

Reel retrospective: Critic looks back on year's best

As the school year draws to an end, take a moment to appreciate the host of great films of the past year.

By Max Turner
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Looking back on the 2002-2003 school year, it is hard not to think of the countless snow days, the looming threat of war, the Columbia disaster, and athletic scandals. Amid all of this, though, I cannot help but recall the numerous memorable movie moments of the year as well.

Good ("Punch Drunk Love"), bad ("Daredevil"), and obnoxious ("My Big Fat Greek Wedding"), this school year had a little bit of everything, and it would be a shame to close out the term without one last look back at what made the year in film one for the records. The following are what I believe to be the five best films that, though I missed my first chance to review them, I simply could not live with myself if I did not give them a good word.

The first film on my list is a little bit of a cheat. "Y Tu Mama Tambien" actually came out at the tail end of last school year, but I did not get a chance to review it then, and I refuse to graduate with-

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out telling everyone I can to see this gorgeous, sensitive, intelligent road movie.

The plot follows the rather simple story of two teens, whose girlfriends have gone away for the summer, and the woman they woo into coming with them on a road trip to the beach in Mexico. Along the way, writer-director Alfonso Cuaron uses the two boys, one bourgeois son of a politician and one lower-class worker, and the emotionally tattered woman after

whom they lust to explore the deepest truths of friendship, sex, age, and even politics and social class as well. A tragic buddy film at heart, "Y Tu Mama Tambien" is, by turns, funny, fascinating, and heart-wrenching and does more for its genre than any other film in recent memory.

The Japanese animated film, "Spirited Away" deals with a youthful quest of an entirely different kind, but does so with just as much eloquence and intelligence as Cuaron's film.

"Spirited Away" is a fantastical journey in the mind of a young girl who, having just moved to a new town, stumbles upon an abandoned (or so it seems) amusement park. The park comes to life at night with creatures reminiscent of "Alice in Wonderland," but decidedly all their own. The film is entirely animated, and could mistakenly be dismissed as just another kids' movie, but stop and give this one a chance. Viewers should resign themselves to the outrageous fantasy, and they will be transfixed and transported to a world they could never have imagined.

I was practically salivating non-stop for three years straight in eager anticipation of Martin Scorsese's latest movie, "Gangs of New York." The film finally opened this Christmas, after a full year of postponements. No, it is not a perfect movie, and, yes, Martin Scorsese has made far better films ("Raging Bull," "Taxi Driver," "GoodFellas," etc.), but "Gangs of New York" is a spectacular achievement nonetheless. Hey, "Moby Dick" is too long, "Apocalypse Now" has third-act problems, and "Falling Water" leaks, but they are all still masterpieces. "Gangs" perfectly embodies the idea of a flawed masterpiece. Leonardo DiCaprio is a bit off, and his character is underdeveloped, but the grand spectacle of the film, the consistent vision, and the supreme confidence of Scorsese to create art and defy convention all ring true. The result is a truly awe-inspiring epic that I predict will, with time, gain the respect it deserves.

Scorsese's New York contemporary and fellow visionary, Spike Lee, also made an underappreciated film this year

with "The 25th Hour." Ed Norton, in one of his trademark outstanding performances, plays a man with one day left before he is sent to prison. The entire film takes place on this one day and follows the psychological turmoil of a man about to give up a significant portion of his life. What does it do to him, his friends, their trust, and his future after prison?

Spike Lee makes an intense, captivating film almost entirely out of conversation. As always, he does not shy away from tough issues; rather, he leaves viewers with enough intellectual fodder to last a lifetime without ever alienating his audience from the human element of his story.

British filmmaker Stephen Daldry contributed this year the extremely ambitious "The Hours," a film worlds apart from his last film "Billy Elliot," yet even more successful. The film involves three stories, one of Virginia Woolf as she writes her novel "Mrs. Dalloway," one of a woman in 1950s

Los Angeles reading "Mrs. Dalloway" and struggling to please her family, and one which follows the plot of "Mrs. Dalloway," but updates it to present-day New York City. The book upon which it is based won the Pulitzer Prize but many filmmakers quickly dismissed it as impossible to adapt to the screen. Daldry, however, accepted the challenge, and succeeded brilliantly.

Aided in no small part by Phillip Glass's mesmerizing score and Nicole Kidman's performance, quite possibly the greatest performance of the past decade, Daldry's film is provocative and deliberate without being heavy-handed. Every single emotion rings entirely true, a feat so few films are even able to approach.

Certainly, these are not the only great films I missed reviewing in the past year. "Talk to Her," "The Quiet American," "Lovely and Amazing," and "The Pianist" all come quickly to mind, and I could come up with an entirely different

list on another day. Still, it is undeniable that the past year in films would not be what it has been were it not for these five incredible features.

Top Ten Films of 2002-2003

10. Adaptation
9. Talk to Her
8. Spirited Away
7. The Pianist
6. The 25th Hour
5. About Schmidt
4. Gangs of New York
3. Punch Drunk Love
2. The Hours
1. Y Tu Mama Tambien

And the worst...

Rollerball
My Big Fat Greek Wedding



Film Comment

Adrien Brody's tragic turn as a pianist in war-torn Warsaw made "The Pianist" one of the best films of the year. The film's Oscar and critical success may be just the remedy to bring back exiled director Roman Polanski's career, once plagued by personal and legal scandal.



Film Comment

Daniel Day-Lewis gives a mesmerizing performance as Bill the Butcher in Martin Scorsese's grand "Gangs of New York." Short of perfection, but far above average, Scorsese's epic is a majestic triumph of cinematic artistry.

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