

A Second Look - 2000

Every year there are a number of singular performances that get short shrift because their movie vehicles are--for whatever reason--little seen.

Among such performances by women in recent months, I would mention Kate Winslet, whose role as Ruth in Jane Campion's *Holy Smoke* showed her an actress of range and gumption. The Australian film, which has Harvey Keitel as an American cult deprogrammer trying to straighten out the newly ecstatic Ruth, doesn't wholly work, but Winslet--who has strenuously avoided the mainstream limelight after *Titanic* three years ago--is wonderful as an aspiring acolyte. She is no dippy pushover but a lively, committed woman who strongly defends her life choice. In *Agnes Browne*, Angelica Huston (in the title role) also turns in a performance better than the package that she's in (which she also directed). Huston, playing a downtrodden but spirited fruit vendor widow with a passel of kids in 1960's Dublin, may be too statuesque for the role but her screen presence, her intelligent eyes, and her genuine lilting brogue are very much worth watching and savoring.

As good as any female work on screen last year was that of Sarah Polley in *Guinevere*, a shamefully neglected picture from last fall. Polley is Harper, a shy young soul who is "educated in life" by aging hippy Connie (Stephen Rea) in contemporary San Francisco. As smart and intelligent about people as any other movie around, *Guinevere* (the name comes from Connie--seeing himself as a King Arthur--naming all his mistresses after "his queen") gives Polley the chance to grow up on screen, moving from her ingenue self (she is barely 20) to a woman achieving a measure of wisdom. And that change is wonderfully manifest in just her great and limpid eyes. The film also sports, as a bonus, a brilliant, cutting turn by Jean Smart as Harper's dominating mother, delivering one of the classic putdowns (of Connie) ever on screen. Male egos beware; they're likely to wither down to pea size.

The intriguing *Beautiful People* never found any audience in Washington and disappeared from local screens in a New York minute; too bad, because its rich and intricate storyline--mingling a batch of Londoners and Bosnian emigres--was a winner. The multiple story lines, most of them centering around a National Health Service hospital, are introduced swiftly, and the actors are hardly household names, but the novice director, Bosnian-born Jasmin Dizdar, blends all of this together and, against some odds, makes a unified movie out of it. Best of all, the picture is full of believable personages who look like they led real lives *before* the camera caught them and feel like they will continue such lives *after* the camera is turned off.

Beautiful People is a work done in ensemble form, i.e., one which usually takes place within a short dramatic arc and shows sundry sets of characters whose varied interrelationships serve to drive the plot to a (hopefully) satisfying conclusion. Another decent ensemble effort now on video is *Cradle Will Rock*, Tim Robbins's affectionate recreation of the story of the Marc Blitzstein opera of the same name mounted in a famous "guerrilla" production in New York City in 1937. Greats of the period (Orson Welles, John Houseman, Diego Rivera, John D. Rockefeller, etc.) and non-greats form the threads of the story and all are amusingly portrayed, but the prize for this ensemble goes to the wonderful Joan Cusack, this time going against her usual comic type by

portraying the earnest young arts worker Hazel trying to save subsidized theater from the nasty Lefties.

Several British period efforts of the last year are worth a rental too. A lovely version of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* was served up with, one could say, an ideal cast: Rupert Everett, Julianne Moore, Jeremy Northam, and Cate Blanchett. Dipped in Victorian brocade and velvet, the picture revels, too, in the cast's velvety delivery (especially Everett as Lord Goring) of Wilde's splendidly arch lines. If anything more tart than *An ideal Husband*, *The Winslow Boy* offered another British play (this time by Terence Rattigan) covering Victorian times, this time presented so dryly that you can hear the starch of petticoats scraping. All this tremendous restraint (guided somewhat surprisingly by tough American director David Mamet) makes the merest suggestion of emotion bespeak an underground passion. The cast, led by Nigel Hawthorne, Rebecca Pidgeon, and--again--Jeremy Northam, all smolder wonderfully. For a considerable contrast, try *Mansfield Park*, whose ardent, slightly updated cinematic version--directed by Patricia Rozema--contrasts nicely with the cooler prose of the Jane Austen original on which it is based.

Among foreign language film entries worth a second look is the Chinese epic *The Emperor and the Assassin*, narrating the saga of the third-century king of Qin trying to unite the ancient six kingdoms. Seen from the distance of so many centuries, the characters appear more stolid than soulful, but the look and flavor of the scenes has a ripe sensuousness along with dogged authenticity--eye candy for Orientalists. A very different Asian effort worth a second look is *Three Seasons*, an opulent look at modern-day Vietnam in the form of three interlocking characters, a rural flower gatherer, an urban cyclist, and a returned American vet (Harvey Keitel) yearning to see a child he had fathered. The striking debut of Tony Bui, *Three Seasons* has as lush a look as any film released within the last few years, full of delicate images that could find a permanent place on your retina.

Director Stephen Soderberg made a massive hit with his *Erin Brockovich* earlier this year, but just last year he snuck in a film that was even more sharp and stylish. *The Limey*, with Terence Stamp as Cockney hitman Dave Wilson, stood out among gangster flicks for its lead's panache and its twists on familiar revenge themes (Wilson is trying to nail the murderer--slimy Peter Fonda--of his daughter). Most effectively, it serves up a series of neat incongruities between the gritty English thug and the lazy, sun-splashed Los Angeles he slithers around in.

How about neglected comedies? A couple come to mind. One from Australia called *The Castle* treats a shlumpy working class family who loves living near an airport and fights the local authorities who want to take away their house to make way for a new runway. Call it a kind of Roseanne show with Down Under twangs--with the protagonists much sweeter, however. In fact, its the downright sweetness and earnestness of the clan that overrides the sense of easy condescension with which the movie begins and, instead, makes you root for them. Much more profane in its humor is *Dick*, the ribald farce of how Watergate was uprooted and exposed by two spacy teenagers walking the president's dog. Even in Washington, this burlesque did little business, which is a shame since it has a number of wonderful send-ups of Nixon-era personages which should give all political junkies over 40 a slew of guffaws. The scowling Dan Hedaya as Nixon, it should be mentioned, is priceless as the scheming,

yet witless Dick, an impersonation for the ages...

That's a baker's dozen to look out for as the evenings gradually lengthen and the temperatures slowly drop. Good viewing.