curl yet wet your knickers with laughter.

So many cited individual performances above doesn't mean that good ensemble work is wholly lacking in recent films. One example of the latter is *Down in the Delta*, Maya Angelou's debut as a director. Stellar acting from Alfre Woodard, Mary Alice, Al Freeman, Jr., Esther Rolle, and several others make this story of how a ghetto gal finds herself among her Southern kin tender but not treacly. Another intriguing ensemble piece that dipped in and quickly out of theaters is *Playing By Heart*, wherein we follow the parry and dance of five relationships. Starring the time-tested (Sean Connery, Gena Rowlands, Ellen Burstyn) and the fresh-faced (Angelina Jolie, Ryan Phillippe, Gillian Anderson), and others in between, this delicate movie rondelay moves its multiple story lines in parallel until they all bend to satisfyingly converge at the film's culminating event.

The collective cast--including Campbell Scott, Ben Gazzara, Rebecca Pidgeon, and a reptilian Steve Martin--is satisfying also in David Mamet's *The Spanish Prisoner*, though here the individual actors are more often pawns than persons in the director's hands. The best thing about *The Spanish Prisoner* is its concept: an elaborate confidence game whose design is intricate and tightly wound, but never less than clear, and whose momentum steadfastly builds, right up to a sudden, swift, and unexpected finale.

A strong concept, too, makes a very different film, π (the mathematical symbol for the Greek letter Pi), worth a look. Viewers who want something very different on a Blockbuster night should not be scared off by its esoteric title. The math of the film (some hocus-pocus about predicting the stock market) is the least of it; what the film offers is an effective study of paranoia, as a harried inventor/programmer (Sean Gullette) tries to keep his sanity within his gear-laden apartment and an ominous outside world steeped in garish black-and-white. While not for everybody, π offers a short, coherent, and provocative experience for those willing to experiment a little.

So, for some entertainment within these last days of summer, do a little work while you roam the video store: pass up the racks laden with lines and lines of the same box and hunt down among the single or double packs for some other fare that might, in the end, prove a bit more memorable.