

A Second Look - 2012

This is my annual look back at “The Movies That Got Away,” films little noticed when first released last year but still worthy to check out on your next DVD or streaming video rental. My idiosyncratic choices avoid standard Hollywood fare for films which offered something distinctive, discriminating, or offbeat.

This list, inevitably arbitrary and personal, includes films which received either a narrow release or a very limited run. These mini-reviews focus on modestly-budgeted productions with sound scripts, capable direction, and stellar acting (no blockbusters here).

I highlight first a quartet of American films, almost ludicrously diverse, but all marked by excellence of screenwriting and performance.



Win Win – Writer/director Tom McCarthy (shown left Paul Giamatti) brings us a wonderful droll contemporary drama featuring a tenuous balancing act by a financially shaky New Jersey lawyer who is 1) trying to keep his head above water using financial shenanigans, while 2) coaching a hapless high school wrestling team. Paul Giamatti, unsurpassed in roles of a mildly desperate figure, is the lawyer, a role that fits him like an old suit. For McCarthy, who also wrote the crafty script,

this was surely a labor of love, depicting a world he knows by heart and offering it to us as a gift.

Margin Call -- A parade of fine actors make for a rousing ensemble piece about the world of finance which is as taut as a thriller. Though the New York trading firm shown going into free fall is invented, the tone and the pace of incidents ring true and plausible. The young traders are appropriately callow and shocked, the old-timers cynical but scared, and everybody tries desperately to keep the lid on and their emotions stilled in one tense 24-hour period. The city that surrounds them, cast in a deep dark-blue, looks exactly right for this cautionary tale for our times.

Higher Ground -- Religion has rarely been an easy subject for Hollywood, which has mostly avoided it. That’s why it is so rare to see a picture like this: a serious—but not morose—story of faith, how it is tested and how it can be sustained. In both her skillful and unflashy direction and her leading performance, Vera Farmiga avoids condescension and aloofness in depicting a striving, fundamentalist religious community. “Higher Ground” might make the jaundiced and the self-righteous uncomfortable because of its unadorned presentation of church language and practice, but that is what makes it so unusual in our coarse entertainment climate.

Meek's Cutoff -- This is definitely *not* the wagon train you might remember from classic Westerns. Writer/director Kelly Reichardt aims to recreate a non-romantic, authentic westward experience, one that certainly many pioneers went through. She does it through showing an arresting, if harsh, landscape and by shooting carefully wrought sequences that wordlessly portray the wagon train's struggle. Reichardt also elicits restrained but excellent performances from her tight-knit cast, including Michelle Williams, as a no-nonsense heroine, and Bruce Greenwood, here as crusty as three-day old bread left in a desert sun.

I recommend another quartet, just as worthy, of superior foreign language films released here within the last year. The first three are in French, and the last in Spanish (all are fully subtitled).

Of Gods and Men -- Films that seriously treat religion--or faith--are rare, as I signaled above. The subject is too risky, too ethereal, but this one is a singular exception. It tells the true story of a group of French Cistercian monks in 1996 living in a monastery outside an Algerian village during that country's grim civil war. Though the story is wrenching (the monks' presence is threatened), it is told in a contemplative, reserved manner that lovingly mirrors the monks' own discipline. The sedate rhythms of their lives are exquisitely captured by director Xavier Beauvois, and each monk achieves a full-rounded, distinct character.

The Hedgehog -- This French film achieves an expansive, humane power in telling a story of three mis-matched people in a narrow setting: a precocious girl, a dowdy 50-something concierge, and an elegant Japanese widower, all living in a Parisian apartment building. How the three work out—slowly and delicately—a *modus vivendi* is triumphal. Josiane Balasko, as the concierge (see right), is a standout as a character who moves from a world of draining repetitiveness to one blossoming with new possibilities. Few movies depict a more subtle view of simple, benevolent friendship, and how it can be found in the unlikeliest of places and among the unlikeliest of souls.



Incendies -- This Canadian film uses the Middle East's troubled recent history to craft a terrific family drama. Twins try to undercover the past of their Lebanese mother and her tumultuous history, and what they learn provides a wrenching finish to this film. It combines a forceful script, top-drawer acting, and a tense, dramatic setting for its story (location shooting in Jordan). The drama can be raw—some prison scenes are not for the squeamish—but it is never less than compelling. This is the turmoil of the Middle East brought down to the personal, and heartbreaking, level.

Nostalgia for the Light -- In Chile's Atacama Desert, the driest place on earth, astronomers peer deep into the cosmos in search for answers concerning the origins of life. In the same area, a group of women sift through sand searching for body parts of loved ones, dumped unceremoniously by the Pinochet regime years before. The film deftly draws parallels between these two groups, the star gazers and the families. In exquisite images of sky and sand, and touching interviews from both the star gazers and the searching relatives, the film finds a connection between the two groups looking for understanding.

Since I often remark that we are living in an era of great documentary filmmaking, I must cite here a couple of outstanding recent examples:

The Cave of Forgotten Dreams -- Werner Herzog, master of the out-of-left field movie, comes up with one of his best documentaries, this one featuring the recently discovered (1994) prehistoric paintings in the Chauvet Cave in southern France. Given unprecedented access to the site, he and his small crew come up with a revelatory and meditative look at what ancient craftsmen/artists could achieve 30,000 years ago: a bounteous, convincing look at our world when it was so much newer. For once, too, the use of 3-D in film is not only utilized to good effect, it is wondrous.

Life in a Day -- This documentary literally spans the globe, featuring YouTube clips from regular folks around the world shot on one specific day—July 24, 2010—to form a kaleidoscopic glimpse of our world. Some 4,500 mini-films were submitted to the producers from 192 countries, and all were winnowed down to 95 minutes. Some clips are amusing or intriguing, some poignant, some sweet, some thrilling, some shocking. This is a cinematic potpourri that achieves a number of funny, striking, and touching moments as well as plenty of puzzling or routine ones. It's one big mélange of who we are as humans.

Besides highlighting movies worth a "second look," I wanted to single out several **individual** performances in solid films that may not have reached as wide an audiences as they deserved. Among them are:

- Demian Bichir in the touching "A Better Life," as a gardener and single-parent in East LA trying to keep his son out of the gang life,
- Rachel Weisz in the sturdy thriller "The Whistleblower," as a tough and principled peacekeeper adrift in wartime Bosnia,
- Brendan Gleason in the eccentric "The Guard," as a small-town Irish cop both brazen and subversive,
- Michael Shannon in the ominous "Take Shelter," a father torn between his visions of disaster and protecting his family,
- Adepero Oduye in the surprising "Pariah," as a Brooklyn teenager searching for her own identity,
- Martin Sheen in the moving "The Way," as a grieving father on a Spanish pilgrimage.