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WALLIS

Reviews

Wonder Boys

Directed by Curtis Hanson

A suitcase, a garment bag, a dead dog and a cow-hide tuba case fit so snugly into the boot of Grady's car yet nothing else in his life falls into place with such ease. Michael Douglas plays Grady, a one-time award-winning novelist—a wonder boy—trying his hand at a second novel, seven years in the making, thousands of pages long, while he teaches creative writing at the university. He fends off the incorrigibly cute uni student renting a room in his house, Katie Holmes, who



is out to show him how innocent she isn't just after his wife walked out on him. Meanwhile he takes under

his wrinkled wing another uni student, played by Tobey Maguire, who loves old movies and anything, really, completely fictitious, including his make-believe life. This student is also the cause of the post-pubescent pin-head policeman trying to catch up with Grady (and his own squad car) while Grady trots around Word Fest with his hypersexual editor, the ever-entertaining Robert Downey Junior. Grady is all this time running into, ringing up, chasing after and racing away from his married lover pregnant with his baby, a solid Frances McDormand.

And what to do with the dead dog? Sometimes life seems a little bit hectic, as we all know, and how can one possibly find a way out? Or in? Throw in a short black man with Roy Orbison's hair who butts Grady's car then bows, the black jacket with the fur collar that

Marilyn Monroe wore on her wedding day to Joe Dimaggio, a gorgeous transvestite and a man named Q, a few spells and a slew of marijuana cigarettes and you've got a movie.

What's great about all these side stories is that they don't overwhelm. They don't play quirky in a how-many-laughs-can-we-get-in way. Considering the chaos, *Wonder Boys* is a mature movie with real drama and subtle humor. It's a coming of age film for a more-than middle-aged man, and Douglas walks and talks the part, especially in his tattered pink bathrobe. It's a love story - or a love parade, rather, to steal the title of the next Great American Novel. It's a movie of mentors and heroes and getting a break and hanging on. There, now I haven't even come close to giving a thing away!

Heather Johnson

Est-Ouest aka *East-West*

Directed by Regis Warnier

East-West is a grand film in every respect. It manages to capture the suffering of a whole people by portraying the life of a French woman who chooses to follow her husband back to his homeland, the USSR, during the Stalin era.

Marie and her Alexei realise, as soon as they arrive in Odessa with their son Seioja, that life is not going to be what they expected. Only because Alexei is a doctor, does the Soviet regime spare his family and send them all to Kiev. Marie soon finds the confinement of their single room in a communal apartment unbearable. She speaks little Russian. All she wants to do is return to France, where they had a happy life together. Instead, despite the strength of their love, Alexei and



Marie gradually grow apart. He conforms to the rules of the party and she can no longer bear his submissiveness and betrayal.

East-West is such a strong film. It has an extremely authentic look and feel to it, which no doubt is the result of the intimate collaboration between the scriptwriters, two of whom are Russian. Regis Warnier, the Frenchman



who directed as well as co-wrote the film, says he was fascinated by the way his Western point of view was broken down. This distinctively foreign feel is only part of what makes *East-West* such an amazing cinematic experience. The intensity of the way the actors carry their roles and the skill with which Warnier handles his material are other contributing elements. Not one scene is out of place. The cinematography is simply magnificent. Sandrine as Marie and Oleg Menchikov, who actually doesn't speak a word of French, as Alexei give their characters the weight they need to tell the incredibly sad but beautiful story.

To make a film about a time in history that many people are still afraid to speak of, or would rather forget, is a brave and admirable venture. *East-West* is an important film which finds just the right tone.

It was nominated for both the Academy Award and the Golden Globe as best foreign film – and it is definitely one of the most moving films I have ever seen.



Shower

Directed by Zhang Yang.

A stony faced career man and not a talker, Da Ming (Pu Cun Xin) heads north to Beijing, the home of his father, Master Liu (Zhu Xu). The former has been led mistakenly to believe that his father has died, by virtue of an unusual postcard from his mentally disabled brother, Er Ming (Jiang Wu). Da Ming is a product of the new China, fast and modern. But his father is of an older, slower China: with Er Ming, he runs a bath-house, to which customers return year after year, to this haven wherein they are treated like kings.

The patrons' various amusing peculiarities, as well as the warm relationship between Master Liu and Er Ming, are a big part of the film, and a big part of what makes the bath-house so important for the dedicated Master Liu. But when Da Ming rocks up, finding his

father alive, he looks on the establishment with an icily contemptuous attitude. Tensions build between father and son, until finally tragic events see Da Ming's ice just beginning to melt. This is a personal film, about particular people, but through the particular, we see the general. In the relationship between a father and a son, a larger relation is captured, between the old China and the new, and then a larger still, between the slow and the fast, the warm and the cool.

Shower is one of those warm sad ones, but despite the genre cliché - viz. lovable eccentrics v. big bad businessmen/bureaucrats who want to crush the lovable eccentrics - it is still pretty convincing, since the clichés aren't all that carries the film. It holds one's interest because of both the unique setting and the absorbing nature of the characters. Furthermore, the film's broader themes provoke thought. Out of five, hmm, 3 stars? Or maybe 2.7593. Actually it's a real but irrational number, so you'll never know what I thought sucked in.

John "I'm Giving False Names Due To Fear Of Retaliation From Joe" It Is Improper To Use The Society Organ As A Vehicle For Implicit Personal Attacks On Fellow Society Members "Bloggs" Smith

American Psycho

Directed by Mary Harron

There was no way Brett Easton Ellis' brilliant novel could have been transferred properly to the screen. It was too sterile and repetitive, let alone violent and gruesome, to have had more than a quarter of its bulk filmed. But these elements were done in a very literary way, and made a thorough and ultimately terrifying point about human nature, greed and so forth. Mary Harron's screen adaptation has, for my money, lost almost all of the novel's impact, trading it in for a smugness and reassurance that eventually becomes annoying in a way the book never did.



It was a similar experience to *Dune*: brilliant but huge book gets eviscerated for the big screen leaving only a few verbatim conversations, an altered ending (which is slowly infuriating me in this case too) and none of the intriguing ideas that made the book so much more than just a collection of words.

The film has a few things in its favour, mainly the adequately flat set design and the clothing, such an important part of Patrick Bateman's life. But that's really about it. A few allusions to masks and identity in the opening reel, and some hints about the unreality of his world are dropped fairly soon, and another major subplot doesn't even make a cameo. At least we get the three famous monologues about pop music.

Like many others, I had a really specific idea of how this film should look, and this wasn't it, so of course I'm going to be let down. Nowhere do we plumb the depths of Bateman's life, neither the extremes of sterility or violence are given much screen time so it is not like we

can be shocked into examining the culture he represents. Ellis blasted our psyches with a vision of an impersonal hell which became uncomfortably familiar to us all. Harron delivers a smug little comedy of mannerisms that left me unsatisfied and unhappy. Perhaps one day a more interesting film version of *American Psycho* will be made, but until then this is all we've got, and it's just not enough. Admittedly it could have been worse, but it could just as easily have been so much better.



Craig

High Fidelity

Directed by Stephen Frears

All you John Cusack-fans out there, this film is for you. Even if you have no idea who Cusack is, it is more than likely that you will sympathise with his character by the end of the movie – that is how good an actor he is. *High Fidelity* is about problematic relationships, something most of us can relate to, whether we are the ones who left or the ones who were left.

Cusack's character, Rob, is a man in his mid-thirties who has just been left by his long-time-partner Laura (Iben Hjejle). He starts listing the five most terrible

break-ups of his life, neatly addressing the camera to engage the audience. Then he gets the idea to contact his former girlfriends to see what became of them.



Through Rob's thoughts and his encounters with these women, we get to know him quite well. However, it is still mainly in the scenes from his old-style record shop, where he sells vinyls with his employees/friends Dick and Barry (brilliantly acted by Todd Louiso and Jack Black) — "the musical moron twins" – that we really get under Rob's skin. All three of them have expert knowledge of music and this creates some hilarious dialogue.

What is so good about this film (and about the novel by Nick Hornby, on which it is based) is that it centres around the sometimes comic, sometimes painful struggle with self-examination that is known to most people in the Western world. Even though the story is told from a male perspective, women can find a lot of gratification in the way it exposes the ridiculous male nature and gives an insight into what break-ups can be like from a male point of view.

Stephen Frears' direction is excellent. He manages to transport the story from London to Chicago in a most natural fashion. The music is abundant and simply fabulous. What more can I say? It made me smile. *High Fidelity* is not your average romantic comedy by a long shot.



Frequency

Directed by Gregory Hoblit

Tagline: What if you could reach back in time? What if you could change the past? What if it changed everything?

John Sullivan is not having a good life, his girlfriend has just left him, he is still living in the house he grew up in and the future looks gloomy. The Aurora Borealis is clearly seen in the sky over San Francisco, just the way it was thirty years before when John was a little boy, the New York Mets and the Cincinnati Reds were looking forward to a great season and, most importantly, John's father, an heroic fireman, was still alive. By some freak of fate John sets up his father's old ham radio and hears a familiar voice on the other end: his father, thirty years ago, the day before his tragic death. John attempts to warn his father, thus setting into action a series of events that change history, and allow a

serial killer to run rampant, killing several women, including John's mother, thirty years ago. John and his father desperately try undo what they have done, and prevent and solve the thirty year old crimes.

The film is well conceived and executed. The interactions between the two men are well scripted and acted. The fantasy of the whole set-up is intelligently dealt with, and the shifts in history that occur along the way are intriguing and well thought out. The ending is, however, incredibly schmaltzy, but what the hell, don't we all love a happy ending? If you have ever wondered what would happen if you could change the past, this is the feel-good film for you.

ESther

Chopper

Directed by Andrew Dominik.

Given its subject, Mark Brandon 'Chopper' Read, this film has inevitably attracted enormous attention. Read has made his name with cultivated notoriety, playing up to the public's prurient fascination with seediness and brutality. The film captures well a violent and paranoid personality combined with natural flamboyance and a craving for attention. Both the first and last scenes show him reveling as the subject of an interview; and then again with the guards who watch it on television with him. But when they go he is left alone and empty. I came out of this film feeling that I had dignified a

repugnant thing he de-audience. In film tri-Bana has con-picted a real of the other are carica-ertheless they believable.

Dominik's dic-ellent. The als are very Some scenes clever, such tion of the Nightclub

hideous realism, then retold in Chopper's apologetic version, and lastly as it came to exist in the public imagination in surreal artificiality.

Bio-flicks need some unifying theme and overarching structure to be dramatically satisfying. *Shine* moulded itself on the 'fall-and-redemption' theme. *Shadowlands* confined itself to a narrow aspect of C.S. Lewis' life.



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Gandhi used biography as an approach to history. *The People versus Larry Flynt* and the recent *Joan of Arc* I found unsatisfactory because they included too many aspects of their subjects' lives from over too long a period, loosing any unified structure.

This is the ultimate feeling I had from *Chopper*: it comprised a few loosely connected semi-fictional anecdotes. Ultimately, I am not convinced that this film had much substance or point to it.

Guy O.

My Mother Frank

Directed by Mark Lamprell

The word that initially springs to mind after watching this first feature from writer-director Mark Lamprell is sincere. It is an honest film about honest feelings. Despite occasional exaggerations to make the characters potentially larger than life, they are all quite real. Frank (Sinead Cusack) is a 51 year-old mother of two who has created a safe and secure world for herself after her husbands' death. She is a devout Catholic and displays quirky behaviour when her prayers aren't answered by Mary Magdalen. Her prim and proper daughter (played by Sacha Horler, who makes this small role memorable) comes over for visits but it is from the perspective of her 18 year-old son David (Matthew Newton) that the story is told. He still lives at home and, as he constantly notices how bored she is, urges Frank to do something with her life. Which she does. She enrolls in a degree at the same university that he attends. Let's just say, David is not impressed.

Even though she studies hard, Frank soon finds herself in trouble with her strict but ultimately human professor (Sam Neill). Through her struggles, Frank becomes an inspiration to those around her who want to change their lives but are afraid to take the chance.

The interaction between mother and son is intense and both Cusack and Newton give fine performances. So the film isn't just Frank's coming-of-age story, it is also David's – as he finds love and also the courage to proclaim it. His story is one that we have seen many times before, but the fact that it is intertwined with Frank's makes the film more interesting.

One of the reasons why *My Mother Frank* comes across as so unaffected and – well, frank – is probably that Lamprell developed the script over ten years, from his own childhood experiences. It manages quite well to tread the fine line between comedy and tragedy, without falling too deeply into the sentimentality trap in the middle.

