

## A Second Look - 1998

With this column the summer movie season is winding down; the sundry monsters and meteors, the chillers and thrillers, the gross-out comedies and the merely gross ones end, leaving you a few more days to catch *There's Something About Private Ryan*, *The Private Ryan Show*, *How Private Ryan Got His Groove Back*, *Armagedoryan*...

If you don't have the time or the stomach for the hit movies, there is always the video store. There you can always discover a number of worthy films that go relatively unnoticed on and off local screens and never really have time to find their audience. The following highlights a few of these less-hyped films from the last year which are now in Capitol Hill video stores. Most of them, it should be noted, are serious dramas with worthy performances, liable to be passed over in the general summertime bent towards popcorn-brained flicks.

Several of these recommended films offer not star turns but tight ensemble work among a congenial group of actors, players who play well off each other and whose individual performance is enhanced by their fellows. One such film which received a lot of critical attention last year but limited box office was *The Sweet Hereafter*, Atom Egoyan's vivid dissection of a small Canadian community wracked by a school bus tragedy. Anchored by Ian Holm's stirring performance as a casualty lawyer trying to get at the bottom of the case while rooting out his own demons, a whole community is brought to troubled, grieving life (note, in particular, splendid performances by Canadian actors like Bruce Greenwood and the young Sarah Polley).

Another example of fine ensemble work is in the little seen *Critical Care*, a futuristic black comedy about the disenchantment of a young doctor caring, or trying to care, for a ward full of the comatose. Deftly directed by veteran Sidney Lumet, the all-around solid cast is led by James Spader, just right as a dreamy-eyed Dr. Ernst, and Helen Mirren, very fine as the stalwart and merciful Stella, head nurse of the ward. This is grim humor lightly handled, but with a serious side that questions some major trends in our medical care.

Another splendid collective performance adorns *In the Company of Men*, director Neil LaBute's debut film of last year. Though filmed in eye-squinting sunlight and anonymous neon-lit offices and restrooms, it is as dark a picture as any recently released in America. Two grasping corporate types, played by Aaron Eckhart and Matt Malloy, amuse themselves in a provincial town by literally playing games with the affections of a sweet deaf woman (Stacy Edwards). As grisly as their motivations are, their thwarted lives ring true; though the script drips acid, the tale is all too plausible. Again, terrific acting carries the day, especially, Eckhart's Chad, a studly devil in a crisp white shirt and tie. It is a movie for men and women to see together--and argue about its validity over the next week.

Among the fine ensemble films now on video, none are better than *Hollow Reed*, a searing social drama from England that can make you ache for each one of its well-wrought characters. A family breaks apart when a husband, admitting his gay nature, leaves his wife for a new partner but wants to continue to see his small son. The boy is secretly abused by his mother's new boyfriend, which the husband discovers. A legal squabble over custody heightens the conflict over the child on all sides until the

boyfriend reveals his true violent nature. All of this conflict--though it sounds like soap opera--is done with an honest, genuine intensity that is totally believable. The whole cast--Martin Donovan as the father, Joely Richardson as the ex-wife, Jason Flemying as the boyfriend, Robert Carlyle as the partner, and especially, the amazing Sam Bould as the boy whose affections are fought over--is exemplary.

A different kind of English ensemble acting is found in *The Winter Guest*, presenting several sets of diverse characters--two small truant boys, a young couple, two old ladies--in a frigid Scottish seaside town whose quotidian lives graze each other but never really intersect. The crucial pair at the film's center is, Emma Thompson, as Frances, who, together with her mother (played by Thompson's real mother Phylida Law) act out a testy relationship in the wake of Frances's grieving over her lost husband. The whole film is muted--literally icy at times--but not so much that these two solid acting pros can't offer a rich medley of hues for their characters.

From Brazil comes another overlooked film with a cluster of excellent performances: *Four Days in September*, a fictionalized version of a true event, the 1969 terrorist kidnapping of American Ambassador C. Burke Elbrick in Rio de Janeiro. The film's strength is its remarkable evenhandedness. Equal weight and motivation is given the shaky terrorist group, the captured diplomat, and the dogged police. Avoiding polemics, director Bruno Barreto gives a strong documentary pulse to the film while still giving most of his large, diverse cast real resonance as individual figures. Standouts are Pedro Cardoso as Fernando Gabeira (the academic idealist among the terrorists) and Alan Arkin (as Ambassador Elbrick), playing perhaps the most dignified and credible U.S. diplomat ever seen in the movies.

As ever, too, there are always the relatively ignored films which are redeemed by a single standout performance, the kind of movies where the presence of one actor, if not the whole package, remain in memory. One example is Kevin Bacon as a slick deejay in the moral fable *Telling Lies in America*. Bacon, one of our most versatile actors, is superb as a character who is all false front and bravado, yet who knows his superficial life is barren, a con man who is shady but not really evil. Another less than successful film with a smash performance was *Afterglow*, a puzzling rondelay about two struggling couples which offers a luminous Julie Christie (recognized with an Oscar nomination earlier this year). Playing a has-been actress, Christie brings a luster and subtlety that transcends her tawdry role. She is that all-too-rare thing in today's movies: a fascinating "older woman" who gives off most of the glow of the title.

A world away--or several worlds away--is the child actor Georges du Fresne as the seven-year old Ludovic, a boy who cannot shake the conviction that he is a girl in the quirky Belgian tale *Ma Vie En Rose*. With a wistful face that captures every delight yet poignantly registers every hurt, Master du Fresne captures the viewer no matter what his/her identity. Finally, a recommendation for another child actor, this time Jurnee Smollett, as the young Eve in *Eve's Bayou*. Within a touching, if somewhat thin, family drama, 10-year-old, russett-haired Smollett holds the picture together as a youngster discovering the complexities of life--and the sins of the fathers. She, like Julie Christie, glows, but with a naturalness and lack of affectation which is heartrending to watch. She is, like the rest of those cited above, well worth getting to know during an evening's video rental.

