

## Film review

November 19, 2018

### Green Book

M \*\*\*\*\*

Green Book tracks the 1962 tour of the renowned Don Shirley Trio from the perspective of Tony Lip (Viggo Mortensen), an Italian-American from the Bronx employed by Dr Shirley (Mahershala Ali) as driver and minder. Over the course of the tour, Tony's attitude to African Americans transitions from ignorant prejudice to admiration and respect.

Dr Don Shirley, the first African American to graduate from the Leningrad Conservatory, has earned several doctorates and speaks several languages. He has chosen to tour down into the deep south because of, rather than in spite of, the segregation laws and practices.

For Tony, the two months prove educational and enlightening. Not only are his views on race changed by the experience, but his verbal and written expression, his manners and his musical appreciation all develop under Don's tutelage. In one of his many letters to his wife Dolores (Linda Cardellini), the former bouncer from the Copacabana nightclub describes "Doc" as "like Liberace only better".

As Don's trust in his garrulous minder gradually grows, the latter develops an appreciation of the way Don feels caught between two worlds. The wealthy southern gentry might fawn over the cultured, elegant virtuoso pianist, yet there is no way they will allow him to dine with them or even use the same bathroom. He might travel in a chauffeured Cadillac, but he can only stay in the "Black only" motels listed in "The Green Book", a travel guide for African Americans. This systemic racism almost defeats Tony's innate ability to handle trouble and Don's determination to retain his dignity, no matter what. In Little Rock, only their legal right to a phone call, if arrested, saves them.

The two men became life-long friends and the story of their 1962 tour inspired Tony's son, Nick, to record their recollections before both died a few weeks apart in 2013. Nick Vallelonga subsequently co-wrote the Green Book screenplay with Brian Currie and the film's director, Peter Farrelly. Several members of the Vallelonga family played roles in the film. An inspirational story and superb music!



### Journey's End

M \*\*\*\*\*

R.C. Sheriff wrote the play Journey's End, his seminal depiction of the absurdity and inhumanity of war, in 1928. It continues to be produced on stage a century later and has been adapted several times for the screen. This latest screenplay by Simon Reade also references the novel that Sheriff co-wrote with Vernon

Bartlett, allowing Laurie Rose's camera to take us outside the officers' dugout, into the trenches and over the top.

It begins on 18 March, 1918, and depicts the experiences of a company of British infantry officers over the four days leading up to the 100-day German spring offensive in 1918 in northern France. An early evocative shot of the troops at St Quentin, depicts men and boys of all shapes, sizes, ages, tired and cold, yet stoically accepting their circumstances.

Young Lieutenant Raleigh (Asa Butterfield) requests his uncle, General Raleigh (Rupert Wickham), to allow him to join Captain Stanhope (Sam Claflin) and his platoon, whose turn it is to man the front line for six days. Although he knows that a German attack is imminent, the General reluctantly agrees. Stanhope, however, is clearly suffering from PTSD and fears that Raleigh, his prospective brother-in-law, will report home that he is seeking solace in whisky.

Former school master, Lieutenant Osborne (Paul Bettany), lives up to his nickname "Uncle" by looking after everyone in the company, especially Stanhope. Mason (Toby Jones), the company cook, also endeavours to maintain a good-humoured atmosphere in the dugout as he serves up some semblance of food.

The ingrained British class system is embedded throughout in rank and accent. As the days pass, the tension mounts. Finally an order comes from the Brigadier to launch a daylight raid across the trenches to capture a German soldier to ascertain the date of the planned attack. The cynicism with which the timing of the raid is greeted reflects the general belief in the callous indifference of the commanding officers to the lives of the lower ranks: they are cannon fodder.

Long before the term "post-traumatic stress disorder" was coined, Sheriff's perceptive exploration of the condition remains pertinent today. *Journey's End* is an exceptionally well made film. Director Saul Dibb presents the human face of war, without Hollywood heroics or jingoism.

## **Boy Erased**

MA \*\*\*\*

Joel Edgerton's screenplay for *Boy Erased* is based on Garrard Conley's true-life memoir *Boy Erased: A Memoir of Identity, Faith, and Family*, which details the author's own experiences of "conversion therapy". Conley and his family collaborated with Edgerton, his cast and production team, thus adding veracity to the project.

Marshall and Nancy Eamons (Russell Crowe and Nicole Kidman) have the future mapped out for their only child Jared (Lucas Hedges). He will marry his high school girlfriend and eventually take over Marshall's car dealership. However, Jared is gay. When he is outed to his parents by a college acquaintance, Marshall, himself a Baptist minister, is advised by the church elders to enrol Jared in a conversion therapy course at *Love in Action*, an establishment run by Victor Sykes (Edgerton) who, like many of his staff, professes to be "ex-gay".

The basic tenet of Sykes' methods is that being homosexual is behavioural, a matter of choice. Being the son of devoutly religious parents, born and bred in Arkansas, Jared commences the course in good faith. But as he witnesses and personally experiences various abusive practices, such as literal bible bashing, he stands up to Sykes and questions the legitimacy of his so-called therapy. Edgerton's edgy portrayal of Sykes reveals the man's inner conflict and self-doubt, especially in the scene where a newly assertive Nancy Eamons eventually confronts him. Her transition from submissive, supportive wife into an assertive, fiercely protective mother is a positive product of Jared's non-conversion.

Sadly, it takes a tragedy to bring *Love in Action* to the scrutiny of the authorities. However, such beliefs and practices still exist. Ironically, the perpetrators are the ones who need to carry out a "moral inventory" and change. As Dr Muldoon (Cherry Jones) tells Jared early on, "It's not my place to say that your parents are wrong, but they are."

Not only the four lead actors, but the entire cast give outstanding performances. Similarly, the production values are top-notch. The final credits are accompanied by photos of the Conley family, illustrating the remarkable attention to detail paid by the design team.

## **Fahrenheit 11/9**

M \*\*\*\*

This latest enthralling documentary from Michael Moore reveals the bizarre background to Donald Trump's decision to run for the highest office in the land. What is even more alarming, however, are revelations about the way the Democratic Party hierarchy manoeuvred Hillary Clinton into position as the Democrats' presidential nominee, basically, denying Bernie Sanders the nomination that he had actually won.

Although the 2016 election provides the spine of Fahrenheit 11/9, it also highlights the emergence of political activism in colleges and schools. Scenes of mass rallies organised by the youth of America, where teenagers speak eloquently and passionately against the administration and the gun lobby in the light of mass shootings, provide some glimpse of hope for the future, as do scenes of teachers taking successful industrial action.

A clear message throughout the film is that intolerable behaviour, individual or institutional, must be denounced. Fahrenheit 11/9 is an incisive, alarming, wake-up call that is leavened throughout by Moore's idiosyncratic manner and wry commentary.

## **Lean on Pete**

M \*\*\*\*

A clear illustration of the adage "What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger" is this film from director Andrew Haigh. Based on the novel Lean on Pete by Willy Vlautin, the film depicts 15-year-old Charley Thomson's (Charlie Plummer) indefatigable quest for emotional security. Charley lives with his dad Ray (Travis Fimmel), his mother having abandoned him as an infant. Because they move frequently to wherever Ray can find work, Charley is a loner.

Despite his failings in the parenting stakes, Ray does love his son. Unfortunately, his penchant for alcohol and women lands him in hospital, after an irate husband beats him up. Luckily, Charley has landed a job at Portland Downs horse racing track, with gruff Del Montgomery (Steve Buscemi) who runs quarter horses. Despite advice from Del and jockey Bonnie (Chloe Sevigny) to the contrary, Charley forms a special bond with one of Del's horses, Lean on Pete. Learning that Pete is destined for the slaughter house, Charley sets out with the horse to find the one person he believes can save them — his Aunt Margy (Alison Elliott).

Lean on Pete is a gritty, realistic portrayal of ordinary people whose existence is a continual battle for social and economic survival in a harsh landscape. Nevertheless, Haigh and Vlautin reveal glimpses of good in even the least savoury characters whom Charley encounters, which enables him to retain hope even in the face of devastating tragedy.

Life-affirming without being sentimental.

Tricia Youlden is on extended LSL