

Film review

June 12, 2019

Red Joan

M ****

In 1999, 87-year-old Melita Norwood was unmasked as having been a Russian spy while working as a secretary at the British Non-Ferrous Metals Research Association in London from 1945-72. During that time, she had systematically passed on top-secret research documents about the development of Britain's atomic bomb to the Soviet NKVD, in the hope that if both sides had the bomb neither would use it.

Her story inspired Jennie Rooney's novel, upon which Lindsay Shapiro's beautifully written screenplay for Red Joan is based. The film is impeccably directed by Trevor Nunn.

In May 2000, 80-year-old Joan (Judi Dench) reads about the arrest of Sir William Mitchell, former head of the Foreign Office, who is charged with having committed 27 breaches of the Official Secrets Act.

Shortly after, MI5 arrive on Joan's doorstep and arrest her, much to the bemused indignation of her QC son, Nick (Ben Miles). During the subsequent interrogation, her mind drifts back to Cambridge, 1938. There, a young Joan (Sophie Cookson) is befriended by exotic, Russian-born Sonya (Tereza Srbova), and falls in love with her cousin Leo (Tom Hughes).

An ardent Communist, Leo calls Joan "my little comrade". Separated from Leo at the outbreak of World War II, Joan completes her studies and is recruited to work with Professor Max Davis (Stephen Campbell Moore) on the development of the atomic bomb.

Although Joan resists pressure from former Cambridge contacts to pass on classified information to Russia, newsreel footage of the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 provides the ultimate catalyst for her to capitulate. By then she has re-connected with Leo, but tragically, can no longer trust him.

Red Joan is a very romantic film in plot and appearance. The actors playing the bright young students flirting with ideologies, philosophies and one another, are groomed to evoke classic movie stars; Sophie Cookson as Lauren Bacall, Stephen Campbell Moore as Dirk Bogarde. Or perhaps this is simply how 80-year-old Joan remembers it.

After he has digested her revelations, son Nick comments that he always thought his mother was over-educated for a librarian. He is not angry, just surprised, which is precisely the charm of Joan's story.

Danger Close: the Battle of Long Tan



M ****

Stuart Beattie's screenplay for *Danger Close: the Battle of Long Tan* acknowledges the remarkable courage the men displayed and the respect they deserve. Kriv Stenders' tight direction, Ben Nott's amazing cinematography, Sam Hobbs' production design and outstanding performances from the whole company make this film a long overdue tribute to the men of Delta company and to all the Australians who served in Vietnam. It vividly depicts the utter hell experienced by the 108 young Australian and NZ soldiers, conscripts and volunteers, who fought the Battle of Long Tan on 18 August, 1966.

The first 15 minutes or so of relatively banal repartee at Nui Dat introduces most of the characters. Major Harry Smith (Travis Fimmel) is not happy because his request for a transfer back to Special Forces has been denied by both Colonel Colin Townsend (Anthony Hayes) and Brigadier David Jackson (Richard Roxburgh). When the North Vietnamese launch a surprise rocket and mortar attack, he and his Delta company are sent out to locate the enemy positions.

The soldiers are rather disgruntled because they will miss Little Pattie (Emmy Dougall) and Col Joye (Geoffrey Winter), who have been choppered in to entertain the troops. However, the concert is aborted when Delta 11 platoon stumbles upon an enemy patrol in a Long Tan rubber plantation and all hell breaks forth. It becomes increasingly apparent to HQ that Delta company – at 108 men – is up against a North Vietnamese battalion of around 2000.

Outnumbered, running out of ammunition, and with limited radio contact between platoons, Harry Smith and his men demonstrate remarkable strength and determination to protect their mates to the point of ignoring orders from HQ to abandon their stranded comrades. "We all come back or no one does."

Echoing their spirit, Flight Lieutenant Frank Riley (Myles Pollard) also ignores orders and choppers in much needed ammunition through monsoonal rain and enemy fire. Knowing that the actual battle was at least as horrific as that depicted on screen heightens the nail-biting tension throughout. It's gut-wrenching.

As the survivors fall in for a sombre roll call on 19 August, it becomes clear that 18 men have been killed and 24 injured. Tragically, upon their return to Australia, these survivors were to be largely ignored, even scorned, and their post-traumatic stress untreated. They would pay the price for our government's unpopular decision to go "all the way with LBJ".

Sorry.

Happy as Lazzaro

M ****

Written and directed by Alice Rohrwacher, *Happy as Lazzaro* has won numerous accolades and awards, including the Prix du scénario Cannes 2018. It tells the story of a community of sharecroppers who live in abject poverty on the estate of Inviolata, ruled by the imperious Marchesa Alfonsina de Luna (Nicoletta Braschi). The workers' superstitious beliefs reinforce their susceptibility to exploitation.

Little do they know that such a feudal set-up has long been illegal. Only when Tancredi (Luca Chikavani), the Marchesa's spoilt son, forms a friendship of sorts with Lazzaro (Adriano Tardiolo), the best worker on the estate, does the Marchesa's tobacco fiefdom finally come to the attention of the authorities and the workers are rescued. Or are they? Rohrwacher asks us to judge whether their subsequent life is actually better.

She uses intermittent narration to present the story as a fable, deftly employing magic realism to lighten what is essentially quite a bleak tale of man's inhumanity to man. Although there is a passage of time between the rural and city scenes, Lazzaro does not age; his innate goodness, innocence and honesty magically preserving him. His ingenuous acceptance of people, never questioning their motivation, adds both gentle humour and pathos. Intriguing, enthralling and charming.

My Big Gay Italian Wedding

M ***

The opening scene of *My Big Gay Italian Wedding* is an endearing marriage proposal delivered direct to

camera by Antonio (Cristiano Caccamo). Paolo (Salvatore Esposito), having accepted, the happy couple set out to break the news to their parents, with their housemates in tow for some tenuous reason.

While Donato (Dino Abbrescia), a cross-dressing bus driver with suicidal tendencies, does serve some plot purpose, two-dimensional Benedetta (Diana Del Bufalo) is extraneous and annoying. Add in Antonio's vindictive former girlfriend Camilla, his mother Anna (Monica Guerritorre), his father Roberto (Diego Abatantuono), Paolo's estranged mother (Rosaria D'Urso), brother Francesco (Antonio Catania) and the picturesque hilltop village of Civita is soon overflowing with characters and sub-plots.

Although Roberto was elected mayor of Civita for defending people's rights, he can't accept his son's wedding, so Anna channels Lysistrata and evicts him from their home until he will. Brother Francesco, however, believes that celebrating a gay wedding would attract tourists, thus solving the village's employment problems.

Somehow, they all blunder through a series of unlikely plot contrivances to an unexpectedly musical ending. This frothy Italian comedy is chaotic, but undeniably entertaining.

2040

G *****

Please show or direct your students to Damon Gameau's latest documentary 2040, in which he explores viable solutions to current environmental problems, in the hope of providing a positive future for future generations. This "fact-based dreaming" is most informative and entertainingly presented. Above all, it provides hope of a better future for our planet.

Apollo 11

G ****

Todd Douglas Miller's 93-minute documentary about the Apollo 11 mission is a remarkable assemblage of archival footage filmed in and around NASA's mission control centre and inside the actual modules carrying astronauts Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins to the moon in July 1966.

Footage of Armstrong and Aldrin on the moon is fascinating, but so is the whole film, which shows the thousands of Americans gathered around the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida to watch Apollo 11 blast off. We catch snatches of news about the Vietnam War and Chappaquiddick – quite ironic in retrospect.

Unfortunately Matt Morton's inappropriate and intrusive music regularly drowns out the re-mastered soundtrack of actual conversations between the astronauts and mission control.

The acclaimed Paraguayan film *The Heiresses* (Las herederas) was awarded the Sydney Film Prize at the 2017 Sydney Film Festival. Although it was reviewed in Education Edition 5, 2018, it was only released for cinema screenings on May 23rd 2019.

Tricia Youlden is a retired teacher