

Bill Rea ? Right actor can make the difference

There was a time when I would go to a lot of movies, but such outings are very infrequent now.

If my wife and I get to two in a year (and by that I mean actually going to the movie house, paying to get in, munching on popcorn, etc.), that's exceptional.

As I indicated, that was not always the case. When Beth and I were going together, we would get to at least one movie per week (it was the usual Friday night routine), with occasional weeks when we'd get to two, and sometimes even three. Those were the days when Beth was just my girlfriend. When she became my wife and girlfriend, things changed. As I have frequently observed, once we entered into marital bliss, there wasn't as much need to go on dates, so we didn't.

That's why we only get to a couple of movies maximum per year.

We still enjoy watching movies, and I have a pretty fair collection on disc and tape, which we take in certain evenings; especially if the Jays and Leafs aren't playing. We're also in the habit of adding to the collection when the opportunity presents itself. I make a point of checking the inventory when I go to take pictures at church sales and the like. One such sale in the last couple of weeks netted us a couple of James Bond offerings; Goldfinger (my favourite) and On Her Majesty's Secret Service (which I have never seen).

But the point is that over the years, movies have played a rather important part in my life, if only through the volume of films I have seen. Needless to say, I have seen a lot of wonderful movies, and I have also seen an awful lot of garbage. I have paid to get into movies that have pleasantly surprised me when I wasn't expecting a lot (Local Hero and Remains of the Day are the two examples of that which spring readily to mind, because I believe they were both interesting stories that were well told). By the same token, I have paid to get into shows high with hopes, and walked out keenly disappointed. A good example of that was Lee Daniels' The Butler (one of two films I went to in the last 12 months), a kind of okay story that was very badly told, but more of that later.

So going to see a film can be a bit of a gamble. As one of Tom Hanks' characters observed, "Life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get" (I lifted that quote directly from the Internet Movie Data base, so if it's wrong, blame them).

One type of film I have always enjoyed is those based on history, with historical figures depicted. But it's largely predicated on getting the right person to play the part. Surely they could have found someone better than Ronald Reagan to play the Gipper! And I have always believed that Charlton Heston would have done a better job of playing Moses by doing more to be Charlton Heston than trying to be another Rudolph Valentino, but that's just one man's opinion.

On the other hand, sometimes, they do hit the mark, with the actor doing such a good job that he or she saves an otherwise turkey.

For example, did you ever see the 1995 movie Nixon? I don't profess to be a historian, but I have read quite a lot about Richard Nixon's life and times. As a piece of historical documentation regarding the 37th President of the United States, I believe the film is a big hunk of rubbish. I remember thinking that it was not surprising this picture came out after Nixon was in his grave, because I suspect lawsuits would have been flying had he been around to launch them. Yet, when I first saw it, I was completely entertained by Anthony Hopkins doing Nixon. I have no way on knowing how accurate his portrayal of Nixon was (I never met the man), but I have faith (possibly a naïve faith) in the professional integrity of Hopkins. Watch the movie to be entertained, not to be educated.

There are other cases when even the best of thespians can't save the product. Meryl Streep is a superb actress, and Margaret Thatcher was a remarkable woman. But I have seen the motion picture The Iron Lady, and I don't believe that combination clicked. I think part of the problem was the subject was still alive when they made the film (Mrs. Thatcher died a couple of years later). I think it's usually a mistake to do a biographic piece of cinema on one who's still kicking. It's much better to wait a couple of years, or actually many years. True, Helen Mirren was able to get away with it in The Queen, but that film dealt mainly with one week in the life of the lady.

Bad choices of actors to play figures from history simply won't work, which brings us to The Butler.

I was attracted to the film when it came out. Part of it had to do with my life-long interest in the American Presidency. The other part had to do with Robin Williams (a pretty good actor ? full value for the Oscar he received in Good Will Hunting) doing Dwight Eisenhower. I just had to see that, largely because I didn't think he could do it. Fact is he didn't.

?That guy's Truman, not Eisenhower,? I thought as I watched the movie, but things got worse.

James Marsden was okay as Kennedy, Liev Schreiber's portrayal of Lyndon Johnson was actually the high point of the whole film, with John Cusack as Nixon prompted me to call ?Give me a break? out loud. The movie hit bottom at that point, and stayed there. It was also interesting that only deceased presidents were depicted in the film, so we didn't see any actors try and portray Jimmy Carter or either of the Bushes.

I should also stress my belief that the real killer of the picture was Oprah Winfrey. While watching every scene in which she

appeared, one could just feel the brakes being applied to the whole story.

The only other film I paid to see in the last year was Saving Mr. Banks. Again, I was intrigued by the thought of an actor with whom I'm familiar portraying an actual figure from the past (I'm old enough to remember seeing Walt Disney on TV Sunday nights). I couldn't imagine Hanks as Disney, but I was willing to watch the attempt. And it was successful.

The film was a little depressing. For those of you who are not familiar with it, the movie is basically a biographical piece about P. L. Travers, the creator of Mary Poppins. Travers had a very loving and colourful father, but the man was also an alcoholic, and his decline was depicted in considerable detail in the movie.

As I stated above, I enjoy films based on history, but I do insist on accuracy, or at least an attempt to be accurate. And that runs into my main problem with Saving Mr. Banks. There was no smoking depicted. I have subsequently learned that Disney Studios has a policy about showing the use of tobacco, and I wish it could be dropped. The matter popped into my head as I watched a scene in the movie set in a bar. This was supposed to be in the mid 1960s, yet not a trace of smoke in that air. Not realistic! Therefore, not an accurate depiction of history.

People shouldn't smoke, but the reality of life is some of them do, and in that period of history, a lot of them did. I used to be a smoker, but I am not today (and have not been for about 20 years). It is well documented that Disney smoked (in fairness, Saving Mr. Banks made very passing reference to that), and that he had lung cancer when he died.

There are many, many negatives of human nature that the motion picture industry is ever willing to show. Why stop there

