

Film reviews

November 08, 2019

The Report

MA ****

On 28 October, Human Rights First awarded *The Report* the Sidney Lumet Award for Integrity in Entertainment. Written and directed by Scott Z. Burns, the screenplay draws from the 6700 pages of Senate staffer Daniel Jones's report into the use of torture by the CIA after 9/11.

Reporting directly to Senator Dianne Feinstein (Annette Bening) chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI), Jones (Adam Driver) painstakingly researches CIA records, which reveal how they manipulate Bush's White House into allowing the post-9/11 Detention and Interrogation Program.

No wonder Jones and his fellow researcher experience nightmares. Disturbing re-enactment scenes give us some idea of what they are reading about daily.



These scenes portray the brutal "enhanced interrogation techniques" developed by psychologists James Mitchell (Douglas Hodge) and Bruce Jessen (T. Ryder Smith), self-proclaimed experts in eliciting information from detainees, a field in which they have no real experience, yet are awarded a contract of more than \$80 million.

Their techniques are based on debility, dependency and dread, even though US Intelligence bodies had concluded as far back as 1978 from lessons learnt in Vietnam and South America that such torture doesn't work. Nevertheless, CIA operatives proceed to practise water boarding, rectal rehydration, confinement with insects, mock burials, sensory deprivation and other outlawed, outright torture.

After spending years in a leadlined windowless room at a covert CIA site, Jones produces the SSCI's Report into the Detention and Interrogation Program (aka "The Torture Report") of 6700 pages, only to face the threat of prosecution by the CIA under John Brennan (Ted Levine).

This film deserves to be widely seen. Apart from being a gripping political thriller with a stellar cast, it is a chilling reminder that we need to be able to hold our elected governments accountable without fear of prosecution. Yet, here in Australia, over 75 pieces of legislation effectively criminalising journalism and penalising whistleblowing have been passed this century. Worrying, to say the least.

Pain and Glory

M *****

This latest film by Pedro Almodovar has been chosen as Spain's entry in the 2020 Academy Awards. It stars

Antonio Banderas as filmmaker Salvador Mallo, a role loosely styled on Almodovar himself and for which Banderas was named Best Actor at Cannes in 2019.

Despite being an acclaimed filmmaker, Salva is not a happy man. He lives with constant pain, both physical and emotional, which the cocktail of prescription drugs that he takes cannot banish.

His explanation of his many ailments is graphically illustrated by Juan Gatti's animations. Although his house is full of beautiful paintings and *objets d'art*, he must keep the curtains drawn to ease his headaches.

In an opioid haze, he remembers his childhood, living with his parents in Paterna in a white-washed cave. Scenes such as singing with the village women while they launder sheets in the stream, teaching Eduardo (Cesar Vicente) to read and write in exchange for him whitewashing the cave's walls, are infused with light and a feeling of well-being.

Salva's mother Jacinta (Penelope Cruz) is a formidable woman: pragmatic, astute and possessing the strength and worldliness lacking in her husband. She ensures that young Salva (Asier Flores) receives the best education a poor boy can, even if it means attending a seminary. Needless to say, he does not become a priest, but a renowned director.

Years later, when Salva is invited to speak at a screening of a restored print of his film *Sabor*, he contacts the film's star, Alberto (Asier Etxeandia), from whom he has been estranged for decades.

They literally smoke a peace pipe — of heroin. The renewed friendship and the drug provide the impetus Salva needs to come to terms with the past, especially his long ago love affair with Federico (Leonardo Sbaraglia), about which he writes a one-man performance piece, *Addiction*. Just as Salva is ready to direct again, Alberto is attempting a comeback as an actor. Synchronicity!

Addiction provides catharsis for all concerned in unexpected ways. Even though love may not be enough to save the person you love, it is nevertheless wonderful to have loved. The sheer visual beauty of the film complements the resurgence of *joie de vivre* that Salva experiences, as Almodovar ties up all the narrative threads he has woven.

From the exquisite kaleidoscopic title sequence, colours, especially luscious reds, resonate throughout this film, making it truly a joy to watch.

Pavarotti PG ****

Ron Howard's documentary provides a fascinating and revealing insight into Luciano Pavarotti, son, husband, father, lover, superstar and philanthropist.

Interestingly, Pavarotti refers to his wonderful voice as being feminine, and "she" is the real star of the film.

Judy M ***

Similarly, this bio-pic about Judy Garland is a cautionary tale for stage mothers and their talented offspring. Exploited by MGM as though she were merely a property, young Judy is fed a variety of pills, the "uppers" and "downers" to which she became addicted.

Today we would consider it child abuse. Director Rupert Goold shows Judy's vulnerability and strengths. Renee Zellweger gives a brilliant performance as Garland. Not to be missed!

Brittany runs a marathon M ***

Brittany (Jillian Bell) is an overweight party girl with poor attitude to punctuality and work.

When Dr Falloway (Patch Darragh) prescribes exercise and healthier life choices rather than Adderall, Brittany reluctantly joins a local running group with upstairs neighbour Catherine (Michaela Watkins).

This leads to a falling out with her vacuous, narcissistic flatmate Gretchen (Alice Lee), an aspiring social media "influencer".

To Gretchen's disdain, it is Catherine who proves to be a true friend to Brittany, as does another novice runner, Seth (Micah Stock).

He and his husband have started a family and he wants to become healthier for their sake. The trio set their sights on running the New York marathon.

Over a period of several years, all three weather ups and downs in their personal circumstances, supported by their running, their friendship and their families.

Brittany lands a job as nanny to a dog, a position she shares with Jern (Utkarsh Ambudkar), who also becomes an unlikely confidant and friend. No character is unflawed; no one's life is perfect.

Although the journey that writer-director Paul Downs Colaizzo takes his characters and audience is often uncomfortable, *Brittany runs a marathon* is believable, accessible and unexpectedly enjoyable.

Ride Like a Girl

PG ****

If you've not yet seen this delightful bio-pic from novice director Rachel Griffiths, I urge you to take your whole family to see it.

Ride Like a Girl stars Teresa Palmer as Michelle Payne, the first female jockey to win the Melbourne Cup, Sam Neill as her father Paddy and Stevie Payne as himself. Stevie steals every scene in which he appears.

And please don't miss *Emu Runner*, which I reviewed in the June edition of *Education*.

Promised

M ***

Nick Conidi's film gives an interesting insight into the lives of Italian immigrants and looks at the old Italian custom of arranged marriages.

It opens in 1953 in Melbourne when Sal (Paul Mercurio) promises baby Angela's hand in marriage to five-year-old Robert, the son of compatriot Joe (Mirko Grillini). How Angela (Antoniette Iesue) and Robert (Daniel Berini) deal with this in 1974 makes a neat little story. Tina Arena is lovely as Angela's mum.

Tricia Youlden taught drama for a long time