

Laina with April 2011 movies  
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Of Gods and Men.

This was a difficult movie to watch because it was a contemplation\227a contemplation of French monks living in an Algerian mountain village who must contemplate their inevitable murder. This film was based on the true story of a small group of monks who remained in Algeria, despite warnings to leave, because they believed that this was their duty to the poor villagers who depended on them, and their duty to God.

We meet this band of brothers\227many of them very old---who have been living in Algeria for a long time. They raise sheep, produce honey and fresh vegetables, provide medical care for the village, conduct prayers and services for themselves, and contemplate the life of Jesus. They represented what has always been best in Christianity, gentleness, service, and what they consider imitation of the life of Jesus, the shepherd of men.

From 1992 to 1998, an insurgency war roiled Algeria. The military dictatorship that had ruled since Algeria\222s freedom from France had become corrupt and out of touch. In a round of urban elections (an experiment), Islamist parties won. There were no other options\227just support of the status quo or Islamists. The government responded by canceling further elections. The Islamists\227several factions of thugs using Islam as an excuse, left a trail of slaughter across Algeria. They arrived at night and murdered women not sufficiently covered; they assassinated journalists and artists; they decapitated a group of women swimming at a private beach; and they went after \223unbelievers\224 such as the monks.

This is a heartbreaking story that poses good against evil, one would think. However, the filmmaker found it necessary to insert a bit of awkward political correctness so that certain audiences would accept the film. They attempt to make both parties in the insurgency equally evil, which they most certainly were not. The government, for all its lack of democracy, was protecting people as much as they could from nightriders professing religious zeal. The nightriders were just fanatics, thieves, and butchers.

In a letter from one of the monks, voice over, we are told that these nightriders were not real Muslims; that the gentle villagers were the real, tolerant Muslims. This is palpably not true. Both the nightriders and the villagers were Muslims\227representing two faces of Islam\227just as the monks and the Borgias (now to be seen in a TV series) represented two very different kinds of Catholics. Why tiptoe around this issue?

The entertainment industry has ignored this little French film, which is a shame because it should be seen.

The Tempest

This play was Shakespeare\222s last\227which he signaled by the wizard breaking his magic staff and casting his book of spells into the sea. Shakespeare was indeed a wizard, who has enchanted us for centuries.

The Tempest is part fairy tale; part tribute to the discovery of the New World with its strange and mystifying people; and most important of all, exploration of what is human. In the original play, a Duke has been usurped by his brother and exiled with his infant daughter to a desert island. The Duke is also an alchemist (wizard chemist) with the ability to summon storms, force the sole native of the island, Caliban (cannibal) to serve the Duke and his daughter, and entrap a magical imp, Ariel (spirit of the air) to serve them also. (Slavery was already in the air in the 16th century as the Spanish and Portuguese revived the African slave trade.)

The Duke summons up a storm and shipwrecks his evil brother, traveling with an entourage, including the King of Naples and his teen-age son. The play follows the adventures of the shipwrecked, their servants, and the astonishment of the Wizard\222s daughter, Miranda (her name means \223wonderful\224), now 15, as she observes the first human beings aside from her father that she has ever seen. Miranda speaks the funniest line in the play, as she notes: \223O, wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, That has such people in't!\224 She is, of course, unaware of what a trove of villains she is admiring.

The movie, directed by the talented Julie Taymor (Lion King), makes a few changes in the play. Prospero, the Duke, is now Prospera, the Duchess, played by Helen Mirren, now a magician/witch instead of a wizard. This bit of imaginative casting does not hurt the play. It actually helps that Miranda has never seen a human male. However, despite the magical effects that Taymor brought to filming this play, I felt that The Tempest has its best magic in the words themselves. I felt it moved a bit slowly\227and although I left the theater happy that I had seen a Shakespeare play, I was not as enchanted as I had hoped. Sometimes less is more. But do see it anyway. There can never be too much Shakespeare.

Jane Eyre

As with Shakespeare plays, I can never get enough of Jane Eyre either. I have seen many versions of this Charlotte Bronte 19th century novel, the best being one done through Masterpiece Theatre, a three-hour miniseries.

The current filmed version was lovely, romantic, dark, passionate, with exceptionally moving actors. Mia Wasikowsk, was delicate but with an unshakable moral core; Michael Fassbender, Edward Fairfax Rochester, grows from a restless, unhappy man with too much money and no purpose in life to a passionate lover, enchanted by his modest, plain governess whose real worth he sees. His secret, when uncovered, changes both of their lives in a heartbreaking way.

Indeed, Cary Joji Fukunaga\222s film does make one love the novel even more. Its only flaw was that with a two-hour frame, things had to be cut that I missed, particularly expanding on the nature of Rochester\222s social equals and giving us more of the wretched charity school of Jane Eyre\222s childhood.

One always has to make choices\227and a two-hour Jane Eyre is still a very good thing indeed.

The Conspirators

Coming out around the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War, and around the date of the assassination of President Lincoln, this important movie explores constitutional protections (or not) during a time of war. Of course this issue is not merely a nostalgic visit to the past, but has current importance as our country grapples with how to provide fair trials for Islamist terrorists, the prisoners at Guantanamo.

Robert Redford directed this fascinating film about the trial and execution of the first woman in the United States, Mary Surratt (played by Robin Wright Penn), who ran a boarding house in Washington that was a gathering place for southern diehards plotting the assassinations of President Lincoln and key members of his cabinet. As the war ended, a war that had embittered the entire country and was responsible for horrendous loss of life, it was not certain that the South would accept their loss without further mayhem. Not all the Southern generals had yet surrendered; Jefferson Davis, the Confederacy president, was on the run hoping to rally more support for continued conflict; and conspirators of all sorts were plotting assassinations.

Lincoln was murdered while attending the theater with his wife; as news of this reached other cabinet ministers and military officers at a party across the city, the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton (Kevin Klein) took charge to avert what he feared would be national chaos. He wanted the conspirators caught, tried by a military tribunal, and hung. Stanton took charge, pushing aside the newly elected vice president, Andrew Johnson, was a southerner whose sympathy for the south was suspected. (Johnson\222s scuttling of the reconstruction later proved this suspicion valid.)

There was no doubt about the guilt of the conspirators, all of whom had been arrested, except for the ringleader, John Wilkes Booth and one companion, who were tracked down and shot by soldiers. The sole woman in this conspiracy may or may not have been part of the plot, but her son (who had fled) most certainly had.

A former Maryland Senator and former U.S. Attorney General, convinced that justice demands a fair civilian trial, he defends the male conspirators but puts pressure on a young attorney, Frederick Aiken (James McAvoy), a former Union soldier and hero, to defend Mary Surratt. Aiken is doubtful of the woman\222s innocence, but reluctantly takes on her defense. A military tribunal is assembled, and despite feelings then (and now) that it will not serve justice as would a civil trial, the tribunal does try to be just.

I think this film can stimulate a good deal of discussion among us about that trial and our own issues today with terrorists. Some believe that no matter what, not even at a time of war, should we surrender a civilian, constitutional trial. I for one understand that sometimes national defense might require otherwise. Chaos and anarchy do not further democracy. But see this movie and decide for yourself.