

## A Second Look - 1995

The recent announcement of nominations for the Academy Awards triggers thoughts of the 1995 cinema season now behind us. It is also as good a time as any for a second look at some quality work in the movies which was relatively little seen (and which was not acknowledged by the Academy). Thanks to videotape, we can reacquaint ourselves with (or see for the first time) such work.

The films cited in this article are, clearly, not the big-time money makers, such as *Apollo 13*, nor the clear critical favorites, like *Leaving Las Vegas*, but motion pictures which were either standard commercial films or narrowly-released specialty items which, for whatever reason, never found a major audience. They are all now available in VCR format--or soon will be--at video outlets on Capitol Hill.

Some movies, of course, lose considerable impact when squished into the small screen; films of sweep are cramped; rich sound tracks are muted. One example of such a film from last year was the Euro-vehicle *Farinelli*, an esoteric tale of an 18th century castrato opera singer. While flamboyant to look at, the film's real distinction is its splendid sound track which mimics the (to us unknown) quality of the castrato voice. It does this by electronically melding the voices of a soprano and a counter-tenor to produce an exciting, seamless current of sound--an introduction to the unearthly.

Certain films look better than they play, and, even on video, viewers can let their sumptuous imagery wash over them without paying too much attention to the story line. One such is the ignored *The Underneath*, by the talented director Steven Soderbergh. Its lush version of a Texas town interspersed with showy flash-forward sequences can make you almost forget the confusing plot and the vagaries of a clutch of unsympathetic characters.

Independent films, which rarely rely on big stars, often depend on balanced, ensemble casts (like the current films of Jane Austen's novels). One of the neglected ensemble pictures of 1995 was *My Family*, covering three generations in the life of a Hispanic family in L.A. Led by director Gregory Nava and headed by "NYPD Blue's" Jimmy Smits, a well-rounded and *simpatico* cast of Latino actors offers a colorful slice of American life rarely displayed in motion pictures. Just as effective in its very different way is the charming Irish cast--ranging from crusty seamen to tiny colleens--which peoples *The Secret of Roan Inish*. Gentle and evocative, this delectable fable by American director John Sayles is a video the whole family can enjoy.

An ensemble of two is all it takes to make *Before Sunrise* palatable. Made by young director Richard Linklater (*Slackers*), it is essentially one long self-conscious chatfest. What makes it work at all is the right-on tenor of the lines and the wholly believable fencing between the American floater Ethan Hawke and French student Julie Delpy. Sure, their dialogue is arch and forced--*exactly* like two young people feeling out each others' minds and hormones. The twosome in the Australian *The Sum of Us* is also worth getting to know. Russell Crowe is a decent gay guy looking for love, and Jack Thompson is his sometimes *too* supportive papa. Smart and funny, yet touching, this film loses nothing in its transfer to video.

Other lesser-viewed but worthy "art" films of early 1995 boasted stellar individual performances. There was Julianne Moore as Carol, a trophy wife taken with an inexplicable environmental disease, in the puzzling but fascinating *Safe*. Often wasted

in more commercial films, Moore here is just about perfect as a domestic cipher whose illness gains her unwanted complexity. Linus Roache, too, is a standout in the controversial *Priest*, touchingly embodying a starchy cleric who agonizes over both his faith and his homosexuality. Then there is the stirring Rena Owen in *Once Were Warriors*, a very grim depiction of the demise of the Maori in contemporary New Zealand. Owen is stunningly real as the long-suffering yet stalwart wife of a raging, abusive husband.

There were other movies released last year which, while flawed, contained at least one of those redeeming performances that sticks in the mind--even if the overall picture doesn't. These are films ideal for video rental, where the filmgoer can sample a cheap product under his control rather than committing to the movie house visit and price.

One good example is *Murder in the First*, an otherwise cliched prison pic which offered Kevin Bacon's stunning characterization of a prisoner/defendant. It was, admittedly, an obviously plum roll: that of a poor con who becomes partially demented through his brutal prison experience. Bacon not only makes his handicaps palpably real, he incarnates a poignancy that is at times almost unbearable to watch--and makes you understand utterly a man driven to murder by rage. If his film had been a better film released near the end of the year, I think Bacon probably would have garnered an Oscar nomination.

Another such acting turn that goes well beyond the level of a mediocre film was Mary-Louise Parker's effort in the conventional girl-buddy picture *Boys on the Side*. Parker, whose character suffers from AIDS, rises above the cornball and the maudlin aspects of the script through her distinctive wit and intelligence. Likewise, Faye Dunaway resuscitates a career in the doldrums through her wonderful presence as Marlon Brando's wife in *Don Juan de Marco*. In a film of sheer whimsy, she is wholly earthbound, and she is radiant besides. It's a shame her role is not more ample.

To round out this voyage through videos, we offer a nod in recognition to one of our most consistently good film actresses: Kathy Bates. She was superb last year in the title role of *Dolores Claiborne*, portraying both a frumpy, grumpy middle-aged domestic and, in an earlier incarnation, an affecting, put-upon young wife. And she seems to make this shift principally through her wonderfully expressive eyes. Much as in her award-winning role in *Misery*, Ms. Bates' screen personality dominates a thin piece of calculated dread written by Stephen King.

You should give some of these videos a try; the price is right, after all, and you can always judiciously use the fast-forward to get to the good parts!