

## **A Second Look: An Annual List of Films That Got Away**

Again, this September column considers movies “That Got Away,” worthy films of the past year (2016) that were little publicized or seen when first released. If you read this column, you know that this reviewer has catholic tastes. This selection thus avoids mainstream Hollywood fare and major Oscar contenders to note films offering something distinctive, discriminating, or offbeat. A reader of mine years ago called this annual round-up piece “For the Fridge,” since you can cut or print it out and tape it on your refrigerator to consider what to look for in your next movie rental or streaming video.

As in every movie season, there are standout individual performances that too few people see and are forgotten about once awards season has passed. I cite first two such outstanding female performances.

**The Lady in the Van** – This “mostly true story,” offers a great English eccentric: one Mary Shepherd (Maggie Smith), living in a decrepit van, who enters into the life of author and playwright Alan Bennett when her vehicle is pushed into Bennett’s London driveway and remains for 15 years!



Smith is perfect as the troubled Mary, the part having been written for her and polished to a shine by her earlier theater and radio performances. Both garrulous and secretive, both truly dotty and surprisingly perceptive, she dominates the film as she comes to dominate the serene neighborhood she invades with both a grotesque sense of privilege combined with a flinty vulnerability.

**Marguerite** - An advanced case of cluelessness is examined in this French film “inspired by” the life of the American diva wannabe, Florence Foster Jenkins, a musically inept singer who dedicated her life to a talent she did not possess. The film is ravishing, a beautifully constructed period piece with lavish attention paid to lavish living. The Jenkins figure is Marguerite Dumont, played by Catherine Frot, who won a Cesar (the French “Oscar”) for this role of a 1920’s baroness who aims to enchant listeners with her money and position, if not her voice. “Marguerite” aims for comedy, but, while there are a few laughs, this story of an unhinged obsession with music is mostly heartbreaking.

While “Marguerite” was one of the stellar foreign-language films to come to Washington last season, there were others, such as the following standouts:

**A War** – Yet another Mideast war film, but one so precisely focused and so rich in moral weight that it avoids cliché. Its two-part narrative covers both a deadly skirmish by a Danish army unit against Taliban in Afghanistan and an army inquiry into the nature of their mission back home. Both are handled with utmost realism. Director Tobias Lindholm’s filmmaking style shows admirable restraint in examining men under great pressure. Viewers used to more hyped and obvious American war films may find “A War” too unemotional, but for this reviewer the tone is estimable, enhancing a tale told with care and sensitivity.

**The Innocents** -- A searing and moving drama set in the aftermath of World War II, when a bright young French doctor (Lou de Laâge), caring for French prisoners of war in Poland in 1945, somewhat reluctantly comes to the aid of Polish nuns at a nearby convent who have been sexually assaulted by invading Russian soldiers. Laâge’s heartfelt and fresh performance, matched by that of the stalwart Agata Buzek, as Sister Maria, one of several pregnant nuns at the convent, both enliven and humanize a tale—one potentially fraught with grisliness—with fellow-feeling and grace.

**Fireworks Wednesday** -- Iranian director Ashgar Farhadi’s film took 10 years to reach America, but it was worth the wait. Farhadi’s intricate drama of a contemporary Tehran marriage coming apart unfolds carefully just as an Iranian national holiday is celebrated. The plot is handled with subtle care: key moments and clues to behavior are carefully dropped, only to resonate later. The actors, including those in minor roles, are all distinctive and form an intriguing mix that comes together with striking force in revelations both temperate yet devastating.



I am always on the lookout for great ensemble films, which combine multiple acting talents with vivid story telling. Here are two good examples.

**Eye in the Sky** – A taut, timely thriller that examines drone warfare, depicted through one case of a potential anti-terrorist strike in Kenya. The film scrutinizes the heart-chilling decision whether to strike a known enemy within an urban setting fraught with potential harm to civilians. In a fine acting collective headed by Helen Mirren and Alan Rickman as British officers, the picture builds pounding momentum by toggling between the command post and ministerial meetings in the UK, an American drone control guided from Nevada, and the target site in Kenya, playing out actions in almost real time. A contemporary moral dilemma superbly outlined.

**Love and Friendship** -- A bracing re-imagining of a Jane Austen bagatelle from American director Whit Stillman, who has beautifully re-created the flavor of Regency England (mostly shot in Dublin) but with contemporary panache. A radiant Kate Beckinsale heads a varied and sparkling cast as the widow Lady Susan, who will do anything to advance the cause of her penniless daughter. The brittle and brilliant dialogue from a work Austen never published carries the picture and sounds like a “Masterpiece Theater” episode on steroids. Pay attention.

Worthy documentaries continue to grace our screens every year. Two American winners were:

**Weiner** -- A compelling examination of our politics and campaigns, in this case within the notorious 2013 New York City mayoralty run of Anthony Weiner, the Congressman who had lost his seat for online sex-capades. Compelling because it fully captures one modern and exciting political campaign, both in its unremitting drudgery and its indubitable high points. Sadly, it also shows a marauding media badgering Weiner on his self-destructive sexual behavior and utterly ignoring his reformist policies, however laudatory. It thus raises larger questions about our politics and the media that covers it, and how much the public conversation is driven by scandal and spectacle.

**Miss Sharon Jones!** – This stirring documentary follows the vibrant soul/funk singer of the Grammy-nominated R&B band "Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings" during the most

challenging year of her life. Renowned documentarian Barbara Kopple shadows Jones, sometimes called the “Female James Brown,” as she is diagnosed with then confronts pancreatic cancer. As we see Jones struggle to recover her health--and her voice--the movie reveals the spirit of a small woman with a fervent sound and massive soul determined to resuscitate her singing career. The film is perfectly capped with her return to the stage with an explosive rendition of “I’m Still Here.”

Finally, just a final example of a well-crafted Hollywood product that illuminates a too-little-known sector of American history.

**Loving** -- A wonderfully reflective drama of a civil rights case which led to the Supreme Court’s landmark 1967 decision permitting cross-racial marriage. At its center are the Lovings, played by Joel Edgerton and Ruth Negga, who married in 1958 but cannot get their union acknowledged by the state of Virginia. The two actors show touching devotion and modesty within admirably restrained performances. The narrative of the Lovings’ innumerable difficulties proceeds with a measured and careful pace that stands in striking contrast to the monumental judgment the case led to. Shot in areas of Virginia where the couple actually lived.