

A Second Look – 2007

If you read my reviews, you know that your friendly reviewer has a catholic taste in films and does not eschew the subtitled film. Since so few foreign-language films get noticed in our overwhelmingly monolingual culture, I thought it would be a good occasion to signal up-front a batch of recent foreign language films that offered insights and visions outside our domestic purview (all are subtitled). Though I have tried to indicate pictures available at local video stores, some of them may have to be searched for via Netflix or another video supplier.

Volver – The latest from the prolific Pedro Almodovar, with one of his many female muses, Penelope Cruz, back on her native Spanish turf and in top form. The film parades a veritable regiment of intriguing women in a plot triggered by a familial murder which leads to cover ups, rampant female bonding, outbursts of emotion, and a return from the dead of one principal character. Pedro sorts it all out with panache and a palate drenched in lush primary colors.

Days of Glory – A wonderfully illuminated piece of forgotten WWII history: the commitment by tens of thousands of French colonial soldiers (the film features Algerians) who volunteered to fight on behalf of their colonial master. The infantrymen's dogged efforts are modest, yet heroic, especially when contrasted with the casual racism and condescension they must suffer at the hands of their hidebound French commanders. The war scenes are offhand, grim, and grippingly real.

Water - An unvarnished look at traditional Indian widowhood and its travails, as director Deepa Mehta takes us inside a bleak widow's ashram of the 1930's through the eyes of an eight-year-old "widow" Chuyia. Mehta makes this strange world coherent and moving, and--especially when following young Chuyia--captivating. The film, with potentially incendiary elements, avoids real pyrotechnics by developing at the measured, graceful pace of an Indian dance.

Tsotsi - The moving story of rootless urban youth in South Africa that can stand with earlier classics of the genre. Out of lives barely redeemable, the film presents Tsotsi (young Presley Chweneyagae--in his first film), a grim teen-aged menace who slowly, slowly opens up to true emotions as he takes responsibility for an inadvertently kidnapped infant. The whole picture is filled with wonderful, convincing performances from a batch of actors you have never heard of but will enjoy watching. "Tsotsi" was the winner of the 2006 Oscar for best Foreign Language Film.

Sophie Scholl: The Final Days - Germany's most honored film of 2005 is based on the true story of a young student who challenged the Nazi regime in a protest act in February 1943. As Sophie, Julia Jentsch graces the film with an open, unassuming face, the face of a school girl representing a modern-day Joan of Arc. The film is chilling, but it is also redemptive. Sophie Scholl is not portrayed as a paragon but rather as one person who is high-minded, a trait the viewer can't help but think we

would all hope to show in such dire circumstances.

The Death of Mr. Lazarescu - A sobering, but mesmerizing odyssey through the modern healthcare system that happens to take place in Bucharest, but really could be any big city. A retired professor, an isolated widower who drinks, then collapses, and tries to get care in an emergency room somewhere in the city (when hospitals are full of other, more obviously injured patients). Though aided by a paramedic (wonderfully sympathetic), he is shuttled and wheeled from site to site without effect, in a hospital system that, while not harsh, is simply too busy to care.

Mountain Patrol - This Chinese-made film shows how a group of Tibetan tribesmen go after poachers of the storied Tibetan antelope in the 1980's. Based on fact, it shows the Tibetans' dogged trek to locate a key poacher and his gang among one of the starkest landscapes you are ever going to see in the movies. The story is simple, the characters almost archetypes, the outcomes of their efforts bleak, but if you get caught up in this sweeping, ominous world (no, it is definitely not Shangri-La!), it will prove riveting.

House of Sand - A striking Brazilian period piece starring the great Fernanda Montenegro (*Central Station*) and Fernanda Torres, her real-life daughter who plays her daughter in the film. A stark story of the Brazilian northern frontier, it traces the lives of the two women, both widows, confined for decades to a parched land full of sun, wind, and an endlessly drifting sandscape. Beautifully shot in a dunes-laden backdrop that stands for the filmic equivalent of Latin American literature's "magic realism," it is a arresting evocation of an exotic world.

Only Human - Another from Spain, but with more of a Neil Simon flavor: a young Jewish gal brings home her Palestinian fiancée to meet her funky family in their Barcelona apartment. Hijinks ensue—and with a lot of goofy characters and a string of misunderstandings, the picture delivers not only rich humor, but—in a tremendous face-off between the couple—as colorful and implacable a litany about the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma as ever seen on film.

Besides the above foreign-language films, another little gem from England that saw only limited release in the DC area was:

Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont - All but abandoned by her family in a shabby London retirement hotel, an elderly widow, Mrs. Palfrey, strikes up a curious, but affecting, friendship with a romantic young writer who passes for her grandson. Acting legend Joan Plowright gets a film role worthy of her talents and is surrounded by stellar players in a story of true sentiment that avoids the sentimental.

In this heyday of the documentary film, I could not fail to mention a couple of U.S. works which deal—splendidly—with two very different worlds of competition:

Wordplay – A documentary about a national crossword puzzle contest may

sound deadly, but this one can be recommended to those who already do crosswords as well as others who could get caught up in it. The finale of *Wordplay* is a gas, a rousing battle between players with whom we have already come to identify. Even better, when the three top puzzlers must solve one last puzzle live, in 15 minutes, before TV cameras, we witness a genuine thriller—and a kind of very serious fun.

The Heart of the Game - An inspirational human story set in the world of girls' high school basketball--a *Hoop Dreams* with ponytails. Darnellia Russell is a gifted player from the poor part of Seattle who comes to play ball at middle class Roosevelt High under the tutelage of bear-like coach Bill Resler. These two contrasting figures become basketball bound in an unpretentious epic that took director Ward Serrill seven years to compile and which ends in a thrilling fairy tale finish.

Finally, I want to highlight what was, for this reviewer, the best film I saw last year. A distinctive, bittersweet American film which exuded much more class and smarts than the all the standard Hollywood product:

Little Children – An intricate comedy-drama of suburban life with compelling, believable performances and complex narrative strands that keep you guessing till the end. Tops in the quality of its script, the vigor and subtleties of its acting, and its almost serene direction by Todd Field, it strikes no false notes. It keeps coming at you so naturally, just like real life. Kate Winslet is exquisite as a dissatisfied wife, Jackie Earle Haley is a revelation as a sex offender, and the rest of the cast just sparkles.