

Second Look: An Annual Survey of Overlooked Films

With this column, I again nominate several “Movies That Got Away,” feature films (from 2018) less noticed or hyped upon release. This selection avoids mainstream Hollywood fare for movies which offered something distinctive, discriminating, or offbeat. Most of the films mentioned below had short runs and very modest box office returns.

This column has also been christened “For the Fridge,” since you can cut out and tape this column there to remind you of good picks for your next movie rental or streaming video. As in all movie seasons, there are standout individual performances that too few people see and which are ignored during awards season. I cite several here, all featuring female performers of varying ages.

Eighth Grade - This film works because of its lead, 15-year-old Elsie Fisher. Maybe she is just playing herself, a prototype American teenager, but she makes the character of Kayla her own. Her round face of acceptance and her moony eyes seem just right for this puzzled, poignant young girl, as is her placid, hesitant voice aching for affirmation. She is moody and muddled but still emits bursts of courage in trying to grow up enough for the next stage of her life. Writer/director Bo Burnham makes his feature film debut and reveals tremendous promise with this achievement, appearing to have total recall of middle school and its multifarious humiliations.

The Children Act - Based on an Ian McEwan novel, “The Children Act” offers one of Emma Thompson’s best roles in years, playing a family court judge who must decide about saving the life of a young leukemia victim whose parents reject blood transfusions. Her Judge Maye is demanding with people, cynical about family life, striving to achieve a queenly serenity above the messy cases she adjudicates. Balancing both knitted brows (in court) and sympathetic gestures (in hospital), she captures this balancing act brilliantly. The film is also graced with fine supporting performances from Fionn Whithead (as the leukemia victim), Stanley Tucci, Jason Watkins, among others.

Puzzle - This story of a woman’s self-discovery is a modest but touching film with a superb lead performance from Scottish actress Kelly Macdonald. MacDonal appears in virtually every scene, and pulls off the transformation of housewife Agnes, a mousy, 1950’s drudge, into a self-confident woman who finds her competence in spectacular jigsaw-puzzling. Throughout, Agnes maintains a reserved demeanor and quiet tone (delivered in an excellent American accent), standing up to her husband and family even as she remains ever measured, never agitated. She is a mouse that finds her roar. Co-star Irrfan Khan, imposing and imperious in voice, proves a lovely contrast to the vulnerable Agnes.

Leave No Trace - Director Debra Granik achieved notice with “Winter’s Bone,” (2010), which shares with this film a stern outdoor setting and a central role for a pro-



mising young actress. And, in telling the story of a troubled father (Ben Foster, very fine) and his dutiful daughter Tom who live off the grid, she has echoed her earlier film: rugged, palpably real locales populated by utterly believable actors. Tom, played by Thomasin Harcourt McKenzie (see above) is a revelation. She incarnates a soft-spoken but ever aware young woman, loyal but searching. Granik has found just the right visage and voice to adorn another melancholic but worthy effort.

Well-made ensemble films are a particular weakness of this reviewer. Here are three of the best I viewed:

The Death of Stalin - A sardonic comedy by British writer/director Armando Iannucci about the Soviet power struggle following the 1953 death of Joseph Stalin. The film's two facets--ribald tone and mordant paranoia—are amiably juggled by Iannucci as he traces the bizarre struggle among the Central Committee members. Their machinations



at times seem like a zany update of the Marx(ist) Brothers but with pratfalls and one-liners mingling uncomfortably with the darkest sides of Stalin's legacy and the vicious practices of henchman Lavrenti Beria (see illustration at left). The film toggles between ready giggles and chilly winces—sometimes in the same scene! It makes for a heady but nasty stew.

The Rider - This film is a beautifully crafted portrayal based on real events that actually happened to the rodeo folk it depicts. It's a "documentary" in its look and method but is in fact a careful fiction. The players, all non-actors, appear perfectly authentic, especially the lead, young Brady Blackburn, a promising bronco-buster who suffers an injury that thwarts his career. Writer-director Chloé Zhao tells her story at a measured pace, giving scenes a chance to breathe and highlighting the stark beauty of Pine Ridge, SD. The region clearly inspires Zhao, and her use of vivid landscapes is brilliant. This is simple yet riveting cinema.

The Front Runner - Jason Reitman's film, limning Gary Hart's disastrous 1987 presidential campaign, examines a tipping point in American politics when a politician's private life became fair game and when "character" became a defining element of a candidacy. Reitman concentrates less on Hart (Hugh Jackman) to focus more on the campaign workers. Jackman's performance, in fact, is fairly opaque; the grit of this narrative comes from his sundry staffers, true believers who dream of a political breakthrough. The human side of this story comes from Hart's family, while its unwitting "villains" are the media. All combines in a believable campaign story, with an ensemble that clicks.

To wrap up this list, A couple of superb documentaries:

Three Identical Strangers - This [documentary](#) examines the amazing story of a set of American [triplets](#), David, Eddy, and Bobby, born in 1961 and [adopted](#) as infants by diverse families, unaware that each had brothers. By a twist of fate, the brothers discover each other in 1980 and become a media sensation. Their separations, it turns out, were part of an undisclosed and sinister scientific [twin study](#), to track the development of genetically identical siblings raised in differing circumstances. The film combines archival footage, re-enacted scenes, and contemporary interviews, including two with the original twins, both reliving—and lamenting—what happened to them in a human experiment gone haywire.

Science Fair - An inspiring and wonderful true-life *Revenge of the Nerds*. The film follows nine high school students from around the world as they compete in an international science competition, an annual event that attracts some 1,700 of the brightest (and quirkiest) teenage scholars. The kids the filmmakers highlight are a varied and fascinating batch, from a lively math genius from West Virginia through a self-effacing Muslim girl from South Dakota to a lanky German trying to revive single-wing aircraft. Co-directors and co-writers of "Science Fair," Cristina Costantini and Darren Foster, have pulled off a true winner in their first documentary feature.

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