

Laina at the Movies
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Farewell, My Queen

I remember the first time I visited Versailles, the royal palace compound, during a trip to France. This home of the last of France's royalty is one of the historic treasures of France, and it gives modern visitors an opportunity to see how the French kings lived. Of course what we see today is much cleaned up. In its time, which ended with the French Revolution, there was not a single privy or toilet in sight (dark corners and stairwells served that purpose) and rats and mice frolicked or slunk around. Cleaned up, the palace is very beautiful and it was clear that money was no object.

Walking through the palace and its gardens, I thought about something I learned about King Louis XIV, the Sun King, who had this palace built in 1682 and where it remained the seat of absolute French power until 1789. Louis XIV began his reign as a youth of 15, a shining symbol of the greatness of France. Fifty years later, when he died, his extravagances had so impoverished the French people that he needed to be buried in the dark of night.

This problem happened again with Louis's descendant, King Louis XVI. While the royals and nobility lived in luxury, the French were starving and sweltering in the hottest July in memory, 1789. Their wheat crop had failed and there was no bread. I could well understand the fury of the population and the revolution that resulted in heads rolling, nobility either fleeing or being executed, and the revolution eventually ending in a savage dictatorship. (Every revolution except the American has always ended that way.)

This film is about that fateful week in July when news of the storming of the Bastille filtered through to Versailles. A revolution had begun and the fate of all the people in Versailles was being deliberated. In this film, we meet the queen, the Austrian Marie Antoinette (Diane Kruger), whose frivolity and shallowness had become the focus of popular rage. The heroine of the film was a young noblewoman who was the Queen's reader (why the Queen needed a reader is not clear), played by Lea Seydoux. We also meet the Queen's most immediate ladies in waiting, her court, the King (a rather dull fellow), and the Queen's favorite, the beautiful young Duchesse de Polignac (Virginie Ledoyen). The Queen was obsessed with this beautiful young woman. The Duchesse, however, loved only herself.

We never see the horrors of this revolution, but know it is coming. We do see the hapless court, the hierarchy of servants down to the lowest kitchen staff, all scrambling to save themselves. This is a fascinating, but sad movie.

The Campaign

Of course, this being an election year, Hollywood had to give us something. No, this one is not of the caliber of *The Candidate*, but it is, embarrassingly, funny. The story is about a really wretched congressman, Cam Brady (played with zest by Will Farrell), from North Carolina, who thinks he is running the unusual unchallenged campaign. Although this particular congressman is a parody, it made my skin crawl to realize how many like him there are in our congress, particularly after hearing from the dull-witted Todd Akin, that expert on women's anti-rape secretions.

A couple of billionaire brothers (a parody of the Koch Brothers) decide that Brady is no longer controllable enough and they finance the campaign of a most unlikely candidate, a local very unglamorous but honest director of the tourism center, Marty Huggins, played by Zach Galifianakis.

We are treated to this unlikely duel—the sleazeball and the boy scout—with broad, crude comedy. All the elements of a managed campaign (expense no object) unfold throughout, including the hilarious makeover of Marty and his family, and we watch with familiarity the very ambitious wife of Brady who doesn't care a bit about his philandering; she just likes the power.

This is fun, but a little like a guilty pleasure—embarrassing to talk about. I hope that this election will bring out something better by way of political cinema.

The Odd Life of Timothy Green

Out of sheer desperation to find some summer movie to see, I spent a couple hours

with a fantasy that had me weeping throughout. I hate being manipulated into crying. The last time I was so manipulated was when I read Victor Hugo's Les Misérables; sobbing over the ending, I threw the book into the corner! This movie made me feel the same way.

The story was about a couple that so desperately wanted a child that they fruitlessly spent thousands of dollars on fertility treatments to no avail. Their longing was painful. In an attempt to bring their quest to some kind of closure, they imagined the qualities of their ideal son, wrote these things down, and buried them in a box in the garden. Of course, since this was a fantasy, in the night during a terrific rainstorm (that only rained on their garden), out of the box came a young boy, a ten-year-old, who was perfect in every way, but had an anomaly: leaves growing out of his legs. He was Timothy Green indeed.

The couple bumble through parenthood as most of us do, making mistakes, being over-protective, and conflating their child with their own identities (he must win at soccer, for example), but they gradually learn to parent.

Fall comes, and the little boy's leaves fall too; he is, after all, a plant. I am crying again, so I will end this. Take plenty of Kleenex if you can stand this sort of thing.