

A Second Look - 2011

This annual column means an look back at “The Movies That Got Away,” films little noticed when first released last year. This selection avoids mainstream Hollywood fare for films which offered something distinctive, discriminating, or offbeat. It is subtitled “For the Fridge,” since you can tape it there to remind you of what to look for in your next movie rental or streaming video.

If you read this column regularly, you know that your friendly reviewer has a catholic taste in film and does not eschew the subtitled kind. Since so few foreign-language films get noticed in our overwhelmingly monolingual culture, I would like to first signal several foreign-language films that offered visions outside our American purview (all are subtitled).

The Secret in Their Eyes (“El Secreto de Sus Ojos”) – An Argentine gem that won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film of 2009. It’s a carefully plotted murder mystery in today’s Buenos Aires but is made much the richer by an emphasis on the intricate relationship involving a female judge and a male court clerk trying to solve a troubling case and, especially, the complex and carefully limned legal world in which they move. This is sophisticated, adult filmmaking with a storyline which keeps you guessing, a script that convinces, and a cast that shines.

I Am Love (“Io Sono l’amore”) - A film of vivid passions contrasting with chilly family values which bears comparison to the films of earlier master Italian filmmakers. Writer/director Luca Guadagnino constructs a stylish, sumptuous drama, graced by an alert but restrained cast, spare but pithy dialogue, elegant production design and lighting, and a striking score taken from the music of American composer John Adams. It skirts melodrama to edge into the operatic.

A Prophet (“Un Prophète”) - The Compleat Education of a Criminal told in the gripping narrative of a teenaged Franco-Arab punk named Malik who comes under the protection and tutelage of a Corsican gang in prison and quickly learns how to gain status in the group’s hierarchy. Tahar Rahim is superb as the at-first callow then ever-more confident Malik whose innate survival skills and intelligence prepare him for a life as a crime boss. Utterly realistic and palpably tense in its depiction of life behind bars in contemporary France.



North Face (“Nordwand”) -- This vigorous mountain-climbing saga offers all the usual thrills of the climb, but it adds a more human dimension in its naturalistic depiction of the climbers themselves. Made in Germany, the film tells the true story of an unheralded team of two modest mountaineers who dared to take on the “Murder Wall,” the sheer north face of the Eiger mountain in the Swiss Alps, during the 1930’s. The final struggle of the climbers is—take your pick: gut-wrenching, nerve-wracking, nail-biting cinema.

Farewell (“L’affaire Farewell”) -- An espionage thriller that packs plenty of tension without any of the obviousness of the standard spy film. The sensibility, provided by director Christian Carion and screenwriter Eric Raynaud, is thoroughly French, i.e., relatively understated and subtle, in part because the story is based on a French novel which stems from a real case, that of KGB colonel who passed information to the West in the 1980’s. Part of its attraction is that, while it does develop that tension mentioned above, “Farewell” is not morose or heavy—and is even occasionally light-hearted.

Among domestic films, there were also films that were praiseworthy for a pair of outstanding performances, such as the following:

Cairo Time – A lovely, delicate almost-romance set in an intriguing cross-cultural context. Alone and off-balance in incomprehensible Cairo, an American woman finds herself intrigued with his husband’s friend, a retired cop who now runs a tea shop. With her husband away on a mission, he shows her the ins and outs of Cairo, and she opens both to the fascinating city and to him as its representative. Patricia Clarkson and Alexander Siddiq are very finely tuned as the unlikely but smitten couple.

The Last Station – This film treats the last tumultuous months in the life of the venerable Leo Tolstoy and is adorned with two superb actors—Christopher Plummer and Helen Mirren. Plummer is thunder and honey, a man full of appetites who plays the novelist--not as the spiritual Great Author—but as a carnal and questing man. Mirren, as his wife Sofya, is, if anything, more mercurial but never less than passionate and vibrant, able to switch with ease between rhapsodic joy and wholly stunned grief.

Highlights among motion pictures which displayed superior ensemble casting were the following two, very different, gems:

City Island -- A fine prototype of the ensemble family comedy, this film, written and directed by Raymond De Felita, presents us with the rambunctious but sympathetic Rizzo family of City Island, a little-known enclave of the Bronx. The family members have this in common: everyone is hiding a serious secret from everyone else, and all are exposed in one crazy night of revelations. Andy Garcia and Julianna Margulies head the feisty family unit, and Steven Strait and Emily Mortimer add fine support as outsiders drawn into the domestic mélange.

The Ghost Writer -- A literate and acerbic suspense story from director Roman Polanski, a master of the unsettling scenario. It follows an English ghost-writer who has a contract to redact the memoirs of a former UK Prime Minister who has retired, under a cloud, with his wife and entourage to an isolated New England island. Polanski conjures up a spooky, blue-cast bunker for the setting, keeps the rich plot roiling and bending, and gets striking performances from his leads, Ewan McGregor, Pierce Brosnan, and Olivia Williams.

Among the many fine performances from individual actors, I want to single out Jennifer Lawrence, a debut that rightly earned her an Oscar nomination but which was too little seen by the wider public:

Winter's Bone – Lawrence stars in this portrait of a world down among the meth lab farm, portrayed in all its grainy poverty and ratty dysfunction, but with its coarseness redeemed by the wondrous and dogged character of Lee (Lawrence). The look and feel of hard-scrabble Missouri hills is captured authentically by director Debra Granik and screenwriter Anne Roselini, and young Lee moves through the landscape like a virgin princess with a smudged face, a teenager taking charge of her family's life and saving it.

Finally, we continue to live during an era of great documentary filmmaking, and I cite here just two outstanding examples:

Restrepo -- This wrenching documentary gets filmgoers as close as possible to experiencing the veritable taste of the Afghan war. Writer/commentator Sebastian Junger and cameraman Tim Hetherington dug in for a year with an airborne combat team of the 2nd Battle Company of the 503rd Infantry Regiment in Korengal Valley, one of the war's most strategic sites. What they documented reveals extraordinary insight into the surreal combination of hard labor, deadly boredom, terrifying firefights, and virile camaraderie as the soldiers painfully contest the Taliban.



The Most Dangerous Man in America -- A compelling re-telling of the inside story of Daniel Ellsberg and the release of the Pentagon Papers. This event that changed history is told largely by the players in that dramatic episode, most particularly by a still feisty Ellsberg himself. Paced like a thriller, the story features interviews with Ellsberg's colleagues, family and critics; Pentagon Papers authors and government officials; Vietnam veterans and anti-war activists; and the journalists who covered the story.