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# New York Film Festival #3: Wonderstruck, Last Flag Flying

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The 55th New York Film Festival is in full gear and hurtling towards its finale. Most film festivals have other components to them. But far more than Cannes or Toronto or Sundance or any other major film festival, this one feels bursting at the seams with events and panels and conferences. Short films, virtual reality, artist profiles, retrospectives of actors like Robert Mitchum and on and on...you can spend a lot of time at NYFF and never even attend a screening of an official new film. It really feels like a festival, a celebration of the art form of cinema rather than just the a roundup of the best new films a fest could get an exclusive on. And to be fair, the films that you can world premiere or get an exclusive on for your continent or country or city isn't always going to be among the year's best. Sometimes, a festival is at the mercy of a film's post-production schedule or commitments to international release. It's easy to nitpick a festival's selections, but the politics behind those choices (or abilities to choose) are feverish to be sure. Happily, I've already seen two films that will be on my best of the year list and hope to find at least one more, along with several I admired a lot. After 20 years of fest going, I know any event that offers 3 or more films that will be on your Top 10 is a good fest. Period.

**WONDERSTRUCK** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**LAST FLAG FLYING** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**WONDERSTRUCK** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

It's easy to see why the works of Brian Selznick are so tempting for filmmakers. An illustrator of other's work and the author of six books of his own, Selznick burst into prominence with *The Invention Of Hugo Cabret*. That novel uniquely straddles multiple genres. It glides back and forth, sometimes using wordless pictures to tell a story, sometimes using strictly text for page after page and then slipping back and forth in a dream-like manner. He's created his own distinctive style that's not a picture book or a novel or a comic book but something deliciously in between.

Selznick is getting bolder and more confident I think, with his most recent book *The Marvels* his best yet. You don't often find a book that is uncategorizable, but that's what he's done. Yet, when a director gets hold of

them, he or she sees one thing: storyboards! It's as if Selznick is already imaging how his tale can be told on film. Unfortunately for them, what makes Selznick interesting is not the stories he tells but *how* he tells them. And that means they've found their best form and it ain't a movie. When *Wonderstruck* is transformed into a film, the storytelling device is (mostly) gone and we're aware more than ever that the actual plot involves one unlikely event after another, each one provoking little more than, "What a coincidence!"

As in the novel, the story told by director Todd Haynes is set in two time periods. In the 1970s, we meet young Ben (Oakes Fegley), a kid whose mom has died and lives uncomfortably with his relatives just a few yards from the home he and his single mom happily shared. The mystery of Ben's dad was never revealed by her (played in flashbacks by Michelle Williams) and now Ben may never know. Poking around in his old home, Ben stumbles across a clue, namely a bookmark from a store in New York City and a man's written note. Crazy, Ben goes on the telephone during a lightning storm just when it is struck by lightning (what a coincidence!), goes deaf, ends up in a hospital and soon bolts for a bus to take him to the big city.

At the same time, we flash back to the 1920s, where a little deaf girl's sad life is depicted in black and white and near silence. (The score by Carter Burwell is eccentric and omnipresent.) Slowly we learn about Rose (Millicent Simmonds), how her famous mother is a silent screen star just as talkies are about to take over, how she loves an older brother who works at the Museum of Natural History and yearns to break away from the sheltered, almost hidden life her mother has banished the child to live in. She too bolts for Manhattan and something better.

Both children end up at the Museum of Natural History (what a coincidence!). Ben impulsively follows a sweet boy he bumps into on the street (Jaden Michael) while Rose clearly knows the place well. They both find friendship and love while discovering more about their past and future than they ever imagined.

What do these two stories — set 50 years apart — have to do with one another? When will their paths intersect? Will Ben learn the name of his father? Will Rose convince her mother not to ignore her or make a home with her brother, an employee at the museum (Cory Michael Smith)? In a gentle story like this, you're rarely in doubt and never disappointed.

Again, the clumsiness of the plotting is laid bare when told as a film. But so is the kindness at its core. Both *Wonderstruck* and *The Marvels* (and perhaps *Hugo*, though I don't have a copy at hand to remind myself) contain young boys who are gay, though they're not necessarily aware of it yet. They meet older gay men who serve as positive role models and also make friends their own age who might become lifelong companions. Life can be difficult but anyone who feels an outsider — because they're gay or D/deaf or just artistic and “strange” — learns they are not alone. Entire communities await you with open arms, be it a school for the deaf, a theater company, a movie set or a kindly gay man or couple who will take you into their home/museum and raise you up with love and safety.

Yet that's not enough to recommend a film where the coincidences pile up so precariously you either roll your eyes or worry for the safety of the story when they come tumbling down. The colorful trash heap that is New York City in the 1970s is visually fun and the “hair casting” alone is to be commended — it's a parade of funky and cool styles. But the black and white section is a disappointment. Cinematographer Edward Lachman falls short here, as does the production design. While a silent movie clip (starring Julianne Moore as Rose's mother) is especially disappointing, the entire look lacks style. When a film shot in black and white is done well, you're absorbed in the story, the gorgeous lighting and old Hollywood effect. When black and white is done poorly today, your mind constantly fills in what the color of everything you see should be; it's not “black and white” so much as footage lacking color. Lachman has done great work before for Haynes and others (*Carol*, *Far From Heaven*, *Mississippi Masala*, *Less Than Zero*, etc.) and I'd happily pass a law saying films should always be shot in black and white unless they can justify the need for color so this was especially disappointing.

Worse, the film is dominated by kids, despite the presence of actors like Moore, Williams and Tom Noonan in supporting turns. And the three kids are not up to the dramatic tasks at hand, though I don't think any actors could have rescued the script. Simmonds is better, though with a tendency to telegraph what she's doing (as in jutting forward her head when “looking”). Perhaps it's a nod to silent film acting? But the boys fall flat unfortunately and they dominate much of the action. (Still, Jaden Michael has an appealing sweetness and might mature into an actor with more work.)

None of that really matters because this ultimately isn't a story that needs to be a film. Sometimes a picture book should remain a picture book; sometimes they can be turned into a brilliant 22 minute short yet be godawful as a feature film. (See *The Cat In The Hat*.) Sometimes a song should remain a song. Selznick's story was told the way it should be told.

And no film can rescue a finale that amounts to endless exposition as a woman scribbles out her own story on a piece of paper and then a little boy reads it out and then she writes more and he reads more and you glance at your watch. True, Haynes nods to Selznick's inventiveness by employing a new form of storytelling to capture her tale. He lands on a sort of stop-motion animation style, with "dolls" representing characters that amount to photos in small keepsakes frames turned this way and that as Moore's character tells Ben where he came from. Of course, that echoes in a way the short film *Superstar* that Haynes made about Karen Carpenter. It does enliven things a bit but can't camouflage the essentially inert drama of what we're hearing.

The movie ends with Ben standing outside, the woman on one side and his friend Jamie on the other. A blackout has struck New York City and all three of them are holding hands and looking up in wonder at the stars. It's a sweet image with all sorts of hope implied for the future and I remember it well — and better — in the book.

### **LAST FLAG FLYING** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

*Wonderstruck* suffers from too much ambition — it attempts to transmute a unique bit of storytelling into another format that doesn't suit it. (They already had gold, so transmuting it just left them with lead.) *Last Flag Flying* sadly suffers from too little.

Director Richard Linklater is often bold in his conceits, from the one night of conversation trilogy begun in *Before Sunrise* to the animated *Waking Life* to his 12 years in the shooting nuttiness that is *Boyhood*. (My favorite is still *Dazed & Confused* and its companion piece *Everybody Wants Some!!* which are more sneakily bold.)

That formal daring seems missing in action on *Last Flag Flying*, a movie very loosely compared to Hal Ashby's 1970s foul-mouthed delight *The Last Detail* but which stands and falls entirely on its own. Set in 2003, it stars Steve Carell as a sad sack guy nicknamed Doc who slips unobtrusively into a NYC dive bar. The owner is Sal, a loud, tiresomely aggressive guy embodied by Bryan Cranston. When they chat and Doc prods the guy by saying something like "You really don't remember me?" of course Sal squints his eyes, trying to place the guy and we feel for him. Doc is the sort of guy you might forget even as you're meeting them for the first time.

They're old Army buddies, having served in Vietnam and there's a minor mystery of something that came between them. Doc served time in military prison for something Sal and their third buddy Mueller were also responsible for. Someone had to take the fall and it was Doc. No hard feelings — Doc isn't the sort of guy to hold a grudge, after all. He can't afford them.

But Sal does have a favor to ask. "I've got something to show you," he says. Sal reluctantly agrees and off they go. No surprise it's to find their friend in common, Mueller (Laurence Fishburne). The surprise is where: a church where Mueller is the man of the cloth, holding forth on his faith in God. Since Sal and Doc knew Mueller as a fighting, drinking, drugging and whoring machine back in 'Nam, they can't help being agog at this transformation.

Mueller is a little wary, especially of the still-drinking, still-cursing and probably still drugging and whoring Sal, but he invites them home for dinner. That's when Doc reveals he wasn't just setting up an impromptu reunion. His wife is dead, his son joined up and was killed in Iraq and Doc wants, no he *needs* Sal and Mueller to join him on a road trip. Will they help him pick up the body and bury it in Arlington? Since he went to prison for them (something Doc won't hold over them even if their guilty conscience will), what can they do?

All this takes about ten or fifteen minutes. All three actors are modestly playing against type (or at least their most famous roles), with Carell here contrasting nicely with the sad sack but showy role of Bobby Riggs in *Battle Of The Sexes*. Cranston of course is playing the flip side of Walter White and Fishburne has embodied many roles but it's easier to imagine him tearing it up than as a man of the cloth.

But once these three characters are established, the movie has nowhere to go. You know old grudges will surface and shenanigans will ensue (even as the passage of time renders them sillier or sadder or whatever combination of that the film wants. We'll surely learn the ins and outs of what they got in trouble for and why Doc took the fall. Lessons will be learned, like when to share hard truths and when to keep your big mouth shut because an old woman who lost her son in Vietnam some 40 years ago really doesn't need to learn the bitter facts. Hatchets will be buried and tears will be cried.

Sadly, that's exactly what happens. You imagine the beats the film will hit after the first act ends and that's precisely where the film takes you. While Cranston is a tad chewy, the role calls for it and essentially the three

actors are just fine. How can they surprise us when the script has no intention of letting them? Tech elements are bland, with the score by Graham Reynolds a particular distraction. It's not a particularly bad or difficult film to watch. Unmemorable is a cruelly indifferent verdict but given the track record of all involved, like Doc I won't hold a grudge.

**NYFF #1:** The Rider, Arthur Miller: Writer, The Other Side of Hope

**NYFF #2:** The Florida Project, BPM

**NYFF #3:** Wonderstruck, Last Flag Flying

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