

Laina with May Movies
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The Footnote

When this little Israeli film was first shown, the producers expected a half-dozen people in the audience. This should not have been a popular film, but to everyone's surprise, audiences loved it and it was Israel's nomination for the Best Foreign Film at the 84th Academy Awards celebration.

The story follows the intense and painful competition between two scholars, father and son, who both teach in the Talmud Department of Hebrew University. The father, Eliazar, a philologist, has devoted his life to the study of the texts of various copies of the oldest extant Talmud, produced during the Babylonian exile. Just before he published, one of his colleagues, found a perfect copy of the Talmud hidden inside the cover of a much later volume, and he published. Eliazar has lived the rest of his life in bitterness, passed over every year for the Israel Prize that he thinks his 40 years of labor deserve.

The son, Uriel, is a popular professor in the same department, much resented by his father. Uriel, as a good son, refuses to be nominated for the Israel Prize until the death of his father. However---someone slips up. The Minister of Culture calls Eliazar by mistake to tell him that he has won the Israel Prize. The call was meant for Uriel. Uriel is told, and must wrestle with the consequences: accept the honor of the award and wound his father, or give up his own glory to protect a father who might not be as kind to him had he faced a like dilemma.

What is delightful in this film is the portrait of family life\227its joys and its pains---and the realization that academic life can be the pettiest tyranny around, with grown men fighting tooth and claw for recognition. I have lived in that world and found much to laugh over in this clever film.

Coriolanus

Shakespeare is always wonderful to see\227even in a less than stellar production. I am not fond of present-day versions of Shakespeare that maintain the 16th century glorious language of the original. This can be clever, such as Orson well\222s version of Macbeth with the soldiers (and Macbeth) dressed in Nazi uniforms, but that can go only so far. Wells did this because he had no money for costumes.

This is a play that most people have not read or seen before. It is one of Shakespeare\222s \223Roman\224 dramas in which he shows timeless aspects of politics and history. Coriolanus (played and directed by Ralph Fiennes) was a great general who had earned acclaim for repelling a very dangerous enemy army. When he returns to Rome, he is offered the position of consul (President), which he would certainly like. He easily receives the votes of the Roman Senate, but must also court the public, which has the last word in an election.

Vanessa Redgrave plays the role of the hero\222s mother, a woman who is as ferocious as the son she bore; a very scary portrait.

Coriolanus is exceedingly scornful of ordinary Romans, whom he considers stupid, brutish, and stinking. His attempt to court the public is a disaster; he cannot hide his scorn. He loses the election and turns traitor: he offers himself to the very enemy tribe he had recently defeated.

I love the language in this play, and certainly admire the keen analysis of pride, vanity, and the \223democratic\224 process. We can exchange Coriolanus for many political aspirants alive today. However, this is a difficult movie to love.

The Raven

This film was not admired much by local critics, but I thought it was wonderful. The story follows the last weeks in the life of Edgar Allen Poe, one of America\222s great poets and an inventor of the mystery story. In mid-19th century Baltimore, Poe\222s home town, a serial killer is carrying out showy murders based on Poe\222s imaginative stories. A detective (Luke Evans) enlists the assistance of Poe (played wonderfully by John Cusack) to find and stop this murderer.

It is fascinating to be reminded of each of Poe\222s dark mystery stories fleshed out by an admiring and very evil criminal. As an act of imagination by this particular film writer, the film offers a speculation on why Poe died so young, found dead on a park

bench in his 30s.

If you love Poe, you will enjoy this movie.

Monsieur Lazhar

Canada has an excellent film industry, but we do not get to see many of these films. Monsieur Lazhar, which has played only briefly in Santa Cruz, is hands down the best film I have seen this year. It raises cultural issues that Canada must face every day.

In this story, a 7th-grade teacher has committed suicide by hanging herself in the classroom just before the children arrive. The principal and other teachers scurry around to protect the children from this upsetting event. Psychologists are called in and the children gingerly interviewed.

A substitute teacher presents himself: an Algerian immigrant with 20 years of experience. He is hired, and takes over the class.

The children are 11 and 12-year-olds, mostly polite, but seething with opinions that they cannot openly express. One child tells the teacher privately that she thinks the teachers are more damaged by the suicide than the children are.

Lazhar is an excellent teacher who seems to have a common sense approach that his terribly \223nice\224 French-Canadian colleagues (mostly female) do not have. His methodology, however, is very old-fashioned, and we see him learning some good things from the other teachers. He also has his own secrets that he is not willing to share with the children or his colleagues----until a crisis brings it out.

Lazhar is an asylum seeker who must prove that he cannot return to Algeria for fear for his life or torture. His wife, a schoolteacher, wrote an article condemning the \223reconciliation\224 process between the Islamist murderers and the Algerian army. She considered both extremes a nightmare for Algeria. Upon publishing this article, the death threats began and it was apparent that the family needed to leave Algeria. These are the refugees from the Muslim world that the west should welcome; they deserve our protection.

I have seen other French language films about public schools, their children and their teachers (one of my favorite being \223Pocket Change\224). This film must be added to my list of wonderful explorations of how modern societies teach their young. The audience the day I saw the film was full of schoolteachers. I am glad.