

Laina with June Movies
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The Dictator

Sacha Baron Cohen is one of the cheekiest comedians in England, a land of cheeky comedians. His outrageous Borat had him pretending to be a journalist from Kazakhstan who traveled through America to report on America's great culture. Cohen remained in character the whole time, with his documentary crew, interviewing unsuspecting Americans (making them look like fools). His interviews neatly revealed racist views, know-nothings, and born-again Christians, as well as many well-meaning nice Americans who extended him hospitality. This film was hilarious, embarrassing, and often crude. The Kazakhstan government was outraged, but after a spurt of tourism poured money into that unpleasant backwater, they now enjoy their notoriety.

In The Dictator, the script was much more fully written, with little ad hoc action, except for police who thought that Baron Cohen (in full costume as a very bearded and much medaled Middle Eastern dictator) might be dangerous.

In this story, the dictator is determined to resist the efforts of the UN (and America) to force him to stop his nuclear program and hold an election. He and his uncle (Ben Kingsley) decide that he must go to America to make his case. Although the dictator says he is not an Arab, he most assuredly is, and the jokes about beheading, polygamy, and other ugly institutions of the region make the point.

He, like the late Saddam Hussein, employed body doubles just in case someone might succeed in assassinating him, getting the double instead. His idiot double is now in New York, being sent to announce that his country would hold an election (that uncle Ben Kingsley would manipulate in his own favor).

One of the funniest scenes has Baron Cohen trying to get into a hotel where the real Ahmadinejad was staying for the UN opening session. The police would not let the actor get any closer than across the street.

Much of the movie's humor comes from a real clash of cultures; the dictator falls in love with a skinny little idealist who runs a health food center and who uses an organic deodorant which does not work. A very funny and wicked movie, and it is dedicated to the late Kim Jong Il of North Korean infamy.

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel

When a group of British retirees outsource their retirement to India, which they hope will be charmingly exotic and get them much less expensive amenities, they arrive at a hotel in Jaipur which is indeed venerable (old and falling apart) but not like the photo-shopped brochures.

This is a charming film featuring many of Britain's oldest and most revered actors: Judi Dench, Bill Nighy, Maggie Smith, Tom Wilkinson, and two lovely Indian actors: Dev Patel, who plays the enthusiastic owner of the rundown hotel, and Tena Desae, who plays his exquisite girlfriend.

India is certainly a venue for culture clashes, and the story provides many opportunities for this. There is the food (savory but upsetting for British tummies), the dust, masses of humanity everywhere, chaotic traffic, and cultural differences in intentions and behavior.

Unlike the film Endless April, in which a group of British women take a holiday in a rented Tuscan mansion, which I watch with pleasure every year, The Exotic Marigold Hotel is certainly good for one visit. India is an acquired taste.

First Position

This film is about the Youth America Grand Prix for ballet students, a gripping documentary for those of us who really love ballet.

What is it about it that sets off every little girl who has ever seen a ballerina to want to become one of those airy angels? I remember my own ungraceful self, aching to look and dance like one of those. My daughter and granddaughters were and are the same an ache to dance that soon will be replaced with love of horses.

This unlikely art form was an invention of France's Louis XIV in the 17th century to keep his nobility busy and out of time for conspiracies. They had to spend hours of practice in holding unnatural positions on tip toe, leaping gracefully, and lifting (or being lifted) by another dancer. Only the nobility could do this.

Within a few centuries, however, the Russians took to this art form and professionalized it. Ballet was a great favorite of Russia's Tsars, and many a beautiful ballerina became a mistress of the same. Today, ballet is a global phenomenon (except in the Muslim world), and competition for admission into ballet schools and troops is as fierce as getting into the Olympics. First Position gives us a window into the hopes and accomplishments of a remarkable international cadre of six young dancers, boys and girls, as they progress through this competition around the world over the course of a year.

The children and their stories are engaging and the dedication and money required to advance in this art daunting. As with the Olympic Games gymnasts, these children have trained their bodies through blood, sweat, and stretched muscles to provide us with one of the most beautiful and ethereal of art forms.

This is 90 minutes of great pleasure.

Polisse

Many of us are familiar with American police movies, both in cinema and television. We become familiar with realistic presentations of police and detectives, male and female, some of whom have the particularly difficult task of finding and prosecuting sex offenders against children.

Polisse is a French version of this sort of film, directed and starring a famous French director, Maiwenn. We see these officers who spend much more time with each other than they do with their own families, often to the detriment of their marriages. Their work involves criminals so horrible and children so damaged that they must steel themselves to bear it and perform professionally. They cannot really go home and talk about their work, so they hang out together, drinking wine and enjoying as all French do, food and conversation.

A Gypsy camp is raided just before sunup and the small children removed to foster care, all of this amidst passionate objection of the parents. That their children are taught to pick pockets and some to prostitute themselves is an old way of life that preserves their clans. They don't see what they have done wrong.

One Muslim man is arrested for polygamy, and he objects that he is only a bigamist, not a polygamist. The detectives laugh. This crime against French law and the unfortunate taxpayers is much more frequent than occasionally nabbing one. But I suspect this is better than we do, and certainly better than in England.

Another pious family man is brought in for an "honor crime," and he is most indignant to be interrogated by a woman (horror). She is indeed a woman, and a Muslim herself, and she grabs her Koran off the shelf and shouts at him to find where in the Koran it says that it is all right to kill his daughter.

The film is a window into not only French law enforcement, but into the lives of these mostly blue-collar defenders of their society. In this case, their multicultural origins are subsumed to being thoroughly French. The French are lucky to have them.