

Laina with July Movies
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A Little Chaos

If there was ever a monarch who detested chaos, it was King Louis XIV! He controlled everything, fearing anarchy so much that even nature had to be under his control. Louis, ruled France with an iron hand between 1638 and 1715.

In this story, Sabine, a talented landscape designer wins a competition to help design and build a water-garden ballroom at Versailles, under the guidance of the royal court's famous garden master, Le Notre. What makes this a most unusual project is that Sabine is a woman in business for herself, has no noble lineage (making it difficult in a most caste-conscious court), and that she is an advocate of nature, not artifice, both personally and professionally. She is most assuredly a wildflower in a garden of orchids.

Those unfamiliar with history might think that no ladies at that time ever supported themselves, but there are a few examples in addition to this famous landscape designer. One in particular is the Comtesse Marie de La Fayette, author of *La Princesse de Cleves*, France's first historical novel and one of the earliest novelists in literature in the 17th century, Louis's time. She was widowed and made her living with her writing. (The earliest novel in the world is Japanese, *The Tale of Genji*, also written by a court lady, Mirasaki Shikibu, in the 11th century.)

Alan Rickman wonderfully directs this film and plays most sympathetically King Louis XIV, much more sympathetically than that monster deserves. I never expected to feel sorry for a king who bankrupted his country and made the peasantry starve. But in a scene where the king goes into the countryside, takes off his wig, and pretends to be the proprietor of a garden shop where Sabine (played by Kate Winslet) engages him in a conversation about flowers, is so enchanting that I even liked him.

Sabine's tentative love affair with Le Notre (Mathhias Schoenaerts), the prickly master gardener married to a treacherous court beauty, unfolds with the grace of a rose opening.

One of the most touching scenes takes place as Sabine is summoned to a court function and she waits with all the court ladies, painted dolls, who grill her curiously. They know she is a widow and ask if she has children. She pales (obviously has a painful secret). Each pours out her own losses (smallpox, husbands lost to war, stillborns, the usual horrors of life of the times). Rank is no protection. This is sisterhood and I was moved.

The end of the movie is the absolute delight to wait for. No chaos there. Absolute artistic order. A great delight indeed, an elegant royal ball taking place in a garden.

Testament of Youth

This British period piece is one more revisiting of World War One, the start of which was in 1914, exactly 101 years ago. The war broke out in August at the end of a summer of such incredible beauty and tranquility, everyone on holiday, nobody even contemplating that the world was about to erupt into an unimaginable nightmare of death and destruction.

That was the surface of Europe in 1914. Under that serene surface, however, what exploded was not unimaginable. But for the underpinnings of World War I, this is not the movie to see. You would need to know that despite the fact that every major (and minor) monarchy in Europe was related by blood and marriage to their common grandmother, Queen Victoria of Great Britain; that all of these countries shared a common European culture, values, and diplomatic rules; that all of their military forces shared common technologies and laws of war; that they would were already engaged in an arms war that would explode into a war that, before it was over, would sweep away almost all restraints. A quarter of a century later, that "almost" would be removed and no restraints would be left.

But this movie does not deal with that. It only deals with a handful of idealistic young aristocrats who go from innocence to the horror of warfare, one of them a young woman played by Alicia Vikander (she of the memorable face in *Ex Machina*), here playing a proto-feminist who first violates the rules to go to all-male Oxford and

then serves as a nurse in the front lines of the horrible trench warfare of the war in France. She, playing the real life Vera Brittain, survives the war to become a naive pacifist, believing that this is the only way to bring world peace. Indeed, she had not yet met the Nazis.

This was a fine movie, but its two hours felt like four hours to me.

Max

Like the film American Sniper, this movie will be loved by most Americans and scorned by the snooty critics. Not edgy enough for them, no doubt. I loved it! I thought it was everything that a movie should be: fit for a family, exciting, with a purpose, with values that one could admire, and with the best dog actor since Lassie! How different from the usual summer fare with its explosions, car chases, and hyper-sexuality.

Max was a military dog brought from Afghanistan whose Marine trainer/handler died in an IUD explosion. Inconsolable and devastated, the dog could not be retrained, but the Marines discovered that the dog would accept (reluctantly) the teen-aged brother of the dead Marine. The family adopted the dog and turned his training over to the boy. Josh Wiggins plays the teen-ager and I look forward to seeing much more of him.

The film is about the recovery of this remarkable dog, the healing of the devastated family, and the mystery of what really happened in the death of the Marine when one of his buddies turns up is the rest of the film. It involves a coming of age story for an adolescent who might otherwise have gone bad; the healing of a dog who might otherwise have had to be destroyed; the uncovering of some bad guys; and most exciting of all, a dog actor who deserves an Oscar! I don't know how they can train a dog to do what Max could do! My goodness!

Lovely movie!

Ant-Man

Ant-Man sounded like the typical Summer movie, but seeing the previews triggered my interest. Being a lover of Gulliver's Travels, I liked the idea of a science fiction treatment of a superhero whose powers might lie in being miniaturized to the size of an ant-aided by an ant army.

In this story, in 1989, a scientist, Hank Pym (played by Michael Douglas), has invented a technology that can shrink a human being to the size of an ant. He considers this technology very dangerous and refuses to release it. He then resigns from his own company after discovering that his protégé, Darren Cross (Corey Stoll) is trying to replicate the technology, which he will use for evil military purposes.

Science used for good or evil is not the only issue in this movie. People also have families. Pym has a grown daughter, Hope (Evangeline Lilly) from whom he has been estranged, who is still in the company and is a partner of the evil Darren Cross.

Enter the movie's hero, newly released from prison, a thief, expert at house breaking, Scott Lang (Paul Rudd), who is desperate to go straight and find work so that he can pay child support for his own little daughter Cassie. In America, ex-convicts are punished for having been convicts; he cannot find a job. His old friends convince him to go back to his expertise and break into the house of a millionaire who is on vacation, the house of Hank Pym!

Now we learn of two magic garments---the very stuff of old fairy tales! While getting into the safe of Pym's house, Lang finds what looks like a motorcycle uniform. He puts it on, presses a button on the left---and with a whoosh---shrinks to the size of an ant.

The next few minutes are as good as anything in Gulliver's travels.

Darren Cross has invented another magical suit: this one a Yellowjacket (wasp).

This is enough for you to know. The rest of the movie is an absolute hoot, and is well worth the fun you will have watching it play out. It is clever, it has excellent human elements, and for those who like action, there is plenty here. It is not a trashy summer movie at all. It is really fun.

Mr. Holmes

When it seems nobody could imagine another take on the Sherlock Holmes stories, someone has! The newest film, *Mr. Holmes*, envisions Sherlock Holmes as a 93-year-old retired Holmes living in the countryside with his housekeeper, her young son, his bees, and his fading memories. This should be depressing stuff---but it most certainly is not.

Holmes is played by the remarkable Ian McKellen, who manages to create a fascinating man who even at 93 can think rings around most of us! Holmes has just returned from a difficult trip to Japan where he is confronted by a purported Japanese admirer who is, instead, a client with a grievance: a man whose father disappeared years ago in London leaving behind a note in a book Sherlock Holmes book. Holmes cannot remember this case.

Also haunting the detective is another case involving a beautiful woman who thirty years before Holmes followed, suspecting she was about to murder her husband. This case too has fallen into a black hole in his memory.

Holmes is cared for by Mrs. Munro, played by Laura Linnney, an unhappy widow, and her young son, Roger, played by Milo Parker, who becomes an impromptu apprentice to Holmes. He learns beekeeping---and prods the old man into solving the two mysteries haunting him.

This is a rich, wonderful film; Sherlock has plenty of life left in him even at 93!

(For the readers among you, I would recommend even another take on Sherlock Holmes: Laurie King's books in which Holmes has a young wife. Start with *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*. These would make wonderful movies.)

Paper Towns

Teen movies not just for adolescent audiences give grownups a chance to relive our own early years. This movie certainly does that, and unlike many that I have seen recently, this one does not alienate an adult audience with foul language, overt sexuality, or drugs. The teens are just nice kids at the end of their senior year, living in a pleasant community, all planning to go to college. Not much drama here. Except for an unexpected adventure that a most reliable youngster undertakes, along with his most danger-averse friends----in pursuit of a romantic runaway who has fled town, leaving a trail of clues.

This drama is based on a popular young adult novel in which Quentin "Q" Jacobsen (Nat Wolff) who knows exactly what he wants to do with his life (medical school, oncology practice, wife, children), has long been enchanted by a young neighbor, Margo Roth Spiegelman (Cara Delevingne), who seems to be guided by magical spirits into great and fearless adventures. At 13, they are kindred spirits, but later, they drift apart. However, just before graduation, she lures him again late one night to accompany her on one last caper of revenge against all who betrayed her: cheating boyfriend, best friend, another young man. The revenge is mischievous, not lethal. They end the evening at the town's tallest building, where Margo surveys the view, pronouncing the town a "paper town," and her view of "Q's" future rather shabby.

The next day, she disappears and Quentin, stewing over her disappearance, manages to disrupt his two best friends' and their girlfriends' senior prom plans to accompany him on a road trip to find Margo, whom "Q" is sure is his true love.

The road trip is wonderful, and these youngsters are terrific and endearing children. Margo, however, is something else. Is her "magic" really just negativism? Is there no "there" there? Perhaps Q needs to know this if he is to grow up.