

A Second Look: 2015

As usual, this September column takes a look back at movies “That Got Away,” feature films little noticed or publicized when first released. This selection avoids mainstream Hollywood fare for films which offered something distinctive, discriminating, or offbeat. Most of the films mentioned below had short runs and had very modest box office returns.

This column has also been labeled “For the Fridge,” since you can cut out and tape this column there to remind you of what to look for in your next movie rental or streaming video. If you read this column, you know that your friendly reviewer has a catholic taste in films. As in most movie seasons, there are standout individual performances that too few people see and are forgotten about when awards season roles around. I cite several here, beginning with one of the most intrepid acting jobs of the past few years.

Locke -- A unique movie, a one-man suspense drama where Tom Hardy, as Ivan Locke, holds the screen in almost real time, viewed almost entirely at the wheel of a



BMW as he rolls from a construction site in up-country England down to London on a personal mission. The concatenation of voices he must endure builds up a gradual, but excruciating suspense during the film. Rather than call Hardy’s singular performance a “tour de force.” I would rather call it a “tour de face”: a film defined by one actor’s

visage, an earnest, knit-browed face that reveals worlds. It’s a travesty that Hardy received no “best actor” nominations.

Fort Bliss -- A most worthy addition to the list of films on our recent wars, this one treating one warrior returning home. Stationed at Fort Bliss after an extended tour in Afghanistan, a decorated U.S. Army medic and single mother struggles to rebuild her relationship with her young son, who barely remembers her. Her difficult readjustment to stateside America is incarnated in a nuanced, pitch-perfect performance by Michelle Monaghan (usually relegated to roles as eye candy), who displays all the toughness, hurt, and resilience required for one returning home to an uncertain life.

The Railway Man -- A former British Army officer, tormented as a prisoner of war in a Japanese labor camp during World War II, discovers that the man responsible for much of his treatment is still alive and sets out to find him. Based on a riveting re-telling of one

man's true story, the film unfolds both in a contemporary narrative and in flashbacks of the vile prison camp where he was held. Within both narrative strains, "The Railway Man" exudes an authenticity that convinces. Colin Firth shines in the lead role as a sincere but haunted man trying to expunge his tortured past and finally confronting the man who conducted his actual torture.

A Most Wanted Man -- Based on a John Le Carré book, this movie unfolds very much in the spirit of the writer's spy novels, showing the painstaking work of intelligence, full of detours and compromises and occasionally justified by a half-hearted appeal to a higher purpose. Much of the grubbiness of this work is mirrored in Phillip Seymour Hoffman's characterization of a German intelligence officer, an unkempt man with an ever-wary look. Hoffman pulls off this type with ease, showing his fierce dedication to his tight-knit intelligence team, played by a roster of international actors. It is a fine swan song for the actor.

Love is Strange -- This New York story of two gay men in their sixties, pressed to a crisis point after they marry, resonates with its depiction of a mature love split asunder. Director Ira Sachs infuses the film with believable, rich dialogue and achieves superb results with his two leads. John Lithgow—in his best role in years—glows as the arty Ben who is the spirited member of the couple within which Alfred Molina is the practical bedrock. Molina as the thoughtful George is just as memorable, playing a sweet Englishman who has adopted a thoroughly New York persona.

Nothing wrong with highlighting individual performances, of course, but I wanted to mention at least one superior film that thrived not because of a star turn, but because of the strength of its ensemble playing.

Pride – In the summer of 1984, British gay activists worked to help miners in a small town during the lengthy strike of the National Union of Mineworkers. This film's recreation of that heartening story is told with passion, sympathy, and humor, showing that solidarity (without pathos) can thrive across age and lifestyle barriers in the best British carry-on spirit. In a rich and varied ensemble cast, veteran actors like Bill Nighy and Imelda Staunton represent the valiant townspeople while young stars like Ben Schnetzer and Andrew Scott lead the gay activist's corps.

I also note in this column two outstanding foreign-language films that offered insights and visions outside our domestic purview.

Force Majeure -- The benign setting of a Swedish family of four on an upscale ski vacation in Switzerland blooms into a meditation on personal guilt and a test of family values when one member, the father, appears to abandon his charges during an avalanche outside their lodge, an act which launches the film's careful speculation on cowardice and culpability, as well as the strength of a marriage. The film's couple dances around both blame and shame after the incident while their young children sometimes seem more grounded than their parents. A film ripe for discussion afterwards.

The Lunchbox -- An lovingly understated, measured Indian creation whose emotional depth emanates from simple, natural human gestures. The plot revolves around a mistaken delivery by Mumbai's sophisticated lunchbox service, which leads to an epistolary relationship between a widower counting the minutes to retirement and a lonely housewife and mother. The filmmaker is blessed with his leads. Irrfan Khan shows dignified restraint, a man who buries a great heart under a placid exterior and heavy-lidded eyes. Nimrat Kaur is his match, balancing his stoicism with a wholly believable yearning and his poise with a hunger to connect. Here is a film as bright and polished as the nesting cans that make up the lunchbox itself.

Finally, we remain in a period of great documentaries, and the past year was no exception. I highlight two very different exemplars of the genre.

Particle Fever -- This striking documentary about the limits of our science is much less about the abstract principles concerning particle physics at a massive European nuclear facility than it is about the personal and human factors behind them. It focuses on seven earnest and committed scientists working on finding the basic building block of matter using a supercollider, and presents it in the form of a cliffhanger. To simulate what the supercollider does, the director uses imaginative animation to give a sense of what actual proton break-up may look like.

Last Days in Vietnam -- It's exciting when a documentary makes a compelling narrative from historical material we think we know so well; "Last Days" achieves this by telling the story of the 1975 US withdrawal with great momentum, telling details, and the use of fresh material and voices. The interviews with a striking cross section of players—both Americans and Vietnamese—provide a most human dimension to the story, and the real surprise coming from director Rory Kennedy is the discovery of some amazing lost footage taken from one of the ships taking on those fleeing the takeover.