

Laina with May 2011 Movies
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Water for Elephants.

In this entertaining movie, we are taken back to 1931 when a young man, Jacob Jankowski (Robert Pattinson), about to graduate from Cornell with his veterinary degree, has a major reversal. His parents die in a car crash and he winds up without money and no way to finish his studies.

He hops a freight train and is taken in by a group of hoboes who are roustabouts for a circus. He begins shoveling muck out of the animal cages\227but events reveal him to be an almost vet\227and he becomes the circus veterinarian.

The story becomes a love triangle when the young man falls in love with Marlana (Reese Witherspoon), the circus equestrian. She, however, is the wife of an extremely unpredictable circus owner, August (played by the amazing Christoph Waltz who dazzled us in the Inglourious Basterds). The fourth protagonist in this film is a wonderful elephant, Tai, who is loved by both the young man and Marlana.

The film is pure pleasure in the atmospherics of the 1930s traveling circuses and the always wonderful and complex acting of Waltz, who can make a villain both terrifying and human.

Winter In Wartime

By the time you read this, Winter in Wartime should be available on Netflix. It did not play long in the theater, but should have.

This is a serious coming of age story about a 14-year-old Dutch boy as World War II was in its last year. The boy discovers a wounded British paratrooper and not only helps him hide, but becomes involved with the \223Resistance.\224

His father is mayor of their little town and by having civil relations with the Nazi occupation, manages to protect his citizens. To the hot-headed adolescent, however, this seems cowardly. He much prefers his uncle, who is active in the Resistance.

The child learns a painful lesson about what heroism really is by the end of the film. Except for an overly dramatic music score, I think this could become a real classic in films that deal with war, particularly with World War II in Europe.

Queen to Play

When the French make a good movie, it is a really good movie! In this one, what appears to be another sort of coming of age story, this time of a middle-aged hotel maid who discovers chess, a game that transforms her life and transcends her lower class. Yes, the French still are quite class conscious.

Sandrine Bonnaire plays the role of the maid, a housewife with a shipyard worker husband and an adolescent daughter. She has few expectations for herself or husband, but scrapes to send her daughter to school and on a class trip to England. The daughter, initially a thoughtless adolescent, is embarrassed by her parents\222 bourgeois lives.

By chance, Bonnaire discovers a couple in the hotel where she works playing chess. She becomes fascinated by this game, and buys her husband an inexpensive electronic chess set for his birthday. He has no interest, but she does, and when she cannot learn enough from the chess set manual, she seeks out one of her clients, the mysterious Dr. Kroger, to teach her chess in return for cleaning his house. Kroger is played by the astonishing Kevin Kline, who speaks and acts in French as well as he does English!

The key to Chess is the Queen, who is more powerful than the King. This fascinates Bonnaire and her daughter\227a budding feminist who encourages her mother to enter a chess contest.

A pleasure not mentioned by critics is the site of this film\227only referred to as an Island not far from Marseilles. It is Corsica, a place with astonishing vistas, an unfamiliar and dazzling landscape fit for a queen.

13 Assassins

I love sushi, sashimi, and Japanese samurai films. They seem to go together. I have recently revisited Shogun, the wonderful TV series based on James Clavell's historic novel about an Englishman washed ashore in 17th century Japan. I also remember well the many Samurai movies that I have seen and loved.

13 Assassins is the latest of these, which will surely become a cult film. It is the story of 13 Samurai (actually 12 and one peasant who wields a wicked slingshot) who come together to save Japan from the Shogun's heir and half brother, a psychopathic monster.

This film, despite being very bloody, is a morality tale that explores duty, the obligation to be loyal unto death to one's lord and the higher obligation to care about the nation itself. Autocracy can provide stability, and attacking that autocracy can lead to civil war, which is to nobody's benefit. However, if the autocrat is mad and evil, civil war can come because of it.

The Samurai are a diverse lot, several of them without masters, mercenaries for hire, as the whole Japanese culture of the mid-19th century was beginning to come apart. The challenge to take out the Shogun's young half-brother represents the beginning moves to produce a Japan that would care about more than just the nobility. This heir to the seat of power regarded nothing and nobody above him, and his most perverted blood lusts were his by right.

This film explores duty and loyalty and concern for the bigger picture of a nation state. Another Netflix film that I watched yesterday was the even better movie, A Man For All Seasons, that follows the fortunes of Henry VIII's chancellor, Sir Thomas More, one of the most famous lawyers and thinkers of his time (16th century). Duty and loyalty are not always one in the same; they sometimes do conflict. This is a human dilemma.