

## **Holiday Movies: A Look at Significant End-of-Year Films**

By Christmas Day Hollywood typically brings out two kinds of movies: 1) the big-budget crowd-pleasers aimed at the holiday crowds of teens and families, and 2) the earnest, serious films that producers and studios hope will receive critical attention during the end-of-year awards season, which begins with collective critics' awards and ends with the Academy Awards. Call it "Bucks vs. Trophies" (both of which mean more revenue, of course).

This column concentrates on highlighting upcoming pictures that might fall into the "award" category, potentially thoughtful or intelligent fare that might make your movie dollar better spent. Current examples of the latter currently in cinemas are the splendid tandem of "Spotlight" and "Brooklyn," both already in release and likely to contend for nominations (see my reviews of these in the right column).

All of the films mentioned below have official release dates during the end of December, making them eligible for the sundry screen prizes.

Among films based on true stories, one much anticipated is "The Big Short," a mostly fictionalized account of the Michael Lewis 2010 bestseller about how a few outlier fund managers bucked the trend of the 2006-2007 housing bubble by betting that the fervent real estate market would tank. The script, co-written and directed by Adam McKay, focuses on four financial players—played by Christian Bale, Ryan Gosling, Steve Carell, and Brad Pitt—and how they bet against the trends. The trick here was to make the intricate and tedious machinations of major finance into genuine drama and entertainment: i.e., guys jabbering in offices while wincing at computer screens. It can be done: "Margin Call" of 2011 turned the trick of making a fictional financial meltdown into riveting cinema. McKay, a long-time comedy writer for "Saturday Night Live" and a collaborator of Will Farrell, has never made a film on such a serious topic, but here he proves that he can stretch by tweaking drama with telling humorous moments.

Also based on a true story, "Concussion" stars Will Smith as a Pittsburgh neuropathologist Bennet Omalu who begins investigating the effects of constant head-ringing violence on professional football players, concluding that the activity creates brain trauma and shortens lives. The movie heightens the drama by having one lone alarmed physician, armed with the truth, battling the corporate biggies of the National Football League, loath to admit that their gravy train runs over damaged souls. The film is directed by Peter Landesman, a filmmaker who comes from a background as a novelist and investigative reporter. The drama may be inherent; the test for Smith is to incarnate the Nigerian Omalu.

"The Danish Girl" is yet another example of a drama taken from life. This one features a married couple of painters from Denmark, Einar and Greta Wegener, the husband of which goes to his feminine side big time and begins to favor dressing and acting as a woman, an early example of transgender behavior when it was deemed demented (the story begins in 1926). Made by English director Tom Hooper ("The King's Speech"), the film stars Eddie Redmayne and Alicia Vikander as the Wegeners

and presents an earnest, sympathetic view of the young man's dilemma and his wife's steady loyalty (rather like Redmayne and Felicity Jones in last year's "The Theory of Everything"). The latter film won Redmayne the Oscar for Best Lead Actor; the test will be to see if he can come impress Academy voters' again this season in sensuous drag.

Finally, there is "The Revenant," directed by Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu, fresh off his Oscar triumph last February for "Birdman." Not one to repeat himself, the flamboyant Mexican has this time adapted a true story about an early 19<sup>th</sup> C. frontiersman and hunter, Hugh Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio), into an epic revenge Western, where Glass—presumed dead after a bear attack—revives to doggedly pursue the man who would have him killed (Tom Hardy). This means a tough slog through the Canadian frontier in the dead of winter. The film hints a bit of the classic John Ford Western "The Searchers" but be assured it is much darker, dirtier, and a lot colder.

Literature forms the basis for a couple other intriguing holiday offerings. Yet again, Shakespeare's "Macbeth" has been filmed, this time with the versatile Michael Fassbender as the doomed Scotsman and French actress Marion Cotillard as his bloodthirsty Lady. A relative newcomer, Aussie director Justin Kurzel, helms the picture, which, given current tastes and Kurzel's taste for grim subjects, will likely be ultra-violent and laden with blood packets and clots of Scottish soil. Word is, too, that the plot and text has been tweaked some, though most of the Bard's language remains intact.

For an utterly different literary take, there is the Todd Haynes picture "Carol," based on a Patricia Highsmith novel about a forbidden affair between a haughty, but troubled, society dame (Cate Blanchett in the title role) and a department store clerk (Rooney Mara) in the New York of the early 1950's. Director Haynes has assayed this territory before, in his throwback masterpiece "Far From Heaven" (2002), so you can be assured that he gets the period couture, décor, and furnishings just right. You can also count on just the right bearing from Blanchett, with just the right makeup and wardrobe to go with her moneyed character. The only question is whether the chemistry really works between the worldly Blanchett and the youthful Mara (best known for her feisty portrayal of "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo").

Dipping into rare material for current movies is the British film "45 Years," a chamber piece for two with long-time English stars Charlotte Rampling and Tom Courtenay, as the Mercers, an older couple living comfortably—and a little boringly--in a provincial British town getting ready to celebrate their 45 years of marriage. A letter to the husband brings to light past events that tests their union and leads the wife to question her relationship with her husband. Expect nothing flashy here—rather the opposite of the Macbeths! —but rather superb Brit-style understated acting of gesture, visage, and hidden motivations longing to surface.

One major documentary surfaces this December, Michael Moore's latest "Where to Invade Next," a heavily ironic reference to recent American military adventures, which Moore mocks by visiting (personally "invading") countries that could teach bellicose America some lessons about political and economic life. Thus he checks out Italy for workers' rights and strong unions, France for gourmet school lunch programs, Slovenia for free college tuition, etc. He also muses on whether women in positions of power

would make for better governance overall. This sounds like a picture that is strictly for the Moore fans and his heart-on-sleeve liberalism.