

Laina with Early April Movies
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Laina At the Movies
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The Muppets

I couldn't resist seeing this, the latest Muppet movie particularly since the villain is an identical Kermit look-alike, except that he has a mole on his lip and a Russian accent. Shades of my children's childhood with cartoons featuring a Bullwinkle J. Moose and his pal, a Rocky the Squirrel, with Russian spy villains: Boris Badenough and Natasha. These delicious cartoons amused my children and made their mother laugh too.

The Muppets replaced these earlier cartoons and have succeeded in entertaining children while simultaneously delighting adults with very subversive humor. The present Muppet movie is just one more piece of hilarious mayhem, combining the antics of the whole clan of cloth muppet puppets with straight-faced human actors interfacing with them.

The latest Muppet adventure takes the good Kermit the Frog with his entourage (including the incomparable Miss Piggy) on a world theatrical tour. Enter the villain, the bad frog who looks like Kermit, who stages a jail break from a Russian gulag and manages to assume Kermit's identity (with the help of green face makeup to cover the mole) while slapping a mole on poor Kermit, who is now imprisoned in the Gulag. Tina Fey plays a Natasha-like prison guard and the ensemble of gulag prisoners have hidden talents (including an extraordinary Swan Lake).

Mayhem all around, including an almost marriage between the villainous Russian frog with ever-hopeful Miss Piggy, a world class wedding at Westminster Abbey! Have fun recognizing all the human actors in their unlikely (and good humored) roles.

This is a bit of good cheer that we could all use today.

The Grand Budapest Hotel

Wed Andreson is a delightfully eccentric filmmaker whose film, Moonrise Kingdom, was a charming film about a pair of 12-year-olds who elope from summer camp to set up housekeeping. This film was a little gem, and it was no surprise that a roster of important actors chose to take small parts in the film.

The present picture secured the same unselfish loyalty of Ralph Fiennes, F. Murray Abraham, Adrien Brody, Willem Dafoe, Jeff Goldblum, Harvey Keitel, Jude Law, Bill Murray, Edward Norton, and many more, most of them for cameo roles.

Seeing the trailer for his next film, The Grand Budapest Hotel, and considering all the breathless anticipation and advance publicity, I really hoped to see more genius in action. Alas, however, it is painful when a trailer is better than the movie itself. And it is painful that what was intended as whimsical and hilarious was instead dark and tragic.

The story follows the adventures of a legendary concierge, Gustave H. (played by Ralph Fiennes) at a famous European hotel between the two world wars. The concierge befriends a young man (Zero Moustafa), an orphan, who wants to be the hotel's Lobby Boy (bellhop). There are all sorts of plot twists: a stolen Renaissance painting, the battle over a family fortune, and an arrest, imprisonment, and escape across a snow-bound landscape.

This should have been light-hearted and fun, but it was not; it was dark, and one could feel the increasing ugliness of European life culminating in the Nazi takeover. The comedy drama genre was eclipsed by all this. And behind the story, based on one by the great Austrian-Jewish Stefan Zweig, reminded me that Zweig committed suicide in 1942. He had enough of that Europe. It failed to be funny.

Noah

Hollywood used to do very well with biblical spectaculars from the inception of motion pictures. This is part of the latest wave, and probably can pull in more people, not just believers, than some of the more recent offerings. It got my attention.

The Noah story is very, very old, much older than the tale that appears in Genesis, a tale of obedience to God even when nobody else believes it. But sorry, my biblical literalist friends, this story first appears in Sumerian Tales of Gilgamesh, which among other things, talks of a great global flood that kills almost all human beings, with the exception of a few righteous survivors. The author of that flood is not God, but the great moon goddess, Nut (or Nua), who, like all moon goddesses, controls the flow of waters (tides, etc.). She grows disgusted at the corruption of humans and decides to end them once and for all. Then, looking at the destruction, she relents and permits a few humans to survive and re-people the earth. Nothing in this story about animals, however.

The ark, however, in Gilgamesh, is the crescent moon, in which the moon goddess floats.

The biblical story supposedly takes place well before there is any such religion as Judaism; it is about early mankind. I do note that the poetic notion of the creation as it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, if one turns \342\200\234days\342\200\235 into \342\200\234eons\342\200\235 does seem to track the evolution of our planet.

The earliest fault line for human beings upon the advent of agriculture is the emergence of the city vs. primitive agriculture or herding. The other fault line was between farmers (mostly surviving on grain) and the herders, surviving on meat. In reality, they traded with each other, but in this film, the film makers decided to make it a struggle between a handful of vegetarians surviving on the fringes of the world, unable to defend themselves because they were few and weak, and the meat-eaters who developed metallurgy too and were tough and belligerent. They were also, in the movie, very corrupt and sexually violent.

Noah, played heroically by Russell Crowe, gets a message from God through a dream. He is instructed to build an ark (no crescent this time, but a gigantic box that can float) and God sends all the creatures that he wants to save to the ark. The birds come, then the snakes, then all the animals (then known to the bible writers). No mention of insects, and fish are not in trouble.

This really is a wonderful, whimsical tale, one of many versions around the world. There seems to have been some sort of cataclysmic flood remembered by human beings, and our ancestors, like ourselves, like to have an explanation for natural cataclysms. The best, from then to now, is that human beings were somehow responsible for very bad behavior, which resulted in God\342\200\231s (or nature\342\200\231s) punishment.

This film is really fun. It is fairly reverent to the biblical story, with exceptions, of course. Ham, the second son of Noah, was a bit of a rebel and while his father was in drunken sleep, he \342\200\234uncovered his nakedness.\342\200\235 Noah awakened, and cursed his son for his sin to turn black (origin of the black race) and said he would be a servant to his brothers (slavery). Needless to say, this was not in the film; it wouldn\342\200\231t fly well today.

Meat eating and metallurgy seemed to be the greatest offenses of corrupted city dwellers in this film, along with the always exciting scenes of rape and violence, a Hollywood special.

The United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain have banned the movie because it depicts a prophet, which, as Danish cartoonists will attest, isn\342\200\231t such a good idea in the Muslim world. For me, it is another reason to see the movie.

I was so excited that I rushed home and wrote this review. Despite my failure as a true believer (or any kind of believer), this is an entertaining take on a very old tale. They even solve the problem of how you keep all these animals from eating each other while floating on the flood: you put them to sleep with incense. Nice touch.