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Michael Giltz

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Posted: September 13, 2010 05:21 AM

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Toronto Film Fest Day 4: Old Men, Young Girls, Graham Greene and Amigos

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Now we're talking: a five-movie day with no hiccups. Now if only we could do something about the quality of the films.

BEGINNERS ** out of ****

Finding out your 74-year-old father is dying of cancer would of course be tough. And finding out he's gay and has known it all his life but waited for your mother to die to do something about it? Also tough. That's the dilemma facing Ewan McGregor, playing an illustrator who won't sacrifice his art for easy money (a deal to do an album cover for a big band becomes a battle of wills). His quiet steeliness extends to his

private life, where any suspicion that a romance might not pan out pushes him to end it. We get two stories: Ewan dealing with his dad (Christopher Plummer) suddenly holding movie night to watch a Harvey Milk documentary with all his gay friends or moving in his much younger boyfriend (Goran Visjnik, with a really bad haircut/wig); and Ewan after his dad's death trying to wake up to life again. His reawakening comes via a classic meet-cute. Ewan is dressed as Sigmund Freud for a costume party where he meets an actress (Melanie Laurent) with laryngitis. She of course can spy that he's sad. Oh it's all earnest and nicely done in a low-key way, even if the romance stays in the whimsical stage for far too long. (Subtitles for the thoughts of his Jack Terrier dog don't help.) Frankly, the illustrated comic The History Of Sadness -- a passion project Ewan works on throughout the movie -- is far more compelling than anything the humans do. Ewan is accepting of his dad, ready for love and generally just a little complacent or sad, nothing more. So without any conflict to speak of, there's not any call for drama. That's welcome if you're an old man saying goodbye to life but not so welcome in a movie.

BRIGHTON ROCK ** out of ****

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Betty White: 'I'm Going

I finished the book by Graham Greene just as the movie was starting, so I was surely more tuned in than most to the changes the film made. An earlier version by Carol Reed wasn't faithful enough to the tale so here was a chance to get it right. Nope. Written and directed by Rowan Joffe, it exhibits none of the subtlety he showed on *Last Resort* (a gem) or even the current George Clooney flick *The American* (which I'm also not fond of). The cast is certainly top-notch. Sam Riley (from *Control*) plays Pinkie, the young thug desperate to cover up a murder and maintain control of his gang. Helen Mirren is Ida, the tea shop owner who suspects the worse of him and is determined to get justice. Andrea Riseborough is the timid but determined Rose. Only Riseborough's character captures the character on the page. The first big problem is the casting: the two leads are good but Pinkie and his girl are supposed to be 17 and 16 years old. But Riley is 30 years old and Riseborough nearly 29. There's a world of difference between those ages. And the time has been moved from the late 30s to the early 60s, which makes their older age all the more significant. A 29-year-old woman in 1964 is a far different creature than a 16-year-old girl in 1938. It throws the entire film off balance. Pinkie's most notable aspect is his disinterest and even disgust with sex and women in general, though he's not gay. Other than a small twitch in his cheek when he kisses Rose, that crucial lack of humanity is lost. Mirren's character is changed even more. In the book, she's so compelling (and frightening to Pinkie) precisely because her desire to see justice done over the dead man is so random. She doesn't know him from Adam, really. In the movie he's a dear friend. So without these insights, what are we left with? A young thug and his gal driven to despair by a nosy woman and their past crimes, all of it laid on thick with an over-the-top score that warns of doom and gloom and eternal judgment at every turn. They even change the ending to avoid Greene's final hammer blow to optimism. Not even false hope has a place in his world. What a missed opportunity. Here's a clip from the misguided Carol Reed production.

THE SLEEPING BEAUTY ** 1/2 out of ****

Has it really been nine years since director Catherine Breillat delivered *Fat Girl*, her best movie by a mile and one that wasn't nearly so didactic or obvious as her others? Apparently, but she's been replenished at the well of classic fairy tales. Last year's *Bluebeard* earned raves from my friends who are not always keen on Breillat. (I haven't seen it yet.) Now here is *The Sleeping Beauty*, which begins as a fairy tale, edges into eroticism and ends with a modest critique. A little girl is cursed by a witch to die on her 6th birthday. But her fairy godparents deflect the curse into just causing her to sleep for 100 years and wake up as a 16 year old. Then there's a twist. So she won't get bored, they promise lots of adventures in her dreams, which mostly consist of a spin on *The Snow Queen*. It's all presented in a rather faux, make-believe manner. Until the girl wakes up at 16 and deals with the modern world in the form of a strikingly handsome young man/suitor called Johann (David Chausse). It's not for everyone and the changes in tone are jarring, but it's interesting and fun and I'm more eager than ever to see *Bluebeard*. Here's the trailer for *Bluebeard*, which is out now on DVD from Strand for \$27.99.

Away For A While'

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WHAT'S WRONG WITH VIRGINIA * out of ****

It was a packed house for this screening and why not? A strong cast and a new movie by Oscar winner Dustin Lance Black. Sight unseen, it's the definition of promising. Some people think critics love to bash movies, but I've never met anyone who wouldn't rather be thrilled by a movie than disappointed. This one is a disappointment. Black seems a fine director and gets the performances he wants from his cast, which includes Jennifer Connelly as Virginia, Ed Harris, Amy Madigan, Toby Jones, and Emma Roberts. The problem is a script that's so aggressively eccentric, so divorced from reality (even the reality of the movie itself) that the plot twists and turns become exhausting. Just describing Virginia is tiresome: she's a mentally unbalanced single mom dying of cancer and pretending to be pregnant by her lover the Mormon sheriff who is running for the State Senate but thinks his daughter is too good for Virginia's son, who confides in his imaginary friend the NASCAR driver he thinks is his dad. I haven't even arrived at the gorilla mask, the robberies, the gay amusement park owner who dresses in drag for assignments and paints his Ferris wheel pink and so on and so forth. You know a movie is out of control when a character shows up halfway through (Virginia's best friend, in this case) and you have no idea who they are but you know you're supposed to know. Painfully off the rails in most every way, I'm afraid.

AMIGO ** out of ****

I'm a huge fan of writer-director John Sayles so believe me when I say his latest is a bit thin. It's set in the Philippines in 1900 when the US had arrived to "liberate" the country from Spain. Our Sayles focuses on one small village where US soldiers dig in to fight off rebels. If you imagine one fresh-faced soldier falling for a local, a hardened leader learning to respect the town's leader and peasants caught literally in the crossfire between two sides that demand the impossible from them, well by god you're right. Sayles has always been fascinated by the Third World and Latin America. One of my favorite movies of his is the little-seen *Men With Guns*, which was set in a mythical Latin country and explored issues of exploitation in a fascinating manner. This movie feels too schematic to come alive. Again and again we see the Yankees doing one thing and the rebels in their own way doing the same, if from opposite ends of the spectrum. The villagers of course are just trying to survive. If it were any more of a lecture, it would come with notes. It doesn't help that the cinematography is flat and dull while the costumes are just that: costumes. It's a curious thing how some movies can never let you get past the impression that everyone on screen is pretending, playacting. That's certainly the case here and no good cause or weighty message can give it enough purpose to matter. P.S. The anachronism of referring to winning over "hearts and minds" is just one example of how Sayles hits the wrong notes too obviously here. This is the trailer for *Amigo*.

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Dan Same 03:57 PM on 9/13/2010
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What is with critics (not you) who like Catherine Breillat? She's responsible IMO for the single most anti-women film of all time; Anatomy of Hell. I really hated it. It was intellectually and artistically bankrupt and what I wouldn't give for the 2 hours back.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 02:23 AM on 9/15/2010
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Other than Fat Girl, I haven't found her very interesting, I must say. But friends with good taste who also don't like much of her work have really found Bluebeard interesting. Since this is also a fairy tale inspired project, I was intrigued and tried to keep an open mind. Yes, sexual and feminist politics intrude, but only modestly. Haven't seen Anatomy of Hell, thank goodness.

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Dan Same 04:24 PM on 9/15/2010



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Because of her sexual and feminist politics, I probably won't see The Sleeping Beauty, however I might see Bluebeard, if only because I love the story, but I really don't like. You should be eternally grateful that you haven't seen Anatomy of Hell!

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I really don't like HER, which is what I meant to say.

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Will Holston 01:00 PM on 9/13/2010

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Wow. Not a great day for you, eh?

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