

Making a List for 2007 | BY DANEEN AKERS

I'll admit right up front that I'm a movie junkie. And not just one of those intellectual, art house movie junkies but a true movie fan who loves both indie and big budget Hollywood films. I went to Sundance Film Festival this year and regularly patronize the small one-screen theaters still left in my city, but I also went to see the latest *Harry Potter* on the first day it came out—in full IMAX splendor.

(Did you know that the IMAX in San Francisco is the third-largest movie screen in the world? It's a glorious experience.) While I'm confessing, I also saw the latest *Pirates of the Caribbean* on its first day out and thoroughly enjoyed myself—there's a place for popcorn movies. I'm hoping my confession will tempt those of you who might dismiss some of these films as either too popular or too “different” to take a risk and adjust the Netflix queue.

While researching this list, I was reminded why I love movies so much. Quite simply, this is our campfire, the place where we go to learn our stories. For two hours, we sit in a dark room with cell phones turned off, next to our neighbors, suspended in disbelief as we enter into the reality of another and sometimes (perhaps most cathartically) *The Other*. We encounter our fears, hopes, and yearnings through who we meet and what we see on that screen. These two hours are the closest thing to a sermon many people ever hear—and they pay for it. These two hours are power. Like Uncle Ben says in *Spiderman*, with great power comes great responsibility.

The following ten films represent two hours well spent in the hands of filmmakers who take that responsibility and don't disappoint. (Yes, a couple are just two hours spent in harmless entertainment that can take us out of the stress of our lives for a mini-vacation.)

Top Films of 2007

1. *Once* — Walking out of the theater after seeing *Once*, my husband and I found ourselves unusually speechless. We just kept muttering profound insights like, “Wow,” and “Oh, wow.” The reviewers seemed to have had the same experience as they universally fell in love with this little Irish gem. It's technically a musical, but director John Carney reinvents the genre so completely that you wouldn't necessarily realize that fact until you read a review.



- This is a film that sticks with you far longer than others. This staying power comes from the raw honesty and emotion between the two main characters (whose names we never know) who connect over their love of music and a similar brokenness in their lives; they are willing to befriend each other in a manner rarely seen in cinema. Oh, and did I mention that the music is dynamite?
2. *Into the Wild* — As a huge fan of the Jon Krakauer book this film is based on, I didn't have high expectations for the film (when is the film ever as good as the book?). But this film actually might just surpass the book, and that credit goes to Sean Penn's directing. He clearly identifies with the fiercely independent idealist Chris McCandless, who takes to the road after college, shunning the materialism, shallowness, and deceit he sees in his parents, and eventually dies on his final great adventure alone in an abandoned bus in the wilds of Alaska.

Everything about this film, from the superbly cast supporting characters to Penn's directing style, fits the character and his very American streak of ideal-

ism (think Thoreau and Muir) to live pure, unfettered, and in harmony with Nature.

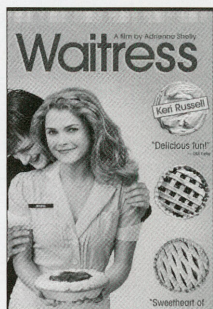
3. *For the Bible Tells Me So* — Readers of the *Spectrum Blog* or the Progressive Adventism Web site will know that I have a history with this film. My husband and I, along with a group of Pacific Union College students, waited for three hours to get into the midnight screening of this film at Sundance. Even though we ended up with the worst seats in the house on the very front row, we were all deeply moved by the power of this film, possibly the first mainstream film to try to reconcile homosexuality and the Bible.

It does so through the stories of five conservative Christian families who discover that their son or daughter is gay (including the Rev. Gene Robinson's family) and the scholarship of prominent theologians and ministers who offer biblical exegesis and scriptural analysis that aren't always taught during Sunday (or Sabbath) School. The film is meant to be a conversation starter for families and churches—and the evidence from the *Spectrum Blog* is that it wildly succeeds in this endeavor.

4. *Grace is Gone*—The many possible meanings of its title haunts this film—and in the best way possible. This was the Audience Award winner for a narrative film at Sundance this year, and it's already being talked about as John Cusack's best performance to date (he's actually almost unrecognizable, which worked quite well for Charlize Theron when Oscar season came around).

The film follows a father who can't figure out how to tell his two daughters that their mother has been killed in Iraq. As the Sundance program guide read, the fact that this film can actually be seen as promilitary is part of its power. The filmmakers don't draw conclusions for us; rather, they leave us with a story we can't shake.

5. *Waitress* — Keri Russell stars in this quirky and utterly charming little film about a waitress, Jenna, who discovers that she's pregnant with her vile husband's baby, a discovery that jeopardizes her plans to leave and start her life over. She vents her frustrations by creating pies (sometimes literally and sometimes just as a survival



technique) with names like, "I-Don't-Want-Earl's-Baby-Pie" and "Baby-Screaming-in-the-Middle-of-the-Night-and-Ruining-My-Life-Pie."

As a woman more than a little scared of how having a baby might change/dare-I-admit ruin my life, I found the ambiguousness of Jenna's feelings toward her unborn child a rarity in film, and it made the climax all the more meaningful.

6. *SiCKO* — No matter what your opinion of Michael



Moore, *SiCKO*—his best film by far—is worth your time. Moore unmasks the deep and troubling issues with American health care through his unique style of op-ed filmmaking that drives some people mad, but is ultimately meant to start a conversation. He cleverly doesn't even address the 50 million uninsured Americans, choosing to focus on those of us with "good" health insurance.

The ensuing litany of migraine-inducing stories of Americans who had the misfortune actually to need to use their health insurance should get all of us to pay more attention to this issue (and not just in election years). Although this picture is often grim, it is actually a comedy, and his optimism that we can change and that the United States is ultimately a land of good people left me feeling hopeful, not discouraged.



7. *Ratatouille* — Billboards proclaiming this film to be the "best reviewed film of the year" aren't exaggerating (but that's partially due to the fact that it came out in the summer when movie fare is more Michael Bay and less Michael Clayton). Still, the accolades are well deserved. This is a sweet, family friendly film about a Parisian rat who longs to be a chef; it's what you've come to expect from Pixar but with a lot of good French cooking thrown in.

8. *In the Valley of Elah* — The latest film from Paul Haggis (*Crash*) is an unflinching look at what war does to our children. Based on a true story, the film follows a father and former army man (Tommy Lee Jones) looking for his son, who has gone missing after returning from Iraq.

The story that unfolds is never manipulated and is about as raw as they come. The film gets its title from the valley where David fought Goliath, and as Jones's character tells a little boy named David the genesis of his name, we imagine other little boys hearing the same story but from the Koran, not the Bible, similarly situating themselves as Davids, facing their Goliaths with courage. I left wondering what my responsibility is as a citizen of a country that is sending our young



men and women to witness and participate in atrocity.

9. *Evan Almighty* — Okay, I know that half of you just wrote me off after seeing this title on my list. I'm apparently one of four in the country who loved this movie—the other three being the rest of my party who spent almost two solid hours laughing (those deep belly laughs) at this modern-day Noah and the flood story.

Steve Carell can always make me laugh, but that's not all



that was going on in this film. If God is anything like Morgan Freeman plays him, then we're going to be just fine.

10. *Paris, je t'aime* — Most filmgoers never get to see short films, and even the ones who do almost never get to see accomplished directors and actors make short films. This collection of eighteen shorts, set in the eighteen arrondissements of Paris, varies tremendously in style, but they all have heart, charm, and a healthy dose of that intangible Parisian joie de vie.

Top Films That I'm Embarrassed Not to Have Seen Yet:

I'm afraid I've missed a few greats (by all accounts), including:

- *3:10 to Yuma*—A western to remind us why we like westerns.
- *Away From Her*—A poignant look at Alzheimer's.
- *Eastern Promises*—David Cronenberg's brutal examination of violence.
- *Hot Fuzz*—If you like a good British farce.
- *No End in Sight*—The documentary hailed as a balanced, inside perspective on how things went so wrong in Iraq; it's at the top of my Netflix queue.
- *Michael Clayton*—A lawyer/thriller film with a con-

scious that Roger Ebert says "is just about perfect as an exercise in the genre."

Upcoming Films That Look Like Winners:

Of course, as this issue goes to press, we're entering the best movie season of the year (everyone is trying to qualify before the Oscars). Here are a few that seem well worth the theater experience:

- *Lars and the Real Girl* (10/26)—Although it sounds more than bizarre—a lonely, isolated man (Ryan Gosling) orders a life-size doll from the Internet and seems to think she is his real girlfriend—all signs point that it's actually an affirmation of love, community, and unconditional acceptance.
- *Bee Movie* (11/2)—The new animated flick from Jerry Seinfeld (note that it's rated PG, parents).
- *Lions for Lambs* (11/9)—A Robert Redford film about Iraq war policy. I have to admit that the biggest reason I can't wait to see this film is because one of my husband's PUC students worked as an intern on it.
- *I'm Not There* (11/21)—The unconventional biopic with six actors portraying Bob Dylan's life, including the indomitable Cate Blanchett in a role that is getting beyond rave reviews.
- *Atonement* (12/7)—Based on the Ian McEwan World War II novel that was short listed for the Booker Award—need I say more?
- *The Kite Runner* (12/7)—This was one of my book club's favorites, with its themes of friendship and redemption.
- *Juno* (12/14)—This is possibly the film I'm looking forward to seeing the most. It's being hailed as this year's *Little Miss Sunshine*, a quirky little film about a pregnant teen girl from a small town.
- *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (12/21)—Johnny Depp can get me to see any movie (I mentioned my *Pirates* obsession above), but Johnny Depp singing in a Tim Burton film? This I gotta see.
- *Charlie Wilson's War* (12/25)—Give me Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts, and Phillip Seymour Hoffman in a movie about a self-absorbed congressman who ends up concocting a scheme for a covert war in Afghanistan with Mike Nichols at the helm, and I'll predict a hit.
- *There Will Be Blood* (12/26)—It's been years since either P. T. Anderson or Daniel-Day Lewis made a film, and now they've both found something worthy of their talents. ■

Daneen Akers writes from San Francisco, where she is pursuing a graduate degree in English with emphasis on composition. As the reviews editor for *Spectrum's* new web site, she welcomes ideas for book and film reviews. She can be contacted at daneen@dneenaker.com