

Second Look: An Annual Survey of Overlooked Films

By Mike Canning

With this annual column, I again signal several “Movies That Got Away,” feature films (from 2020) less noticed or hyped upon release. This selection avoids blockbuster fare for movies which offered something distinctive, discriminating, or novel. Most of the films mentioned below had short runs and modest US box office but glowed with quality.

As in all movie seasons, there are standout individual and ensemble performances that too few people saw and which were mostly ignored during awards season. I cite one lead performance and two 19th C. period pieces with standout ensembles.

Sound of Metal – A triumph of a lead performance from Riz Ahmed as Ruben, a rock drummer who gradually loses his hearing, laments his fate, then struggles to come to terms with that loss with grudging acceptance and a careful, thoughtful reconstruction of his life. That redemption comes through working and learning within a small deaf community where he is mentored by Joe, a Vietnam War veteran, who helps him find his own way by learning signing. The film exhibits stunning sound design, with clots of sound whirling in and out of the sound track, mimicking Ruben’s auditory experience (The film won an Academy Award for sound design).

EMMA– Debut director Autumn De Wilde’s take on the Jane Austen classic is strikingly traditional and fully in period. Locations, costuming and hair,



high-toned dialogue, and period music (a mix of Mozart, church tunes, and traditional airs)—all combine to present a world that Austen would recognize. As a “comic” Austen novel, the picture opens as flighty and twee, but then develops a more poignant mood as the miscues of Emma (Anya Taylor-Joy) come to actually affect

people’s lives. Young Taylor-Joy shows she can handle period rom-com quite capably. Her look—porcelain skin and marble eyes—gibes with the

character, and she expresses moods both shallow and spirited with poise. For now, she will do nicely as the latest EMMA.

Anya Taylor-Joy (left) as Emma Woodhouse and Bill Nighy as her officious father in EMMA., a Focus Features release

The Personal History of David Copperfield – This is a triumph of a movie adapting a literary masterpiece, achieving, in boisterous style, the feel of the original. The diverse cast, led by a lively Dev Patel as David, offers a parade of fine comic actors performing as if oblivious to their own comic world. Peter Capaldi (Micawber), Ben Wishaw (Heep), Hugh Laurie, and Tilda Swinton, among many others, are standouts in their clueless unawareness of their circumstances. Director Armando Iannucci choreographs his charges in a headlong series of quick cuts and lively vignettes that keeps the pace hectic yet the plot clear. The production lovingly creates the world and wardrobe of rural Victorian England to a tee, and the jaunty music and smart cinematography enhance the fun.

As usual, each film season presents great foreign-language films worth a look. Here are two of last year's best:

Collective -- This documentary about ingrained corruption in contemporary Romania is a wonder: a meticulously crafted landmark of investigative journalism. The title comes from the name of a Bucharest nightclub, scene of a fatal fire in October 2015. After the fire deaths, multiple burn victims died of infections in the aftermath, causing a national scandal. By early 2016, director Alexander Nauau and his crew began covering the scandal, following crusading journalist Catalin Tolotan, who leads a team to discover the truth through persistent inquiry and shoe leather. That inquiry is told in a pokerfaced style reminiscent of documentarian Frederick Wiseman: no interviews, no voice overs, no suggestive music track: just the steady presence of the all-seeing camera.

The Traitor – The story of the man who broke the Mafia in the 1980's told in gripping detail. Tommaso Buscetta (Pierfrancesco Favino) makes a fateful



decision in prison to tell all to another Sicilian as tough as he is: Judge Giovanni Falcone (Fausto Russo Alesi). The result of his vast testimony is the famous maxi-trial in Palermo, with Buscetta the star witness before more than 300 Mafiosi defendants. Favino carries the film with a mix of toughness and grace, portraying a once violent man

seeking a way to a better life. While there is action and suspense, the best scenes are quiet, thoughtful ones where Tommaso pours out his revelations to the solemn but sympathetic Falcone. The film, directed by legendary Italian Marco Bellocchio, swept the 2019 Italian film awards.

Pierfrancesco Favino as Tommaso Buscetta (on the lamb) in "The Traitor." © Fabio Lovino. Courtesy Sony Pictures Classics

Splendid documentaries, too, surface every film year. Below, note three intricate and heartening American exemplars:

Crip Camp -- In the early 1970s, teenagers with disabilities faced a future shaped by isolation and institutionalization. Camp Jened, a camp "for the handicapped" in the Catskills, exploded these limitations. And it became their breakout Utopia, a place with summertime sports, smoking, make out sessions, and campers who finally felt fulfilled as human beings. Those bonds endured as some migrated to Berkeley, California, where friendships forged at the camp morphed into movements that realized that disruption plus unity could secure life-changing accessibility for millions. Co-directed by Nicole Newnham and former camper Jim LeBrecht, this exuberant documentary depends crucially on found footage from the 1970's camp that introduces us to irrepressible characters who will later lead to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Boys' State -- "Boys' State" is a week-long program in which rising Texas high school seniors gather at the University of Texas for an elaborate mock exercise: building their own state government. Filmmakers Jesse Moss and Amanda McBaine tracked the 2018 edition of the program, where some 1,000 17-year-olds participated in a riveting gubernatorial race. The filmmakers, showing an eagle eye, focus on a quartet of committed, distinctive kids to carry the drama. It



is a kind of miracle that the directors pulled off the film from out of this ten-ring circus. One reason is that they collared seven different sound-and-film crews to troll the campus, collecting hundreds of offhand conversations, speechifying moments, and personal interviews with the boys themselves.

A contingent of attendees at "Boys' State." At center, front row, is Rene Otero, one of the convention's leaders. Photo courtesy of A24 and Apple

The Fight -- Though hardly a reclusive organization, the ACLU has never granted access to its offices, where it battles rights issues like immigration, abortion, LGBTQ issues and voting—subjects that remain more significant than ever. The filmmakers of "The Fight" were granted that access and followed four inspiring attorneys, all handling landmark cases. Each lawyer is given equal time in this smartly edited film, making complex cases clear while keeping up the tension. Though the four are nerdish workaholics, their humanity also comes through. To get that rounded view of brilliant individuals, the filmmakers show their vulnerable sides, too, as when one panics trying to charge his cell phone, and another dutifully practices his Supreme Court speech at his bathroom mirror.

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