

Laina with February Movies
Posted On:December 31, 1969

The Space Between Us

Last year saw several really wonderful Science Fiction movies about space, Aliens and Passengers. Both were imaginative, beautiful, and essentially optimistic. Although there has been a hiatus in this country's adventurous space travel, we are still getting ready for what will undoubtedly be a flight to Mars in the future. Like the European venture into the discovery of the New World in the 16th century, our next great exploration will be space.

This movie, however, is pretty thin on science but wonderful on imagination and romance. The story is about a group of earth colonists who settle in Mars, only to find that one of the colonists is pregnant and gives birth immediately upon arrival. She dies in childbirth and the boy child is reared by the rest of the colonists, all 14 of them, one of them a woman who serves as a mother to the boy.

We meet Gardner Elliot, a 16-year-old boy who has known only the 14 colonists and is an extremely adept techie, proper training for new life on Mars. He has been e-mailing with a girl on earth named Tulsa, who, like him, is an orphan. She has been shuttled from family to family and has never known a real home. And at 16, she is approaching the point that she will age out on Social Services support and have to survive on her own.

Gardner is played by a beautiful kid (Asa Butterfield) who radiates innocence and longing. He smuggles himself aboard a shuttle returning to Earth and finds Tulsa, (played by Britt Robertson), is a cynical girl who is amazed at how truly innocent Gardner is. It melts her. She becomes his protector in High School and his tutor on things earthly (rain, ocean, green trees), all wonderful to him. He is like Miranda in Shakespeare's last play, The Tempest, who is filled with wonder when she meets the first human beings she has seen besides her father.

But as we already have seen with our astronauts who spend an extended time in the Space Station, they return to earth with serious physical problems. Their bones lose calcium, their hearts work differently, and they need an extended rehab upon return to earth and its gravity.

Gardner, born on Mars and obviously adapted to its environment, begins to have serious physical problems. The Astronauts on the shuttle realize that Gardner has escaped and his enlarged heart might be fatal. The rest of the film involves the flight of the two children across the country to find the man that Gardner believes is his father.

Despite the thinness of the science, the movie is absolutely delightful. A nice love story for Valentine's Day.

Lion

This film is based on the real story of an Indian child, Saroo (Dev Patel as the grownup Saroo) who by accident boarded an empty train and awoke to find himself thousands of miles from his village. He only knew his name, but not the name of his mother (Mommy) or the name of his town or region.

The five-year old was taken to an orphanage where he was lucky enough to be adopted by an Australian couple who reared him and another Indian waif a year later.

The story leaps to 25 years later, when our hero begins to have flashbacks of his early childhood. He becomes obsessed with finding his mother and his elder brother, and his friends suggest that he use Google World to explore India and perhaps find his birthplace.

Of course, this is a touching, emotional story. I was happy that he did find his family, but I left the theatre much more moved by the luck of his adoption! I found so much about the India of his childhood (and even today) horrifying.

The hordes of humanity, every place a mob scene (the railroad station particularly ugly), the mobs of children, lost, homeless, and facing all sorts of exploitation as they lived and slept on the station platform, and a close call for our little Saroo when a nice lady fed him, bathed him, and then her pimp arrived to assess what use he might make in selling the boy. The child had the sense to flee, and he wound up in an orphanage.

During his first night in the orphanage, he overheard the director handing over a child to a sinister man with instructions: "bring him home by morning." We know what that was about. The only redeeming thing in the orphanage was a kind civil servant

who tried to locate his family, and when that attempt failed, found a good couple to adopt him. She was the feeble attempt of the Indian government to look after the thousands of lost and exploited children that are ubiquitous in that country. Saroo, who, although desperately poor, had enjoyed the love of his big brother and mother, a single mother who worked in a rock quarry. Those early years gave him a sweet character. The other child that the couple adopted was not as lucky. His earlier years had obviously done enough to damage to make him psychotic. Nothing the adoptive parents could do made a difference.

This is a fine film with a touching story but it was a grim couple of hours in the India of his early childhood. Not a happy experience.

Fifty Shades Darker

Yes, I saw Fifty Shades of Grey, and this one is part 2. There will be a part 3, as these films are based on a trilogy of books that captured quite an audience of readers and film goers. These films certainly illustrate how fine the line has become between pornography and romantic cinema, this one opening on Valentine's Day, 2017. The young lovers, played by Dakota Johnson and Jamie Dornan, are, respectively, a young new college graduate and a billionaire entrepreneur. What makes this different from most romantic movies is that the man is a sadist and bully and the young woman, who has fallen in love with him, is struggling with understanding his malady.

If the protagonists were not both so attractive, these films would be even more repellant than they are. The sequel is more of the same stuff that was in the first film. I am too old to accept Sado-Masochism as mainstream and ok. Not nice.

The Salesman

I have been entranced by Iranian movies since the wonderful renaissance of culture just before the Islamic Revolution. That there is an international market for Iranian films today, considering the sour rules and censorship of Iran's Islamist dictatorship, is a tribute to the ingenuity of such filmmakers as Ashgar Farhadi, who has produced film after film getting Academy Award nominations.

Getting around the censors is a delicate business, since filmmakers are forbidden to show women without head coverings (even in their own homes, which is silly) and never any intimacy even between married couples. This contrasts with western films that leave nothing to the imagination and films that deal with the complexities and mysteries of human behavior.

The last Farhadi film I saw was Taxi, in which Farhadi himself (newly banned by the clerics from making a movie) drove a taxi, picking up passengers (actors), having conversations with them and listening wryly to their conversations among themselves. One could learn a great deal about the discomforts of daily life in Iran. Clever film.

In this one, a young couple must evacuate their apartment because the building is about to collapse (commentary on how much Tehran is falling apart too). They move into another apartment owned by a fellow actor (the couple are stage actors) who neglects to tell them that the former occupant was a woman of loose morals (prostitute). We see a little hint that she had a child from stick drawings with crayons on one bedroom wall and a child's bike among the possessions she has left behind.

The young wife, about to take a shower, hears the buzzer and thinking that it is her husband returning from work, unlocks the door for him. The man who enters the apartment expects to find the prostitute and he rapes the woman, leaving payment for her and fleeing when she starts to scream. (We do not see the rape. We see the aftermath.)

This fascinating movie has all sorts of engrossing threads: the husband, who is a genuinely nice man, teaches in a boys' high school and we see him struggling to teach literature but running into constant censorship about his choices. At night, he is playing the lead in a production of Death of a Salesman, a surprising choice (Jewish author) and a frustrating battle with censors not to cut lines. His wife plays the salesman's elderly wife, but she is completely devastated and psychologically undone by the rape. The couple opt to not report the rape to the police because she would have to admit that she let the rapist in to the apartment (by mistake) and Islamic law is not kind to raped women.

The complexity comes when the husband turns sleuth and finds the rapist. The next complexity is the surprising character of the pathetic rapist himself. Will revenge satisfy? Will it help the wife deal with her psychological damage?

Nobody in this film is one-dimensional. It moves quickly and with clever insight into modern life in Islamic Revolutionary Islam, a place in which the revolution may be in its last gasp.

