

Laina with April Movies  
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Laina At the Movies  
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Effie Gray

If even at the beginning of Downton Abby, during the Edwardian era, when sexuality was something done behind closed doors and, as one spicy lady said: "Do what you like, but don't do it in the street and frighten the horses," the sex in Effie Gray was not just hidden, it was smothered.

Emma Thompson is not only a marvelous actress, but also wrote a sensitive screenplay based on the true story of a young woman trapped in a marriage with a famous art critic, John Ruskin (dates) whose sexual hang-ups were, apparently, not that rare during that time. Ruskin (like Lewis Carroll of Alice in Wonderland fame) loved little girls but not so much the grown women they became. Ruskin (Played by Greg Wise) had known, and was very fond of Euphemia (Effie) Gray (played by Dakota Fanning) since she was 12 and married her, imagining her "perfect" until their wedding night when, seeing her naked body, he fled from the room and never touched her again. Why he married her is not clear, but his monstrously hovering parents, in particular his mother, seemed to think his career would benefit from having a pretty wife on his arm at soirees. None of them seemed to have any interest in her bearing children, it seems.

Effie, innocent as she was, knew there was something amiss, and her own growing sexuality began to create in her a disease common among 19th century women, something called "hysteria." She had nervous symptoms, eating disorders, patches of hair falling out, anemia, sleep disorder, something her family doctor recognized and the cure he recommended was for her husband to take her away from his parents. Go to Venice, he recommended. In Venice, her husband noticed Effie's growing sexuality and he began to see her as whore-in-waiting, no longer virgin. She tried, but failed to awaken her husband's sexuality and began to hate him.

Upon returning home, at an artistic dinner party given by Sir John Eastlake and his wife (Eastlake is President of the Royal Academy of Arts), Ruskin defends a new artistic movement, the Pre-Raphaelites, and one of its brightest young artists, John Everett Millais (played by Tom Sturridge). Elizabeth Eastlake befriends Effie and encourages her to stand up for her own ideas, the first time anyone has ever done such a thing.

Ruskin takes his wife and Millais to Scotland where Millais can paint and he can write and he hopes that the bracing Scottish air can return his wife to health. While there, Millais observes how cruel Ruskin is to Effie and Ruskin observes that something is beginning to happen between his wife and Millais. Things turn ugly.

Effie goes to see Elizabeth Eastlake, her only friend. When she tells Elizabeth the story of her marriage, Elizabeth sends her to a doctor and then to a lawyer. What happens next is worth sitting through the rest of the suffocating Victorian society to relish. Good for Effie! Good for Millais! The Ruskins, parents and child, deserve each other. Brava for Emma Thompson!

Child 44

This is probably not a movie that many of you will see, but you should. It will not be playing in a multiplex. It is an American-British film, two and a half hours long, a thriller, very dark, and takes place in a very dark place indeed, the Soviet Union between 1933 and 1953

I am not crazy about art films that depress me, which Birdman did, but this is different; it is a redeeming story, a story that shows us that no matter how terrible the culture, no matter how oppressive the government, human beings can surprise us with the ability to be decent. This is like the redemption of King Lear, of Hamlet, also terribly dark stories with very evil people yet with people who learn something and who manage to rise above it.

There could scarcely be a worse place than the Soviet Union, even when compared with the obvious thuggery of the briefer Nazi empire, because the Soviets pretended to virtue and foolish idealists around the world fell for it.

The Ukraine, long the breadbasket of Russia, counted on grain produced by the Ukrainian peasants who refused to collectivise. Stalin started deporting them, and then went on to the "final solution," confiscated their entire harvest in 1933, forcing them to starve. This film begins mentioning the forced starvation of 4 million people in Ukraine in 1933-4, not counting those already deported. We meet orphan boys, starving and abused in orphanages, crying themselves to sleep. (The film does not cover the outrage of Stalin denying the famine, selling the grain on the world market, the New York Times reporter Will Duranty backing Stalin, and two foreign eye-witnesses, trying to tell the world only to be accused by the press of being "right-wing anti-communists.")

We next meet the hero of the film in 1945, one of the orphan boys now grown up and a soldier, storming Hitler's bunker and raising the Soviet flag over the Nazi headquarters. We can already see that he is not crazy about all this killing and posing with the flag as his buddies. He is Leo Demidov, played by Tom Hardy, who later becomes an MGB Agent (Military Police).

We meet him next in 1953, a swaggering MGB agent, fully indoctrinated by his corrupt Communist state, in pursuit of a "traitor" with a team of subordinates. They follow the suspect to a farm, hidden by a young farmer, his wife, and two little girls. While questioning the farmer and his family, the suspect makes a run for it. When they catch him, he tries to kill himself, but fails. When asked why he ran if he was not guilty, he says: "you will find something even if I did nothing." They haul him in. Meanwhile, for harboring him, his subordinates shoot the farmer and his wife, and when one of them starts to shoot the little girls, Demidov slaps him. "We don't kill children!" he tells him. He gently packs the suitcases of the little girls and takes them with him to an orphanage. Meanwhile, the "suspect" is given a paper and pencil and asked to write down all the other "traitors" he knows. (Note, this was the system also used by the East German Stassi, that eventually had everybody implicating everybody else. Horrible!)

We next see Demidov with his friends and his wife, Raisa (played by Noomi Rapace of Dragon Tattoo) at a nightclub where he recounts his courtship. He adores her, obviously love at first sight. For her, we gather that she knows that she had no choice. She lives in a culture where choices are not there. Demidov soon finds that he too has fewer choices than he thought he had. The "suspect" he brought in named his wife, Raisa, as a traitor. Demidov is instructed to "investigate" and find evidence. Now here is a dilemma.

But there is another dilemma, an even more political one. A boy's mangled, sexually abused body is found next to a railroad track. It is Demidov's best friend's son. Demidov is given the official report: a train accident, and he is instructed to give it to the family. "There is no murder in Paradise" he is told. (Once more, this most corrupt state that makes up crimes where there are none (traitors) denies crimes where there are (serial deviant crimes). Stalin insists that such crimes are only found in the corrupt west, and not in the Marxist Paradise.

Demidov is stubborn. He is astonishingly decent, and he refuses to knuckle under, despite punishments being heaped on his head.

He and Raisa are stripped of all their privileges, sent to a horrible posting back in Ukraine, and while there, Demidov discovers that there have been 44 other little boys murdered in a similar fashion and he suspects that one serial killer is responsible.

This is what makes this film a thriller. But during this process, other brave souls (one played by Gary Oldman) are encouraged to help Demidov and Raisa learns that she does have some choices that she did not know she had. The sunshine at the end of this film makes up for two hours and 36 minutes of darkness that approached the mouth of hell.

Note, dear colleagues, that the Russians are not showing this film. And also note that it was shot in the Czech Republic---perhaps the sweetest revenge of all.

#### The Woman in Gold

The story is familiar: the Nazis were thugs, which by now everybody knows. They stole art, jewelry, gold, and everything else they could get their hands on from wealthy Jews before they slaughtered them. As a matter of fact, they even removed the gold fillings from teeth after incinerating them in the concentration camps. Their greed knew no bounds.

This film is not about the scope of this greed. It is just about one spunky old woman survivor, living in Los Angeles, who has learned that the Austrians (quite belatedly) are trying to make restitution for some of the stolen Jewish art hanging in Vienna's state museums-if surviving Jews can prove ownership.

This is a big "if." How does one prove ownership when the owners were murdered, their documents stolen, and any family members who might have survived had to flee with just the clothes on their backs? And how does one spunky old lady and her inexperienced young great nephew-lawyer take on the country of Austria, a country that still pretends to be a "victim" of the Nazis when it was a much too enthusiastic mistress?

Maria Altman (played wonderfully by Helen Mirren) and her young lawyer Randol Schoenberg (played by Ryan Reynolds) of the famous Schoenberg family (composer Arnold Schoenberg, among several), take on Austria. The object of their lawsuit is the dazzling painting of Gustav Klimt called "The Woman in Gold," considered Austria's Mona Lisa, who just happens to have been Maria Altman's aunt. How ironic that this beloved masterpiece of Austrian art was a Jewish woman.

The film jumps in and out between today's legal struggles and flashbacks to Maria's memories to her lovelier childhood and wedding night party to the arrival of the Nazis and her agonizingly narrow escape---at the cost of the loss of nearly everybody in her family. For many young viewers, this will be new territory. They need to see this.

The film tells us there are two Austrias: the bad old one (that still gives me the creeps when I visit); and the good new one that is trying to face up to it. I hope so. However, the bad old one still peeks out if you look hard. See the movie anyway.

#### The Water Diviner

This is a centennial year for all sorts of horrors: the Armenian genocide, the second year of World War I, and in a strange way, the coming together of two elements of both: the war in Gallipoli. This movie has nothing to do with the Armenian genocide, but your reviewer is a historian so I will fill you in later.

The water diviner of the title is an Austrian farmer, Joshua Connor (played by Russell Crowe who also directs), with a gift of finding water in his dry outback ranch, has lost his three young sons in the Gallipoli campaign of World War I and sets out to bring back their remains to their home. This film is based on a true story, and if so, is not only a remarkable adventure but shines a light on a period of history with ironic significance for today.

The battle for Gallipoli, a narrow peninsula off the coast of Turkey, was the site of one of the most stupid military campaigns of the war, setting the tone for the rest of World War I: carnage on all sides, for no purpose whatsoever. This supposed British lightning-strike using Australian and New Zealand forces against the Ottoman Turks dragged on for nine months, killing 44,000 allied troops and 86,000 Ottoman soldiers. This idea was Winston Churchill's, certainly one of his worst!

What was unusual in this movie was presenting it at least a little, from the Turkish side. Connor, in his passion to find his sons, is confronted---and surprisingly---aided by a Turkish officer Major Hasan (played by Kurdish actor Yilmaz Erdogan), who helps him to find the bodies of two of his sons and helps him find the third, who may have been taken prisoner. This is quite an adventure indeed---taking us into the Turkish interior and witnessing the beginnings of the Turkish War of Independence that transformed the crumbled Ottoman Empire into Kamal Ataturk's modern Turkey.

There is plenty of romance for you in old Istanbul, a charming hotel run by a very beautiful young widow; the old bazaar right out of Hollywood's Casablanca, and the famous Blue Mosque in all its glory.

Now for the historian's note: watching the Turks rage at the way the Ottoman Empire was torn apart by the cynical winners of World War I (the British behaved badly not only toward the Turks, but to their own Australians and New Zealanders, not to mention the rather stupid creation of Arab "nations" from the former Ottoman Empire) explains much about today's nations melting down. The Turkish rage during the Gallipoli War also explains (but does not excuse) their paranoia about the Armenians being a fifth column. They felt they were surrounded by

enemies. It was a time of madness. Sounds like today, doesn't it?