

## A Second Look - 2001

### Worthy Ensemble Work

A grand picture from last season, shockingly ignored, was *Sunshine*, one of those rare movies that aims at an epic quality and this time earns the epithet. The film's scope is nothing less than Middle Europe of the 20th century, with a tale of three generations of the Hungarian Sonnenscheins (or "Sunshine"), a Jewish family which tries to deny its heritage and finds that it cannot. Ralph Fiennes (playing three different roles in three generations) and a varied cast are excellent, but it is the vision and the recreation of his wracked homeland by Hungarian writer/director Istvan Szabo that is truly stunning. Szabo meant this as his magnum opus, his testament, and I think he succeeded.

It also never found its audience, but last year's modernistic version of *Hamlet* should have. It is wryly reinvented with the hero, a brooding video artist, returning home to Manhattan to mourn his father and to rail at the usurpation of his father's position as CEO of the Denmark Corporation by his perfidious uncle Claudius. Hanging out in the Hotel Elsinore, he loses interest in the punkish Ophelia. Then the ghost of his father materializes out of a Pepsi machine... The fact is that these contemporary touches and the film's slick urban look work surprisingly well, and, importantly, director Michael Almereyda maintains the Shakespearean language to lend necessary weight and gravitas.

From France comes *Human Resources*, a realistic account of labor relations so rarely seen in motion pictures. In a provincial French town, a new business graduate comes home to work in management at the factory where his father has logged 30 years as a machinist, testing the young man's loyalty to the firm against his family. The first feature-length film made by director Lauren Cantet, *Human Resources* stands out both for its seriousness of theme and its convincing, semi-documentary execution.

In the English-made *East is East*, tracing the lives of a rambunctious Pakistani-English family in 1970's Manchester, the cast, including a passel of Anglo-Indian kids, is spot on. Using mere tidbits of action and a few lines, each actor brings to life a fully realized individual character. More, they work together effortlessly as an ensemble while displaying a genuine--and humorous--melding of their mixed heritage. This is one film where the casting director deserves a special bow. *What's Cooking?* looks at one Thanksgiving day through the prism of four ethnic families in Los Angeles: Jewish, African-American, Vietnamese, and Hispanic. Mothers (played by fine actresses like Alfre Woodard, Mercedes Ruehl and Joan Chen) are at the core of these families, all of which have their own stresses at table but which also are full of honest banter and sentiment. Director Gurinder Chadha, a British-Indian (via Kenya) making her first American film, does a splendid job of capturing one collective American Life within the illuminated pieces of this holiday mosaic.

Among ensemble comedies, few lately has been better than the delightful *Best in Show*, a low-key but hilarious mockumentary about half-a-dozen canines and their utterly bizarre owners competing at a Philadelphia dog show. Its naturalistic style--achieved though much improvisation--heightens the feeling of "real people" who have

been only slightly exaggerated; just folks you might know in your church or club or office--made nutty by their animals. The cast, led by director Christopher Guest, is uniformly silly and often touching, topped perhaps by Fred Willard, a hopelessly incompetent "play-by-play" announcer.

### **Individual Performances of Note**

The film *Pollock*, a biopic of the noted Abstract Expressionist artist, was a long-time dream for Ed Harris. As both director and impersonator of the artist, Harris superbly suggests Pollock's genius through action, through his bodily struggle with paint and canvas, through the artist's desperate creative drive battling an equally desperate need for approval. He also does not pull back from Pollock's unattractive traits but mingles them inextricably with the fellow's ache to passionately make Art. Contending with Ed Harris for a "best actor" Oscar last spring was the Spaniard Javier Bardem, also portraying a real-life contemporary artist, in his case the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas in *Before the Fall*. This performance, showing a character both tortured (a gay artist in Castro's Cuba) and ecstatic, was a fully rounded and moving one, told against an effective re-creation of revolutionary Cuba. It's well worth a look in video.

*The Yards* was a small picture about big city corruption which had at its center young hottie Mark Wahlberg. Wahlberg's acting range is limited to contemporary types, but as a tentative, seeking urban kid in this movie his acting was so guileless that it hardly seemed like acting. His open-faced naivete, his halting desire to comprehend things bigger than himself was just right for a character slipping into crime against his desires. *The Claim* was a serious film about the American West (made by Englishman Michael Winterbottom) which got no respect from critics and less from movie patrons. Yet this story of the demise of a frontier town had much going for it, especially a stellar lead from Peter Mullan as the town overseer and owner. We see him go from pompous master of all he surveys to a man confounded and vulnerable to a final demise which is almost biblical in its suffering. It's a measure of his performance that Mr. Mullan brings out one's sympathy for a character little worthy of it.

In the period piece *The House of Mirth* (based on the Edith Wharton novel), Gillian Anderson was an unlikely choice to play the lead Lily Bart. Famous from TV's "The X Files," she had never been asked to "carry" a motion picture, but here she pulled off a fully creditable job, moving her character from sprightly confidence through earnest befuddlement to grim acceptance of her fate. It is a controlled and restrained performance, matching the mood of the entire project.

When I reviewed the slice-of-life drama *You Can Count on Me* last year, I noted that the lead actress, Laura Linney, was a revelation. Re-viewing her performance more recently, I consider the term justified. This actress--too often cast in routine blonde roles--finally had her breakthrough dramatic role in this stellar independent picture. As Sammy, a divorcee trying to balance her life between a prodigal brother, a sensitive son, and a boss-lover, Linney is both winsome, winning, and nurturing, as well as bossy, harassed, and unsure--just like a real contemporary woman.

Finally, the mention of another fine performance in a film nobody saw but me: Julie Walters (better known last year for her role in *Billy Elliott*) as an unlikely crusader in *Titantic Town*. She plays an ordinary Belfast housewife who decides (during the

1970's troubles) she must do something about the Northern Ireland fighting when her own house is shot up in a crossfire. As this accidental peacemaker, Walters keeps it real until the end, wonderfully mingling her innate humor with the surprise of both new-found celebrity and political sagacity. It shows a true blossoming.