

Laina with October Movies
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Laina At the Movies
By Laina Farhat-Holzman
October 2011

Moneyball

This film is based on a book about the Oakland A's general manager, Billy Beane, who put together a baseball club on a budget by employing computer-generated analysis to draft his players. You might think that this is a film about baseball, but it is much more than that; it is even more about gaming, doing the unexpected with numbers that nobody had used before that. (Perhaps the 2008 economic disaster owed its genesis to similar gaming.)

The film stars Brad Pitt as Billy Beane and Jonah Hill as a young economics wiz, Peter Brand, who convinces Beane that the professionals have been drafting players all wrong. Beane has a budget that cannot pay the salaries demanded by really good players. If he wants any chance to win the World Series, he must find another way of putting together a team.

Watching these two work out a system that turns a losing team into a winner is great fun. We learn that there is really much more to baseball than just numbers as well. This is a delightful movie filled with irony, clever dialogue and acting, and some thoughts to take away afterwards.

The Ides of March

The title of this film gives a hint of what will happen: a great big betrayal. The original Ides of March was the 15th of March in which Julius Caesar (of ancient Rome fame) was assassinated by some of his friends who feared that their republic was about to become an empire. Politics, ambition, and betrayal seem to go together and have done so for 2,000 years.

George Clooney directed, wrote, and starred in this film, playing Governor Mike Morris, an exciting democratic candidate running for president. Ryan Gosling plays Stephen Meyers, a very smart young campaign operative, who thinks that Governor Morris walks on water. Philip Seymour Hoffman plays Paul Zara, a grizzled, cynical campaign manager who has seen it all over the years and has no compunctions about doing whatever it takes.

Paul Giamatti plays Tom Duffy, the campaign manager of the Republican opponent, who sees an opportunity for some dirty tricks and goes for it. He tempts the smart young staffer with an appeal to his ambition which does not seem to work, but causes major trouble for him.

Another familiar element of political campaigns is the use of eager young people who willingly intern in the campaigns and often find themselves exploited sexually and otherwise by the very officials they worship. We have seen that one before more than once!

Gosling's character learns quickly about danger, betrayal, and the loss of ideals. His epiphany is fascinating (and to this idealist, too bad). Good movie!

The Mill and the Cross

After attending the annual Renaissance Faire last week, an event in which romantic hippies of all ages attempt to live out their romantic fantasy about the colorful European Middle Ages. I confess to enjoy being called milady by vendors of roasted turkey legs and sellers of little pies and magic potions; I love seeing medieval jousts and farces, the daily processions of the Good Queen Bess and her entourage, and monks carrying signs warning that the world is going to end.

It is fun. It is also missing the most terrible element of the real medieval world: its stink. The poor in one piece of clothing worn all day and slept in all night, until the garment falls apart; people with loathsome diseases and foul decaying mouths; gratuitous and casual violence, including heads on pikes. It was a period in which people lived only for the day; when a sneeze could mean the onset of the Black Death; when the king or nobles (or church) had life and death control over everybody.

The movie, The Mill and the Cross, exposes us to that same period, albeit minus the

stink, but is a far truer representative of what that time was like. This film is very unusual: it is like stepping inside a great work of art, Peter Bruegel's "The Way to Calvary," and not only watch how the painting was created, but what it was saying—not only about the crucifixion of Jesus and the Bible's telling of it, but about the repetition of such horrors in the daily life of the Middle Ages. The film is set in 16th century Flanders, under the nasty occupation of Spain and the Inquisition. We see the painting unfolding with the story and the message that Peter Bruegel was showing those who cared to pay attention. This film is an extraordinary contemplation of art, religion, and history. Lech Majewski directed, Michael Francis Gibson was the writer, Rutger Hauer is the artist, Michael York his patron, and Charlotte Rampling the Virgin Mary.

Margin Call

This fascinating and very uncomfortable movie was based on (loosely) the collapse of Lehman Brothers at the start of the financial crisis of 2007. We follow a 24-hour period in which the management of the company has recognized the disaster they had created through unconscionable risky behavior (little different from gambling with other people's money) and they are scrambling for a way to save themselves at the expense of their clients.

It is fascinating to see this disaster as handled by human beings—not some sort of theoretical evil. The movie stars Kevin Spacey, Demi Moore, Paul Bettany, Jeremy Irons, Zachary Quinto, Stanley Tucci, Simon Baker, and Penn Badgley, all enormously talented and drawing the audience in.

If there is a villain in the film, it is the company CEO, John Tuld (played with loathsome authority by Irons). Tuld has decided to sell off all the toxic assets before the market can react to the news of how worthless they are. He justified this action by citing all the other market crashes for the past century, which were just part of our system. He has no concern for all the lives that these crashes destroy. Tuld considers these disasters inevitable, which they are not. Appropriate regulation will at least minimize their effects. Markets are not self-correcting.

There is a lot more detail about how this disaster happened, but a few things are important to note and correct. The SEC, the government watchdog, was extremely lax. There was no regulation of derivatives (perhaps the major cause of this fiasco); inadequate reserve requirements, too much interlocking of investment banking houses, extreme overdependence on math models to manage risk, gambling risk, and caring more for revenue than for prudent risk management.

We also see what happens when the best young minds with Ph.Ds choose to make money fast rather than practice the fields of their training. About 25% of Cal Tech graduates with advanced degrees in math and physics took jobs on Wall Street as Quantitative Analysts, making nothing of worth but pushing imaginary paper around. This is a terrible waste of talent.

This is a film about the violation of trust, bad ethics and values, and the long-range misery such actions cause. It should be an opportunity to discuss seriously the use of oversight: regulations that should and must be watchdogs over the worst of human behavior.