

A Second Look - 1996

This column reconsiders a batch of recent films, many of them independently made, where human interactions are in the forefront instead of humans being the mere backdrop for blatant special effects, as is all the fashion. Being made to a more human scale, these are also movies which don't need the big screen to be enjoyed but can afford a decent evening of summer viewing.

If there is one discernible trend among these films, it may be the prevalence of good roles for actresses, something admittedly rare in blow-'em-up Hollywood scripts. There is, for example, Alison Eliot in *The Spitfire Grill* as a troubled young woman, Percy, who finds a new life in a tiny Maine town. A sentimental script, which just skirts the edge of cloying, is enhanced by Eliot's honest and almost beatific presence. She is nicely seconded, too, by Marcia Gay Harden, as a cowed wife who finds her place, and her independence, in the woebegone diner of the title. Displaying a similar kind of transformation is Dianne Wiest as corporate secretary Sally in the relatively ignored Whoopi Goldberg comedy *The Associate*. Wiest is a highlight as a long-ignored lackey who reveals, when given a chance, both business acumen and backbone while never betraying a sweet reserve.

In the valentine to the 1950's and 1960's pop music business, *Grace of My Heart*, Illeana Douglas stands out as Denise Waverly, a youngster from Philly who becomes a top songwriter out of New York's famed Brill Building. The surprise is how sensibly and good-heartedly she plays out the tumults of her career, avoiding the facile dramatics of the tortured *artiste*. Another performance of great integrity is that of Laura Dern in *Citizen Ruth*, one of the more knowing comedies of last year (and far too little seen). Playing the irredeemable drifter-junkie Ruth Stoops, who becomes a national symbol in the abortion wars, Dern somehow makes a simple-minded, moral zero convincing and likable in a performance that eschews all vanity. Her Ruth never loses her rawness and lack of guile, but, as she turns into an icon, you root for her to become herself.

Liv Tyler shows much more than her Renaissance-madonna face in *Heavy*, another tight little domestic drama built around a cheesy Eastern diner (like *The Spitfire Grill*). As Callie, a waitress at "Pete and Polly's," she shows her luminous air but also a wonderful reticence and delicacy in dealing with the diner's shy cook, Victor, one of film's most profoundly timorous souls. Pruitt Taylor Vance's hermetic performance as Victor represents some kind of triumph, a bit like Billy Bob Thornton's role in *Sling Blade*--but without the dialogue. Among other heavier dramas, *Jude*, based on Thomas Hardy's last novel, merits mention. A lachrymose, even turgid, Victorian chronicle of a poor would-be scholar's woeful life, it is adorned with the presence of Kate Winslet as Sue Bridehead, the protagonist's life-long love, who must carry off the transition from vibrant free spirit to dogged martyr--and does so impressively. Christopher Eccleston, as the Job-like Jude Fawley, seconds her nicely.

Adapted from Kurt Vonnegut's novel of the same name, *Mother Night* offers a complex story of an American radio personality (Nick Nolte) playing a double life in Hitler's Germany. Quirky and hard to credit at times, the film at least raises some serious and provocative questions, such as: how much does a propagandist come to believe his own propaganda? A very different piece of historical fiction is assayed in *Get*

on the Bus, Spike Lee's labor-of-low-budget take on the 1995 Million Man March. Very much an ensemble piece, it parades some of America's best black actors in compelling character studies, notably Charles S. Dutton, Roger Guenveur Smith, Isaiah Washington, Ossie Davis and Wendell Pierce. Though each individual role is relatively small, each actor imparts to it a lived-in richness.

A Family Thing gives viewers a chance to revel in the interaction of two acting giants--Robert Duvall and James Earl Jones--as unlikely half-brothers, red-neck Arkansan vs. black Chicago cop, who bump up against each other late in life. This is a motion picture of sweet reconciliation, yet with appropriate dollops of vinegar. Another, droller version of white-black chemistry appears in the film adaption of Herb Gardner's play *I'm Not Rappaport*, with Walter Matthau as the cantankerous, unrepentant socialist Jew ever challenging Ossie Davis as the cautious, skeptical Afro-American. Both old-timers do wonders with Gardner's wiseguy lines as they move through what amounts to a paean to New York's Central Park. These are good feel-good flicks.

A small-scale, but sparkling suspense film which never really found its audience was *The Trigger Effect*, about a mysterious L.A. power outage which slowly drives otherwise "normal" folk to the edge. Its principal strength is its gradual, yet sustained momentum, which makes the everyday protagonists--Kyle MacLachlan, Elizabeth Shue and Dermot Mulroney--consider extraordinary acts. Its tightly built finale is a genuine surprise.

To cap this lineup of films that deserve a second look on video, try *Looking for Richard*, Al Pacino's hard to classify homage to "Richard the Third." Part documentary, part home movie, part confession, part classic drama, this melange somehow comes together as Pacino and several of his best friends, in investigating the power and pertinence of Shakespeare's evil king, also pull off a fine rendering of highlights from the play itself. Typical of the film's liberating spirit is its handling of the famous scene of Richard (Pacino) seducing Lady Anne (a lovely Winona Rider) over the corpse of her husband. At the precise point where Anne wavers and is hooked by Richard's morbid offer, there is a snap cut to the real Pacino exulting to the camera, "Yawp"--he's got her--and he's got you, too.