

## A Second Look: 2016

As usual, my September column looks back at movies “That Got Away,” feature films of the past year (2015) that were little noticed or publicized when first released. This selection thus eschews mainstream Hollywood fare of raunch, explosions, and comic book heroes for films offering something distinctive, discriminating, or offbeat. Most of the films mentioned below had short runs and modest box office returns.

A reader of mine some years ago tagged this round-up column “For the Fridge,” since you can cut it out or print it and tape it on your refrigerator to remind you of what to look for in your next movie rental or streaming video.

If you read this column, you know that this 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 once awards season has passed. I cite first two outstanding female performances.

**45 Years** -- This constitutes both an advance acting class and a moving chamber piece for two long-time English stars, Charlotte Rampling and Tom Courtenay as the Mercers, an older couple poised to celebrate 45 years of steadfast marriage when a letter to the husband arrives which tests their union and leads the wife to question her relationship with him. There is nothing flashy here—everything moves at its appropriate, measured pace as directed by filmmaker Andrew Haigh--but the superb Brit-style understatement of gesture, visage, and tone evokes hidden motivations longing to surface.

**Grandma** -- At age 76, Lily Tomlin gets the role of a lifetime in “Grandma,” where she



carries a road movie wherein she seeks an abortion for her granddaughter. Tomlin fans will appreciate her familiar performing style including the usual wisecracks and ironic asides, used artfully in a script written with her in mind by writer-director Paul Weitz. Providing a lovely foil to Tomlin’s grumpiness is Julie Garner as her winsome but clueless granddaughter. Avoiding the stereotype of the jaded, wise-ass teenager, she emerges as both

a naïve yet practical schoolgirl who needs help and guidance.

The past year also showed some stellar works based on the lives of real creative artists. Three examples:

**Mr. Turner** -- British director Mike Leigh exercises an entirely new set of movie muscles with the use, for him, of an entirely new cinematic eye. Known for 30 years for his gritty, offbeat, unscripted slices of contemporary English life, Leigh takes on this historical biography and invests it with a wondrous look, evoking both JMW Turner’s

19<sup>th</sup> C. period and, especially, his radiant seascape paintings. Timothy Spall, as Turner, presents a peculiar persona, looking like an upstanding gopher given to grunts and snarls, but you still come to believe in his craft, his eye. A marvelous performance.

**The End of the Tour** -- A rare and layered examination of the writer's life revealed through the thin guise of a *Rolling Stone* interview. David Lipsky (Jesse Eisenberg) is the *Stone* correspondent who convinces his editor to interview the hottest new US writer, David Foster Wallace (Jason Segel) over a five-day sojourn of hanging out in the Midwest. Talk here is the thing (dialogue by David Margulies), and the two men, Lipsky, resentful yet worshipful, and Wallace, touchy and woeful, have rich exchanges about growing up, relationships, culture, watching TV, and especially, writing well. Segel, known for shambling comic roles, shines as the troubled but talented Wallace.

**Love and Mercy** -- A splendid, personalized biography in two interlaced parts, one showing the young Brian Wilson (leader of the Beach Boys) on the brink of a ghastly breakdown, and the second part featuring a mature, troubled Wilson and his fight to escape a paranoid state. Paul Dano as the young Wilson is touching and wholly convincing as this self-taught soul culling harmonies from a fevered brain, while John Cusack, as the older man, incarnates a caged being, enslaved by the voices in his head. Elizabeth Banks also shines as a sensitive and magnanimous soul, trying to salvage a wreck like Wilson.

I also favor important foreign-language films, such as the following gems:

**The Second Mother** -- How class consciousness plays out in contemporary Brazil is superbly handled in this film about the commitment of a house servant, Val, to a wealthy family not her own in today's Sao Paulo. Her own independent-minded daughter comes to live with her, and how they adjust to class conflicts generates the humor and the poignancy of "The Second Mother." The movie's engine is Regina Casé as Val. She makes her ever-deferential character both understandable and complex, never cloying or sappy. She gets all the best laughs, too, and though long cowed by her drudging life and class, she is finally able to break free.

**Human Capital** -- The most honored Italian film of 2014, "Human Capital" eschews linear narrative, observing major events through three main characters' perspective over a six-month time span, while spinning out a mystery about who, among a group of well-off Milanese, was responsible for a fatal accident. The diverse and able cast is singular in its variety and contrasts from the almost purely comic foil to a troubled and delicate soul. Director Paolo Virzi said he was aiming for a combination of a sharp Italian comedy, a mournful existential drama, a tale of searching youth, and, finally, "a cold, dark thriller," and he achieved his aims.

**Leviathan** -- This picture is a vivid sketch, at the micro level, of the corruption that permeates modern Russia, in this case depicting a small businessman in an obscure village trying to hang on to a shredded dignity, while the local pol will stop at nothing to feather his nest. The protagonist, Kolya (the excellent Alexei Serebriakov), is no

paragon, and sympathy for him is hard earned, while his antagonist, the mayor, a leftover USSR apparatchik, is as cruel as he is officious. "Leviathan" contains moments of offhand humor, but you just know this semi-moral fable is not going to end with any roseate conclusion. Oscar nominee for Best Foreign Language Film.

Finally, the category of documentary, one that contributes much to contemporary cinema. I cite here two examples that—excellent as each in its own way—could hardly be more different.

**The Look of Silence** -- Documentarian Joshua Oppenheimer follows up his unsettling "The Act of Killing" with another take on the 1965 Indonesian massacre of leftists, this time from the point of view of a mild-mannered optometrist, Adi, a man haunted by the death of his older brother, who seeks out and queries his brother's killers. Adi's unrelieved placidity may seem alien to us Westerners used to acting out. What is, however, still riveting is his seeking the truth about his family history and thus closing the circle on that past's pain.

**Seymour: An Introduction** --- This charming documentary is a paean to a little-known but treasured member of the classical musical world, the 87-year-old pianist and teacher Seymour Bernstein, a keyboard prodigy who left the concert stage to coach talented pupils. Enlivened by ample interviews with the charming Bernstein, the movie was directed by actor Ethan Hawke, who met the musician at a dinner party and set out to tell his story. For classical music fans, the excerpts of classic piano works will just whet their appetites for more, while any moviegoer will be left with memories of a true talent and a graceful soul.