

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

The films of 1994 offer a kaleidoscope of human experiences

by Rupert Kinnard

Last year's examination of 1993's cinematic landscape was divided into three categories: The good, the bad, and the ugly. The good was represented by such movies as *The Wedding Banquet*, *Schindler's List*, *The Ballad of Little Jo*, and *Like Water for Chocolate*. The bad included *Amos & Andrew*, *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, *Rock Hudson's Home Videos*, and *Last Action Hero*. The ugly—which were, disturb-

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ingly, good movies that were rendered almost unwatchable due to an intense and unnecessary degree of violence—included *Kalifornia*, *Bad Lieutenant*, *Boxing Helena*, *Reservoir Dogs* and *Dead Alive*.

Looking over the list of nearly 100 movies I've seen in 1994, some were so bad they tended to sink to the very bottom of a multicolored concoction like rocks. The larger number of movies tend to float like fluffy foam in the middle, as a buffer between good and bad. At best, they were pleasantly entertaining; at worst, they contained enjoyable performances that made me overlook weak plots, poor direction, and/or predictable situations. The smallest number of movies make it to the top, like cream. All the elements of these movies come together in a way that allows the viewer to appreciate a filmmaker's exploration of themes within relationships, politics, religion and art. And if these particular films don't quite provide the entertainment that so many seem to demand of their movies, they can be very enlightening and educational. These films also embody the standards against which so many others are measured.

My list for 1994 (in alphabetical order):

The good...

Boys Life; *Clerks*; *Four Weddings and a Funeral*; *Fresh*; *Go Fish*; *Heavenly Creatures*; *Hoop Dreams*; *Oleana*; *Philadelphia*; *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; and *Quiz Show*.

the bad...

Angels in the Outfield, *Blankman*, *Greedy, I'll Do Anything*, *Low Down Dirty Shame*, *Milk Money*, *Only You*, *Radioland Murders*, *Renaissance Man*, and *With Honors*.

and the ugly (or simply problematic)

Crooklyn, *Forrest Gump*, *In the House of the Spirits*, *Natural Born Killers*, *The Professional*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Six Degrees of Separation*.

Philadelphia (which was officially released at the end of last year but most people saw it at the beginning of this year) and *Quiz Show* are the only two traditional Hollywood productions listed among my favorite movies of the year. Some of the movies listed—*Boys Life*, three short coming out films by three young gay men; *Clerks*, a hilariously dry day-in-the-life film about convenience store clerks; *Go Fish*, a contemporary look at the state of lesbian relationships; and *Oleana*, David Mamet's thought-provoking examination

of sexual harassment as intellectual and class harassment—were smaller and more innovative forms of filmmaking. Most of these films, along with *Fresh*, a different and riveting retelling of the kid-in-the-'hood-gets-over-against-all-odds story, weren't as widely hyped as the bigger Hollywood movies but are highly recommended as video rentals. *Heavenly Creatures* (which, amazingly, was directed by the same man who directed *Dead Alive* last year) blew me away with stunning visuals and the depiction of passion between two young women obsessed with one another. *Hoop Dreams* (which is a shoo-in for this year's Acad-

The movies listed as ugly are problematic for various reasons but absolutely cannot be dismissed as merely good or bad movies. They probably end up as the best of the "middle ground" movies. Like last year's larger number of "ugly movies," there were a number of films which featured violence levels turned up so high it was hard to look beyond the gore to appreciate what the filmmaker might have been trying to convey.

Natural Born Killers was such an assault on the senses it left filmgoers divided between those who thought director Oliver Stone was saying something profound about violence in our society

examination of the '70s through the experiences of a close-knit African American family. It was hard to totally enjoy the movie because Lee's homophobia reared its head once again. Likewise, a wonderfully complex film such as *Six Degrees of Separation* was marred by its clichéd treatment of an apparently straight man committing suicide after having sex with another man. *In the House of the Spirits*, with its all-star cast (Glenn Close, Antonio Banderas, Meryl Streep, Jeremy Irons, and Winona Ryder), was one of those rare films that I felt was such an over-acted, predictable, overly dramatic soap opera of a movie, it became one of the campiest movies of the year. As far as *Forrest Gump* is concerned, I actually do think it was one of the best films of the year, but when a film becomes so popular and exploited it really leaves a bad taste in my mouth. The country went through "Forrest Gumpmania"—spawning bumper stickers, soundtracks, sound bites, parodies and toys. But the U.S.

cinema's golden-boy-of-the-moment, Tom Hanks, was a marvel to watch.

Other movies of interest during the past year were movies that dealt with sexual politics in some way: *Spanking the Monkey* (masturbation and incest), *Sirens* (sexual repression and liberation), *Barcelona* (sexual obsession), *Savage Nights* (sexual responsibility in the age of AIDS), *The Boys of St. Vincent* (child sexual molestation in the Catholic church), and the documentary *Sex, Drugs and Democracy* were all riveting and insightful. *Just Like a Woman* (a lighter-than-light wisp of a film about cross-dressing) was good for a few laughs, but that was about it.

Other honorable mentions for favorite movies of the year would be *Mi Vida Loca*, a wonderful Latina girls-in-the-'hood film; *Fear of a Black Hat*, a stinging parody of the world of gangsta rap; *Eat Drink Man Woman*; *Ed Wood*; Roman Polanski's *Bitter Moon*; *Interview with the Vampire*; *Bullets Over Broadway*; *The*

Shawshank Redemption; *Bhaji on the Beach*; and the delightfully mysterious *Widows' Peak*.

The biggest challenge of the exercise of picking the best films of 1994 lies in choosing what I consider to be the best movie of the year. It's really difficult because of the variety of movies that made my list of favorites. But, for sheer emotional impact and cinematic accomplishment, I have to go with the documentary.

Hoop Dreams is a stunning film. Four years in the making, it actually follows two young African American men through their lives as they cling to basketball as a way to achieve their dreams. It's a close look at families, relationships, human aspirations, and the society in which we live. It is literally a slice of life. I found it riveting and thoroughly enjoyable. I suppose I can bear such horrible movies as *Low Down Dirty Shame* when I think there might be another movie of *Hoop Dreams*' integrity right around the corner.

In the end, the movies I tend to really appreciate are films that illuminate our perceptions of the human spirit. I go to movies as my primary form of escapism, but I also go to take part in the kaleidoscope of human experiences.



emy Award for best documentary) and the instant cult classic *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* were both wonderful and deserved every bit of praise that has been heaped upon them. *Four Weddings and a Funeral* was one of my favorites, partially because of the positive light in which a gay relationship was presented in the midst of other viable relationships.

As far as those movies I've listed as bad, you probably don't even remember them because they all came and went quickly, if not painlessly. I have to defend the fact that I even saw them by saying a number of them were free screenings. Nevertheless, don't let an evening of not knowing what to pick out at your local video store lead you to choosing any of these stinkers. They were basically a waste of time.

and those who thought Stone was like a kid gleefully playing in a mud bath, with violence as the mud. *The Professional* was a story about a paid assassin befriendng a young girl, and I knew it would be violent. But the degree to which the film seemed to glorify the violence disturbed me. I found myself not wanting to be lured into thinking that an assassin should end up being the "good guy." Of course, the rave of the year has been *Pulp Fiction*. In the end, I can't help but wonder: Are we so starved for rich dialogue, quirky characters, and nonlinear storytelling that we can justify being bombarded by the type of violence that happens in this film?

acters, and nonlinear storytelling that we can justify being bombarded by the type of violence that happens in this film? And yet, I did enjoy the unique thrill of *Pulp Fiction* as a cinematic roller coaster. Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* was an entertaining

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