

Laina At the Movies, December, 2010
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Client 9

This fascinating documentary is as emotionally involving as most fiction (at least for me.) It is the story of former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer. As New York's Attorney General, he was one of the brightest, most upright, and unflagging prosecutors of mal-doers that New York has ever had. He went after Wall Street big shots who played dangerous games with the nation's economy; the very lucrative escort business (very expensive prostitution); and corruption by politicians. He was fearless. This man was on the fast track to becoming President of the United States.

I still feel heartbreak at how foolish he was to bring all of this crashing about his ears due to secret behavior that I have not yet been able to comprehend. This man had a splendid career, a beautiful and adoring wife and children, and had never had a blot on his reputation before he took up with the very industry that he had been prosecuting a high-end escort service.

The mystery here is about the sexuality of rich and powerful men, men who are rich enough to do whatever they like and feel entitled to act on these desires. There is something compelling about a man being able to afford an hour (or a night) with some of the most beautiful and accomplished women in the world almost flaunting this ability to their male peers. It is like being a member of a very exclusive club for them. Very expensive goods.

But not for Spitzer. He was so righteous, so blessed by having such a lovely family, and such a Mr. Straight that when he was tempted to exploit the very industry that he has been prosecuting, he was paranoid about anybody finding out. He knew that he was doing wrong and was very afraid of having this secret revealed. Why did he do it?

For me to even fathom this action, I have to plumb literature: Alan Patton's famous South African novel: Too Late the Falerope, written at the time that sexual relations between blacks and whites were severely punished. The hero was a decent policeman, happily married and living a proper life, who was inexplicably drawn into a clandestine and tawdry sexual relationship with a Black woman. There was nothing in this relationship resembling love; it was purely sex. And his weakness made his life crash around him just as Eliot Spitzer's life did. There is nothing worse than a hypocrite an official who prosecutes violations of the law and then succumbs to the same crime themselves.

I can never understand this sort of meaningless lust. Perhaps being female renders me tone deaf to the appeal of the kind of risk some men assume in pursuing the forbidden. Surely sex should mean more than that to anyone with values.

In the movie, Spitzer speaks for himself and blames it on hubris his own vanity and seems to mean it. I suspect that his many enemies also played a part in his downfall, but Spitzer blames nobody but himself.

You can see the reinvented Spitzer now as a political talk show co-host on CNN news. I wonder if he has a future beyond that.

Burlesque

Aside from the innate vulgarity of burlesque, which is essentially a tease for the titillation of men with nothing better to do, this movie was fun. I love watching Cher, who is aging like good wine (and I have a daughter who looks like her); and Stanley Tucci is another one a pleasure to watch. Christina Aguilera played the eager Burlesque Theater wannabe and it was amazing to hear her voice sounding much like Cher herself! This is not a profound movie, but I thought it was fun and entertaining.

The Black Swan

Human beings are made for challenges, and we can see this in serious sports and in the fine arts. Playing professional golf, for example, requires physical movements that are essentially unnatural. Gold champions often find their older years painful with back and knee problems. Tennis players injure their elbows again, a result of unnatural and repetitive movements. But there is nothing more unnatural and damaging to the human body than ballet and yet nothing more beautiful. Those who strive for such excellence in these endeavors do pay a price for success.

Black Swan is a psychological horror film that focuses on a perfectionist young ballet dancer, played by Natalie Portman, who is chosen to dance the double role of the White Queen and the Black Swan in Tchaikovsky's beautiful Swan Lake. Although she performs the role of the virginal White Queen very well, she must plumb the depths of her very being to assume the role of the Black Swan, who is evil, sensual, and very aggressive. The process of learning to dance this role completely undoes the sanity of a young woman who was not all that normal to begin with. Portman, who had studied dance, trained for several years for this film, and it shows. It is also clear that the combination of stresses, not eating, and obsessive training, can indeed turn a young dancer into a nut case.

Strangely enough, this horror movie was fun to watch and the boldness of the director in going over the top had the audience laughing but watching nonetheless. It is worthwhile to see Natalie Portman in the role of the dancer and it is always worthwhile to see any kind of performance of the wonderful Swan Lake.

The Fighter. Just as the demands on the body of becoming a ballet dancer are excessive, so are the physical demands of becoming a prizefighter. The boxing game is not something that I can take in real life, but if the movie good enough (as this one is), and I know that they are not really pummeling each other, I will see it. To see this film, I also violated another principle of mine: not to spend time with people in a film who represent those in life that I would not have over for lunch.

The Fighter, however was worth the time. This film is more about family than about fighting. The story is based on a real welterweight fighter who became world champion despite every difficulty. His difficulties included his older brother, his trainer, who was hopelessly drug addicted and not very smart and a fierce mother who was his manager. This mother of nine (seven girls and two boys) claimed that she loved them all equally which she most certainly did not. Her eldest, the Prodigal Son, received all of her love while the rest struggled for attention, to the detriment of his career, until he could get out from under his dysfunctional family..

What is most worthwhile in this movie is the acting: Mark Wahlberg playing Mickey Ward, the aspiring boxer; Christian Bale as Dicky Ecklund, his unreliable brother; Melissa Leo as his mother-manager; and Amy Adams playing Charlene, Mickey's girlfriend who helps rescue him from the bullying of his family. These actors are all at the top of their game and Wahlberg, like Natalie Portman in The Black Swan, trained for years to play this boxer. Most impressive.

True Grit. My husband and I have a deal: that he will see one movie a year with me and it was True Grit this time. His problem is that as soon as the theater lights go off, he goes to sleep. I am happy to say that True Grit kept him awake and entertained.

It is not easy to make a film like this that had such popularity as the former one in which John Wayne played Rooster Cogburn, the one-eyed drunken Marshall who is hired by a very spunky 14-year-old girl to help her hunt down her father's murderer a very nasty wild-west outlaw. The Coen Brothers (most famous for their bloody films Fargo and No Country For Old Men) have made their first family movie and it was wonderful! This version was much closer to the book on which both films were based and the proper language of all the characters (except when drunk) in the face of their very bad behaviors were a little like watching Macbeth, a very savage play with characters speaking very beautiful English. I loved it!

Jeff Bridges was a delight as Rooster Cogburn, holding his own against the memory of John Wayne; Matt Damon was very funny as a Texas Marshall who was also after the same murderer; and best of all was a young actress (13 at the time of filming), Hailee Steinfeld, who held her own with all the scenery-chewers in this film. I am sure we will see her again.

The King's Speech. What a wonderful way to end the movie year with this lovely film about King George VI, who had a crippling stammer, and an Australian speech therapist (non-licensed) who helped him deal with his disability and ultimately---to a successful reign as king the British Empire.

The story is true and has not been told or dramatized until after Queen Mother Elizabeth died at her request. The movie is about a number of issues: an untimely abdication of Edward VIII, the elder son of King George V, and its consequence for the next in line, Prince Albert, who was crippled by a stammer that made public

speaking impossible.

The story is also about Britain in the 1930s being faced by the rise of two horrors for Europe: Hitler and Stalin, and how the British Empire should deal with them. Had Edward VIII not abdicated, England's entry into World War II might not have happened with dire consequences for the world. That King and his dreadful wife, Wallace Simpson, were not only shallow, but were very impressed by how Hitler handled things.

Prince Albert (Bertie to his family) was terrified at the prospect of having to become King and lead his nation through dire times. This is the story of a man agonized by self-doubt and fear who not only overcame his difficulties, but served as a model of decency and intelligence as King.

Remembering how different child-rearing was a century ago than now is enough to make us all feel very lucky. The number of British stammerers used to be notorious in part due to the old superstition about being born left-handed and the cruel insistence on punishing this condition. Add to this the cruelty and fear of the elites to have children who were in any way abnormal or different. One of King George's brothers was epileptic and shut away from sight, although he was said to be a delightful and clever boy. He died in his adolescence from the disease that had no treatment at the time of epilepsy.

Colin Firth, who played Prince Albert, may well get an Academy Award for his extraordinary performance of a prince with a destabilizing stammer. Geoffrey Rush, always wonderful, was his therapist and over the years real friend. Helena Bonham Carter, who seems so at home in period dramas, was luminous and loving as Bertie's wife and mother of today's Queen Elizabeth and the late Princess Margaret-Rose. And two of my least favorite people--the Duke of Windsor and his American much divorced wife---were played by Guy Pearce and Eva Best with horrifying accuracy. The world was blessed by their removal from any position of power.

I think this film could well become a classic favorite and I for one would love to see it once a year.