

Laina At the Movies
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Mockingjay 3

This film was part 3 of the Hunger Games series, a dystopian country in the future that distracts the hungry and miserable population with Roman-like gladiator games, something like our own "survivor" program. One young archer, Katniss, is a survivor of several games and has become a national heroine, and, in Part 3, a leader of a revolution against the evil government.

To make more money, the producer divided part 3 into two films, the next one to come next year. I am sorry to say that I fell asleep early in this movie, and was only aware that most dialogue was whispered. Only the most devoted fanatic of this series would enjoy this.

Exodus: Gods and Kings

I cannot resist biblical movies, which I find great fun and often I laugh in the wrong places. One of my movie buddies regards anything mythical or supernatural ridiculous, but goes along for the special effects.

Moses and the exodus of the Hebrew people out of Egyptian slavery is a terrific story professed by all three revealed religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). The story handed down from antiquity is that the Jews had been enslaved for four centuries by the Egyptians, primarily because their birthrate frightened the government. This certainly would have been alarming to the Pharaoh, who decided to do some population control: every Jewish family was to hand over their firstborn boy-child for death. Soothsayers had also told the Pharaoh that a boy was being born who would challenge his throne.

One Jewish mother made another decision: she put her newborn, Moisha (Moses) into a basket and her daughter put the basket into the river where it would float up to the garden of the Pharaoh's childless daughter. The daughter greeted the baby as a gift from her gods and gave the young girl the job of nursemaid to both Moses and Ramses, the newborn and heir to the Pharaoh, his father.

The boys were reared together almost as brothers, and the Pharaoh privately recognized that Moses would have been a better king than his own rather reckless son. However, law is law, and Moses served the state as a general. Moses one day happened to inspect the quarry where the Jewish slaves labored and he witnessed some gratuitous violence by an Egyptian guard. In anger, he killed him. Then some elders of the slave community sought him out and told him about his real birth. He was a Hebrew, and was predicted to be a leader to take them out of slavery.

In both the Bible and the movie, his murder made him a criminal and he was forced into exile, set loose in the desert, where he came upon a Bedouin tribe that took him in. For the next nine years (in the Bible it was 20) he had joined the tribe, worked with the sheep and goats, and married a beautiful Bedouin woman and gave birth to a son.

Then out of curiosity, he climbed a mountain forbidden to the Bedouin, who called "God's Mountain." Up on the summit and amidst a violent hailstorm, a bush burst into flame. In the Bible, a voice came from the fire: "Take off your shoes; you are on holy ground." In the movie, instead of the voice of the invisible god (which I prefer), God was in the form of a 12-year-old boy, a baby god, which has some validity too because the first God of the Hebrews certainly was fierce and adolescent. The Jewish God changed as the Hebrews changed and grew up.

The rest of the story is best known: Moses returns to his foster brother, the Pharaoh, and demands the emancipation of the Hebrew slaves. The Pharaoh tries to explain that this would be economically impossible. Moses then attempts an internal revolt (which does not work) and the baby god goes into action. And what action! The Nile and all waters turn to blood; a plague of frogs, then flies, then boils on all the Egyptians, and finally, the worst of all, the Angel of Death comes in darkness and kills every first born Egyptian boy, the Hebrew homes having been marked so that the angel would not come to them.

Also well known, and the delight of movie-makers from the beginnings of cinema, the Pharaoh yields and lets the Hebrew slaves go, all 600,000 of them. As they leave Egypt and approach the Red Sea, the Pharaoh regrets his weakness and rushes with his army to take back the slaves. Of course, God is protecting them and he lets them go across the Red Sea almost dry shod. In the Bible, the waters part and they go

through. But in both the Bible and the Cinema, the Pharaoh's army tries to go through and the parted sea floods together, drowning the army.

In this version of the story, Christian Bale plays Moses, and, I think, does so very well. Ramses is played by Joel Edgerton, also well, but who could forget an older film with Yul Brenner playing the role!

Really striking were the women's roles, several with Middle Eastern names (probably Israeli or Iranian): Hiam Abbass, Golshifteh Farahani; and some male roles: Ghassan Massoud, Dar Salim, Kevork Malikan, and quite a few more.

I do like the Bible story better, but this was an imaginative attempt at making this story palatable to a whole new audience. It was fun, and as always, fascinating. My other cap, that of a historian, makes me wonder if there really was a Moses (no archeological evidence yet), but if there were not, somebody gave birth to monotheism, rule of law (ten commandments), and a sense of nationhood to the early Hebrews.

The Homesman

Having read all the Little House on the Prairie series in my childhood, and watching the televised version as an adult, it never crossed my mind that these pioneers might have included young women who were driven mad by this life. But there were, and this is a film about them, and about people who cared for them.

The extraordinary heroine of this movie is Mary Bee Cuddy (Hilary Swank), who is a pious, proper, and probably once privileged single woman who has succeeded in making her holdings profitable in America's great prairies. She knows that three young wives in nearby homesteads have gone mad: losing all their children to a typhoid epidemic, or bleak loneliness, or a bad and abusive marriage. She is the only one in her church who steps forward to take these women to a place where they might recover, back to "civilization."

She saves a low-life rascal George Briggs (Tommy Lee Jones) from being hanged by outraged townspeople and in return demands that he accompany her and her charges.

There were memories of the African Queen for me in watching these very un-alike people. But most interesting was how much Briggs changed and how useful he became. He saved them from what might have been a horror when some Indians came with bad intentions and he distracted them by setting loose one of their horses.

The film was gripping and wonderfully made. My only gripe was historic: that nobody wanted to marry a successful and competent woman because she was "bossy" and "plain." Considering the shortage of marriageable women and their death rate in childbearing, I don't believe for a moment that she would not be able to find a man to marry. This was a little bit of feminist nonsense.

But never mind that. It was a movie worth seeing. Even Meryl Streep and John Lithgow have cameo roles in this film.

Imitation Game

This movie had the double allure of a gripping story about World War II and a chance to watch Benedict Cumberbatch (Sherlock to many of you) inhabit the role of Alan Turing, a very strange British genius who helped his country survive what might have been a losing war against Germany.

Germany's U-boat wolf packs were blowing up convoys of food and materiel being sent by the US to keep Britain afloat at the beginning of World War II. The British were slowly starving and were well in danger of negotiating a shameful peace (again) when British Intelligence organized a cadre of mathematicians and linguists to try to break the "unbreakable" Nazi code machine, the Intrepid. With this machine, their communications were so protected that they could broadcast in the open without fear of being understood.

Alan Turing, a university math professor joined a group of clever men (and women) working to break the codes. He was brilliant, very eccentric and strange, and did not "play well with others." His behavior illustrated a little known syndrome: Aspergers, which made him obsessively single-minded, socially maladept, and not an easy man to like. But he was fascinated by problem solving and was determined to create a machine that could decode the German Intrepid.

That he and his team did so is historically known; by doing so, they enabled the

British to survive and helped win the war. This was done at a price, however; they had to permit some of the air raids to go through (such as the destruction of Coventry) so that the Nazis would not see that their code had been broken.

(An aside from me: the US broke the Japanese code just before the outbreak of the war which gave us the same sort of ultimate advantage.)

An additional reason to see this film, aside from the pleasure of a great story, is to know that Alan Turing had his own secret: he was homosexual, a condition that was considered criminal in Britain, with the only options being prison or chemical castration. Hard to believe, and painful to consider.

This is a very rewarding and fascinating movie to see.

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