

A Second Look - 2004

Hollywood doesn't particularly value them, so they can be hard to find: they are **ensemble films**, films which feature a cluster of coequal, effective acting performances rather than a single star turn. *House of Sand and Fog* is one of those ensemble works that, while critically acclaimed, did not attract wide audiences. Heart-wrenching as well as heartfelt, it tells of a pedestrian real estate squabble that leads to a dispossessed American woman and a striving Persian man staring across a cultural gap they cannot bridge. Jennifer Connelly and Ben Kingsley are splendid as the ying and yang of this melancholy story. Connelly personifies heartache as a young woman who can't see past her own sense of loss, while Kingsley portrays a soldier from a paternalistic upbringing who must adapt to California society without compromising his own values. Shohreh Aghdashloo, as Kingsley's Iranian wife, is an especial revelation as a woman movingly torn between her husband's implacable actions and her own desire to fathom her new world.

Raising Victor Vargas was a small film with a big heart and a cast of New York unknowns who brought off a complex and comic vision of a Lower East Side Dominican family trying to just get along in the big city. Young Victor Rasuk plays his namesake Victor, a teenage ladies man who finds his match in feisty Judy (Judy Marte), all the while contending with his doggedly old school Grandma (Altagracia Guzman) and his tetchy siblings. Director Peter Sollett brings off wonderfully natural performances from all his principals in a contemporary slice of life well worth tasting.

The Station Agent is also worth a mention here as another triumph of the small, ensemble movie. Not that much happens in this film about a very private dwarf, Finbar, settling into the rhythms of a provincial New Jersey town. The richness comes from the delicate balance among the film's three protagonists and the wonderful naturalness of their playing. Patricia Clarkson triumphs as the vulnerable and humane Olivia, while Bobby Cannavale's Joe is windy but winning, upbeat and open to the new. Crowning the threesome is Peter Dinklage's touching Finbar, who begins hermetic and then reveals himself slowly, unveiling an inner life you were not sure was there.

Another trio of wonderful performances grace *The Cooler*, set within the rancid world of Vegas casinos. The "cooler" is Bernie, bringing bad luck to gamblers by his very presence. He is put upon by his nail-hard boss, Shelly, but softened by the love of sweet and sour Natalie. Maria Bello makes a fine impression as Natalie, seeking unsteadily for her main chance. Alec Baldwin is a wonderful Shelly, a role that melds the actor's qualities of New York wiseacre and charmer--dashed with a tincture of real menace. William H. Macy is tailor made for Bernie. His lugubrious, hang-dog look have never been better employed as he is transformed from forlorn schmuck to smitten lover and, finally, a surprising kind of hero.

Shattered Glass should have been seen by more people in Washington. In a town roiling in politics and journalism, it turns a gimlet eye on the city's driving ambition to tell a cautionary tale of a real hotshot writer, Stephen Glass of *The New Republic* who went over the ethical edge in a series of pieces he wrote in 1998. Hayden Christensen is exemplary as the earnest, ever-ingratiating Glass, giving off just the right mix of rank callowness and grinning cynicism. Matching him is Peter Sarsgaard's Chuck Lane, the editor who ran Glass to ground. Sarsgaard's Lane at first seems a

mere sleepy-eyed wonk, but he gradually comes across as a beacon of hard-won integrity who does what he can to save his magazine and becomes, for us, an unassuming but very legitimate champion.

The Magdalene Sisters is a harrowing, but compelling story of how “fallen” girls in 20th C. Ireland were taken from their families and consigned to “Magdalene” asylums to pay for their “sins” under Catholic sisters acting as prison guards. Director Peter Mullan highlights the stories of three young women in the 1960’s, played superbly by unknowns Anne-Marie Duff, Nora-Jane Noone, and Dorothy Duffy, victims of, respectively, a nasty rape, a healthy libido, and a youthful affair. The three Irish actresses, very different types, come up with three exemplary performances: you root for these girls as you would for any unfortunates falsely accused in any prison flick.

A final affecting ensemble film that flew under most people’s radar last year was *The Company*, director Robert Altman’s and star Naomi Campbell’s homage to ballet and the Joffrey Ballet Company that fosters it. While the film contained something of a narrative element, that’s not what makes the film worth watching. You can forget the thin story line, but sense, almost palpably, the arduous work of a dance company behind the scenes, and, especially, before the curtain, with several splendid dance numbers staged by noted choreographers like Alwin Nikolais, Lar Lubovitch, and Robert Desrosiers, et al.

Special kudos for an **individual** acting job seen by too few would go to Cate Blanchett as *Veronica Guerin*, the film about a real-life Dublin journalist who took on the bloodier toughs among Irish drug lords and paid for her exposes with her life. Blanchett, who remains among the most versatile actresses on screen, seizes the role of the driven--and at times foolhardy--crusader and makes her utterly believable, as a both right- and wrong- headed woman and a hero for her people. Just as stalwart as an example of integrity but in a very different role is Chiwetel Ejiofer as Okwe, an educated but underemployed Nigerian refugee down and out in West London in Stephen Frears’s *Dirty Pretty Things*. This off-kilter little thriller focuses uniquely on the immigrant underclass in England and denizens like Okwe, a doctor who is hustling three jobs to survive. Ejiofer memorably portrays a fellow who maintains his decency and humanity against all the sleazy odds in a world of wretched illegals and illicit organ trading. He comes out of dreck with dignity.

Another singular performance--or rather embodiment--comes in *Osama* (which does not refer to Bin Laden). It offers a gripping glimpse into the pinched world of Muslim fanaticism and shows why an Afghan invasion could be justified. This striking Afghani feature tells the simplest possible story of the severe repression that was the Taliban’s rule. Osama is the male name taken by a 12-year-old Afghan girl (Marina Golbahari) who must pass as a boy for her family--of only females--to survive. The pressure on the young “Osama” is crushing, and you agonize along with her as she strives to void discovery. Shot cheaply on location, the film also looks wonderful, with an eye for the primitive beauty of the place and for the rapt concentration on the sweet, troubled face of the magnificent little Golbahari.

One film whose allure is principally its look is *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*. This is a movie of understatement, underplaying, and undertones--a picture that aims to replicate, if not duplicate, the exquisite coloring and delicate reflected light of the

Vermeer paintings whose creation drives the story's plot. Leads Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth are perfectly adequate as the house maid and the famous painter, but it is the production design and cinematography that make this movie a ravishing experience. Also, the more one knows about the works of the Delft master, the more one should appreciate this stylish film.

Memorably stylish, too, but in quite another mode is *Swimming Pool*, a classy, slippery French-English plot twister by François Ozon. The curlicue story turns around a mystery writer (Charlotte Rampling) and a fetching ingenue (Ludivine Sagnier) and the erotic tension that divides and draws them together in a villa laid in the blissfully sunny French countryside. You can both hear the older woman's brain hum and feel the young girl's exposed skin brown as the two dance a mix of the minuet and the down-and-dirty. Puzzling but provocative.

Finally, a fervent recommendation for a more obscure work which you may have to search for at more adventuresome video outlets. *In This World* is a searing odyssey of two Afghanis seeking a better life in London by trekking from Pakistan across Iran, Turkey, and middle Europe. British director Michael Winterbottom shot the film in hand-held digital video and produced a cinematic effect that, though scripted and acted (by a range of eager non-actors playing themselves) has a wholly lived-in, documentary flavor. This is, in capsule form, the universal story of the tens of millions, both seekers and refugees, who have migrated across our world for centuries--and it is utterly compelling. Ask for it by name...