

A Second Look – 2010

This annual September column highlights those “Movies That Got Away,” worthy films that were relatively little seen when first released in area theaters. It is also subtitled “For the Fridge” since you can tape it on your refrigerator to remind you what to look for the next time you are contemplating a video rental.

This compilation of mini-reviews focuses, as regular readers know, on modestly-budgeted productions with sound scripts, capable direction, and stellar acting (no blockbusters need apply). Though I have tried to indicate pictures now available at local Hill video stores, some of them may have to be searched for via Netflix or another video supplier.

To begin, I will cite a trio of films from last year made most memorable by stellar performances by their female leads. They are:

An Education - A coming-of-age story (set in 1960's pre-swinging London), with a lovely mix of low-key humor, sociological acumen, and youthful drama, is wonderfully crafted by screenwriter Nick Hornby and director Lone Scherfig. The lead, young Carey Mulligan, must maneuver between cuteness and smarminess, presenting her character as clever, but not smart ass; vulnerable but not supine; pensive but not dull. Fact is, she is charming throughout and carries the picture on her prim shoulders.

Broken Embraces - Spaniard Pedro Almodar is at it again, with an intricate and satisfying melodrama about memory, movies, and mystery involving a film director and his actress muse. An elaborate flashback story is handled adroitly, and a varied cast is handled superbly. Like much of his work, Almodovar's film is full of ripeness, in story detail, in color, in composition, and, principally, in the stunning presence of Penélope Cruz as a doomed actress. In Spanish.

Ameerka - A little seen, low budget gem with a singularly rich lead performance. Nisreen Faour is Muna, a single Palestinian mother who migrates to the US to join her sister and family in Illinois. She and her teenaged son have problems downsizing their expectations, especially after the American invasion of Iraq, and Faour makes Muna fully believable and sympathetic as she struggles to cope with the vagaries of American culture. In Arabic and English.

As impressive as were the above ladies, there were also films that were praiseworthy for a pair of outstanding performances, such as the following:

Goodbye Solo - A lovely two-character study of what happens when an ebullient African emigrant taxi driver and a rawboned drifter come together, slowly and tentatively bond, and then must part. Low-key and shot on a low budget in North Carolina locations, this very honest story feels palpably like real life with two people testing both the bounds of cross-cultural communication and friendship.

Sin Nombre - An exhilarating film of escape as the fates bring together a Honduran teenage girl, with a dream of life in the US, and a young Mexican gang member, finally

ready to flee his life of barren crime and violence. Told—in Spanish—with a group of non-actors in a gripping documentary style, the film is the stunning debut of a young (not yet 35) American director, Cary Fukunaga, and makes wholly human a facet of our immigration dilemma.

Bright Star - The literary life is notoriously difficult to capture in the movies, but director Jane Campion, whose film looks at the last part of the life of poet John Keats, does a splendid job of both recreating the period milieu in which Keats worked and the source of his inspiration, young Fanny Brawne. The film basically avoids “Tragic Poet” clichés for a richer story of blossoming love and shared sympathies. With shining performances from Ben Whisaw and Abbie Cornish as the leads.

Then again, there was quality cinema from a whole ensemble of players. Two good examples:

In the Loop - A smart and profane mock of politics--on both sides of the Atlantic. A dim-bulb British minister of international development and his fire-breathing press secretary come to Washington to sort out a pro- and anti-war debate and run into a clot of noxious US officials living on hype and spin. Many pretensions are pricked and inanities revealed in hilarious and breathtaking dialogue, delivered in the best understated British style by an agile cast of British and American actors.

Summer Hours - A sweet, knowing, and delicate narrative about family, brothers and sisters, and family legacy, as a set of three very different French siblings must decide what to do with their late mother’s house and its contents, both nostalgic and artistic. The three are all portrayed as full-rounded yet very distinct personages, and the film offers—though never obviously—a subtle, even poignant, commentary on how globalization has touched the modern family. In French.

For my taste, too few creditable foreign-language films ever get to screens in the DC area, and those that do usually have limited runs. Such as two gems from Japan whose presence went by too quickly...

Departures - Out of the potentially grim material of the Japanese practice of preparing corpses for burial comes a film of almost aching sensitivity and refinement. A young cellist gives up his music and the big city to apprentice in this work in his hometown with a master, and he finds ineffable meaning in the work. The film’s tempo matches precisely the pace of the man’s gaining knowledge, moving from shock and distaste to acceptance and new-found grace, all leavened with off-hand humor. In Japanese.

Ponyo - Another masterpiece from the great Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki which tells the story of a small boy who finds a goldfish who is actually the daughter of a masterful wizard and a sea goddess. Transformed into a young girl, Ponyo, the two children embark on an adventure to thwart a dangerous imbalance in the world. This is classic, fully drawn, exquisite animation full of imagination and charm and a palette that delights the eyes. With English voicings.

We continue to be in an era of great documentary filmmaking, and I cite just two outstanding ones from last year, whose subjects and styles could hardly be more different.

Food, Inc. - Best documentary of last year for my money and a rude wake-up call as to what we have been and are doing to our national food supply. Scrupulous and careful in building up its case and avoiding stridency and the facile, the film gives a sound critique of what our industrial food business is doing to us. Especially telling are segments on how the skewed food delivery system produces obesity among the poor and how sick, trapped animals become a principal food source.

Every Little Step - A fascinating look at auditions for that prototype musical of auditions "A Chorus Line," the real-life auditions being just as compelling as the show itself. The film is very well paced, but what heightens its impact is the inherent drama of the auditions themselves. The filmgoer gains a rooting interest in many of these talented, committed performers and wants to see who will come out on top. A competition with both pizzazz and class in a story that takes a neat 96 minutes to tell.