

Dr. Ed's Movie Reviews 2014

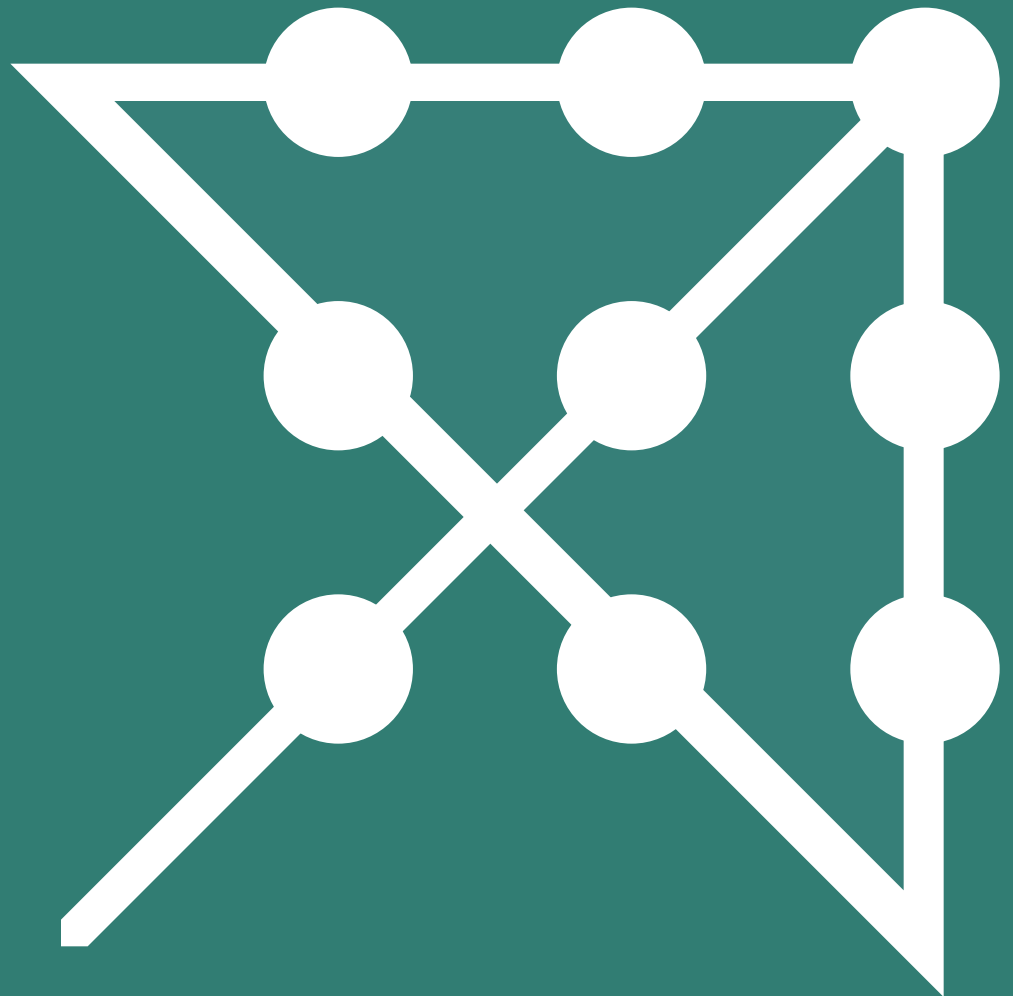
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thinking outside the box

All Is Lost (+) is Robert Redford's version of Ernest Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea." In this wordless film, he provides a fine performance as a man stranded at sea alone, fighting for survival on a sinking sailboat. The question is what an old man is doing in a small boat all by himself 1,700 miles off the coast of Sumatra.

American Hustle (+ +) is loosely based on the FBI's ABSCAM operation during the late 1970s and early 1980s--which led to the conviction of a US senator; six members of the House of Representatives; one member of the New Jersey State Senate; members of the Philadelphia City Council; the Mayor of Camden, New Jersey; and an inspector for the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The performances of the ensemble cast are great. Jennifer Lawrence is especially funny.

August Osage County (+ +) is a film that will make you appreciate your own dysfunctional family more because it can't be as bad as the one presided over by the matriarch played so brilliantly by Meryl Streep.

Calvary (+ + +) is one of the best depressing movies I've seen in a long time. Brendon Gleeson is outstanding as an Irish priest whose life is threatened by a parishioner during confession. Faith is a salient theme of the movie. One of the main messages is that many of us spend too much time on sin and not enough on virtue.

Captain America (-) is one of the better films in the superhero genre, which I find increasingly boring with every sequel. However, they do make lots of money, suggesting that the public desperately wants some superheroes to fix the world's problems. In this movie, the evildoers, running an organization called "Hydra," decide that we all will be better off with more stability, provided by them, and less freedom, which leads to too much instability. So they devise a Big Data algorithm to determine who might be opposed to this new world order based on such factors as voting records and web-cruising history. These 20 million people are marked for summary execution on giant airborne drones. Captain America (like Mighty Mouse) saves the day. If Michael Lewis succeeds in putting high-frequency traders out of business, might they find employment with a new Hydra to get their revenge? Beware of unintended consequences.

Dawn of the Planet of the Apes (+ +) is one of the better of the eight PoA movies that have been made. The first was the best, with the final scene showing Charlton Heston's shock and anguish at seeing the Statue of Liberty's torso sticking out of the sand on a beach. He cursed the human race. The latest sequel also tends to favor the apes, who have better makeup and more interesting roles than the humans.

Divergent (+) is the latest movie in a new genre about teenage rebels with a cause, namely to rebel against an authoritarian regime that has created a nightmarish Dystopian society. In this one, the government's mantra is "faction before blood." Human nature is bad so the regime must change it to maintain peace even if that means killing anyone who is a Divergent. Like "Hunger Games," the theme is remarkably conservative: Big Government, not human nature, is bad. Schools should make these movies required viewing and incorporate them into social studies course discussions.

The Drop (+ +) is James Gandolfini's final movie. He was a superb actor. Also giving a splendid performance is Tom Hardy, who tends a Brooklyn bar that Gandolfini's character runs and that is used by a criminal gang of Chechens as a drop for laundering money. The movie is reminiscent of Taxi Driver, with Hardy doing a good intense impersonation of Robert De Niro, saving both the girl and the dog.

Get on Up (+ +) is a biopic about James Brown, the "Godfather of Soul." The music is great, especially since Chadwick Boseman, who brilliantly plays the lead part, lip syncs the original songs. Brown's music was truly unique for his time and inspired lots of other musicians, including Mick Jagger, who co-produced the movie.

Godzilla (- - -) actually received some good reviews. I don't know why, and I don't know why I went to see it. I think it's been mostly downhill for this genre of movies since the original "King Kong" (1933). The big ape really had a big heart, which was broken by a very beautiful woman. The big lizard has no personality at all, just a big tail, though he winds up as the hero of this movie. He has mostly a walk-on part, so it's hard to really get to know him.

Gone Girl (+ +) is a long, but riveting, suspense movie. The screenwriter is also the author of the hit novel on which the flick is based. She ended the movie differently than the book. I guess the producers could do remakes of the movie with several different endings. Fed officials who are struggling with their exit strategy should see the movie to be reminded that plans don't always go as planned. How about a movie titled, "Exit Girl," starring Janet Yellen?

The Hundred-Foot Journey (+ +) is a light-hearted and big-hearted movie about how different cultures can learn to coexist and even like each other. I know that's hard to believe given all the ethnic and religious conflicts around the world. Maybe everyone should be required to see it to learn that paths can be found towards peaceful coexistence. The plot centers on the conflict resolution of two bullheaded restaurateurs. One is running a French restaurant. The other has an Indian eatery 100 feet across the street. After seeing the movie, my wife and I chose to eat at a local Indian restaurant.

The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part 1 (- - -) is the third sequel of the trilogy, but delivered in two parts to maximize the franchise's revenues. It's a big bore. Katniss Everdeen (played by Jennifer Lawrence, who is better in comedic roles) becomes the symbol of the rebellion against the autocratic government. I guess we will find out in Part 2 of the third sequel whether she can succeed in doing so with her bow and arrow.

Ida (+ + +) is a Polish movie set in the 1960s. It's a black-and-white film about a dark subject. A young woman who is about to take her vows as a nun discovers that she is Jewish and meets her aunt for the first time. Her parents were murdered during the war by a neighbor who saw an opportunity to seize their home. She joins her aunt in a journey to discover the truth about what really happened. They both respond in different ways to their ordeal. Faith works for some of us, but not all of us when confronted by evil.

Interstellar (-) stars Matthew McConaughey as an astronaut who volunteers for a mission to find another planet that we Earthlings can move to, because sandstorms are destroying our food supply. Presumably, this is a consequence of global warming. In any event, the mission is accomplished. But it takes nearly three long hours to do so in a movie that seems like a bunch of clips edited together from "2001: A Space Odyssey," "Star Trek," "Gravity," and lots of previous outer-space movies. As a result, it's lost in space. The special effects weren't all that special either. I'm staying right here at home on Earth.

The Invisible Woman (+) is about Charles Dickens, who at the age of 45, met an 18-year-old aspiring actress, Ellen "Nelly" Ternan. He aspired to have a secret affair with her, which he did over the rest of his life. He was bored with his wife after she bore him 10 children. Ralph Fiennes plays Dickens. It seems that Nelly was more in love with the great author than the man, who wasn't so great. Don't come to the film with any great expectations because the plot is a bit slow paced and fairly conventional by the standards of the French presidency.

Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit (- - -) is a film with one of the worst plots and most badly written scripts I've sat through in a long time. It is a totally un-thrilling spy thriller. Jack Ryan, played by Chris Pine, is a Chief Compliance Officer by day on Wall Street and a spy by night in Moscow, breaking into the bad guy's office to download data from his computer to stop him from causing a global financial meltdown. That's followed by the obligatory car chase scene.

The Judge (+ +) has a great cast led by Robert Downey, Jr. and Robert Duvall. It's a genre film about going back to one's childhood home in the Midwest somewhere. In this one, a big-city lawyer returns to his hometown for the funeral of his mother. He stays longer than he expected or wanted to in order to defend his estranged father, the town's judge, who is on trial for committing a murder. In this genre, the main characters usually realize that their families are still as dysfunctional and crazy as when they last visited and rush to leave town at the end of the movie. This one has a more ambiguous ending.

The Last of Robin Hood (+) stars Kevin Kline as the aging and fading Errol Flynn, who remained a leech until his last dying day. His Lolita was Beverly Aadland, played by Dakota Fanning. Susan Sarandon plays her greedy, star-struck mom. She willingly enabled Flynn's illicit affair with her daughter, who was a minor.

Lucy (+) is a good idea for a movie that is badly executed. It should have been more entertaining. Scarlett Johansson plays modern-day Lucy, who evolved from Lucy, the original ape woman. In one scene, the two meet and touch their index fingers in a Michelangelo moment. The modern woman turns into the smartest human who ever lived with the help of a mind-altering drug. There are some bad guys and lots of clueless guys. There are a few lame jokes, some lame science fiction, and a lame ending. As in the latest "Planet of the Apes," I found myself rooting for the ape.

The Lunchbox (+ +) is a nicely crafted Indian movie about love, marriage, friendship, work, aging, and death. In other words, it covers a lot of ground including unexpected opportunities as well as missed ones. The cast is great. Mumbai is very crowded. Lunch can be quite an elaborate and appetizing ritual over there. After watching it, my wife and I headed to dinner at our favorite Indian restaurant.

The Monuments Men (- - -) is a very badly made film about the mostly successful efforts by a small unit of the Allied forces during World War II to recover and return art stolen by the Nazis from their victims. They had to scramble to do so before German troops destroyed the art, as they were ordered to do if Hitler died, and before the Russians absconded with the loot. It's a good story that isn't told very well or accurately by the movie, with an all-star cast that provides uniformly wooden performances.

Nebraska (+ +) is a bittersweet comedy about getting old, but never giving up hope of winning the lottery. The real insight is that we may have won the lottery by simply having children who still care about us despite our flaws, especially when we start forgetting their names. Bruce Dern performs admirably as a dazed and confused senior citizen, though he may not be acting. June Squibb is hysterically funny as his wife doing her best to cope with her husband's senior moments and drunken stupor.

Nightcrawler (+ +) features an outstanding performance by Jake Gyllenhaal in this crime thriller. He plays an ambulance chaser who speeds around Los Angeles filming footage of gruesome crimes and accidents so that he can sell the tapes to local news stations. To increase the value of his merchandise, he manipulates the crime scenes. It's reminiscent of "Network," "Natural Born Killers," and "Bowling for Columbine," which also examined how the news media manipulates the news all for the sake of ratings.

Noah (- - -) was better than "Waterworld," which was one of the worst movies ever made, but not much better. The acting and the dialogue were uniformly awful. The special effects weren't so special. Noah and his children are the sole living descendants of Seth. He is portrayed as a Green, while everyone else on the planet is a sinful industrialist descended from Cain. All but Noah and his immediate family are doomed to death by drowning. I did like the ark. It was actually built to biblical scale in a private preserve five minutes from our house. It was hit hard by Hurricane Sandy, but was repaired in time to finish the movie. However, many members of the production crew with houses on Long Island suffered lots of flood damage to their homes.

Non-Stop (+) is an entertaining movie with a really bad plot, which isn't obviously bad until near the end of the movie. The action is non-stop, with Liam Neeson playing a federal Marshal assigned to protect a passenger plane from bad guys. The bad guys are also really bad characters, but again that's not obvious until near the end of the film. The producers were quite clever to keep the audience entertained by the suspense until they spoiled it with a remarkably lame ending.

The November Man (+ +) is an espionage thriller starring Pierce Brosnan as a retired CIA agent who is brought back for one last mission. I'm tired of this Bond/Bourne genre. However, this one was quite good with a good plot that's loosely based on the rise of Vladimir Putin. Nevertheless, I was annoyed by the writers' need to imply that Putin's surrogate in the movie is a puppet of the CIA. Give us a break: There really are bad guys out there who we don't control and who are out to get us. Hollywood's attitude seems to be that anyone who believes that is just paranoid for no good reason.

St. Vincent (+ + +) is a movie about a cranky old man, played by Bill Murray, who has a heart of gold. Actually, almost everyone has a heart of gold in this flick, including the kid, his divorced mom, the lady of the night, and even the school-yard bully. In other words, the plot and characters are typical for this genre and very schmaltzy. However, I always enjoy Murray's performances as a crank who somehow manages to extract happiness (and plenty of comedy) despite unhappy situations that life throws his way.

The Theory of Everything (+ +) examines the relationship between the famous physicist Stephen Hawking, played brilliantly by Eddie Redmayne, and his wife Jane, played by Felicity Jones. Their combined strength in overcoming Hawking's terrible medical condition is just as extraordinary as Hawking's contributions to physics.

This Is Where I Leave You (+) is a movie about a dysfunctional family gathered together for a funeral. Jane Fonda plays the mother, who insists that her four adult children and their families spend seven days mourning the death of their father. Secrets come out. Fights erupt. Hugs are shared. They all go home. No one really changes. Life goes on. If you see it, you'll go home mildly entertained and unchanged.

Whiplash (+ + +) is an excellent and intense movie about a young drummer who aspires to be one of the best in the world. His drill-sergeant conductor, who aspires to find the next Buddy Rich, pushes him over the edge, but he climbs back impressively.

The Wolf of Wall Street (+ +) is a very entertaining and over-the-top film about scoundrel Jordan Belfort and his firm Stratton Oakmont. It's not really about a typical Wall Street firm, but rather a pump-and-dump boiler room operation. Nevertheless, the greed-is-good mentality has been a persistent problem on Wall Street, especially after many of the partnerships went public during the 1980s. I was on Wall Street from 1979 to 2004. I heard about some of the excesses, but didn't participate. That's what happens when you are a family man and an economist, I suppose. I was surprised to learn from the film that during the Wolf's glory days, before he went to jail, he lived in Old Brookville, NY, a few minutes from our home office.