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Cinema's independent summer road trip

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Aug. 31, 2012

Along with a few million people, I watched as four richly textured films opened this summer and gently held their own against crowd-pleasing blockbusters. From the darkened theater we traveled near and far.

The starting point for our journey was the United Kingdom, but we jetted swiftly to India in "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel." The film's title is the name of the retirement destination for "the elderly and beautiful" that seven disparate Brits read about in a brochure. Strangers, they decide to make the move to India for their own reasons. Evelyn Greenslade (Judi Dench), now a widow, had to sell her London flat when she discovers that her husband left her with almost nothing. Muriel Donnelly (Maggie Smith) is an unmarried retired governess without means who needs a cheap hip replacement. Douglas and Jean Ainslie (Bill Nighy and Penelope Wilton), an unhappy married couple, lost their savings when their daughter's Internet startup company went bust. Graham Dashwood (Tom Wilkerson) is a judge and bachelor who decides to quit the bench on the spur of the moment. Madge Hardcastle (Celia Imrie) would like to find a husband. Norman Cousins (Ronald Pickup) would like to find someone to love -- him.

When they arrive at the tattered old hotel nothing is prepared for them. Some are offended at the sights and smells. The hotel's impractical but earnest owner, young Sonny Kapoor (Dev Patel), greets every complaint with "Everything will be all right in the end. So if it is not all right, it is not yet the end." This exasperates some of the folks yet Sonny is irrepressible even when his mother shows up determined to sell the hotel and take him back to Mumbai with her. She also wants to thwart his plans to marry the girl of his choice.

Muriel adapts in ways that renew her and give life to those around her. Her character is the most developed and adds much of the humor. Graham disappears in search of a man with whom he fell in love while growing up in India decades before. Graham finds him, and his wife and family. The two men talk through the night about what was and now will never be.

This ensemble story could have dissolved into a soap opera. But with John Madden's empathetic direction, Ol Parker's script based on the 2004 novel These Foolish Things by Deborah Moggach, Britain's stage and screen royalty leading the cast, and India as the stage, "Marigold" shows us that life is never over until it is.

Now for time travel to the mid-1960s, to an island off of Maine for "Moonrise Kingdom." The island is called St. Jack or the "New Penzance." Sam Shakusky (Jared Gilman) is a 12-year-old orphan at the "Khaki Scout" summer camp. One night he sneaks away to meet up with Suzy Bishop (Kara Hayward, looking about 14). He is as prepared as every scout should be. Suzy is the opposite and brings books, a record player and a cat. Sam leads Suzy through the wilderness to a cove where they can make a life together. They met the previous summer at a church concert, became pen pals, and made a pact to run away together. They are lost in an adult world of parents, society and religion that seems to have abandoned them.

While the adults scramble to find the kids (Edward Norton is the awkward and kindly scout master, Bill Murray and Frances McDormand play Suzy's rather creepy and spacey attorney parents, and Bruce Willis is the amorous and somewhat slow-witted sheriff), complications ensue that only the quirky likes of director/writer

Wes Anderson (with co-writer Roman Coppola) could devise. Yet, if a viewer grew up in the 1960s like I did, the children's loneliness and the adults' ennui resonate.

"Moonrise Kingdom" is as improbable as blue snow. I did not expect the offbeat humor, the depth of understanding of the soul space where isolated children go just to survive. Its gentility charmed me.

The next stop is Paris with "The Intouchables." It is based on the true story of Philippe (François Cluzet), a millionaire who was paralyzed from the neck down in a paragliding accident. Driss (Omar Sy), a black man who came from Senegal as a child, is just out of prison. He gets in line to apply for a job as Philippe's attendant just so he can collect another signature that will allow him to go on welfare. Driss is bold, disrespectful, funny, macho, and his life experience is confined to street culture. Philippe is educated and intrigued. He hires Driss for a two-week trial period that stretches into months.

It's easy to dismiss this film as a patronizing rehash of feel-good stories where a rich white person and a deprived ethnic person save each other. Though the filmmaker tries, there is little grit in the story. When Driss suddenly and inexplicably acquires paints and a canvas, it is a little too cute except that Philippe manages to sell one of his paintings to an ambitious and unsuspecting collector for a great deal of money. But the men scam and play well together, both breaking through the limits of their own prisons. I appreciated the film's gentle pace and tone; it's a poem of friendship and respect.

After exotic India, coastal Maine, and modern Paris we arrive at a rural community in the Louisiana delta in "Beasts of the Southern Wild." Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis) is 6 years old and the only child of Wink (Dwight Henry) and a woman who left when she was born. Hushpuppy attends a makeshift school where the science lessons spark the little girl's imagination. She is a still point in her disordered world where she plays, thinks, works and tries to make sense of life where she has no mother and nature is out of control. She and Wink are materially destitute; he lives in one trashy trailer and she lives in another, as if they are bedrooms. Meals, bathing, laundry are erratic and housecleaning nonexistent. Wink drinks. With a mighty storm coming, Hushpuppy is confused by her father's behavior and she wants only to find her mother.

"Beasts of the Southern Wild" is one of the most original fantasy films I have seen. The visuals made me think immediately of "Where the Wild Things Are." Indeed, at the end, the mighty, threatening beasts bow to Hushpuppy; they recognize her qualities of soul. But they were never threatening to her, only to us for whom the universe of this film is possible but foreign, disordered and far away. Hushpuppy is strong, quiet and wise beyond her years. "Daddy says brave men don't run from their place," Hushpuppy says to herself, and to us.

She sees everything. The seemingly weak father possesses a certain nobility. He is a hero who, despite grinding poverty, loves his daughter above everything. His rough manner is to prepare her for what will come. The only comfort in the film, originally a one-act play by Lucy Alibar, comes from the powerful, transcendent, reciprocal love between parent and child in a land without pity. There is social commentary here. Perhaps the strongest statement is that the bond between parent and child and a family's culture, no matter how tenuous, is unique and sacred. Hushpuppy is an amazing wild child.

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