

Film Reviews

February 28, 2018

Sweet Country

MA

This outstanding film from director Warwick Thornton is exceptional in all regards. If you have not yet seen it, may I urge you to do so. The confronting, relevant screenplay by Steven McGregor and David Tranter pulls no punches about the appalling treatment of Aborigines by many early white settlers, who considered them to be “black stock”. Others like Fred Smith (Sam Neill) regarded Aborigines as equals.

However, guided by his Christian values, Smith places his Aboriginal stockman Sam (Hamilton Morris) and his family in mortal danger by sending them to help newly arrived Harry. Unfortunately, “that bloke Harry, he mad one”.



When Sam consequently shoots Harry in self-defence, Sergeant Fletcher (Brian Brown) forms a posse complete with Aboriginal tracker to hunt down Sam and his pregnant wife Lizzie (Natassia Gorey Furber). The manhunt takes them through the spectacular Northern Territory outback, the beauty of which contrasts vividly with the ugliness and violence of the events that play out.

The incisive screenplay, great performances, exquisite cinematography and top notch production values make this a particularly significant and important Australian film. In the light of the Prime Minister’s rejection of the 2017 Uluru proposal, the trial scenes and outcome feel especially resonant, as do the following lines: “What chance have they got? What chance has this country got?” And the riposte: “They’re smarter than we are.”

Lady Bird

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From writer-director Greta Gerwig comes this bitter-sweet coming of age film, over the course of which one 17-year-old girl transitions from adolescence to adulthood and finally appreciates how much her family and friends mean to her.

Christine “Lady Bird” McPherson (Saoirse Ronan) lives in sunny Sacramento, capital of California, where her family’s economic circumstances are far from bright. The McPherson family comprises father Larry (Tracy Letts), mother Marion (Laurie Metcalf), their adopted son Miguel (Jordan Rodrigues), his girlfriend Shelly (Marielle Scott) and Lady Bird. Larry is out of work, which is exacerbating his tendency to depression and feelings of inadequacy. Marion works the night shift at a local hospital, while Miguel and Shelly stack shelves

to support themselves after college.

Although Lady Bird's arrogant, rebellious behaviour is a constant source of angst for everyone, it is Marion who bears the brunt of it. She is determined to be a better mother to her own daughter than her own mother had been. While both mother and daughter regularly say searingly hurtful things to one another, they nevertheless delight in sharing simple pleasures such as attending real estate open house inspections or searching through op shop clothing racks for some retro treasure. Marion's radiant expression, as she regards her daughter dressed in a vintage prom dress, shows how very much she loves her daughter.

At her Catholic high school, where Lady Bird is in her senior year, her little war on authority draws weary amusement rather than outrage from her teachers. Sister Sarah Joan (Lois Smith), in particular, deflects the girl's attempts to shock, suggesting that Lady Bird channel her dramatic ability into the school production. Although her role is small, Lois Smith deftly creates a fully rounded character, as do Stephen Henderson and Bob Stephenson as Father Leviatch and Father Walther. Indeed, all the supporting characters are economically yet succinctly drawn: Lady Bird's best friend Julie (Beanie Feldstein), her first boyfriend Danny (Lucas Hedges), the too-cool-for-school rich kids, especially pseudo-intellectual Kyle (Timothée Chalamet). Sam Levy's carefully framed cinematography, Chris Jones' production design, April Napier's costumes and Jon Brion's music perfectly complement Gerwig's impressive screenplay.

Some or all of the characters and situations should resonate with anyone who can remember being 17. Lady Bird is a most accessible, heartwarming coming-of-age film.

Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool

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A lamentable exception from the 2018 Oscar nominations is Annette Bening for her portrayal of actress Gloria Grahame in Film stars Don't Die in Liverpool, based on the memoir written by Gloria's last love, actor Peter Turner (Jamie Bell), to whom she turned for support in her final weeks. Barbara Broccoli had known Gloria and Peter when they were living together. She co-produced the film with Colin Vaines and entrusted the screenplay to Matt Greenhalgh and the direction to Paul McGuigan. Between them, Greenhalgh and McGuigan pay homage to the film noir in which Gloria starred. Transitions are deliberately theatrical, employing devices such as a character walking through a door into another time and location.

The film begins in 1981 when Peter is called to his former lover's bedside after Gloria has collapsed before a performance at the Lancaster Theatre. At her request, Peter takes her from hospital to his parents' home in Liverpool, where his mum Bella (Julie Walters) will look after her. Moving from 1981 to various significant times in the previous three years, we initially go to the Primrose Hill boarding house where Peter meets and falls madly, deeply in love with fellow lodger Gloria. Although she is almost three decades older than him, has been married four times and has four children, her irrepressible zest for life and love is entrancing.

Gloria takes Peter back to California where they live in a small house by the beach. Here, in a particularly memorable scene, she introduces Peter to her mother Jeanne MacDougall (Vanessa Redgrave) and acerbic-tongued sister, Joy (Frances Barber), through whose barbed revelations, we learn much about Gloria and her past life and loves. They relish telling Peter that she once lived in a mansion next to Bogey and Bacall and relate details of the scandal that had scuttled her Hollywood career. "Do us a favour ... don't marry her, even if she begs you," they entreat him.

Some while later, when Peter is offered a role back in England, Gloria abruptly ends their affair. It is only after her collapse in Lancaster that he understands why Gloria had behaved so uncharacteristically that fateful day. The poignant scene in which Peter gives his final gift to the dying actress encapsulates the spirit of their love and of the film. Although we know early on that the central character is dying, Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool is nevertheless a celebration of love; not just romantic love, but good old utilitarian everyday love.

French Film Festival 2018

If the following two films are any indication, the 2018 French Film Festival promises to be the finest yet. In Sydney, the Festival runs from 27 February to 27 March and comprises 50 films screening at various venues. For details see www.affrenchfilmfestival.org.

See you up there (Au revoir la-haut) begins in the trenches in Morocco on 9 November, 1919. Although a

ceasefire has been declared, sadistic Lieutenant Pradelle orders a doomed assault on Hill 113. Buried under debris in a shell crater, Albert Maillard (Albert Dupontel) is rescued by young Edouard Pericault (Nahuel Perez Biscayart), who subsequently has his jaw blown off. Maillard assists his young comrade to survive by stealing morphine, to which the young man becomes addicted. The two men devise a scam that exploits the national desire to commemorate the fallen by erecting monuments.

Meanwhile, the villainous Pradelle has insinuated his way into Pericault's family, who believe the artistic Edouard to be dead. With patriarch Marcel (Niels Arestrup), he is running a similarly callous scam involving the corpses of the fallen. Neither pair of schemers, however, foresees encountering an honest public servant, Joseph Merlin (Michel Vuillermoz).

Part melodramatic satire, part thriller, *See you up there* vividly depicts man's inhumanity to man both on and off the battle field, deftly leavened throughout by the sense and sensibility of the fair sex: Edouard's sister Madeleine (Emilie Dequenne), her maid Pauline (Melanie Thierry) and the delightful urchin Louise (Heloise Balster). Wise beyond her years, Louise befriends Edouard and translates his strangled utterances.

As well as playing Maillard, Dupontel wrote and directed this enthralling period piece.

The Return of the Hero (*Le retour du heros*) is an historical comedic romp, starring Jean Dujardin as swashbuckling cad Captain Charles-Gregoire Neuville, who cheerfully admits to a complete lack of ethics and morals. When his failure to write from the front to his fiancée Pauline (Noemie Merlant) takes a toll on the young woman's health, her older sister Elisabeth (Melanie Laurent) begins writing letters on Neuville's behalf.

As the years pass, Elisabeth's alter ego recounts his increasingly incredible adventures in weekly instalments. He travels far and wide, vanquishing the enemies of France throughout the world. En route he acquires a tobacco plantation, a herd of elephants, a diamond mine and amasses huge wealth. Elisabeth finally writes him an heroic death, thus releasing Pauline to marry Nicolas (Christophe Montenez). Unfortunately, Neuville's untimely return threatens to bring everything undone. Much to Elisabeth's chagrin, Neuville relishes playing the character that she has created for him, with hilarious consequences. Directed and co-written by Laurent Tirard, the screenplay is variously reminiscent of Jane Austen, Leo Tolstoy and Shakespeare. Like *See you up there*, the production values are superb.

Another film high on my list is *120 BPM* (*120 battements par minute*) a film about people living with HIV in Paris in the early 1990s and their activism to gain social acceptance and affordable access to the treatment that the drug companies under Mitterand's government were withholding.

And how could anyone resist *Belle and Sebastian, Friends for life* (*Belle et Sebastien 3, le dernier chapitre*). In this third film from Clovis Cornillac, Sebastien (Felix Bossuet) is now 12. He, his dog Belle and her puppies still live in the French Alps with Cesar (Tcheky Karyo), the boy's adoptive grandfather. Cornillac himself plays the villain in this latest adventure.

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