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Artist Yayoi Kusama draws in "Kusama: Infinity." (Courtesy of Magnolia Pictures/Tokyo Lee Productions Inc.)



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September 26, 2018

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2018 is proving to be a bountiful year for worthy films for theatergoers. It is always a challenge to keep up with reviewing new releases, but here are some reviews of films currently in theaters.

Cinematic themes coalescing this year are adolescence, relationships between girls and their fathers, and fathers. Documentaries are more interesting than ever.

I am including one television review here for "God Friended Me." It may just prove to be a religion-themed comedy with some staying power.

### **"Tea With the Dames"**

This very funny film documents a weekend of sparkling conversations between Dames Maggie Smith, Joan Plowright, Eileen Atkins and Judi Dench at Plowright's countryside home. It is intimate, a little salty, and most entertaining.

Director Roger Michell ("Notting Hill"), with minimal suggestions to the ladies, turns on the camera and lets these friends chat about their careers, acting, families and life. Augmented with archival photographs and footage, their stories combine into a thoroughly enjoyable narrative.

If you already like these actresses, this film makes them all the more endearing. They don't take their honors too seriously, not even being named dames of the British Empire. In fact, they remain hilariously irreverent and still seem surprised they have accomplished so much. If your theater sells tea, be sure to buy a cup.

### **"Science Fair"**

This exhilarating and hopeful film tells the story of high school students from several schools in the United States, Brazil (two students from a rural area take on the Zika virus), and Germany (a student takes on aerospace) as they prepare for their state or national science fairs and then, for the winners, on to the International Science and Engineering Fair.



Excited high school students are seen in the documentary "Science Fair." (National Geographic)

It demonstrates not only intelligence and interest in the world and science but that these modest young people, and those who teach and mentor them, are seeking to transform the world for the betterment of people.

The tension builds so well by directors Cristina Costantini and Darren Foster in letting students tell their stories; I was interested all the way through. I appreciated the diversity and the built-in visual and verbal commentary that energizes the narrative. The kids are at once mature and immature, geeky and nerdy, but so very human and humane. Some come from schools that have few resources, yet the students seek to solve real problems through science.

The filmmakers capture "the joy and spirit" of these teenagers who, for some, are participating in the International Science and Engineering Fair for the first time. If you want to "geek out" by rejoicing with young people who are willing to try, treat yourself to this film.

**["The Wife"](#)**

Joan Castleman (Glenn Close) and her husband, famous author Joe Castleman (Jonathan Pryce), are thrilled when they receive a phone call with the news that Joe has been chosen to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The film flashes back to Joan as a young college student who wants to be a novelist and falls for her willing professor. After he loses his job for having an affair with a student and his wife divorces him, Joe and Joan marry. Joan, who is in awe of Joe's talent, begins to help him write when he is struck with writer's block. The years go by. They have two children and David (Max Irons), an aspiring writer, accompanies his parents to Stockholm. All he wants is for his father to acknowledge his considerable talent but Joe resists.

A journalist, Nathaniel Bone (Christian Slater), has been hired by a publisher to write Joe's biography and he senses that things are not as they seem between Joan and Joe. He literally stalks Joan, who does not want to participate in Bone's research.

"The Wife" is based on a 2003 novel of the same name by Meg Wolitzer. It is a morality tale that recounts the life of a woman whose admiration becomes servitude as she allows a charismatic man to manipulate her gifts. Close deftly walks the fine line Joan is facing, knowing the man and life she chose will soon become a lifelong tradeoff for her own identity and talent. Close's performance is Oscar-worthy.

## **"Lizzie"**

Based on the true story of Lizzie Borden (Chloë Sevigny), this film tells of the 1892 murders of Lizzie's stepmother, Abby (Fiona Shaw), and father, Andrew (Jamey Sheridan), in Fall River, Massachusetts. While there are several theories of how the murders came about, the film, approached as a crime thriller by director Craig William Macneill and screenwriter Bryce Kass, seems to follow the speculative plot that mystery writer Ed McBain laid out in his 1984 novel also titled *Lizzie*.

Lizzie is in her 30s and still lives unhappily at home with her older sister, Emma (Kim Dickens), stepmother and miserly father. One day in the summer of 1892, Abby hires a young Irish maid named Bridget (Kristen Stewart) whom she insists on calling Maggie — a name she dismissively gives to all the Irish maids. Lizzie and Bridget are both lonely and drawn to one another.

In a fit of cruel revenge against Lizzie's negative attitudes toward him and Abby, Andrew slaughters Lizzie's pet pigeons with an axe. When their Uncle John (Denis O'Hare) appears at the home to talk about Andrew's will and a possible executorship of the daughters' inheritance, Lizzie and Bridget conspire to murder Abby and Andrew. But did they?

This is a taut, quiet and rigidly paced psychological drama — from motive to arrest, indictment and acquittal — more than potboiler crime thrillers. Because we know it is a murder that really happened, we expect the murders, but not how the household tension reached a boiling point that August summer morning so long ago.

The small cruelties of the stepmother and the violence of the father seem to provide motive in this version of events. Do we ever know what goes on in a marriage, in a family? Will we ever know if Lizzie Borden killed her parents? Probably not in this life, though we have our suspicions. Excellent performances all around, especially by Sevigny and Stewart.

### **"Kusama: Infinity"**

This documentary on the life and art of Yayoi Kusama draws you in and holds your interest from the sound of her voice and the very first characteristic dot that appears at the beginning of the film.

"From the point of view of one who creates, everything is a gamble, a leap into the unknown" is our introduction to Kusama. Born in Matsumoto, Japan, in 1929 as the youngest daughter of a middle-class agricultural family, she gambled everything to create the art that, to her, mirrors the infinity of the universe.

Her mother was controlling and her father had many affairs. Her mother continually sent the young Yayoi to spy on her father "in flagrante delicto" and report back to her, traumatizing the girl for life. She never married, but through the stages of her development and prodigious output as a pop artist, she came to see the human body as so beautiful that, for this reason alone, killing, violence and war are wrong.





Artist Yayoi Kusama next to her "Dot Car" in 1965 (Courtesy of Magnolia Pictures/Harrie Verstappen)

A contemporary of pop artist Andy Warhol (and [Corita Kent](#), who is not mentioned in the film but whose artistic stylings developed in similar ways in the 1960s-1980s), Kusama is now almost 90 years old. Moving to New York after World War II was hard and even women gallery owners would not give a woman, let alone a Japanese woman, her own exhibition. She struggled, went to therapy, and tried to take her own life several times. She was known to be aggressive and determined. After 20 years and little success, Kusama returned to Japan. Her nude sculptures of the body (and her obsession with the phallic) embarrassed her family and town.

But she kept on. She eventually returned to New York, where her art began to attract attention and her work was exhibited (one polka dot creation sold initially for \$75 and more recently resold for \$750,000.) But she was still not well and back in Japan checked herself into a mental hospital from which she never checked out. She leaves each day to work in her studio and returns there each night to sleep.

She still travels for exhibitions and had a successful 2017 series in the United States. Regardless of the medium (paint, pencil, fashion, film, performance, poetry, illustrations, watercolors), Kusama continues her artistic efforts to change the world: "I convert the energy of the universe into dots of the universe and that energy, along with love, flies into the sky."

I cannot recommend this film enough and the information here just touches on her story. The film loves its subject and honors Kusama, the most successful female artist in the world today, at every turn. "Kusama: Infinity" makes me believe that as Dostoevsky once wrote, "Beauty will save the world."

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### **"BlacKkKlansman"**

This bio-comedy from director Spike Lee (and several writers, including Lee) is based on the 2014 memoir of Ron Stallworth's experience as the first black man hired by Colorado Springs police force.

Ron (John David Washington) is harassed by the other cops while assigned to a desk job and asks to transfer to undercover. He infiltrates a local civil rights rally and meets Patrice Dumas (Laura Harrier), president of the black student union. On taking her to her hotel, a racist patrolman, Andy Landers (Frederick Weller), stops Patrice and sexually assaults her.

After, Stallworth is reassigned to the intelligence division. He sees a recruitment advertisement for the Ku Klux Klan and, pretending to be a white man, says he wants to join the local chapter. This works so well that Stallworth has to get his Jewish coworker Zimmerman (Adam Driver) to pretend to be him and attend meetings. Meanwhile, Stallworth gets on the phone with David Duke (Topher Grace), the grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, to track down his membership card. When Duke visits Colorado Springs to induct Stallworth, things get interesting.



Adam Driver and John David Washington in "BlacKkKlansman" (CNS/Focus Features)

The first thing you will notice as you watch this film, and be distracted by, is how much Washington sounds like his father, Denzel Washington. Once you get over this, the story draws you in. It seems incredible that Stallworth would have ever gotten away with this, but he did. It took a lot of moxie and courage for the police officers involved, and "BlacKkKlansman" adds another title to the cinematic canon of films telling the story of the ongoing civil rights movement in the United States.

### **"Operation Finale"**

This film is told mostly through the experience of Mossad Agent Peter Malkin (Oscar Isaac) and stays pretty close to the historical account of how Israeli intelligence tracked down Adolf Eichmann (Ben Kingsley) outside of Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the late 1950s.

Once there is photographic proof that it is indeed Eichmann living with his wife and children, a Shin Bet (Israeli intelligence) team captures him on May 11, 1960, on his way home from work. The film spends much of the film with Malkin trying to



persuade Eichmann to sign his own extradition document so that El Al, the Israeli airline, will agree to transport him to Israel. This process delayed the extradition for several days and creates much of the post-capture drama in the film.



Ben Kingsley as Adolf Eichmann in a scene from "Operation Finale" (CNS/MGM)

The conversations between Malkin and Eichmann ask and answer questions that historians still raise about the legality of the capture-kidnapping of Eichmann and trying him in a country in which the crimes with which he was charged did not take place. Isaac does an outstanding job at portraying a Mossad agent trying to regain his reputation after a botched capture attempt of another Nazi in hiding a few years before. Chris Weitz shows his versatile talent as a director who elicits performances that humanize all the characters, even the ones who seem to deserve it the least.

It is a riveting story and as one who remembers seeing coverage of Eichmann's trial and execution, this backstory of the capture of the man who was called the "architect of the Final Solution" is told within an enduring historical context that is tragic and sad.

## **"God Friended Me"**

CBS is getting religion again with this new comedy about Miles (Brandon Michael Hall), an atheist with a podcast who is also a preacher's kid.

After Miles asserts his joyful and confident atheism once again, God friends him on social media and continues to poke and annoy Miles until he accepts. This puts Miles in a place to make a dramatic difference in someone's life and introduces him to Cara Bloom (Violet Beane), a journalist with writer's block.

Let's face it, it is hard to make television about God, but "God Friended Me" takes a laid-back approach with characters who follow their curiosity to discoveries that inspire but don't overdo it. I enjoyed the pilot. It premieres Sept. 30.

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