

Laina with September Movies
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Buck

This lovely documentary was absolutely engrossing, and left me thinking about its message long after leaving the theater. I am not a pet owner (never had a dog, cat, or horse), but I have always marveled at the variety and special character of these domesticated animals. I love watching how cats walk, and how dogs try to put up with the behavior of their owners (including the brutes among them). As for horses, I was in love with them as was every other 10-year-old girl.

Buck Brannaman is an amazing horse trainer (and the model for the wonderful Horse Whisper film), who is able to assure the most terrified wild horse that he means it no harm, and that a relationship between the horse and its human can be respectful on both parts. He is no touchy-feely hippy, but a real cowboy, raised among the stratum of American society that lives in rural areas and makes a living using horses. It helps to remember that before the internal combustion engine, horses were the absolute standard of power (horsepower) for human travel, pulling vehicles, and farm and ranch labor. Once we all needed them.

This movie has a deeper meaning than just how to be respectful to horses. Buck was a child phenomenon, along with his older brother, taken on the road and performing agile rope tricks on television. What the admiring public did not know was the fiendish beatings these children suffered at the hands of their (usually) drunken father.

That a man with such a hellish childhood could grow up to be a decent, loving, husband, father, and teacher to so many people about how to respectfully train, not \223break\224 horses, is an enormous tribute to the human spirit. This is a remarkable film and one to watch many times over the years.

The Debt

This film was an adaptation of an older (2007) Israeli film, Ha-Hov, a story that raises a troubling issue: does getting revenge, even when justified by the horror of a monstrous offense, do damage to the vengeance takers themselves? And do the requirements of espionage and secrecy also take a toll on good people? Is it inevitable that warfare reduces both sides to the lowest common denominator?

History tells us that this does happen. When World War II broke out, the liberal democracies of the West were horrified that the Japanese and Germans could consider total bombing of cities and mass slaughter of civilians. Yet, by the end of that conflict, the West too engaged in this same horror on Japan and Germany. Warfare, especially when extensive, is always a race to the bottom. That is history's message.

In this film, the story is that three young Israeli Mossad agents (all volunteers) were sent into East Berlin at the height of the Cold War to hunt down a wanted Nazi war criminal, a monster surgeon who specialized in horrific experiments on women inmates of Nazi prison camps. The two men and young woman find the doctor (who is still loathsome and unrepentant, although now a normal gynecologist, living in plain sight in East Berlin. They seize him and keep him locked up until they can spirit him out of East Berlin and take him to Israel for trial. He manages to escape, and the team leader convinces the others that they must lie that he was killed by them during the escape attempt. They know that he, wherever he is, will never tell; he wants to stay alive.

Thirty years later, we follow the three agents again, two of them married and with a grownup daughter, a writer who has written a gangbusters book about the heroism of her mother. An investigative journalist in the Ukraine has gotten wind that a Nazi who was supposed to be dead is alive and living in a retirement hospital. With concern about their heroic saga being outed, the now elderly woman Mossad agent must go to Ukraine to finish the job that she blew before.

This film is a thriller indeed, and the acting and directing is topnotch. Director John Madden has assembled a double crew of superb actors to play the young agents and their older incarnations. Jessica Chastain and Helen Mirren play the young and older agent. Avatar's Sam Worthington plays the young David and Ciaran Hinds the older David; Marton Csokas plays the young Stephan, and Tom Wilkinson the older Stephan.

Jesper Christensen plays the evil, mocking Nazi doctor.

I loved everything about this film until the last few minutes, in which my own bones ached at the spectacle of a 70-year-old woman having to go back in the assassin game again. Ugh.

Ending notwithstanding, this is a very exciting and thought-provoking film. The Nazi tells our heroine quite accurately that Jews really don't have the stomach for killing. They do it, but unlike the Nazis, don't enjoy it.

The Guard.

For some out-and-out enjoyment, pick up this Irish film, a hilarious dark comedy about a bored, small-town Irish cop who stumbles into a couple of murders that have connections with perhaps a very big drug cartel (in Ireland, of all places). A hotshot Black FBI agent comes to town and despite a bad first impression, they team up with wonderful results. The very funny Brendan Gleeson, an Irish sort of Archie Bunker (deliberately politically incorrect), and the earnest and elegant Don Cheadle, are the unlikely partners. The criminals are much like those in Pulp Fiction: thugs who read philosophy and have elevated discussions on the same. That certainly made me laugh.

Contagion

Out of a number of scary films about a global pandemic, this is one of the better ones. Steven Soderbergh makes this story seem very real, and his cast is stellar\important actors willing to play small cameos, such as Matt Damon, Gwyneth Paltrow, Marion Cotillard, and Kate Winslet. This plague follows much more quickly, of course, the path of all previous pandemics. They almost always begin in Asia (the exception being the first Bubonic Plague that came from Yemen), and travel as quickly as merchant caravans and ships (in the past) and airplanes today. New diseases take a terrible toll on their first run (often up to 30 percent death toll), and over successive runs, people develop some immunities. It is hard to believe that measles on its first run was a deadly killer, only to become a serious childhood disease over time. Measles was certainly deadly, as was smallpox, on the indigenous native American population with no prior history of exposure.

This film is fascinating, and is surprisingly not depressing. Worth seeing, I think, and a needed tribute to how science really works. A well done thriller.

Circumstance

This Iranian film only played for one week in Santa Cruz, so most of you would only see this if you order it on Netflix later. There have been so many wonderful Iranian movies, made in the face of nasty Islamic Republic censorship, that I certainly wanted to see this film, which has received considerable cinematic attention.

The film was not shot in Iran, but was made outside the country and was written and directed by Maryam Keshavarz. Her intention was to show the restless underground youth scene, and she certainly did this.

The problem for me was that I am unmoved by spoiled, rich young Iranians whose only revolt against their government is drugs, sex, and heavy metal. It seems to me that they could do better than that!

In the story, we follow a brother and sister, the parents, and the sister's best friend. The teens have grown up in a wealthy household filled with music, art, and books. The best friend, Shireen, has been taken in by her uncle and aunt when her parents, professors, were executed by the state.

The parents, evidently a loving couple, have their hands full trying to keep their children out of trouble. Their son, returned from drug rehab (rather than jail) has exchanged one obsession for another: this time fanatical attachment to religion. The girls pursue very risky actions and finally both get caught by the religious police, who, true to form, can be bought off with a large bribe.

What some reviewers see as a film about lesbians as we see the two young women in sexual experimentation, they do not understand that homosexual activity has a long history in repressive Islam. When young people have little or no contact with the opposite sex, they turn to what they have.

When I consider how wretched women's lives are in Iran and even worse in other parts

of the Muslim world, I cannot waste much sympathy on spoiled, shallow princesses and princelings. I was annoyed, and wouldn't recommend this film.