

Laina with January Movies
Posted On:December 31, 1969

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War Horse

As everyone was shuffling out of the movie, sniffing and wiping away tears, I was angry. That a movie that could well have been added to my list of Best War Movies was not just a mess of great battle scenes and manipulative sentimentality about a horse. Spielberg now has clay feet for me.

The story follows the fortunes of a British boy from Devon and his colt, Joey, obviously a thoroughbred who would not be good as a plow horse, which his father should have bought. The horse, however, manages to save the family farm by learning to plow some muddy bottomland so that the farmer could plant a money crop of turnips to pay off the farm loans. Torrential rains ruin the crop, however, and the horse must be sold. World War I had just erupted, and an army officer bought the horse for himself and promised to take care of it.

The rest of the story follows the fortunes of not only Joey, but of all the young recruits who found themselves marching into the mouth of hell. What made this war particularly hellish was that it was on the cusp of too many monumental changes: mechanized artillery which continually broke down and needed to be hauled by horses; the same with Red Cross Ambulances; cavalry armed with swords running toward machine gunners on the other side; aircraft being used for war for the first time; and most horrific of all, poison gas.

The abused horses made me think of slaves, an obscene thought. My only comfort was to know that this was the last time that horsepower would be used rather than internal combustion engines.

The battle scenes depicting World War I only hint at the total stupidity of the entire venture, on all sides. The mass recruitment of young men used as cannon fodder, aristocratic officers who were very aware of their superior status who ordered them to stupid deaths; and the aristocratic rulers of all the countries embroiled in this war oblivious to the folly and wastefulness of this conflict.

Where realistic war movie met manipulative sentimentality occurs when Joey runs madly through the shooting fields separating the trenches of the British and the Germans. The horse, which miraculously avoided getting shot or blown up by land mines, gets entangled in barbed wire. A German soldier and English soldier come out of the trenches to help free the horse from the wire. This moment in the film reminded me of a really great war movie, Joyeux Noel, which told the true story of a Christmas Eve truce, during which the young combatants learned how similar they were to the fury of their officers.

World War I is not well enough known to the movie going public. This film could have been done much better without the sentimentality of anthropomorphizing a heroic horse. Joey was not heroic. He was reasonably terrified and behaved exactly as a frightened horse should.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy

This film is based on the 1974 spy novel by John Le Carre, which was also serialized as a 7-part BBC mystery. I remember Alec Guinness in the role of Smiley, a top level analysis of the British Secret Service, brought back from retirement to secretly find a Soviet spy among the top members of the Service. All I remember is how dark this story was, and how difficult to tell the difference between the Soviet spies and their British counterparts.

In the new film, the wonderful Gary Oldman plays Smiley, an agent driven out of the \223circus\224 (MI6) by a cabal at the top. When an agent sent to talk with a possible defecting Romanian general is betrayed, captured, tortured, and ultimately released, he returns to England to report that there is a mole in the service, someone turned by the Soviets. Smiley is charged with finding out who that is.

Despite knowing some of the back story, I found it very hard to follow the ins and outs of this film. The acting was wonderful, but I doubt that there will be large audiences trying to figure out this slow, thoughtful, and complex story.

However, for the history buffs among you, it is well worth revisiting this aspect of the Cold War. The British Secret Service was riddled with agents\227some of them aristocrats who had been recruited in college by the Russians before World War II. This problem was not only a bane to the British, but had their American counterparts unable to completely trust them. The agents had to be found and removed.

Although in a struggle such as the Cold War, and often in a protracted war of any kind, the players begin to take on each others\222 qualities. This is an issue that Smiley understands well. He knows that despite the nastiness of \223spy-craft,\224 the Soviet Union was an evil society not to be compared with the West.

If you have recently read the book, do see the movie. If you have not, it will be very difficult to follow until nearly the end.

Iron Lady

This could have been a very important movie about the remarkable former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. This longest-serving PM played an enormous role, not only in Britain, but on the world stage. She was a conservative during an era that began by replacing PM Winston Churchill, the Tory hero who saw Britain through the dangers of World War II. A new day had dawned after that war, and the British were tired of sacrifice.

When Margaret Thatcher took power, not only was she the only woman PM ever, but she was opposing most of the liberal legislation that had probably gone too far and was threatening British life. Labor strikes\227from trash collectors to the coal miners in the outdated mines made governing almost dysfunctional. Thatcher pushed some very unpopular initiatives that eventually had the economy working again.

She declared war against the Argentine military junta that seized the British Falkland Islands, despite criticism from many of her allies in an era of decolonization. Her military was scarcely up to the task, largely because she had earlier cut defense funding, but they eventually prevailed. The British had a brief flicker of national pride, and the war caused the Argentines to replace the military junta, a benefit to rule of law on both parts.

She was also an important player along with Presidents Regan and Bush the Elder in changing Cold War policy toward the USSR, which eventually resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The way this film was written, visiting Thatcher\222s memories as she was old and losing her faculties, provided a wonderful vehicle for Meryl Streep, who seemed to inhabit Thatcher, not just portray her. But this approach did not do much for the movie itself. See it for Streep, but not for an appropriate biography of a great and controversial woman.

And did any of you notice that a great line in the previews never appeared in the picture itself? \223Gentlemen,\224 she said after a dinner party, \223shall we join the ladies?\224