

## A Second Look - 2002

The following rundown does not address Hollywood mainstream pictures but rather notes those films which displayed--in this reviewer's opinion--something of the distinctive, the offbeat, the intelligent.

The Coen Brothers' *The Man Who Wasn't There* was their homage to 1940's *film noir* pictures, with a cynical and convoluted story line involving a dull barber (Billy Bob Thornton) who slips into murder and deceit. It never found an audience (too arcane?) but in one way it really triumphs: in its look and feel. Ace British cinematographer Roger Deakins, working with the Coens for the sixth time, crafts a luscious period feel (the story itself takes place in the Forties) with exquisite black-and-white photography (printed off denser colored negative). The lush blacks and whites--and grays--evoke all those dark night streets--and those bright California days--in the films of Humphrey Bogart, John Garfield, and Alan Ladd. Deakins's cinematography was nominated for an Academy Award this past year--he should have won. (it is probably best to see this film on DVD with a decent-sized screen.)

*The Deep End* was a critically-acclaimed drama of late last summer which ran up against too much commercial competition. Most of the acclaim went--rightly--to the outstanding lead performance by Tilda Swinton, here a non-nonsense Navy wife who does everything she can to protect her wayward son, who is implicated in a murder. It is Swinton's single-mindedness which convinces us, as she braves sleazy dives, threatening hit men, even the deeps of Lake Tahoe, to both discover what has happened to a dead body found near her dock and to save her boy from harm. The film builds ample suspense, most of it driven by Swinton's straight-ahead drive and utter seriousness. This is a woman you'd want on your side.

*Hearts in Atlantis* was a small film whose merit was in its cast led by the redoubtable Sir Anthony Hopkins as a fascinating and mysterious fellow who may be a master spy on the lam in a small New England town. But the real revelation of the movie is Anton Yelchin as the young boy who befriends the Hopkins character. The youngster plays off Sir Anthony splendidly; you can see his big eyes (and his mind) open to the wider world being offered to him through this worldly fellow. You are taking the film in through him, discovering what happens as he does.

Sometimes one pitch-perfect performance can "steal" a picture, like Steve Buscemi's wonderful nerd in *Ghost World*. The film, meant as a coming of age story of disaffected teenagers, is mostly just posturing and condescending until Buscemi's character--an office drudge whose real passion is old blues and jazz records--is introduced. His utterly genuine, egoless creation shifts the film to a more mature, sensitive level as he creates a resonant human being from what appears to be the most mundane of men. Another supporting performance that comes to dominate a film is that of Ben Kingsley in *Sexy Beast*, a British gangster film of otherwise languid charm--and heart-stopping menace. The menace here is Mr. Kingsley's Don Logan, a criminal lifer come to Spain from London to recruit an old retired colleague for one last heist job back home. Gentle Ben (remember *Gandhi*, *Schindler's List* ?) this time is a searing brute with a blast of profanities that could strip five layers of crusted paint. His Logan is hard to watch, but, of course, you can't keep your eyes off him.

A rare example of drama in the business world is well treated in the little-seen *The Business of Strangers*. Even rarer is the fact that the two protagonists are female, with Stockard Channing playing a forceful but anxious corporate type and Julia Styles playing a raw but cunning underling. Their initial defensive fencing eventually moves them to conspire against a fellow employee, with the two women shifting their moods like quicksilver. The exact "business" in which these women are engaged matters little; their joint portrayal of corporate life feels right. Another pair of excellent performances lend assurance to *The Luzhin Defense*, a puzzling work (from an early novel by Vladimir Nabokov) about an obsessed, world-class chess player Luzhin (John Turturro) and a respectable, well-off woman (Emily Watson) who comes to love him--for all his quirks and foibles. Set nicely in an Italian villa (site of a grand chess tournament) during the early Thirties, the film possesses two leads who make their characters, radically different as they are, convincingly come together.

A socially-conscious picture that avoids bathos is *Bread and Roses*, which treats Latino immigrant service workers in Los Angeles seeking better working conditions and pay. The film, made by veteran British director Ken Loach, takes on what could be potentially dull material and fashions it into a genuine drama by making it personal and human, examining the tough work of nascent union organizing told essentially through the dynamics of one Mexican family, led by the vibrant Maya (Pilar Padilla). Sadly, this film didn't even get a theatrical release in the Washington area, but it's worth catching on video.

One of the best recent films featuring ensemble acting is *Last Orders*, wherein three old Cockney veterans and drinking buddies (played by Tom Courtenay, Bob Hoskins, and David Hemmings) lift one last pint for their departed buddy, Jack (Michael Caine), and take a road trip to accompany his ashes to the seaside town of Margate. The story itself is modest--an excuse for the old chums to reminisce about their pasts--but the delight of *Last Orders* is in watching this bevy of great acting talent. Directed by Fred Schepisi, the picture offers an honest sense of small lives, but ones which are emotionally rich, even noble, in their simplicity.

Among foreign language films, one that too few people saw was the Italian charmer, *Bread and Tulips* (released in Italy in 2000, it took a while to find the American market). The story tells of the awakening of a mature provincial woman, Rosalba (Licia Maglietta), who inadvertently leaves her self-absorbed family for a new and different life in Venice. The film's pace is leisurely, matching Rosalba's growing awareness of new possibilities. The overall effect is utterly charming, with gentle humor, the allure of a small-scale, non-touristic Venice, and, especially, the wonderful naturalness of Ms. Maglietta's luminous performance. Call it a kind of sweet adult fairy tale.

Among French-language films, *The Widow of St. Pierre* offers an evocative period piece wherein, in the colony of Saint Pierre off Newfoundland in 1850, a captain's wife (the exquisite Juliette Binoche) befriends a condemned murderer who cannot be executed because--there is no guillotine! The film is more a delicate fable than a realistic narrative, with its characters serving more as symbols than genuine individuals, but *The Widow* (neatly directed by French veteran Patrice Leconte) is redeemed by a splendid sense of period and exquisitely calculated and exquisitely rendered photography.

Finally, among feature documentaries of the last year there is *Startup.com*,

depicting the rise and fall of a dot.com, but, more dramatically, the very human tale of a friendship brought low under intense commercial pressures. *Startup.com* traces the arc of an Internet clearing house idea launched by two long-time friends. The company's timing is catastrophic: it is ready to launch its initial public offering in March 2000, just before the dot.coms' crash. Timely and intriguing as this business tale is, it is the story of the two men jousting and scrambling for success that is truly captivating and makes this documentary a true-life melodrama. *Startup.com* has an authenticity and richness that few commercial features can match; the fact that it depicts a world which, while part of today's business fabric, is rarely seen in motion pictures, makes it all the richer.