

Laina At the Movies, September, 2010
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The American.

It is unusual to see George Clooney in a film that is better shown in an art house than a multiplex\227but this one really fits both venues. Furthermore, Clooney\222s performance could well win an Oscar. He appears in every frame\227and without much dialogue\227his face reveals a most painful inner struggle.

The story is that Clooney has been a government (US?) assassin for many years. As the story opens, he is pursued in Sweden by assassins from the other side (never revealed) wanting revenge. He is then on the run, hiding, as instructed by his Control, in an Italian hill town. Clooney wants out of the business. His Control has other ideas.

What makes this art house instead of just a thriller is the inner struggle of this man who knows that his soul is dying. He is like a walking dead man\227hopeless, haunted, and yet disciplined enough to want to survive.

Nature plays an important role here, as does the choice of Italian hill towns in winter. The film opens with the stark beauty of snowy Sweden and the cozy warmth of a cabin in the woods. Clooney is there with a lovely young woman\227he does have the need for human warmth. Walking through the woods in the morning, snipers pursue them\227and after killing them, he is on the run.

The Italian hill towns, so jolly and crowded during tourist season, are depopulated and empty during the winter\227a reflection of the population crash in Italy. In addition, when so bleak and almost empty, one can see their medieval function: fortresses against every other hill town. That was a time of anarchy. Being an assassin is an anarchic profession too.

Clooney has a tattoo of a butterfly on his back\227and we see him reading a little book describing local butterflies. Odd reading for a killer. The butterfly is also an ancient symbol of the soul, which seems to be Clooney\222s problem.

The assassin finds human companionship in the hill town that proves to be very important to his healing: a worldly old priest who has seen everything (and done unseemly things in his youth) who recognizes this man\222s internal struggle. The other companion is a beautiful young prostitute who, to the surprise of them both, falls in love with him and he with her. (Makes me think of Dostoyevsky\222s Brothers Karamazov.)

I am going to see this film again. I hope you will give it a try.

Lebanon.

This Israeli film played only in art houses and only for a short time. That is too bad, because the film said a lot about war, Israel\222s particularly painful wars, and makes no bones about it that these conflicts are painful. There is nothing triumphal here\227no chest-thumping propaganda; just a fascinating, claustrophobic view of the 2006 Israeli/Lebanon war with Hezbollah, after Hezbollah fired rockets into Israel, killing soldiers on the Israeli border and kidnapping several of the survivors. The politics of this war are not discussed; instead, we see it as four young Israelis in a tank experience one horrible day.

I used to think that the worst military assignment would be in a submarine; but tanks are far worse. The only tank that played a role in a film that I saw was the Russian \223Ballad of a Soldier,\224 in which a young Russian, pursued by a Nazi tank, manages to throw a lucky grenade and kill it. In Lebanon, we live with the young men inside a loud, bone rattling, stinking tank and see the war only through the tank viewfinder. An Israeli commander drops in with instructions and then leaves; a dead Israeli soldier is also dropped in until a helicopter can come to take the body home; a Syrian prisoner is dropped in and awaits his fate; and a nasty Lebanese Christian Falangist drops in to whisper sweetly to the prisoner what they intend to do to him (after making sure none of the Israelis speak Arabic).

One of the young tanks soldiers doesn\222t know what a Falangist is (a Christian fascist, an enemy of Hezbollah, therefore a temporary friend of Israel). The tank commander, equally young but better educated, does know\227and he regards this \223friend \224 with distaste and suspicion. There is further mystery of why a Syrian (the prisoner

of war) is fighting in a Lebanese war\227and further mystery that a Turk was also fighting and was taken prisoner elsewhere.

This film is being added to my list of great war movies. It takes on the subject from a different viewpoint and does it brilliantly.

Mao\222s Last Dancer.

This is another film that is having a rather short life in the art houses, but even if you cannot see it in time, do rent it later. It is a delight and full of soul.

I never miss a Chinese film when it comes to town\227both the sweeping historic dramas and the modern slices of life\227such as my favorite: Not One Less (1999), about a 12-year-old village girl who substitutes for her teacher during his several months\222 absence. She not only rises to the occasion, but becomes a national heroine as well.

Mao\222s Last Dancer is an American film based on the autobiography of a Chinese ballet dancer who was taken as an 11 year old from his village to train in the national ballet school. When he grows up, a Texas ballet company visits China with an offer of a summer internship for one of their students. Young Li-Cunxin is selected and we see not only his culture shock at seeing an American city (after decades of Chinese propaganda), but also his struggle between loyalty, concern for his family\222s safety, and opportunity. This young man was an incredibly good dancer\227much in the tradition of the Russian male dancers. He learned his technique in China\227but found his soul and emotions in America.

Particularly fascinating is seeing the transformation of China from the time that Li was 11 to the end of the film, when he was an established dancer and was permitted to return to his village for a visit. This movie made me very happy.

The Town.

We Americans are a mobile people. Certainly in the West, most of us live without benefit of much family around us and certainly no tradition of connection to our town that goes back generations. Not so with the young men in Ben Afflick\222s new film, The Wall. These are young Irish-Americans whose families have lived for generations in Charlestown, near Boston. And their heritage is not cozy; they are criminals, as were their fathers before them.

Afflick and his friends are bank robbers, as were their fathers, one of whom, Afflick\222s father, is currently in prison.

The young men, lifelong friends, are planning a new bank heist. Afflick, an almost Olympic hockey player who could have escaped this community, decides to come back and falls into the old profession. He is by far smarter than his friends, one of whom is an impulsive, short-tempered killer.

The gang successfully robs the bank and briefly takes the pretty young bank manager hostage. This time, the FBI is on the hunt for them\227and Afflick worries that the young woman might be of too much help to the feds. He manages to meet her in a coin-laundry and they start getting to know each other\227and to the surprise of both\227fall in love.

This wonderful movie goes beyond heist and even film noir; it is a venture into criminality, violence, and the redemption of love.

Cairo Time.

This is another art-house film that is worth finding. It is a most seductive love story without a single moment of sex in it\227a rarity today. But it is more than a love story; it is a cross-cultural contact that teeters on the brink of possible unhappiness.

Patricia Clarkson plays the role of Juliette, a magazine editor, wife of a UN diplomat, and mother of two adult children. She and her husband had planned to have a holiday in Cairo, where she has never been, but he is delayed by problems in Gaza. He sends his former colleague, Tareq, a handsome, sophisticated Syrian who now runs a coffee house in Cairo.

Travel disorients us all. She is stuck in a luxury hotel, bored and restless, and distressed that her husband cannot come. When she tries to explore Cairo herself, young men follow her around whispering seductive things in her ear, and she realizes that she cannot deal with the hypersexuality of leering male Muslim society by herself. She seeks out Tareq, playing chess in his all-male coffee house, and he

offers to show her the Cairo that he loves.

The two of them, thrown together under these circumstances of an exotic, crowded, dusty city with a river that has hosted one of the world's oldest continuous societies, is heady. But as they get to know each other, the vast differences of their cultures emerge. Egypt is a male-dominated culture in every way. It is also very much divided by class, which Tareq takes for granted, but it bothers Juliette.

She also learns more about women's lives in Cairo: a young girl who is being shunted off for marriage in Gaza, begs her to mail a letter to her lover to let him know she is pregnant (and will probably die

when found not to be a virgin on her wedding night). Another young woman, whose fiancé is a diplomat, confesses to Juliette that she had an Egyptian lover for whom she almost left the diplomat. "Why didn't you?" "Because," she says, "these men are wonderful lovers, but once you are theirs, they are jealous, possessive, and impossible."

Tareq takes Juliette to visit a carpet factory where very young girls are weaving carpets. When Juliette comments on their youth and asks why they are not in school, he says that because they are uneducated, they have to earn money for their dowries. That is how their lives are, and that's that.

Ultimately, Juliette must choose what her life will be. I found Tareq exceedingly charming, but I know what my choice would be now. It was not the same when I was 20. Furthermore, this Cairo was a lot more beautiful than the Cairo I visited twice. Only the traffic snarls in the streets reflect the dysfunction of every element of this city.