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A lot of hard choices today. I didn't go to the only screening of *The Road* (based on the Cormac McCarthy novel) because it's already played at other festivals and I know I can see it when it opens commercially in November. I also missed both the Francois Ozon and a well-reviewed French film to see *Dorian Gray* (big mistake, that one.) And everything else slipped away thanks to podcasting duties until I managed to slip into a Czech film I knew nothing about at the

end of the day. Audiences still dutifully applaud volunteers after a trailer encourages them to do so (only in Canada!) and the best part of wandering around the neighborhood is the Beatles music flowing out of all the record stores nearby.

WAKING SLEEPING BEAUTY *** out of **** -- A fascinating look at the resurgence of Disney animation in the 80s (after decades of slumber), the many factors that made it happen and how success can breed resentment as everyone angles for credit. I pinpointed the turnaround beginning with *The Great Mouse Detective* in 1986 and was pleased to see this film agreed as well. But I never realized the many factors that came together to get to that string of critical and popular hits that included *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin* and *The Lion King* that put Disney back on top. Of course, Michael Eisner and Frank Wells rejuvenated the studio as a whole, thanks to the imprimatur of Roy Disney. They brought in Jeffrey Katzenberg, who became passionate about animation and wasn't afraid to trash months or years of work if a project wasn't gelling and start all over again. *Roger Rabbit* brought in a wave of European talent. *The Rescuers Down Under* kick-started computers as a tool for animation. Getting kicked off campus to a new miserable location for the animators meant an open-air cubicle setup that inadvertently sparked more collaboration and teamwork. Alan Menken and Howard Ashman came into the fold as two of the most gifted musical theater composers of their generation -- and two of the most broadly appealing since Rodgers & Hammerstein. (That should be at the top of any list.) That list goes on and this film -- which is 86 minutes long and might be even better as a two-parter on PBS or some such venue at twice the length -- covers it all pretty fairly. My friend was astonished by the bitterness of some at Katzenberg but failure could never equal success for

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generating finger-pointing and backbiting. And I'm still waiting to find out why they never greenlit a sequel to *Roger Rabbit*, which always seemed a no-brainer to me.

DORIAN GRAY no stars out of **** -- I've always been puzzled and intrigued as to how some bad movies almost instantly feel artificial. I mean, the movie begins and a cop goes to work, for example, but somewhere in the back of your mind you can't stop thinking, 'That's not a cop; that's just an actor in a costume!' Not all bad movies are like this (heck, most bad movies aren't like this) and avoiding it doesn't mean you're a good movie. It's just a certain level of artificiality, a certain sense of inauthenticity that stamps some movies immediately and forever. The second *Dorian Gray* begins, I had that uneasy feeling: those are costumes, not clothes; that's a set, not London and so on. I knew I was in for a long 107 minutes. Indeed, when young Dorian Gray arrives in London (played by handsome Ben Barnes, who has unfortunately been in *Stardust*, *The Chronicles Of Narnia: Prince Caspian* and this) his absurdly innocent demeanor -- rube alert! -- is so extreme he just stares in puzzlement when a street urchin reaches into his pocket and takes coins without so much as a "hey!" at the little thief. Any film this false right away is in trouble and this one surely is. Based on the Oscar Wilde novel (which I remember being nonplussed by as a boy), it follows Gray the innocent as he becomes corrupted by the pleasure-seeking Colin Firth, yearned after by painter Ben Chaplin, loved by a no-name actress and soon becomes such a cold hedonist he outdoes his mentor in caddishness. All while remaining forever young thanks to a mysterious portrait he keeps locked in an attic -- handy that. Few things are quite as depressing as deviance when it's dull -- not only are you bored, but you can't even think about sinning after the movie is over, it seems so tiresome. The novel is often read as a coded tale of homosexuality but there's nothing modern or interesting about this take -- Gray may kiss one or two men but it's only because he's running out of possibilities. And director Oliver Parker's depiction of the painting is especially unwise: it groans, it shakes and we even get numerous shots seen *from the painting's own point of view* (a grainy image that leads one to suspect the painting is concealing a CCTV camera). Oh dear.

I feel bad about trashing *Dorian Gray*. I'm sure everyone had the best intentions and the fine cast (including Firth, Chaplin, Rebecca Hall and Fiona Shaw) surely didn't choose to spend their time on a bad film. I rarely take cheap shots and hopefully my tone is seen as properly directed at the film itself and not the people who made it, as such. Which brings up the question of politeness. I referred to a review of *A Serious Man* as "polite" and someone wondered what I meant and why any reviewer would feel the need to be polite. I use it to capture the tone of a review that recognizes a movie had noble intentions and was made with care and craft but for whatever reason falls short. It would be unfair to be dismissive or snide, people evidently took care...it just isn't good in some fundamental way. Hence, a polite review. My review of *Dorian Gray* isn't that polite because the film fell so terribly short, not because the people who made it offended me with their failure. Or the experience is so uncomfortable or exhausting you can't help but reflect your frustration in some way for fear of being too polite and misleading audiences into thinking a movie has some merit. What follows is a polite review of *The Trotsky*.

THE TROTSKY ** out of **** -- Our hero Leon Bronstein (a good Jay Baruchel) is convinced he's the reincarnation of Communist icon Leon Trotsky. (This is a comedy and being a high school revolutionary who is the reincarnation of Trotsky is funny -- Stalin, Lenin, Pol Pot, not so funny. But just the name "Trotsky" holds promise.) No good reason is ever given for this. His father Saul Rubinek doesn't pay attention to him but that doesn't quite cut it -- dad seems fine except when he has to deal with his 17 year-old son organizing a hunger strike at the factory Rubinek owns. And the many "coincidences" between our Leon and Russia's Leon don't work either -- they're either forced into being by Leon (who, for example tracks down a guy with the same name as Lenin and later gets himself arrested) or just too banal. Does any of this matter? Yes, actually. In *Rushmore* (another film about an eccentric high schooler), our hero had all sorts of odd ties about him. But they were presented so matter-of-factly or so convincingly that we bought him whole hog. Leon, we don't. And so the movie never rises above its very high concept, never goes from concept to character. Leon wants to unionize the kids at his new public school. No particular reason, really, he just wants to storm the barricades and any barricades will do. Only the mildest of tyrannies sets this up (a hall monitor who gives detentions for untucked shirts and muddy shoes). That's it. That's the beginning and the end of the outrages, other than the fact that administrators ignore Leon, which suits him fine since he doesn't really want changes in the system, he wants to lead a revolution. But agitation without purpose is pointless. Stalking a girl who is nine years older than he and named Alexandria (just like Trotsky's first wife!) isn't fun either, especially when she rather unconvincingly humors this nut. Imagine if Leon had started as a revolutionary but learned to care about actual issues as the film progressed. That would have made a real story. Instead, the most impassioned speech comes from a fellow student when Leon isn't even around. And the movie has kept the other kids at such arm's length I didn't even realize the guy was supposed to be gay until



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the finale. The movie cares about the other characters as little as Leon. And if he knows them so little, how can we know him? Or care to even try? Director Jacob Tierney made the well-cast gay spin on *Oliver Twist* (called simply *Twist*) and this movie has enough spark (joke intended, Trotsky fans) to make me keep an eye on Tierney. I just wish I had felt more driven to keep an eye on Leon. Still, I did enjoy the Ayn Rand jibe. Audience note: the film got some of the strongest applause so far, though Toronto is clearly not a cheer or boo sort of festival a la Cannes, so this may be nothing more than support for a Canadian movie by the locals.

After *The Trotsky*, I decided to mount a revolution...actually, I spent a few hours doing my weekly podcast for Showbiz Sandbox. That meant my last chance to see a film was down to *Shameless*, a Czech film by the director of the pretty good *Divided We Fall*, so in I dived.

SHAMELESS ** 1/2 or maybe *** out of **** -- Unlike last night's shot in the dark, this quiet little drama had a shaggy charm. Our hero (of sorts) is a shameless fellow. Out of nowhere, he finds his wife's nose disturbingly large, something he can't fail to mention. Then we realize he's been shagging the young au pair (why anyone who's ever seen a movie with an au pair would allow one in their house is a mystery to me -- they are trouble!). The wife kicks him out and he loses his job as a weatherman. She falls for a new man, while getting along great with her in-laws, who seem to like her more than their ne'er do well son. He has the au pair, but falls for a famous singer old enough to be his mother. It's all quite ramshackle and meandering, happy to take its time getting somewhere and not too concerned to make that somewhere important or momentous. Enjoyable.

Tomorrow is just a train wreck of competing film screenings. I interview Vera Farmiga at 10:20 for the excellent *Up In The Air*. But then what? Michael Moore's *Capitalism* or the very well-reviewed *L'Affaire Farewell*? I was leaning towards *L'Affaire*, but that would make it impossible to see the Michael Caine vehicle *Harry Brown*. But if I see that I can't see *Lebanon*, which just won the top prize at Venice. And they both conflict with the fun-looking *Bitch Slap*, a Midnight Madness movie (one of the best curated events at the festival) and involving creative talent that worked on *Xena*. Sigh. At least I know nothing will get in the way of the Frederick Wiseman documentary about the Paris Opera Ballet at 8 p.m.

NOTE TO SELF: NEVER FILE WHEN YOU'RE EXHAUSTED. I inadvertently confused the title of two movies: Drew Barrymore's *Whip It*, about the world of roller derby and *Bitch Slap*, a fun-looking movie I mentioned above directed by Rich Jacobson, both of which I hope to see. My apologies for the mistake.

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