

Second Look: An Annual Review of Films That Got Away

Once again, my September column takes a look back at films of the past year (2017) that were little noticed when first released. This selection avoids mainstream Hollywood fare of superheroes, raunch, and explosions for films offering something distinctive, discriminating, or offbeat. Most of the films mentioned below had short runs and modest box office returns.

As in every movie season, there were standout individual performances that too few people saw. I cite first two outstanding examples:

Wind River - A contemporary Western whodunit, blessed by a fine sense of place (on location in Wyoming mountains), an intriguing and suspenseful story line, absorbing cross cultural rhythms (between white men and Indians), and a wonderfully measured performance by Jeremy Renner as a taciturn Fish and Wildlife tracker. An unsolved murder of a young Indian woman brings an inexperienced FBI agent to work with the tracker to piece together a crime within competing jurisdictions. The chilly, snow-bound setting and the steady tension of the film lead to a grim shootout, violent but earned, but the picture ends on a lovely elegiac ending of white-Indian understanding.

Maudie – A touching biopic about the Grandma Moses of Canadian art, Maud Dowley Lewis, a primitive artist who flourished in Nova Scotia after the 1950's. Maudie is a spinster, "born funny" she says, as a victim of juvenile arthritis who discovers painting and begins decorating the shack where she lives with her curmudgeon husband (Ethan Hawke). For as much as actress Sally Hawkins was lauded for her performance in "The Shape of Water" last year, her turn as "Maudie" may be even better, subtler and more affecting. She is moving, even haunting, rendering a portrait that starts out pitifully but which grows in dimension and depth throughout.



Two very intriguing foreign-language films also made my short list of ignored films:

BPM (Beats per Minute) – A stirring French docudrama which traces the battle in the early 1980's of AIDS activists—following on their American models--both challenging French institutions to treat their malady and looking to forge a unique bond for themselves. The film handles two disparate elements beautifully: the boisterous and stirring general meetings of the movement in Paris and the touching moments between several individuals as they discover their sexuality. Though wholly acted and scripted, the film's urgent performances and its fluid camera style makes you feel that you yourself are a participant in this earnest crusade.

Land of Mine – A Danish nominee for the 2016 Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, this post-WWII story of young German POWs under Danish command defusing seaside bombs is an excellent combination of the idyllic and the taut: idyllic when showing the gorgeous sweep of the west Danish landscape and intensely taut in scenes where callow youngsters must defuse mines. You anxiously wait for the inevitable explosions that occur, but almost all of them are judiciously handled off camera or at a distance. As the Danish sergeant in command, Roland Moller is very fine, acting tough but gradually softening towards his youthful charges.

Superb documentaries, too, took pride of place this past year:

Step -- A stirring and compelling true story about an African-American step-dancing troupe in a small private school in Baltimore. The film highlights three senior girls who look to “step” for learning discipline and teamwork and to foster creativity and camaraderie—all of which they achieve. Just as important to their success (all three, of modest means, go on to higher education) are their step teacher, their academic counselor, and their varied families. You ache for them when they encounter obstacles then root for them as they gear up for a major step dance competition. Not to mention the vigor and pulse of the dancing itself: a stomping jamboree!



I Am Not Your Negro - This striking documentary channels the life and times of author James Baldwin through offering his prescient, still relevant words on US race relations. It is based on Baldwin's memories and musings on the lives of three murdered African-American giants: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Director Raoul Peck frames Baldwin's reminiscences through a letter and outline the writer produced in 1979, contemplating an unfinished book about the fallen leaders. Quotes from Baldwin are forcefully read by Samuel L. Jackson. Most telling, though, are numerous clips of Baldwin himself in TV and film images, speaking in his distinctive, preacher-trained style, graced by a precise and practiced cadence.

Letters from Baghdad -- Gertrude Bell was a singular personage at the turn of the 19th C., a woman who embraced the Middle East and was tagged the female Lawrence of Arabia. She dedicated her life to studying and understanding Middle Eastern languages and cultures, a bent that served her as a British intelligence agent and a nonpareil area expert. Her amazing life is surveyed in this spirited documentary, which is principally constructed around Bell's letters. The latter are voiced beautifully by actress Tilda Swinton and seconded by a parade of her contemporaries, all impersonated by actors. Another treasure of the film is a trove of early silent footage of Persia and Arabia, providing an impressive backdrop to Bell's life.

Obit -- A fascinating look into an essential bastion of journalism as practiced at *The New York Times*. Yet the subject is not depressing, for, as one of the obit writers states, the death of a notable figure is summarized in a paragraph: 90 percent of an obituary is the celebration of a person's life. Several of the obit staff are featured, including veteran Bruce Weber, beginning his research by talking respectfully with the deceased's family to get the details right then crafting a personal story on deadline. All of the writers interviewed are articulate and philosophical, confirming that you also have to be of a "certain" age to really craft the arc of a life.

Plus, to round out the list, an animated film like no other:

Loving Vincent -- A unique effort by Polish animator Dorota Kobiela and English producer Hugh Welchman, a tour-de-force requiring the painting of 65,000 images by more than 120 painters to illustrate every frame. Van Gogh's familiar landscapes and interiors were copied on canvas then real-life actors' images were painted on to individual canvases, frame by frame. There is a modest story using the images, but the core of this exhilarating film is that abundance of the swirling Vincent style in full color and motion, "animating" his paintings as never before. The better one knows Van Gogh's work, the more likely they are to cherish this labor of love.

Photo Credits:

1. Left to right: Ethan Hawke and Sally Hawkins (as Maud Lewis) in "Maudie."
Photo by Duncan Deyoung, Courtesy of SonyPictures Classics
2. The three dancing stars of the documentary "Step." Photo courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures