

2003 in Movies

Written by Mike Schulz

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Among the year's seemingly endless spate of business-as-usual Hollywood product, with the remakes and sequels and – in the case of *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* – a *de facto* remake
of

a sequel, I saw exactly one work in 2003 that, with absolutely no qualms, I would call a masterpiece, and it made its debut on HBO. (It was that kind of year.)

In an indelible six hours, Mike Nichols' screen version of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning '80s fantasia *Angels in America* was, hands down, the artistic success story of the year, a brilliant, brutal, hilarious, joyous, ceaselessly amazing work; not just one of the finest play adaptations ever filmed, but a monumental achievement in the history of television. It haunts me like nothing I've seen in a decade. Subtly, and masterfully, pruning his much-lauded work, Kusher brings to the screen some of the most exquisitely beautiful passages to be found anywhere in modern drama, yet

nothing *Angels* might easily have been
but a first-rate reading of a first-rate play if not for the superlative skill of Mike Nichols. At age 72, Nichols has crafted his most supremely confident work for celluloid, providing breathtaking visual dimension and ingenuity to a production rife with theatrical flights of fancy; in less assured hands, this kaleidoscopic look at AIDS, politics, love, and our place in the world could have seemed at best pretentious and at worst unbearable. As ever, Nichols proves himself a genius with actors; among a thunderously impressive cast that includes Meryl Streep, Emma Thompson, Ben Shenkman, Patrick Wilson, and James Cromwell, the performances of Al Pacino, Mary-Louise Parker, Jeffrey Wright, and Justin Kirk rank with the finest I've seen. Ever. You

could
nitpick – about some of the cheesier special effects, about Thompson's quavery American accent – but doing so misses the bigger picture;

Angels in America

is a staggering, revolutionary piece that, if you let it, will speak directly to your soul. Nothing I saw

at

the movies this year matches it.

So what *did* we get? Well, at the apex of my movie-going experiences are a group of sensational entertainments that run the gamut of cinematic genres – comedy, drama, adventure, documentary, and often combinations therein – and show 2003 to be, if not a year of *much* cinematic greatness, at least a year in which greatness occasionally came about when writers and directors, as in HBO's mini-series, *mixed* their genres with spectacularly unique results.

And now, without further ado, the movie year of 2003, beginning with the inevitable 10-best list
... .

1) *A MIGHTY WIND* – Wha' hopen?! Director/co-writer Christopher Guest returned for his third mockumentary and came up with this comedy classic about the folk-music scene, a work so achingly funny yet so poignant that the jokes are inseparable from the material that makes you weep. The priceless Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara lead Guest's typically inspired group of improvisational artists, and, as a director, Guest proves himself unparalleled in his ability to know *exactly* when a sketch should end; *A Mighty Wind* is like the best episode of *SCTV* ever imagined, but made with such love and respect for its characters that it's as moving as it is hilarious. (I love this movie so much I actually saw it *five times* at the theater.) Bonus points for inspiring the year's best soundtrack; I still can't get through "A Kiss at the End of the Rainbow" without welling up, and you haven't truly lived until you've heard The Folkmen covering the Rolling Stones' "Start Me Up."

2) *CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS* – Emotionally annihilating, yet always fascinating. Andrew Jarecki's astounding documentary about a Long Island family whose lives unravel through home movies is one of the most savagely heart-wrenching nonfiction pieces I've ever seen, a work that continually switches your perspectives and alliances and makes you an active participant in the attempt to solve the film's mysteries. (In Jarecki's view, it's the *search* for answers, not the answers themselves, that might lead to "the truth.") In many ways Jarecki's work is the horror film of the year, deeply frightening and unfailingly engrossing.

3) *THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING* – It's official: Peter Jackson pulled it off. Stunningly. Setting aside the movie's nearly hallucinogenic visual rapture and miraculous production design, what you'll forever remember from Jackson's third and final installment is the grand, completely unabashed *emotionalism* of the work. The flying reptiles and insurmountable armadas are astonishing to see, but watch the way the tale plays out in the characters' *eyes*, their every glance suggesting the life-altering *gravitas*

of what they (and now we) have endured for so long; the characters' conviction and camaraderie are what make this particular series so emotionally satisfying and, now that it's ended, so unforgettable. Exemplary performances all around, with a very fine Sean Astin providing the soul of the piece.

4) FINDING NEMO – By now, what else needs to be said? (I imagine that *eventually* one of Pixar's animated releases won't make my year-end list, but it ain't gonna happen this year.) Employing their usual technical wizardry and infallible comic instincts, the Pixar team has done it again; N

emo

is so gloriously rich in detail and humor and overall good vibes that

every single human being

I've talked to about it raves. Try to resist the movie. I've yet to meet anyone up to the challenge.

5) AMERICAN SPLENDOR – Endlessly inventive. Mixing live-action with comic-book art, dramatized footage with experiments in *vérité*, writers/directors Shari Springer Bergman and Robert Pulcini have fashioned an exposé on graphic-novelist Harvey Pekar that continually defies expectation, leaving you laughing and wincing (often in the same scene) and never less than thoroughly beguiled. The magnificently cranky Paul Giamatti gives his best screen performance yet as Pekar, and the sweetly schlumpy Hope Davis continues her ascent to the top tier of actresses of her generation.

6) THE SCHOOL OF ROCK – Though the storyline sounds like the plot of the worst Adam Sandler movie *ever* – aging slacker attempts to teach grade-schoolers the joys of heavy metal – what results is one of the most exuberant, oddly moving, and fall-down-funny films of the year. It's a true celebration of individuality, with stalwart indie director Richard Linklater helming marvelously, and that human whirligig Jack Black giving – I kid you not – a wondrously resourceful portrayal, delivering the comic goods while displaying an almost shocking level of feeling.

7) MYSTIC RIVER – Clint Eastwood's finest directorial offering to date, and a brilliant meditation on life and loss in the guise of a tricky and engrossing thriller. As a Boston tough whose daughter is found murdered, Sean Penn gives perhaps the most nuanced approximation of grief to be found anywhere in modern movies, and he's joined by the richest dramatic cast of the year – Tim Robbins, Kevin Bacon, Marcia Gay Harden, Laurence Fishburne, Laura Linney – delivering sterling performances all around. Deliberate, moody, and positively entrancing.

8) WHALE RIDER – In this disarmingly moving, completely entertaining look at a young girl's attempts to fit in with her New Zealand tribe, even events that could pass as Hollywood clichés feel startlingly fresh. Director Niki Caro lingers on themes of tradition and empowerment but neither exploits nor simplifies them, and she has a hell of an eye; it's a visually resplendent family film that never shies from toughness. Keisha Castle-Hughes is one of the most heartbreakingly realistic child performers the medium has ever seen, touching, fearless, and absolutely unmannered. A film to cherish.

9) MASTER AND COMMANDER: THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD – One of 2003's few *comp*

lete

entertainments, enabling you to enjoy a high-seas adventure, a drama, a thriller, a period piece, and even a comedy – not to mention, with Peter Weir at the helm, a master class in the art of screen direction – for one ticket price. Why on earth wasn't this a bigger hit? Nearly every scene is alive with filmmaking craft and even magic, and Russell Crowe and Paul Bettany partner each other flawlessly. If it's still possible, catch it in a theater; movies like this are what widescreen was invented

for

10) *LOST IN TRANSLATION* – Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson, the most endearing, riveting Odd Couple of the year, give exquisitely calibrated performances in this look at two lost souls who almost magically find one another amid the flashy madness of nighttime Japan. Those who crave a strong narrative might find it hellish, but writer/director Sofia Coppola builds on the promises of *The Virgin Suicides* with this strong, funny, stunningly detailed chamber piece that packs a bigger emotional wallop than you might be prepared for. Kudos to discerning audiences for making the film a sizeable art-house hit.

Honorable mentions: *Spellbound* and *Winged Migration*. Though actually 2002 releases – both were nominated for Best Documentary Feature at last spring's Academy Awards, losing out to the

behemoth – these films opened wide in 2003, and along with

Capturing the Friedmans

, begat a mini-boom in the movie-going public's appreciation of the documentary as a fascinating and – egads! – colossally entertaining alternative to fiction.

Migration

, with its panorama of birds in flight, offered the year's most miraculous audiovisual delights, and

Spellbound

infused a children's spelling bee with nerve-racking tension, suspense, big laughs, and poignancy. May the financial success of these films lead to future nonfiction offerings earning their due share of the mass audience.

10 Best Runners-Up (alphabetically): *All the Real Girls, Anything Else, Bad Santa, Balseros, Buffalo Soldiers, Holes, Laurel Canyon, Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl, Thirteen, 28 Days Later*

10 Worst (alphabetically, and with heavy competition): *Agent Cody Banks, Bad Boys II, Boat Trip, Bulletproof Monk, Daddy Day Care, Dr. Seuss' The Cat in the Hat, Dreamcatcher, Gigli, A Guy Thing, National Security*

Triumphs of the Middlebrow: *Love Actually* and *Something's Gotta Give*. Two overextended sitcoms that transcend their obviousness with numerous funny, touching sequences and thrillingly good work by their actors; the former features Bill Nighy, Emma Thompson, Laura Linney, and others working at peak ability, and the latter's Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton

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haven't been this fresh and spontaneous in ages.

Guilt-Free Guilty Pleasures: *Beyond Borders, Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle, Cradle 2 the Grave, Final Destination 2, Just Married, Malibu's Most Wanted, Marci X, The Rundown*

Most Overrated: *Bend It Like Beckham, Dirty Pretty Things, Kill Bill: Volume I, The Last Samurai, Lost in La Mancha, Matchstick Men, The Missing, Seabiscuit*

Best of the Year's Many, Many Sequels (The Return of the King excepted): *X2: X-Men United*

Biggest Hit That Nobody You Know Saw: *2 Fast 2 Furious.*

Biggest Hit That Nobody You Know Liked: *Hulk.*

Biggest Surprise of 2003: Great performances in Disney flicks. In a year that boasted terrific output from the family-friendly studio, a handful of actors transcended their potentially one-note characters with superb performances. Johnny Depp, in *Pirates of the Caribbean*

, and Jamie Lee Curtis, in *Freaky Friday*

, were justly celebrated, but also marvelous were *Pirates*

' Geoffrey Rush, Orlando Bloom, and Keira Knightley, *Friday*

's Lindsay Lohan, and *Holes*

' Shia LaBeouf and Jon Voight, not to mention the peerlessly funny voice-over work of Ellen DeGeneres in *Finding Nemo*

. Huzzahs to all, and the talents behind their films, for allowing a critic in his mid-'30s to view a Disney movie alone

without

feeling like an idiot.

Most Fervent Hopes for 2004: That director Alfonso Cuaron, taking over for the maladroit Chris Columbus, will – finally – make something interesting out of the Harry Potter series; that well-received works like *21 Grams, The Station Agent, and The Fog of War*

will arrive here prior to the Oscars; and that everyone who cares about movies will make *at least*

a monthly sojourn to Rock Island's Brew & View, which was the only venue in the area to house many of the year's absolute best works. If you're not checking out this establishment's weekly schedule, you're not a true film fan.