

A Second Look: 2014

This annual column takes a look back at “The 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. It is subtitled “For the Fridge,” since you can tape the 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, including the subtitled variety. Since so few foreign-language films get noticed, I usually take this occasion to signal some recent foreign-language films that offered insights and visions outside our domestic purview (all are subtitled).

The Great Beauty -- A paean to Rome’s classic splendor—and to its charming indolence--“The Great Beauty” follows the vagaries of Jep, a notorious writer who has glided through Rome’s lavish nightlife for decades. A birthday finds him unexpectedly taking stock of his life, turning his cutting wit on himself and his contemporaries. The great Italian film actor Toni Servillo is outstanding as the rakish Jep (seen at right). Director/writer Paolo Sorrentino creates what may be the most glorious travelogue of a city on film. One moves past the extravagant nightclubs, parties, and cafés to capture Rome in all its glory, a timeless landscape of sometimes absurd yet always exquisite beauty.



Wadjda -- Good movies can immerse you into another world and offer a palpable sense of another culture. Such is this Saudi Arabian film telling the simple story of the eponymous ten-year-old girl who, more than anything, just wants to ride a bike like the neighbor boy. This unassuming tale achieves real resonance because of how it attentively introduces us to Saudi society. “Wadjda” reveals the simple intimacies of Saudi family life in a down-to-earth style. Not only is this the first full-length feature ever filmed in Saudi Arabia, it was written and directed by a woman, Haifaa al Mansour, who has created a singular breakthrough.

The Wind Rises -- This film is the great Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki’s fictionalized biography of aviation pioneer Jiro Horikoshi who dreams, figuratively and literally, about flying airplanes and eventually becomes a great designer of aircraft. Miyazaki is of the old school of animation, and he makes it wondrous. He and his team believe in the traditional style: exquisite, fully hand-drawn cels photographed one at a time. The effect can be miraculous, as in the shapes and swirls of an earthquake sequence and in several inspiring flying sections. A feast for the eyes.

Fill the Void -- The first international film to depict the world of the Hasidic Jewish community in Israel, it tells the story of a devout 18-year-old Israeli pressured by the rigid rules of her community to marry the husband of her late sister. It was written and directed by Rama Burshtein, the first Orthodox Jewish woman to direct a film intended for wide distribution. Filmed in an environment both hermetic and poetic, it introduces viewers to a previously hidden realm. It is graced by the lead performance of Shira Mendelman, as the 18-year-old girl, a poignant yet winning presence.

The Gatekeepers -- The “Gatekeepers” here are the six retired directors of Israel’s secret service agency, Shin Bet, (from the organization’s Hebrew initials) talking openly about their work in protecting the Jewish state over the past 45 years. For his incisive documentary, director Dror Moreh got all of these directors to sit down and talk to his camera, discussing their agency’s work since the 1967 Six-Day War. This is the first time that these men have publicly spoken about their super-secret lifework and their stories are compelling. As it turns out, for men who helped the Israeli government to gird for war, they are most convincing advocates for peace.

Beside the foreign-language films cited above, another quartet of two low-key American films plus two European-made gems can be cited as worth a look:

Fruitvale Station -- Based on a true story, “Fruitvale Station” traces the last 24 hours in the life of Oscar Grant, a young African-American from Oakland who was killed by transit police at the Fruitvale BART station on New Year’s Day 2009. At the time, the incident produced a swirl of outrage at police authorities. The film stands or falls on the



work of Michael B. Jordan as Oscar, a young man on the cusp of promise (at left), and he passes that test in a revelatory performance. The picture, written and directed with confidence and acuity by newcomer Ryan Coogler, carries the full dimension of the tragic.

Short Term 12 -- Set in a foster-care facility for at-risk teenagers, the film features a young counselor, Grace, trying to do her best for kids from tough home situations while struggling with issues of her own. Brie Larson as Grace is utterly believable and touching as a woman guiding profoundly scarred kids, earning sympathy both for her and for them. The film displays a great ensemble, with Grace’s fellow counselors and the group’s troubled youngsters completely convincing. For a theme treated rarely in movies, “Short Term 12” offers hope for both those disturbed teenagers and their protector. A small movie but with important themes well handled.

Rush -- Director Ron Howard provides a pulse-pounding chronicle about the greatest season in Formula One auto racing: the year-long 1976 showdown between the Austrian champion Niki Lauda (Daniel Brühl) and the British contender James Hunt (Chris Hemsworth). It was a thrilling contest contended by two men who could hardly be more different and whose natures are extremely well described. Whether you know anything about auto racing, you can still be thrilled by the ample footage of the races themselves, with dramatic car close-ups and track turns that truly tuck you in the driver's seat.

Shadow Dancer -- A tight, tense film about the late 20th century Irish Troubles and the moral dilemmas they present. What shines in "Shadow Dancer" is the acting, underplayed just right and taut in its subtlety. Sturdy Clive Owen is a competent but conflicted British agent who comes to identify too much with his Irish source; he offers here a lovely contrast with his more macho movie roles. Andrea Riseborough plays a young woman under pressure both from her committed family and from Owen with grace and believability, her earnest face shorn of makeup, her hair a bit unkempt, her emotions constantly bottled up.

Finally, there is one singular documentary that arrived this year from Canada:

Stories We Tell -- A searching and compelling portrait of a family discovering and then disclosing a long-held secret. Director Sarah Polley calmly explores her own family's narrative focusing on a deceased mother she never knew. Her documentary technique may at first seem clumsy, almost like a "home movie," as she adjusts equipment and simple set-ups to interview her father and sundry sisters and brothers. Yet it turns out that Polley's method is hardly inept or offhand. Hers is rather a very sly and pointed intelligence that has produced more a work of artfully crafted "truth" than a straightforward documentary. A revelation comes with the credits.