

A Second Look - 2005

The cinematic year since the last column has not produced as many rich ensemble films as last year, but there were some attractive **duos** that graced the screen but were little seen. *Stage Beauty*, a look at the English stage in the Restoration era, was one such. Billy Crudup plays actor Ned Kynaston, famous for his Shakespearean heroines (especially Desdemona), but his career is being threatened by newly permitted female performers, specifically his dresser, played by Claire Danes. With a superficial resemblance to *Shakespeare in Love*, the film takes a less jokey, even light philosophical look at gender representations, and the two Americans (in an English setting) both fence and sport with their feelings, and their inevitable romance is laced with intelligent by-play, as when Crudup demonstrates to his dresser how to play “feminine.”

Worlds and ages away from Shakespeare’s London are Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy in Paris in Richard Linklater’s *Before Sunset*, a revisiting of the director’s *Before Sunrise* of nine years ago, when the two leads talked their way into intimacy through a long day and night in Vienna. The reprise has them reconnecting in Paris after having spent very different lives. More cynical, or sardonic, this time around, their reunion is spiced with the tentativeness--and frankness--that time and distance have given them. Through good, smart talk, we see two attractive people reignite a genuine affection. For anyone who has ever had such a fleeting, though memorable, encounter--full of might-have-beens--this film, and its two attractive leads, will ring true.

Another contemporary duo lights up *Garden State*, the brainchild of Zach Braff, who wrote and directed the film and stars. It works principally because of the lead actor’s chemistry with his co-star, Natalie Portman (thankfully out of her Princess Padme persona from *Star Wars*). This easy-going comedy tells of a failed--and tranquilized--prodigal coming home to his small-town Jersey home where he runs into the resident “free spirit,” Portman. She, however, gets beyond the usual stereotype and delightfully pulls off the role of a funny and touching young woman who comes to warm the dulled heart of the buzzed Braff.

The last year also saw a good batch of individual star turns. There was, for example, the stunning work of Imelda Staunton as the eponymous *Vera Drake*, one of English director Mike Leigh’s best tales of the underclass. The story of a 1950’s sweet-hearted mum--and selfless amateur abortionist--depends on this utterly convincing portrayal by Staunton, a veteran British character actress in her first major screen performance. We see her as the sweet center of her working-class family, as the saint-like benefactor of her “clients”, then we watch her excruciating collapse under the weight of a arrest and trial she cannot comprehend.

Contrasted with the experienced Imelda Staunton in *Vera Drake* was the acting novice Catalina Sandino Moreno, in *Maria, Full of Grace*. The sober story of a Colombian “mule,” paid to bring hidden drugs on her person into the U.S., stands or falls (she is almost never off the screen) on the presence and nerve of Ms. Sandino Moreno. Pretty but seemingly unaware of her beauty, trying to be tough while being at bottom vulnerable--Sandino Moreno is riveting. This is a knock-out debut. I’m not the only one who thought the work of Staunton and Sandino Moreno was worthy; both were--it may be remembered--nominated for Academy Awards last winter. Still, that peer recognition

did not mean that many filmgoers saw their performances. Both of their films are heartily worth a DVD rental.

As is another marvelous, but too little seen, performance, by Javier Bardem as the real-life Ramon Sampedro in Alejandro Amenabar's *The Sea Inside*. Ramon was a quadriplegic confined to bed for 28 years after a diving accident and who fought with Spanish authorities to end his condition by assisted suicide. Here as incarnated by Bardem, a vigorous, toned actor who must play a man who is mostly a head and chest above covers, yet he makes that man animated and vital. He creates a full-bodied, complex character with face and voice and actorly intelligence, a man with an inner life so rich you may question why he wants to end it--yet his conviction is such that you have to give his desire credence. This is one of Javier Bardem's best performances in what has been a cavalcade of strong ones.

People also stayed away in droves from *The Woodsman*, which tries to present an honest and thoughtful portrayal of a child molester. In doing so, they missed one of the very best acting turns by one of our most versatile film actors, Kevin Bacon. Here he is Walter, just out of the slammer after a twelve-year tour for child molestation, under "supervised parole" and trying to fashion a "normal" world for himself. Bacon wonderfully manifests the genuine struggles he must undertake against what his society thinks of him and against his own troubled nature. As he struggles with his appetite, then gets past it, there is a catharsis rarely seen in American movies. Kevin Bacon bravely brings us, without flash, but with conviction, a flawed man who can, by dogged will and heart, exorcise his demons.

The Merchant of Venice is hardly a one-man show, of course, but the recent film version made by Michael Radford still offers a highlight part for an old fox: Al Pacino as Shylock. Part of what is convincing about this portrayal is that Pacino plays his age, i.e., 64 years old, with a scruffy beard, and carrying the weight of his character's scorn and age which hunches his shoulders. His lines come out roughly, plaintively, and the actor's slight stature make him seem a pitiable creature who then becomes almost heroic as he demands his "pound of flesh" before the Venetian court. Most people who know Pacino as a screen star forget that his life as an actor started on the stage, and he has always returned to it (even in movies, as witness his documentary *Looking for Richard*). His filmic version of this classic role is one we should be grateful to have in recorded form.

With all the above very serious individual roles, we should not forget the comedy turn. One I would highlight is the all-purpose Dennis Quaid in *In Good Company*, a light, but not frothy, picture made by the writer-director team of Paul and Chris Weitz, who created *About a Boy*. *In Good Company* has the hot young stars, Topher Grace and Scarlett Johansson, but the film really turned on Quaid's character of a New York advertising salesman who is replaced by an upstart. The surprise here, in the witty script, is that--for perhaps the first time in Hollywood history--the adman is an intelligent and decent businessman who loves his work, is good at it, and projects that confidence to his clients. Quaid completely personifies this principled fellow (who is also an devoted parent) by embodying him with old-shoe smarts and mature grace.

In an era where the best documentaries have often become more compelling than most feature films, two docs now available for rent cover two strikingly different aspects of the Iraqi war. One, *Control Room*, shows how the war is being portrayed

through the lens of the controversial, Qatar-based, cable television news channel Al Jazeera. The second, *Gunner Palace*, documents the life of an artillery battalion based in a volatile sector of Baghdad in a bombed-out palace. The two films, taken together, hardly give a complete rendering of this struggle, but they make aspects of it come alive for those of us far away.

Control Room, directed by Jehane Noujaim (an Egyptian-American), covers the early part of the Iraqi invasion, mainly from the news room of the station in Doha but also from the American command and briefing center in the same capital. It focuses on two Al Jazeera newsmen--a reporter and a news editor--and one young Army public affairs officer, and the interplay between them. Thoughtful and earnest and occasionally biting, their exchanges display a very human dynamic about the nature of the war and its coverage. These are committed people just trying to do their jobs; biases there are but you realize, as you watch, that they are spread all over. A great, even sobering, look at how one kind of journalism is made.

Gunner Place, made by Michael Butler and Petra Epperlein and covering events in 2003 and 2004, has no strong political agenda either. It shows those of us at home all the boredom, tension, and surrealism that this protracted combat entails for our principally young troops. *Gunner Palace* lets the soldiers speak for themselves, and what they offer is an understandable mix of adolescent humor, guarded bravado, fitful patriotism, and ready cynicism. Knowing the randomness of the city's violence, we can also feel for them and understand their ticking off the days until their tours are over in a land few can comprehend. But these men and women are also our representatives and by listening to them, we can hope to understand part of what is being done in our name.