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Posted: September 16, 2009 07:45 PM

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Toronto Film Fest Day 6: Mild Disappointment, Happy Success and a Hero

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Just three movies on Tuesday, thanks to the combination of awkward times and the happy need to go out to dinner with my cousin Jonathon and his girlfriend. When you are determined to see one movie, that immediately eliminates several others. And when the next movie you want to see falls at an odd time, you've got an hour and a half to kill but can't fit in another movie because the logistics don't work or the movies are too long or nothing is starting then.

And then it happens again. Sometimes, putting together the schedule of what movies you're going to see is an endlessly shifting game of, "Well, if I go see this, I can't see that but if I go see the other one I can see two that I don't want to see so much, but the timing is perfect!" In other words, there's no master plan of what to see at a film festival, just a string of compromises.

LIFE DURING WARTIME -- 2 out of 4 stars -- Todd Solondz is an uncompromising director and he's produced gems like *Welcome to The Dollhouse* and his masterpiece *Happiness* (1998) as well as films like *Storytelling* and *Palindromes* that may not be as satisfying but are unquestionably the work of an artist creating the film he must. For the first time, that doesn't feel like the case.

Fairly or not, *Life During Wartime* is seen as a companion piece to *Happiness*. The earlier movie dealt with a cast of characters including a father who drugged and molested his young son's friends (leading to one of the most memorable and painful scenes of confession imaginable). *Life During Wartime* features a father getting out of jail after serving time for being a pedophile and the havoc his crimes have played with the lives of his family. An older son is in college but still haunted by the event. A younger son is about to have his bar mitzvah and is obsessed with the possibility of being a child molester as well.

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The wife (the always dependable Allison Janney -- wait, that makes her sound like a faithful dog; let's say the exceptionally talented Janney instead) is just about ready to marry a mensch of a fellow who isn't her type but does seem to prefer women to little boys and that's certainly a relief. The wife's sisters include Shirley Henderson (who has terrible taste in boyfriends) and poet Ally Sheedy (quite funny in a small turn). This is a serious film made with serious intent but it stands in the shadows of that earlier work. I trust Solondz felt driven to make it and certainly the post-jail life of a pedophile is a fascinating topic. (Just see Kevin Bacon's brilliant work in *The Woodsman*.) But *Life During Wartime* feels like a secondary riff on a theme Solondz already mastered a decade ago.

A SINGLE MAN -- 3 out of 4 stars -- Designer Tom Ford makes an impressive debut with *A Single Man*, adapted from the novel by Christopher Isherwood. Ford co-wrote the script, produced, directed and (naturally) even provided some suits. Ford succeeds and the surprise is how he succeeds. I expected that at the very least he would have some strong visuals.

But in fact, the strength of the film is not some flashy or gorgeous visual style but the acting. Ford brought out an award-winning performance from Colin Firth (who got Best Actor in Venice), but then Firth is always an excellent actor and subtlety is his strong suit. But Julianne Moore is a very good actress who can be jarringly wrong if cast or directed poorly (see *Children of Men*) but can shine in the right role, as she has in Toronto in three films -- this, the Atom Egoyan film *Chloe* and the Rebecca Miller film *The Private Lives Of Pippa Lee*. Moore is especially good here and perhaps the British accent freed her up. Matthew Goode reestablishes the sex appeal he showed in *Match Point*. And Nicholas Hoult of the UK TV show *Skins* is given a showcase for his charms that will keep many a fan restless with desire for days to come.

The story is simple. Firth is a college professor whose lover of 16 years (Goode) has died. He's mired in depression and simply lost the will to live. The drama is amped up quite a bit from the novel. In the film, Firth buys a handgun and meticulously plans his own suicide. And while his appreciation for men has come alive again (cold comfort since the love of his life is gone), the book didn't throw quite so many handsome young men his way (Firth is even hit on by a would-be actor loitering outside a liquor store). Two people rebuild his desire for life: lifelong pal Moore and the astonishingly pretty and clearly available Hoult, who somehow manages to maintain a sexual electricity whilst seeming to also appreciate Firth as a mentor and intellect. (It helps that he always refers to Firth as "sir" in a manner both playful and serious.)

Oddly, my biggest complaint is visual. Having the men Firth is attracted to take on an orange glow certainly gets the point across, but it hardly seems necessary. And I could have done without the bit of opera while Firth plans his own death (at least it wasn't *Madame Butterfly*.) This might have just been the passion project that Ford was meant to make. But it might also be the start of a promising career. At the very least, Ford has a fine eye for casting.

MAX MANUS -- 2 1/2 out of 4 stars -- This Norwegian film is shaping up as one of that country's biggest hits of all time. I assume it will be their choice for Best Foreign Film and it's just the sort the Oscars might single out for its shortlist. It tells the story of Max Manus, perhaps the most famous resistance fighter in that country during World War II. It's always nice to see people fighting back against the Nazis so the story has an innate appeal.

Still, it's the sort of film where Max butts heads with a beautiful young woman the first time they meet and you just count the minutes until they declare their love. Meanwhile, Max (who is haunted by his battlefield experiences) and his friends do what they can to make life miserable for the Nazis who control their country. He's no superhero: for quite a bit of the film, Max is best known as the guy who jumped out of an upper-story window when he was being arrested -- landing himself in a hospital, thus unintentionally giving himself a better chance to escape, which he grabbed.

The film is most distinctive at the end, when it shows how Max is at loose ends when the war is over. His purpose in life is fulfilled so he has no role. And he's seen so many of his friends die that guilt is inevitable. Sometimes, surviving can be a terrible burden.

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