

Laina with February Movies  
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Hail, Caesar!

Joel and Ethan Coen never fail to produce, write, and direct original and very entertaining movies. My first exposure to their work was the film Fargo, which is always a delight to re-watch. You betcha! Where else can you find a pregnant police chief whose much adored husband designs postage stamp art, or a murderer who is just an ordinary, stupid man who is over his head in debt (and failure). Who else would have made Moonrise Kingdom, a summer camp film in which the most grownup people are two 12-year-olds who fall in love and arrange to run away to get married?

Hail, Caesar! Is like an old-fashioned Hollywood movie, not a filthy word in it, no graphic sex, just wonderful entertainment and fun. The story follows one day in the life of a 1950s movie studio "fixer" (Josh Brolin), an executive who handles every emergency with patience and skill (most of the time), and occasionally with his fists. He deals with directors, actors and actresses who often behave badly in their private lives, movie gossip columnists (feuding twin sisters), and a kidnapping for ransom by Communist screen writers.

He walks through movie sets producing a Roman extravaganza (George Clooney as the dense Roman soldier who discovers God); a musical with a group of male dancers and their leader (a Gene Kelly-like dancer), dressed as sailors; an Esther Williams-type swimming movie in its full ridiculousness; and a marvelous Gene-Autry-style western starring an adorable kid who is a master at rope-tricks and cowboy stunts.

Each of these recreations is absolutely spot-on of the movies of 60 years ago, making my toes curl just as if it were yesterday! The dancers were just as good, as were the swimmers and the cowboy. They can still do this in Hollywood (if only they would do so more often).

Josh Brolin is wonderful as the hard-boiled fixer with a heart of gold. The film opens and closes with him in the confessional, trying to assess his sins of the past 24 hours. His priest thinks he is overdoing it.

Scarlett Johansson is the glamorous swimmer who has a little problem: she is pregnant and cannot remember who is the father. This has very funny ramifications.

George Clooney is wonderfully funny as the Roman soldier unhappily stuck in the world's backwater, Judea, at the time of Christ.

Ralph Fiennes is the ever-patient director of a Noel Coward-type drawing room drama whose leading man had an accident that sidelined him. Fiennes is stuck with a new leading man, an earnest young cowboy actor (Alden Ehrenreich), who is so adorable that he steals the show! Watching him with his Texas drawl attempting to manage sophisticated patter is very funny indeed. And watching him later doing rope tricks with spaghetti to amuse his studio-arranged date is memorable. I will never look at spaghetti the same way.

Finally, with a thumb-to-nose revisit of the recent Trumbo, in which the Hollywood film writers were unjustly persecuted by the Hollywood establishment, in this film they are actually a Communist cell (very intellectual philosophical nonsense aided by that master of nonsense, Stanford Professor Marcuse) that takes place in a multi-million dollar beach home). The writers hire thugs to kidnap the George Clooney character who buys enough Communist justification for his kidnapping to ask why he, too, should not get a cut!

A "Das Boot" vintage submarine emerges to play a telling role in the kidnap scheme.

This is a very funny, very entertaining, absolutely wonderful movie for those of you who share with me love of America's leading art form.

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies

This strange film lured me to the theater where I sat during a matinee all by myself!

My two best movie buddies declined the invitation. Jane Austen would not have been amused, but, although puzzled, I was amused. I just could not understand why with such a cast this could not have just been another delightful Pride and Prejudice, a story difficult to spoil.

The Bennett sisters were just as Austen described them, except that they were ninja warriors who never left home without knives tucked into their boots. You never knew when you might encounter an un-dead Zombie who must instantly be killed lest they bite you and turn you into a Zombie too.

Other than that silly notion, the story unwinds in the usual satisfactory way. Elizabeth Bennett was played by Lily James, a Keira Knightley look-alike. The rest of the cast was satisfactorily British with good early 19th century looks and manners.

The difference in this version is that everybody seems to carry sharp weapons. With Austen, the sharpest weapons are wit and tongues. I do prefer that world. Whatever possessed them to make this film? What were they smoking?

## Race

For any followers of the Olympic Games, one of the most noteworthy was the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. By design, the Olympics are supposed to be contests of athletic excellence, and, in ancient Greece, theater as well. The idea was to substitute sports competitions for warfare. The games were to be amateur, honest, and without political interference. This was a lovely ideal, but even in ancient Greece, reality trumped idealism. There were payoffs, teams were trained as professionals with support from wealthy citizens, and judgments were not always unbiased.

Olympic games were resurrected at the beginning of the 20th century with the ancient Greek ideals, along with assumptions that war could be replaced by athletic competition. Unfortunately, during our extremely warlike century, the Olympic Games were too often trumped by war, and even when held, were never free of politics and corruption.

The 1936 games were hosted by Germany, newly in the grips of the Nazi Party and its dictator, Adolph Hitler. This venue proved problematic for Western countries appalled by Germany's domestic programs, which broadcasted the persecution of its small but prominent Jewish population. Newsreels showed Jewish shops trashed, books burned, citizens hustled away to camps, and official looting of Jewish property. Even countries that maintained a long-existing dislike of Jews (England, the US, and France) found the Germans going too far.

Would Germany's official bigotry prevent athletes who were Jewish or Black from participating in the games? To their credit, the British and Americans refused to knuckle under, and the very idea of America withdrawing from the games alarmed the Nazis enough to back off. Two Jewish and two Black track athletes served on the American track team. One of these, Jesse Owens, a black running phenomenon, not only ran, but infuriated Hitler by winning four gold medals!

This film stars Stephan James as Jesse Owens (much healthier and better looking than the original Jesse Owens), and was a joy to watch as he dealt with the rampant Black bigotry at home, in his community, at Ohio State University, and of course in Berlin.

This gratifying film is well worth seeing for the drama of the situation, for a look at Berlin's extravagant Olympic stadium, for the conflict and careful negotiations between the Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels (played by an incorrectly handsome, but menacing Barnaby Melschurat) and on sleazy Avery Brundage (played by Jeremy Irons), an American architect and chair of the US Olympic Committee. The Nazis managed to seduce Brundage into a position where he could be blackmailed for collaborating with them, an issue that eventually came out.

One remarkable American was Coach Larry Snyder, played by Jason Sudeikis, who appeared immune to the racial bigotry of his time. He championed and developed the remarkable Jesse Owens, standing by him in the sinister Berlin of that time.

Some critics were not enchanted by this film, but I do not understand why not. I liked it very much and recommend it heartily.

## Son of Saul

Except for those on the Academy Awards committee, who have nominated this film as a candidate for best foreign film for 2015, few of you will see this remarkable movie. I did, however, despite knowing that it had a distressing theme (inside a Nazi death camp), and came out of the theatre breathing hard.

This Hungarian-German partnership produced the most agonizingly realistic portrait of

a death camp (probably Auschwitz), focusing on the most horrific part of this camp, the poison gassing of unsuspecting people followed by their incineration in giant ovens. The unlikely protagonist is Saul, a Hungarian Jew who has been spared death (temporarily) to perform work that even the Nazis themselves would not do: meeting the trains, pushing people into a dressing room where they were told to undress for the "shower," and then after they were all dead, loading the corpses onto an elevator that would deposit them into the furnace. They were also responsible for sorting the clothing of the victims for anything of value (coins, watches, jewelry) and after incineration, shoveling the ashes into the river. Happily, we were spared another activity, searching the corpses to remove gold teeth. (Hair had already been shaved before the "shower.")

Saul Auslander (his name meant "outsider"), was played and co-written by Geza Rohrig, whose face told everything we needed to know. We see him at the beginning of the film totally blank-faced, already deadened to his daily task. The filming is made very close up (it is very claustrophobic), and the action is prompted by a bellowing Nazi voice urging everyone: "Schnell! Schnell!!" (Fast, fast!)

These workers, "sondercommandos," were much hated by concentration camp survivors who did not understand that these slaves rarely survived beyond a few months themselves before being replaced. I don't think I have ever seen a film that explained this issue before.

Saul witnesses an unusual incident when removing the corpses from the gas chamber. A very young boy had just barely survived, unheard of after such gassing, and carries him to the doctor (also a Hungarian Jew). The Nazis want an autopsy (even with the child still alive). Saul hides the body and begins searching for a rabbi to perform a decent Jewish funeral. It becomes his obsession, even more important to him than surviving himself.

This film, horrific as it is, is a gem of movie making with a real purpose. It is not horror for horror sake. It is a film about humanity versus savagery.

#### Triple Nine

This film seemed to be a routine dark thriller which I might have passed up except that some very good actors chose to make it. It turned out to be very dark indeed, a heist film in which the robbers, cops, and even a Jewish Russian Mafia were all so evil it made my flesh crawl. Everyone in the movie was criminal, with the exception of one honest cop.

In an attempt to show that even bad people are human, all of these villains were shown reading bedtime stories to their children. (Yes, even Nazi concentration camp guards went home after a hard day of work to loving wives and youngsters.)

The best moment in this film was when the bank robbers were fleeing the scene and one of the bags of money exploded red dye that filled the car with red smoke and paint. Gratifying!

The only sophisticated touch was that each evil person was evil in a different way. That Chiwetel Ejifor, Casey Affleck, Woody Harrelson, and Kate Winslet saw fit to participate in this terrible movie is disappointing.

#### Academy Awards Notes

I was happy to see Leonardo DiCaprio and his director winning, as I had predicted. The same for Son of Saul as best foreign film. Mark Rylance well deserved the award in Bridge of Spies, which I thought should have won more awards, especially for Tom Hanks. Alicia Vikander, the Swedish actress who appeared in so many films this year, received an award, but a more remarkable film that she appeared in earlier in the year, Ex Machina, was ignored. I would have given more awards for The Martian than for Mad Max, which underwhelmed me. But we all know that these awards are not necessarily the last word in unbiased excellence. Politics and money play a role, as does the short memories of the voters regarding films that appear early in the year.