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Go

- [Home](#)
- [Movies](#)
- [Movie Reviews](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Media](#)
- [DVD](#)
- [Contests](#)

[Current Movie Releases](#)[Upcoming Movie Previews](#)[Movie Release Dates](#)[Movie Database](#)[Movie Genres](#)[Movie Studios](#)[Movie Blog](#)

[New Theatrical Reviews](#)[New DVD and Video Reviews](#)[Movie Reviews By Grade](#)[Movie Reviews By Year](#)

[Recent Movies on DVD](#)[Upcoming DVD Releases](#)[DVD Reviews](#)

[Current Contests](#)[Contest Winners](#)

[Toronto International Film Festival \(TIFF\)](#) [Movie Reviews and Recap](#)

September 13th, 2008

Robert Bell, who shares his movie reviews on FilmJabber and who is also based in Toronto, somehow was admitted into the Toronto International Film Festival (known as TIFF) despite the chaos he caused last year. OK, he actually didn't cause any commotion last year (that I know of), but regardless, he has weighed in on the festival in general and many of the films that screened there. Without further ado...

Thanks to some amazing Canadian PR firms and studios, I have been able to catch some Pre-festival screenings of selected films to play at the 2008 Toronto Film Festival. While no films have stood out as particularly bad, only a couple of films have stood out as great. Hopefully, some of the films I screen during the fest will have more of a lasting impact.

Strangely enough, I spend most of my daily life in the same building where a TIFF purchasing office and the main press theatre for the festival is so the impact of the festival on our community and how annoying it is to the locals isn't lost on me. Endless parades of accreditation-laden press and starfu**ers mill around the bay/bloor area giving our city some much appreciated tourism dollars, despite occasionally behaving with a manner of entitlement and ignorance.

I have little interest in celebrities and networking parties. In fact, I have ignored invitations to several of them (but am appreciative and thankful for them regardless). While I am sure there are a couple of wonderful people at them, I much prefer the comfort of my own living room with sincere and carefully selected friends. This is why most of the mainstream (studio backed) films I will and have seen at the fest were pre-screening invites.

Thankfully, the fine folks at TIFF have managed to match their understandable need to populate the festival with commercially viable star-centric films with an impressive number of obscure foreign and independent films, as well as documentaries.

Below is a list of the films I have seen, from best to worst, with brief impressions of each.

A Year Ago in Winter

“The magic of *A Year Ago in Winter* is its ability to dabble in stereotype without becoming overwhelmed and its adroitness in exploring the external impact that suicide has on the living without extending naïve answers or solutions. Categorization is thankfully eluded with skill regardless of each character's desire to simplify complex, unanswerable questions with adage. The film is about the human desire to simplify perplexing and layered human emotions while coping with feelings of loss, guilt and isolation. It is consistently powerful, challenging and unafraid to wear its heart on its sleeve.”

Burn After Reading

“The Coen Brothers follow-up their Oscar-Winning triumph with a decidedly kooky satire on human stupidity and exaggerated interaction with *Burn After Reading*, a consistently entertaining and entirely amusing, if slight, film. Structurally similar to “*Fargo*” but far less reflective in its “*Raising Arizona*” comic sensibilities, it will likely be criticized mainly for its deliberate lack of depth. This one suffers only from cartoonish performances from McDormand and Pitt, in addition to the folly of ostentatious hipness.”

Yes Madam, Sir

“Filming the documentary over six years whenever she had time among various editing gigs, Megan Doneman has assembled a cohesive and in-depth portrait of a complicated woman. It is a testament more so to Doneman's editing skills than her direction, as her point and shoot technique is not particularly visionary but given the conditions and limitations of her endeavor, the final product is rather impressive.

A sense of humour and an effort to avoid typical preaching and bias keep *Yes Madam, Sir* on just this side of television biography territory, which is much appreciated in an age of heavy-handed manipulation and self-satisfied “lefty” political hipness.”

Plus Tard

“Reliant on single tracking shots and claustrophobic interiors—specifically to reinforce underlying anxieties that stem from external forces and evils—and passive-aggressive suggestions, Amos Gitai's translation Jerome Clement's novel of a man trying to make sense of his Jewish parents' declarations in wartime has the appropriate gravitas but lacks the emotional complexity it strives for and has nothing particularly cinematic about it. Everything in *Plus Tard*, outside of a WW II flashback, feels and looks like a filmed stage play.”

Blindness

“Acting as a kind of erudite, art-house, zombie movie, which dumbs down potential profundity with hippie-dippy, New Age, pseudo-philosophical insights on the state of mankind, *Blindness* creates discomfort and despondency but glosses over central connectivity, leaving a void where emotional resonance is intended. Don McKellar's script reigns in the literary triumph cohesively on a structural level—which itself is no small feat—remaining within the sociophobic confines that were on display in his earlier success, *Last Night*.”

Happy-Go-Lucky

“Dealing with Mike Leigh's trademark talking head sensibilities and class system introspection, *Happy-Go-Lucky* is essentially a romantic comedy that subverts mainstream sensibilities while questioning the affability of the sincerely well-intentioned. Everything about the film is far too obvious but the overall impact is fairly affecting if surprisingly lackluster. “

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Archives

- [September 2008](#)

Afterwards

“Likely to be criticized for its structural fallibility and its overly sentimental ruminations on the nature of existence and the anxieties involved with acknowledging mortality, *Afterwards* is a lyrical and occasionally beautiful visual poem that essentially crumbles under the weight of its own ambitions.

A lack of relationship and character development between the leads ultimately keep the film from having the emotional impact it strives for—especially in an epilogue that should, in theory, have been devastating—regardless of the occasional graphic and unexpected violence towards children and well-intentioned players. On the upside, sincerity and a refreshingly ‘unhip’ atmosphere make these flaws substantially more palatable and forgivable.”

Sugar

“This seemingly standard sports story of a young Dominican Baseball player who is brought to America to play professionally is deceptively coy in its intentions and ultimately winds up as an examination of cultural difference and Western apathy towards foreigners who are treated mainly as acquisitions and useful only when viable. While foreshadowing is used appropriately in the film, albeit slatternly, the formula never dips into the typical pattern of assigning blame. *Sugar* is interested more in making careful observations about those who are seldom considered in a wholesome and genial manner. “

O’Horten

“Owing a lot of its “uniquely” Scandinavian vision to the dry-humoured and deadpan work of Aki Kaurismaki and the starkly satirical, single-shot obsessed Swede Roy Andersson, *O’Horten* is a slightly amusing satire of aging and retirement. It is communicated in an almost somnambulistic and structurally repetitive manner that seems interested more so in being dryly quirky than truly exploring the directionless nature of retirement that the didactic implies.

The predictable nature of the formula based set-up eventually over-rides the element of surprise that each scenario relies on to create humour, but the initial impact of this structure succeeds in what it attempts to do, which is more than can be said for most intentionally sly comedies.”

Control Alt Delete

“From the moment that “Sock” from television’s *Reaper* and Amanda from *Ready or Not* are seen fully nude in the “69’er” position, it is clear that *Control Alt Delete* is out to shock the audience rather than titillate with any allusion or subtlety. The film seems to be an investigation of sexual perversion and deviance in relation to perceived normalcy and how the desire to be socially accepted can cause repression and self-denial, however, it lacks the sort of cohesion necessary to communicate this point effectively.”

Dean Spanley

“Sure to moisten the panties of the bridge and knitting crowd, who will most certainly gasp when men of the cloth drink Imperial Tokay and other men exclaim “poppycock” during discussions about reincarnation, *Dean Spanley* is the sort of film that one would expect the Queen of England to watch while acting coyly offended and hiding her inappropriately erect nipples. It is a comedy of manners and clever” wordplay that reeks of Oscar Wilde smugness but settles for lengthy analyses of canine customs and thought processes. Limited scope and sincere emotions give it a nudge towards copacetic regardless of being entirely forgettable and often self-righteous.”

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- [July 2008](#)
- [June 2008](#)
- [May 2008](#)
- [April 2008](#)
- [March 2008](#)
- [February 2008](#)
- [January 2008](#)
- [December 2007](#)
- [November 2007](#)

Categories

- [Academy Awards](#) (13)
- [Box Office](#) (19)
- [Contests/Giveaways](#) (10)
- [DVD Releases](#) (30)
- [Images/Posters](#) (26)
- [Miscellaneous](#) (39)
- [Movies](#) (140)
- [Reviews](#) (70)
- [Television/TV](#) (10)
- [Top Ten Movie Lists](#) (12)
- [Videos/Trailers](#) (76)

Blogroll

- [Box Office Prophets](#)
- [Celebrity Gossip](#)
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- [Online Paid Survey Blog](#)
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- [The Office Quotes](#)
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Skin

“Feeling more like an ethnographic biography than anything particularly cinematic, *Skin* tells an interesting story in a discerning, yet detached and glossed-over manner, which does little to make the film exciting or memorable. While the story itself should theoretically make for an emotional and engaging experience, the television movie vibe and a tendency to rush through and oversimplify several serious life events that span over twenty-five-to-thirty years in the protagonists life, leave an overall feeling of expositional hollowness.”

As mentioned before, none of these films are actually bad, rather, most of them are simply “decent”, which itself is certainly not a bad thing.

This coming week I will be seeing: Appaloosa, Ghost Town, Deadgirl, Che, Revanche, Parc, Linha De Passe, White Night Wedding, Lymelife and Fear Me Not: check back for updates!



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