

THE year in REVIEW

BY JASON BLAIR

Mexico, Martin Scorsese and *Little Miss Sunshine* all made headlines in 2006, a year that required some perseverance on the part of filmgoers. Certainly, *Little Miss Sunshine* was a film almost all of us could enjoy, even if the nod for Best Picture is like an awkward gift in the film's tiny hands. Similarly celebrated was Scorsese's *The Departed*, in which the iconic director traversed familiar themes with the skill and confidence of his earlier work. The most compelling story of the year, however, was that three Mexican filmmakers released acclaimed films in 2006, films remarkable for the range of tones and styles they employ. Devastated by NAFTA, Mexico's film industry may rebound after *Babel*, *Pan's Labyrinth* and *Children of Men*.

Another theme to emerge in 2006 is that documentary films are flourishing. Sure, every year a crop of fine documentaries provides the nourishment we need after taking in so much garbage. If you're lucky, a few of them get released where you live. What makes 2006 unique is that in addition to outstanding traditional documentaries, such as *Jesus Camp* and *Shut Up and Sing*, some widely seen features used documentary elements to raise expectations for the genre. *Borat* planted the flag in new (and uncomfortable) territory, using grotesque humor and pinpoint satire like no film before it. *United 93* recreated a horrific event so recent that our daily lives still bear its imprint, while establishing a human context for the men who killed so many.

Documentaries might be the only tolerable by-product of our current fascination with reality-based entertainment. At their best, documentaries connect our fragmented lives to people or places we might otherwise overlook. *An Inconvenient Truth*, for example, is a PowerPoint polemic that avoids being polemical. It's a story of redemption in two parts: a man who lost, and the planet he's trying to save. In fact, 2006 was so laden with good documentary work that *An Inconvenient Truth* — arguably, a film of universal relevance — isn't even the best of the bunch. For that title, what's an eight-letter word for “banter”?

For more on the year's best films (review dates given in parentheses), see the movie review archive at www.eugeneweekly.com/moviearchive.html



1. The Departed A commanding film in every aspect — acting, directing, screenwriting, music — *The Departed* is the runaway best film of 2006. This is Scorsese at his most hyperkinetic and sophisticated. Nobody does violence with more nerve than Scorsese, yet nobody understands its spiritual costs better, either. *The Departed* seethes with wise guys and thugs, but the film revolves around two Boston cops, one a traitor and one a phantom. Even if you don't like the subject matter, consider what Scorsese elicits from his cast. Mark Wahlberg, a passable actor before this, gives the performance of his career. Leo DiCaprio and Matt Damon drive the film like seasoned veterans, while Jack Nicholson stops waving his arms so much. Obviously, *The Departed* is a man-heavy film, and a bloody one at that. But the sense of jeopardy is exquisite throughout, leaving you literally gasping for air. (10/12/06)

2. Wordplay Think you're a word geek? Think again. *Wordplay*, a film about competitive crossword puzzling, will humble and excite you. This documentary has everything you desire from a film: passion, intrigue, triumph and defeat. This proud, fanatical film even boasts a hero: Will Shortz, the “Errol Flynn of crossword puzzling” and the master puzzler for NPR and the *New York Times*. The film is structured around Shortz and his followers as they prepare for the national crossword tournament in 2005. What raises *Wordplay* to the level of high art is the sublime way the personalities shine through as they discuss (and occasionally demonstrate) their pursuit of puzzling perfection. Outrageously clever in every aspect, including the way in which the narrative pieces fit together,



er, this is a film that would have been charming had it been half this good. As it is, it's one of the very best of 2006. (7/20/06)

3. Children of Men The most assured and credible apocalyptic fantasy in a generation, all the more so for remembering to be funny. *Children of Men* takes the *Brazil* formula — the future looks a lot like right now, only it's dirtier and nothing works — but asks a much bigger political question about the dangers of unchecked fascism. Clive Owen plays the rumpled hero to perfection — how can he save the world if he can't even stay sober? — and Michael Caine continues his late-career resurgence as a jolly hippie who gets high while the world burns. *Children of Men* isn't perfect; its third act has too many near-misses and too much scurrying about. But claims that the film far exceeds its source material aren't exaggerated, underscoring how rare an achievement this film is. (1/11/07)

4. An Inconvenient Truth This is Al Gore the way we wanted him to be: relaxed, cheeky, self-assured and casually eloquent. He's feisty and therefore impossible to ignore. If this stirring documentary were only about global warming, it would still be required viewing, but what makes *An Inconvenient Truth* so exceptional is the way it weaves Gore's story of personal renewal into the tapestry of global climate change. Gore, the former “next President of the United States,” has found the cause of his lifetime — of any lifetime — and for once he doesn't give a damn what people think. His legacy in the political arena ended with bitter defeat, but his legacy as an ambassador for reversing global warming may prove that losing the 2000 election was the best possible outcome. This is a thrilling, persuasive and deeply felt production about a most unlikely savior. (6/15/06)



5. United 93 Despite the odds, it's a film of enormous restraint and power. *United 93* reassembles the morning of 9/11 by focusing on the mundane details and tiny rituals that make up a typical workday. The context is both tragic and ironic, given our awareness of the outcome. At the same time, *United 93* presents the hijackers as anxious, spiritual and even quarrelsome — in other words, fully human. Ultimately, the triumph of *United 93* is that it stands as an antidote to forgetting. Against our impulse to memorialize the dead collectively, *United 93* insists we remember the dead individually. The film achieves the authority of a documentary feature by presenting the attacks on a human scale. (5/4/06)

6. Borat He fooled everyone, especially the fools. How the Cambridge-educated Sacha Baron Cohen transformed himself so utterly — into a racist, sexist nitwit — is beyond me. But Cohen's genius is for exploiting the insular segments of our culture, like the rich or the deeply religious. Cohen's infantile demeanor endears him to his subjects until, more often than not, his subjects end up condoning slavery or disparaging Jews. Say what you will of his vile presentation, his method is beyond reproach: He exposes hatred and prejudice by pretending to be prejudiced himself. He's not for everyone, but he's a treasure. Very nice! (11/9/06)



7. Infamous Like *Capote*, to which comparisons are inevitable, this is the story of the creation of *In Cold Blood*. But the similarities end there. *Capote's* Philip Seymour Hoffman gave a commanding lead performance, but it's a performance that at times overwhelmed the movie, which is conventional and emotionally distant. *Infamous* takes us further into Capote's friendships and sexuality. (To give one example, the legal appeals treated so laboriously in *Capote* are only summarized in *Infamous*, and only to show the agony they're causing Capote.) Boasting a vibrant, highly literate script that rings with wisdom and humor, *Infamous* is the more effective portrait of the artist and the writing of his classic “true novel.” Viewed side by side, Toby Jones bests Hoffman, an actor of uncommon gifts. But more surprising is Sandra Bullock in a flawless take on gentle contrarian Harper Lee. (11/2/06)



8. Notes on a Scandal Judi Dench, Cate Blanchett and Bill Nighy in the same film? In times of catastrophe, at least one of these actors should be whisked Cheney-like to a bunker, so as to minimize the loss to our culture. By now, the plot of *Notes on a Scandal* should be familiar: Dench, a lonely, closeted lesbian, tries to manipulate a lusty Blanchett into a relation-

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