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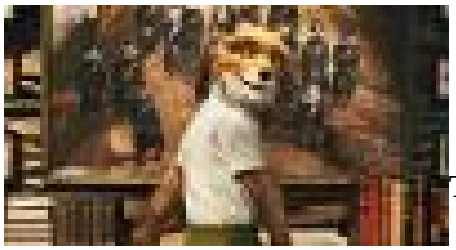
Sr. Rose Pacatte | Dec. 22, 2009 NCR Today

Burning thoughts about new films

These past few weeks has seen the release of several surprisingly good films (though some will receive wide release in January). Here are some of the best:



The Fantastic Mr. Fox -- Based on a story by Roald Dahl (1916-1990), director Wes Anderson ("The Darjeerling Limited") tells a wonderful and quirky stop-action animated tale about a wily fox (voiced by George Clooney who could get an Oscar nod just for this; Meryl Streep voices Mrs. Fox) who takes on three mean farmers by stealing cider, turkeys, chickens and ducks from them. Well, he tries to outwit them as foxes are by nature wont to do. All the farmers get for their trouble is Mr. Fox?s tail and a lot of work and damage and then we are back where we started with the tale. There is no swearing in the film; any possible expletive is smoothly replaced with ?cuss?. Very funny. I chuckled all the way through and I am still not sure what it was about, exactly. Family, maybe. Letting nature be natural. A little existentialism perhaps. Or maybe nothing. Perhaps just a little cuss fun.

Brothers -- Oscar-nominated director Jim Sheridan ("In the Name of the Father," "In America") seems to anchor his films in the idea of family. Here he shows us two sets of brothers, Tommy (Jake Gyllenhaal) a ne?er- do-well and the other, Sam (Tobey Maguire) a military officer about to leave for Afghanistan again. Sam has his military brothers, as well. He and his unit are shot down and the military thinks all are dead, but Sam and another soldier are captured. Sam?s wife, Grace (Natalie Portman, "New York, I Love You"), her two young daughters and Tommy become close. Something terrible happens in Afghanistan to Sam and then he is rescued. He returns home, a shadow of his former self, tormented, suspicious, tightly-wound and violent. Although his brother, wife, children and parents try to embrace him, he cracks. At first, before he leaves for that deployment, Sam seems robotic and tightly-wound yet loving in a stiff sort of way. Even toward his wayward brother when he picks him up when he is released from prison. Sam kindly asks Tommy if he is going to ask forgiveness of the woman he robbed, the act that sent him to prison. Sam implies that there are consequences that require reconciliation and even restitution. Perhaps, we think, this is who Sam is. Yet, he is already a product of his military training rather than an extension of his athletic high school football successes, the jock who dated the cheerleader -- and married her. Did he go from being one cliché to another? Though Sam

seems a one-dimensional repressed character, Sheridan shows his directorial acumen by letting the audience finish creating this character. ?Brothers? is a heart-breaking anti-war film, a heartfelt look at the effects of war on soldiers now and those still suffering from Vietnam: the collateral damage, the consequences. The film seems to ask: who, exactly, is this war protecting? Who will reconcile and make restitution? Excellent acting all around showcasing the heroism of gentleness and love in the face of the unspeakable -- that must be spoken.

The Road -- Cormac McCarthy?s bleak novel interpreted bleakly, but artfully, for the screen. A priest friend close to the film industry wondered why anyone would release such a miserable film before Christmas. Other than the obvious need to release the film in New York and Los Angeles before the end of the year to make the cut for Oscar nominations, the film is actually more about Christmas than one would think during the first horrific 90 minutes or so. A starving man (Viggo Moretnsen) and his son (Kodi Smit-McPhee) travel a world blighted by nuclear winter, trying to reach the ocean. There are flashbacks to when the boy was born, when the man and his wife (Charlize Theron) realize they have brought life into a world of death. She walks into the night and is gone. The man and the boy find people who have committed suicide and others who cannibalize anyone they can capture. The boy learns distinctions between bad people (cannibals) and good people (anyone who will not hurt them) and suffers when his father doesn?t trust the good people, when he won?t share the food they discover. Then the man begins to talk about the "fire" and it takes on a mystical meaning about humanity and hope. Only one character has a name in this film, Eli (Robert Duval). He is like a prophet, a link to something beyond. Intentional or not, the boy seems to be a "Christ-figure," the one who is the light in the valley of the shadow of death and darkness. But, oh, it is a tough film to watch. The theater usher told me the film follows the book, which I had not read, almost to the word. "The Road" employs excellent parallel structure both visually and through sound; it is very literary but not wordy. It ought to get Oscar nods for best adapted screenplay and cinematography. The film deserves a theological analysis, much like the 2006 film "The Children of Men."

All of Sr. Rose's "December Embers" are here:

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Part Two: The Fantastic Mr. Fox, Brothers, The Road [2]

Part Three: 2012, Me and Orson Welles and An Education [3]

Part Four: Precious: Based on the novel *Push* by Sapphire, The Blind Side [4]

Movie ratings can be found at Web site of the Motion Picture Association of America (www.mpaa.org) and some reviews and ratings can be found at the Office of Film and Broadcast of the U.S. bishops' conference Web site (www.usccb.org).

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