Tom Wilkinson ~ 98 Screen Credits



Popular British character actor Tom (Thomas Geoffrey) Wilkinson was born in Leeds, West Yorkshire to parents Thomas and Marjorie on 5 February 1948. Though active in theatre and television from the mid-'70s and in cinema from the mid-'80s, he did not become familiar to an international audience until 1997, via surprise hit and Best Picture nominee *The Full Monty*. His performance as Gerald, one of six unemployed men who strip for cash, collected both plaudits and a Best Supporting Actor BAFTA. His involvement in *Shakespeare In Love*, one of the biggest successes of the following year, helped cement his popularity.

In 1986 Wilkinson appeared in TV mini-series *First Among Equals* as Raymond Gould. Playing alongside him as Louise Fraser was Diana Hardcastle. The couple married in January 1988 and now have two daughters, Alice and Molly. Tom and Diana have appeared in the same production on several occasions since (e.g. *Resnick, If Only, A Good Woman, The Kennedys, The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*). For a little more on this, see pages 160 and 164.

Wilkinson has twice been nominated for an Academy Award, for Leading Actor in 2002 (*In The Bedroom*) and for Supporting Actor in 2008 (*Michael Clayton*). For further biographical information, see page 68.

THE SHADOW LINE (TV, 1976)



Jointly produced by Thames Television and Polish production company Zespól Filmowy, this respectful adaptation of Joseph Conrad's 1917 novel *The Shadow Line*, filmed in Burma and Thailand, marks the screen debut of 28 year old Tom Wilkinson, in the third-billed part of Ransome, the ship's cook with a "weak heart". Directed by Andrzej Wajda, the 100 minute film was first broadcast in the UK on 1 July 1976. TW acquits himself well throughout. In Conrad's conception, the "shadow line" is that bourn all men must cross in passing from youth to maturity. In his own case (the fictionalised captain is unnamed in the book but called "Joseph Conrad" in the film) this transition occurs during a particularly fraught voyage - his first in command - across the Gulf of Siam. Not only is the ship becalmed, but there is widespread sickness aboard (most notably in the delirious first mate), not enough medicine to go round and the crew minded to blame everything on the malevolent spirit of their previous captain, lately buried in these same waters. Given Conrad's love of metaphor, Ransome's sailor-with-a-weak-heart (who leaves ship and captain at journey's end) may well be a symbolic stand-in for the young author himself. TW, too, would move on by and by to greater and better things - but a quietly confident and impressive beginning nonetheless.

IMDb: One of the great adaptations of Conrad to film. The first part, on land before the sea voyage, was filmed on location in Burma with some really fine British actors, particularly the actor who plays the older captain who gets him the job. The photography, especially the use of colour and light, is extraordinary and Wajda captures the sense of a real place and time. This is about one of those Conrad voyages where

nothing goes right. It's a young man's first experience as captain: his ship becalmed, an ailing crew, and a half-mad first mate who claims the ship is jinxed by the former captain. While the essence of the story - a dead calm and nothing happening - is a difficult subject to tackle, Wajda is up to the task and his film is engrossing throughout. And the dialogue isn't plagued by the tin-ear that than can occur when English is not the director's first language. Just a terrific job all around / The early, land-set section is perhaps a little plodding. The interaction of the narrator with various other characters and the details of how he comes to assume his captaincy, serve in Conrad's novel to deepen our understanding of him, to see both his strengths and weaknesses, and observe how he was both ill and well prepared for leadership. Wajda tends to err on the side of mere scene-setting, failing to invest scenes that could easily have been reduced without affecting the essential narrative with the thematic and psychological significance achieved by Conrad. An additional mild annoyance is the over-the-top mugging by John Bennett as the supine keeper of a boarding-house - fortunately it's a small part and compensation is provided by Martin Wyldeck who is very enjoyable as a wily old mariner with a rather donnish demeanour. Once the story takes to the seas, all reservations fade, for what follows is superb cinema. It manages to capture the sense of being at sea as well as any movie I know, including the excellent *Master And Commander*. What makes the difference here, however, is that whereas most ocean-set films either depict the ship's struggle against the awesome, hostile elements of storms and towering waves, or delight in the bracing freshness and freedom of having a fair wind at the sails, *The Shadow Line* tells the story of a becalmed ship, barely drifting through the water, its crew sweltering in the oppressive heat and laid low by illness, their fate possibly in the hands of the malevolent spirit of their late captain. It's an unusual proposition for a cinematic entertainment: stillness, silence and accumulating claustrophobia. In lesser hands, the result could easily have been dull. But the fine performances (including that of a young Tom Wilkinson - although he looks middle-aged even here) and the sharp cinematography (sometimes vivid to the point of unreality) enable the power of Conrad's tale to be conveyed surprisingly successfully.



The performance of Marek Kondrat (above) in the main role is extremely impressive: authoritative, yet retaining the sense of doubt and inexperience so crucial to Conrad's (self) portrayal. Taking the form of a retrospective "confession" the book deals with the emotional development of the protagonist and his traversing of the "shadow line" between youth and maturity - a change that entails both loss and gain. Conrad's narrator is significantly anonymous; this gesture towards universality is strengthened by

the frequent use of the impersonal "one", as in "one thinks", "one does", etc. At the same time, the author allows us to the read the tale as a coded autobiography, with the figure of the young, sea-struck Pole a version of his own younger self - and the older, wiser narrator looking back on his rite of passage as a version of the 60-year-old novelist. The story's significance is thus simultaneously general and particular, both universal and individual. The film adaptation pushes the autobiographical element further by naming the hero "Joseph Conrad" (and I wonder if the lead actor's name is entirely coincidental); the youthful captain's conduct in command is a presage of the literary genius to come. Conrad's entire oeuvre (including the other books, such as *Heart Of Darkness*, that Wajda considered filming) is thus in part a product of these early experiences; the passage into leadership and maturity (though not necessarily wisdom), the passing of the shadow line, is the crucial development that enables great literature - and cinema - to be created. If only more literary adaptations displayed such intelligent engagement with their source texts instead of being content merely to illustrate them according to the genteel standards of decorum and respectability.

Torpid *is a handy little word much beloved of film critics who want a fancy way to say* slow - *but* The Shadow Line *is that rare movie to be actually* about *torpidity itself. It's based on a 1917 novella by Polish-born Joseph Conrad, the first edition cover of which posed the not-so-tantalising question:* Why did the captain and the silent crew of the ship in this story of the Far East have such great and mysterious difficulty in passing latitude 8" 20'?

Perhaps the book provides an answer - but the film itself most certainly does not. Indeed, this adaptation by director Wajda and co-writer Boleslaw Sulik goes out of its way to avoid any kind of definitive explanation ... [The pair] *are essentially stuck with a narrative almost entirely about things* not *happening: there's a 35 minute mid-section dominated by grinding stasis and there isn't really enough going on in terms of inter-character development or individual psychology to properly sustain our interest. It doesn't help that, Burns and Ransome apart, the crew members remain undifferentiated peons, or that Wajda tends to falls into a cycle of repetition in terms of the visuals and the soundtrack, the latter in the form of echoing / ghostly / tinkly piano.*

When the ship is in motion, however, the camera soars and picturesque montage becomes the mode, all to the accompaniment of a soaring orchestral lushness - a combination which will remind older viewers of a certain popular British TV series from the same decade: not so much Shadow Line *as* Onedin Line*, in fact. These first and third acts of the film have a dated, stodgy, airlessly conventional feel, although every penny of the budget was clearly well spent with great attention paid to specifics of period architecture, costume and design. Unfortunately the evocation of a bygone era also extends to the film's tempo: "all we can do is drift" as someone remarks during yet another period of enforced becalmed inertia.*

Neil Young, *Jigsaw Lounge*, 9 December 2007

SPYSHIP (TV, 1983)





This six part mini-series (each episode circa 53 minutes long) was produced jointly by the BBC, Australia's 7 Network and The Entertainment Channel (USA). Following the inexplicable loss in the Barents Sea of Grimsby trawler *Caistor* with all hands and a Public Inquiry whitewash, journalist Martin Taylor (TW), whose father was one of the crew, struggles to find out how she came to sink, and why. With the Cold War still on, "The Russians" make an easy, shady, spooky foe, with our own Intelligence Operatives scarcely more ready to play straight or do the decent thing. Wilkinson carries the series with fortitude and conviction, despite looking for much of the time as much like Benny Hill as *bona fide* hero material. The explanation, when it finally arrives, is hard to swallow and the whole a bit too murky, cynical, dark and creaky for its own good. Based loosely on the "mysterious" real-life loss of Hull trawler *Gaul* in 1974.

IMDb: Excellent, if a little slow to get started, with a quite stunning finale. Well worth a viewing / *Spyship* is one of those excellent cerebral thrillers that used to make every new season at the BBC a treat to look forward to. Sadly those days are long gone. In the meantime, we can remember. The ending of the series was regarded as shocking at the time. Strangely, in our supposedly more civilised society, it seems less shocking now, probably because we've come to expect such things in the name of "national security". I found the title of the series - *Spyship* - curious. It's a spoiler in itself, but when I look back on the series as a whole and at a little distance, I don't think the title refers to a ship at all - I think it refers to Britain and so stands as a rather involving metaphor. Solid production values and good performances all round, with a tense script. Directed for bleak suspense, and succeeds at it. Highly recommended / *Spyship* did not live up to our expectations. The production was obviously dated but even making allowances in that area, it does not forgive the woeful acting. Most of the cast were well known at the time or have achieved some status since. Perhaps they were hamstrung by a thin script. They seemed unable to cope with the slow direction, for example, when the hero finds himself in the water - is he ever going to get out as he crawls across the mud, and will he be able to climb the ladder? Who were the various villains and what did they represent? It was never clear. One saving grace: the ending was quite unexpected, but, overall, a disappointment / Not great but enjoyable.

STRANGERS AND BROTHERS (TV, 1984)




Published between 1940 and 1970, *Strangers And Brothers* is a series of eleven novels by C. P. Snow that deal with, among other things, questions of political and personal integrity and the mechanics of exercising power. The books follow the life and career of their narrator, Lewis Eliot, from humble beginnings in an English provincial town, to reasonably successful London lawyer, to Cambridge don, to wartime service in Whitehall, to senior civil servant and finally into retirement. A BBC dramatisation of the series was broadcast in thirteen 52 minute parts in the early months of 1984. Be warned that Julian Bond's workmanlike adaptation of Snow's narrative is hard going. Spanning the years 1927 to 1965, its frail dramatic structure is subsumed by a surfeit of bloodless esoteric maundering and breast-beating claptrap that between them make for a very long eleven hours' viewing. Worse still, though the production is blessed with an array of more liberally gifted actors - Cheri Lunghi, Elizabeth Spriggs, Anthony Hopkins, Nigel Havers, Frederick Treves and more - the lead role of Eliot is entrusted to vapid Shaughan Seymour, who exclaims the line "I'm hungry with longing for you!" (and more besides) with all the passion of someone asking the way to the station. Nor is the object of his longing, Sheila Ruskin, much more animated. TW appears in the first two episodes as morally and ethically dubious lawyer George Passant, while Hopkins livens up episodes 11 and 12. But neither of them, accomplished as may be, is capable of rescuing this dry, dusty fare from its also-ran fate. *Strangers And Brothers* aims high but promises considerably more than it delivers. Turgid and dull.

IMDb: *Strangers And Brothers* is an immensely satisfying intellectual drama full of men and women who are strong and articulate. C P Snow's goal was certainly not to mirror mundane reality but to reflect through his characters British power in the world, its deflation, reorientation and resilience, from the late thirties to the mid sixties and to illustrate, by way of one character, a transition from Socialist to Establishment. The witty, complex and intellectual characters struggle with history and conscience while striving to navigate a nation through the first stages of the Cold War. I'm a great fan of *Yes Minister*, which treats politicians and civil servants with an equal dose of withering

cynicism. *Strangers And Brothers* is a wonderful tonic to such appalling, effete politics. Here we find the calibre of people we'd like to believe are in government and other positions of power and policy making. Finally, central to the series are the contrasting themes of existential aloneness and concern for one's fellow men and women. This wonderful series is stimulating and mature and makes me yearn for more television of this quality / What a snorefest! I can't believe I watched the whole series. I generally like the Masterpiece Theatre BBC mini-series, but this one was terrible. The characters are shallow, the story is boring and each episode moves at a snail's pace. Most of the dialogue is ridiculous and consists of the characters objectively talking about their emotions. Obviously they did this because we would have no clue what motivates them otherwise. Since the characters were so boring and two-dimensional, I found I didn't care about Lewis Elliot or anyone else. And as for Anthony Hopkins, he is not the star. He has a rather small part and is only in two episodes. Funny thing is, his character is probably the most interesting one in the series, but by the time he shows up, you're already so bored you couldn't care less. My advice: don't waste thirteen hours of your precious time / What I like about this is its quietness. Not fast-paced and gimmicky like modern Brit dramas, this one can be savoured at leisure like a fine bottle of port. A step back in time, yes, and not to everyone's taste, but for those who love this style of period drama, well worth renting or borrowing from your local library. Lots of familiar actors make for great viewing on a rainy afternoon. Just kick back and enjoy.



Shaughan Seymour as Lewis Eliot / Sheila Ruskin as his first wife Sheila



Anthony Hopkins as Roger Quaife / Cheri Lunghi as wife #2 Margaret

WETHERBY (1985)



In *Wetherby*, written and directed by David Hare (*Plenty*, *The Reader*, *Page Eight* etc), Tim McInnerny (fifth below) plays a lugubrious 25 year old student who turns up at an English teacher's country cottage with a brace of pheasants, settles himself in her kitchen and blows his brains out. Vanessa Redgrave (first below) leads a strong cast including her real-life daughter Joely Richardson, Judi Dench, Ian Holm (second, third and fourth below) and TW through a 103 minute meditation on loneliness and alienation that, whilst easy on the eye, is a challenge to assimilate (at least two viewings are recommended) though ultimately well worthwhile. A couple of scenes are unnecessarily graphic and Hare writes with an attitude - *He's the sort of man who keeps sheep* - likely to irritate some, but this is cinema as Art stylishly realised. Wilkinson's Roger Braithwaite, another teacher, provides background colour but is not integral to plot or production. Hare's first feature film as director requires of viewers close attention and patience but offers in return rich rewards.

IMDb: Redgrave gives a breathtaking performance in this extremely well written and executed "puzzle" movie, easily one of the best English language films of the 1980s / Hare's quiet masterpiece conveys a genuine sense of alienation and dislocation while covering a great deal of social and political ground. It never loses sight of the human story, though. A startlingly intelligent drama / If you had any doubt why I rate London over Hollywood, watch this Pinteresque landscape of a movie. Even if you think it's boring, and "they talk with funny accents" you can see that these people are artists and are so good that the "art" hardly shows. It's not supposed to / Great performances from Holm and Wilkinson / Another puzzle movie with ludicrously scrambled pieces. Notice the blah response of the great unwashed public. This baby shot past them on quiet rails in the dead of night because it is just too tortured for its own good / Hare's deep sympathies are with the romantic, the compassionate, the sensitive, the foolhardy, the collective-minded and the lost. He is antipathetic toward the self-sufficient, the

ambitious, the laconic, the individualistic, the successful. This is essentially a sad movie about one who was once happy and her wonder and self-realisation about another sadder than she. Heartbreaking / Boring and annoying. What a shame / A killer script, intriguing editing, fantastic acting (Redgrave is incredible) and a compelling idea drive *Wetherby* / Obtuse. Don't waste your time / The plot is too drawn out and bludgeons us with the following themes: books and education, loneliness in love, Nixon/Thatcher and lack of human understanding - but the problem is that everyone is so stupid and hapless that certain themes (like lack of human understanding) seem to stem from their own stupidity / There is a good deal that is not said and one must read between the lines. Yet, provided you have the patience, this film will fascinate / Confusing, self-indulgent and pretentious. Looks as though it was written and shot by the evil spawn of Fellini, Woody Allen and Wes Craven / Those with patience, time and eyes to see will enjoy *Wetherby* to the maximum and even forgive its problems. It isn't hollow or pretentious, it just buries its points very deep like treasures to be sought. The reward will come for those who work and think a little harder.











AGATHA CHRISTIE'S MISS MARPLE : A POCKET FULL OF RYE (TV, 1985)



As with *Alleyn* (see page 35 below), you know what to expect: this time, a country house, a dysfunctional family, stock characters indulging in stereotypical behaviour, a slew of murders, fussy Miss Marple seeing what no one else (least of all the viewer) can and, as usual, the guilty party being the least likely suspect of all. TW's Detective Inspector Neele is perfectly pitched to remind us that a policeman, even of senior rank, while not exactly dull or common, is still no match in either brains or breeding for the toffs he rubs shoulders with. Though the best of Christie makes for enjoyable reading, none of it fares as well on the screen. The fourth of twelve BBC Marple adaptations with Joan Hickson in the title role, this one aired in two parts of 51 and 52 minutes.

IMDb: The nursery rhyme reference in the title is largely irrelevant but the story is well plotted and the conclusion satisfying. I don't feel enough is made of the plight of the pathetic Gladys - the book does this so much more effectively and you really end up hating the murderer as a result, but, that apart, it's pretty good. The cast is excellent. Tom Wilkinson is one of the better accompanying detectives and there are good turns from Stacy Dorning as the airhead second wife, Rachel Bell as the repressed Jennifer and Peter Davison as the charming Lance. Miss Marple finds a kindred spirit in the formidable Miss Henderson - *The journey between Vice and Evil is but a step* - of Fabia Drake. Best of all, though, is Selina Cadell's Mary Dove - exactly as I pictured her in the book / My second favourite (after *A Murder Is Announced*) of the Hickson Marple adaptations, with lovely photography, sets and costumes, high calibre acting, superb music, an often thought-provoking script and faithful, well-paced story.

TRAVELLING MAN (TV, 1985)



Created by Roger Marshall and produced for Granada Television, *Travelling Man* ran for two series, of six 52 minute episodes in 1984 followed by a further seven in 1985. Leigh Lawson (above, right) stars as Alan Lomax, a former Met Drugs Squad copper sent down for two years after being framed by one or more fellow officers for the theft of £100,000. Upon his release from jail, he finds his wife Jan has gone to Canada, his son Steve has taken to the road and his house has been sold, leaving him with nothing but £6000, a budgie called Frankie and a narrow boat called Harmony. So, with the help and support of Fleet Street journalist Robinson (Terence Taplin), who believes in his innocence and smells a good story, Lomax takes up a nomadic existence on the canal system in order to clear his name and find Steve. Each episode places him at the centre of a different scenario while more or less advancing the overarching narrative. The quality of the whole is uneven, with a few engaging stories mixed in with several indifferent ones. Unfortunately both elements of the overarching framework are poorly handled, with Steve being found but then taking off again and the fit-up investigation fizzling away into nothing beyond a few peremptory and highly unsatisfactory lines spoken over the final episode's closing credits. (Presumably a third series was planned but never made.) In s2e5, entitled *On The Hook*, Lomax helps local farmers catch a rustling ring with the assistance of Granny Jackson, a ne'er-do-well he met in stir, played by a fresh-faced TW. Lawson performs ably in his lead role and Tony Doyle and Colin Jeavons make suitably shady villains, but *Travelling Man* taken as a piece is a crudely-fashioned and significantly flawed disappointment.

HAPPY FAMILIES (TV, 1985)




In the six-part BBC sitcom *Happy Families*, written by Ben Elton, four sisters, separated from their brother Guy at a young age, are now living independent lives in different parts of the world. He sets out to find them so that their grandmother can see them all again before she dies. Episode two takes Guy to Hollywood, where sister Cassie is a soap opera queen. TW plays a JR (*Dallas*) type caricature in the soap in which Cassie is starring. Though the cast list of *Happy Families* - Jennifer Saunders, Ade Edmondson, Dawn French, Stephen Fry, Helen Lederer, Jim Broadbent - reads like an excerpt from a mid-eighties British comedy *Who's Who*, their collective efforts can do little with so feeble a script. The humour is laboured and the end product poor. Not Ben Elton's finest hour, or TW's either, but even actors have to eat. 35 minutes.

Zeppelinbend.com: Ben Elton's spin on the brilliant 1949 Ealing film *Kind Hearts And Coronets* cast Jennifer Saunders in multiple roles: as all four daughters of the Fuddle family and also as their mad granny Edith. It was Edith who set the venture rolling when she charged her dopey grandson Guy with the task of tracking down and reuniting his four lost sisters, ostensibly so that, as her dying wish, she could see her family together one last time. So off went Guy to find his erstwhile siblings, with the middle four episodes dedicated to the hunt for each one: TV soap star Cassie, jailbird Roxanne, novice nun Joyce and dumb beauty Madeleine. The final episode brought about the unlikely reunion and revealed Granny's real and sinister motive for bringing the grandchildren together - she required an organ transplant from each of them in order to save her life. The siblings agreed, provided that first she assign them her entire estate. At the last, however, it was discovered that Granny was not ill but, miraculously, pregnant, so she was left penniless but holding the baby.

IMDb: This series shows how versatile Jennifer Saunders is. She plays five different characters and is believable as each of them. The conclusion is a little silly but that doesn't hurt the appeal of the show. Ade is wonderful as good-hearted, naive Guy. Dawn French as the cook and Helen Lederer as maid are very good in their respective parts. I especially liked Helen's accent. Also, Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry add a little charm to the overall impression. Rik Mayall has a small part in the episode about Madeline. His portrayal of a neurotic French priest is magnificent.

FIRST AMONG EQUALS (TV, 1986)



On 4 December 1969, Jeffrey Archer won a by-election in Louth, Lincolnshire and so entered Parliament as a Conservative MP. Just 29, well married and in a safe seat, his political future seemed secure. He defended the seat successfully in June 1970 and February 1974 (though with reduced support each time) but in October 1974, after losing heavily in the stock market, declined to stand due to the threat of imminent bankruptcy. This he avoided by turning to writing. His first book, *Not A Penny More, Not A Penny Less*, was a modest success, but subsequent ones - *Kane And Abel* in particular - earned him a great deal of money. His fifth novel, 1984's *First Among Equals*, which charts the lives and careers of four politicians who enter Parliament at the 1964 general election, each intent on becoming Prime Minister, clearly drew heavily on Archer's own experiences as both politician and speculator. Though ostensibly fiction, he probably didn't need to make very much up: rather, by mining the narrative of his life and reworking a selection of Westminster tea and bar room stories, the tale would be there for the telling. Granada turned the book into a popular ten part mini-series, with episodes running from 48 to 52 minutes. The production is slick and polished and the plot romps along with all the energy (as well as some of the excesses) of a superheated soap. TW and Jeremy Child are the pick of the aspiring MPs, with Anita Carey and Jane Booker lending solid support as their respective spouses. Clive Swift as oily Pimkin is good value too. Archer seems to have written the Kerslake character with himself in mind. Other more or less thinly veiled real-life figures (Heath, Wilson, Callaghan, Thatcher) also feature, and those with inside knowledge will doubtless recognise others too.

The storyline concerning the minority party holding the balance of power in a hung parliament was, 26 years before 2010, prescient to say the least! Though Diana Hardcastle, cast as Louise Fraser, plays just one scene with TW, the pair clearly hit it off, for in January 1988 they became husband and wife. Rather like Jeffrey Archer himself, *First Among Equals* is not deep and meaningful, but it is fun. For TW's opinion of the production, see page 71.







(1) Diana Hardcastle (2) Anita Carey (3) Clive Swift

* * * * *

Ambition, scandal and betrayal abound in the 1986 ITV adaptation of Jeffrey Archer's First Among Equals*, which mixes the density of British politics and the over-the-top-ness of melodrama with great verve. Every chapter focusing on real-life parliamentary struggles is matched by one relishing in adultery, heart-break and ruin - it's as wonky as a soap opera can possibly get, a sort of* West Wing *by way of* Dynasty*. Yet underneath all that wonkiness lies a ripping character drama, wonderfully acted and smartly paced, building toward a deliciously tense finale that finds all four of its leading men at the culmination of their careers, one of them perhaps even becoming Prime Minister.*

All four leading men are superb, even when the script calls for them to plough through some ridiculous material. Such strong performances truly shine when the script cleans up and goes for straight-on drama. These are four fully realised characters, grandly engaging in broad strokes, thoughtfully interesting through the small moments. Consider one scene in an early episode in which Gould, having previously visited a prostitute, which led to a blackmail scheme against him, is doorstepped by a reporter eager to uncover more on the matter. Watch how Wilkinson handles the material, and listen how the script handles Gould. The young MP, somehow honourable despite the womanising, manages to shoo off the reporter without ever denying the charge. He threatens the writer with allegations of slander, but never lies. TW, meanwhile, allows us to see the wheels spinning quickly in Gould's steel trap mind while also revealing a character who is essentially quiet and shy. It's this seeming paradox - the bold politician with the bookish, muted demeanour - that TW plays best. It also explains how the character earns our respect. Unlike Kerslake, who is essentially flawless (the lone scandal of his career is never his fault; he boldly sidesteps dirty politics) or Fraser, whose life is cluttered with misfortune (a heartrending loss in the family, a troubled wife, all that party in-fighting), Gould is a man who lives fully in the grey areas of his world. He's a brilliant politician yet a subdued one, a moral man with an amoral personal life (he engages in two long-term affairs as the years progress). We root for his success even when we're not sure he deserves it.

The other characters play as less complex "types" but to smart effect. Kerslake may be immaculate but his story is still packed with fascinating drama, such as the plotline that finds him on the brink of bankruptcy; his recovery causes a later scandal for which he is not at fault. Instead of using his lack of guilt as a sign of Kerslake's (and thus Archer's) "perfection," it's used as a great dramatic tool: how can one survive within such a scandal? Kerslake is trapped by circum-stance.

Fraser, meanwhile, becomes the punching bag of the series. He's surrounded by tragedy, the best place for scriptwriter Marlowe to dump any number of dramatic and political ideas, from hardship at home to the inner workings of a

complex election that ultimately relies, of course, on the whims of fate. Yet David Robb (below, left - see also *Parnell And The Englishwoman*) *does not play him as a sad sack, nor does he beg he audience for pity. His Fraser is a man who constantly rises above it and again he earns our cheers.*



The last piece of this puzzle is Jeremy Child's Seymour, who makes for one hell of a villain, the kind we love to hate. We relish in the failures of his personal life, but more importantly, we enjoy watching him in action, the scheming and planning and devilish manoeuvring. He's a slick operator and like all great baddies we come to respect him - so much so that we applaud the scene in the final episode in which, following a lifetime of service, his fellow MPs shower him with admiration. We cheer with them, and how curious, complex and rewarding a story must be when you can say the villain gets what he deserves without meaning he "gets what he deserves."

Such intense character work makes First Among Equals *crackle; the intricate political history is just icing for those who appreciate it. As epic drama it works quite wonderfully and as overblown soapy cheese it's still thoroughly enjoyable, all building to a highly rewarding finale. Even if you're not into* West Wing*-style politics, you'll find something to captivate here.*

David Cornelius, *DVD Talk*, 15 October 2008 (abridged and edited)

THE WOMAN HE LOVED (TV, 1988)




THE WOMAN is American double divorcee Wallis Simpson, *HE* is Edward, Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII, later Duke of Windsor and the film tells in a straightforward manner the progress of their lives from her second marriage, in London, to businessman Ernest Simpson (played by TW, above) to her third, in Paris, to the by-then abdicated monarch-in-exile. Jane Seymour and Anthony Andrews (above, left) take the lead roles, Robert Hardy (not for the first time, or last) imitates Winston Churchill and David Waller contributes a nice turn as an austere (*Love is for grocers*) and quietly appalled Stanley Baldwin. Not for all tastes, but worthy work. 99 minutes.

IMDb: A bad rehashing of the Edward VIII story with Jane Seymour glamming it up and Anthony Andrews not acting but simply imitating Edward VIII - and badly. It's embarrassing to watch / A mawkish, unappetizing historical romance in which Seymour and Andrews give stiff, rather uncomfortable performances, with events moving much too slowly to hold attention / Andrews *is* David Windsor - shy, slight, elite, precise, sympathetic, empathetic, yet out-of-touch. Somehow, he is emboldened to speak on social issues while exhibiting disastrous judgment. Equally well cast and versed, Seymour perfectly captures the all-consuming, calculating and ambitious personality of Wallis Simpson. Cold yet charming, demanding yet vulnerable and always persnickety, Simpson was a force of nature. How else could a twice-divorced, not particularly beautiful American commoner bring the King of England to his knees? Olivia de Havilland is wonderful as Aunt Bessie. She assumed a vital role in the development of the relationship, in essence taking the place of an entire royal court on Wallis's behalf, and proving up to the task / A reasonable effort, watchable TV, but nothing fabulous. *Edward And Mrs Simpson*, with the luxury of more time to tell its tale, is better / The story of Edward and Wallis continues to fascinate. This rendering gives a fine and believable picture of the time period. Seymour and Andrews are superb. He looks very sad, weary, stiff and quite haggard all the time - but maybe this was deliberate? I think that more could have been made of this movie, given its very strong cast and interesting subject matter. First of all, it ought to have been longer - at least as long as an ordinary feature film - and then I would have wanted to see more of the couple's courtship, love and happy times. Still, all in all, a nice film well worth watching / Love this movie! / A story for the ages - and this is easily the version of choice.

THE ATTIC : THE HIDING OF ANNE FRANK (TV, 1988)



Co-produced by Yorkshire Television and based on *Anne Frank Remembered* by Miep Gies (played here by Mary Steenburgen), this excellent TV drama, set wholly in Amsterdam, spans the period from the German occupation of Holland to just beyond the liberation of the death camps. When the Nazis began their active persecution then systematic removal of the Jews, some went into hiding, including, on 6 July 1942, Otto and Edith Frank and their daughters Margot and Anne, in an attic above Mr Frank's place of work. These four were joined later in 1942 by four other adults. All remained successfully concealed for a little over two years before, on 4 August 1944, following a tip-off from an unknown source, the Germans arrested and removed them to Auschwitz and elsewhere. Anne's father Otto (played here with moving restraint by Paul Scofield - see also *Martin Chuzzlewit*) was the only member of the group to survive the war. TW is Silberbauer, the leader of the Gestapo gang that raids the Franks' hiding place. His natural gravitas makes him particularly suited to this kind of role. It may be the first time he plays a German heavy, but it won't be the last (see *Valkyrie* / *Jackboots On Whitehall*). Also with Eleanor Bron. 96 minutes.

IMDb: Beautifully underplayed by the entire cast. Mary Steenburgen as Miep Gies, the young secretary who assumes a major role in providing for the needs of the eight Jews hiding in the attic above her work place, gives the finest performance of her career. Paul Scofield as Otto Frank and Lisa Jacobs as Anne are also excellent. The location work in Holland and music by Richard Rodney Bennett contribute greatly to a tightly written and directed script / I have seen six movies about Anne Frank and, apart from *Anne Frank - The Whole Story*, this is the best. Anyone with an interest in Anne Frank should watch it / Much the most accurate retelling of the Anne Frank story, *The Attic*

really explains the tension of living in such confined quarters, the fear of discovery and the yearning for the war to be over / Steenburgen gives a fantastic performance. The movie touches you / I've seen many Anne Frank films, but this is one of a kind. I loved it / *The Attic* filled in a lot of blanks for me. Wonderful.





(1) Mary Steenburgen and Lisa Jacobs (as Anne) (2) Paul Scofield

RUTH RENDELL MYSTERIES : SHAKE HANDS FOREVER (TV, 1988)




Wilkinson plays an accountant who arrives home to find his wife lying dead on their bed, apparently strangled with her own necklace - though, as is usual in this kind of production, things are never quite what they seem. George Baker's Inspector Wexford (above left) eventually sorts it all out. TW isn't stretched here, or overworked, since after the first third his character plays a secondary role. Decent fare, of its kind. 101 minutes.

INSPECTOR MORSE : THE INFERNAL SERPENT (TV, 1990)



33 episodes of *Inspector Morse* were shown on ITV between 1987 and 2000, starring John Thaw in the title role and Kevin Whately as his assistant, Sergeant Lewis. Colin Dexter, who created the character, wrote thirteen source novels,

all dramatised, with scriptwriters producing a further twenty stories, including this one - *The Infernal Serpent* - from Alma Cullen. TW, in the part of Jake Normington, a gay Oxford don, performs with his customary élan. The cast also includes Geoffrey Palmer (at his most Walter Matthau like), Barbara Leigh-Hunt and Cheryl Campbell. *Inspector Morse* always treads a fine line between *intriguingly faceted* and *frustratingly labyrinthine*, with some instalments too smart-aleck obscure for their own (or viewers') good. Fortunately - eventually - this one comes down on the right side. 105 well turned minutes.



COUNTERSTRIKE (TV, 1990)

After his wife is killed in a terrorist operation, industrialist Alexander Addington (Christopher Plummer) assembles a private team of troubleshooters to help combat terrorism around the world. Their assignments provide the narrative of *Counterstrike*, a proto *Mission Impossible* that aired for 66 episodes between July 1990 and May 1993. According to IMDb, TW appears in the second (*Dead In The Air)* and the fourth (*Art For Art's Sake*) and while his name figures in the credits of the latter, though not the former, *his face cannot be recognised in either one*. There are a couple of characters whose mugs are not shown that could be him (but equally could be anyone else). Possibly he played a minor character edited out of the final cut. Either way, what viewing suggests is that, contrary to IMDb's data, TW plays no meaningful part in either one of these two episodes of *Counterstrike*.

PAPER MASK (1990)




Paul McGann (above left) plays a hospital orderly who decides to impersonate a young doctor killed in a car crash, Amanda Donohoe (above) the nurse he becomes involved with and TW a consultant who instinctively dislikes but never suspects him. 100 minutes of entertaining though slightly implausible fun, let down only by a disappointingly unresolved ending. With Frederick Treves.

IMDb: If the plot of this movie is somewhat simple, its execution is thrilling and chilling. McGann is fantastic as he realises his "dream". Donohoe gets better and better as the film moves along and her realisation that her position changes is cleverly acted / A nifty little psychological thriller / Truly memorable and quite suspenseful as well as disturbing. A large part of what hooked me was the fact that the subject matter is not far removed from real-life news stories that continue to appear every year on television and in newspapers. The performances of both Paul McGann and Amanda Donohoe are subtle and engaging. Also, as in certain Hitchcock films, there are moments when the viewer is pulled into siding with a character who's obviously a sociopath / Gotta be the single most underrated movie of all time. Grips you, chills you, excites you and then spits you out - if you can sleep after this one then you don't care about a thing! Paul McGann is almost accidentally brilliant, and it is so well put together / The cast could not have been better. Despite a low budget feel, *Paper Mask* is riveting. It will give your emotions a real workout, and that's what I class as good entertainment / The attraction of the story is that it is entirely within the realm of possibility and all the more so in view of the seemingly increasing incidence of medical impropriety these days. Hitchcock-like in its use of the inevitable as an instrument of suspense, this gem will keep you glued to your seat to the end. If Robin Cook or Michael Creighton had written it, their names alone would have made it a blockbuster / McGann and Donohoe put in remarkable performances and are ably supported by some terrific actors. It's a little bit dated to watch but still has that British sparkle. Well worth watching / A real sleeper / This movie illustrates in a chilling and provocative manner that Matthew's inexperience and incompetence make him no worse or less dangerous than his more capable and seasoned colleagues with medical degrees. The fine acting from a bang-up cast keeps things humming: McGann and Donohoe do sterling work in the leads, with sound support from Frederick Treves as the amiable Dr. Mumford, Tom Wilkinson as the stern and suspicious Dr. Thorn, Barbara Leigh-Hunt as the sweet Celia Mumford and Jimmy Yuill as Matthew's jolly working class pal Alec Moran.

PARNELL AND THE ENGLISHWOMAN (TV, 1991)




Charles Parnell (Trevor Eve, above) championed the cause of Irish nationalism and led the Irish Parliamentary Party (formed by himself) in the British House of Commons from 1882 until his death in 1891. But after years of unswerving support from his countrymen, feeling turned against him when his ten year affair with English-born Kitty O'Shea (Francesca Annis, above) became public knowledge via divorce proceedings, instigated by her husband, in which Parnell was implicated. As the mini-series has it: "Home Rule perished in the stench of the divorce court." Comprising four episodes of circa 52 minutes each, *Parnell And The Englishwoman* was co-produced by the BBC and a company called Polymuse. TW appears in two scenes of episode three only, with total screen time of about five minutes. He plays Sir Charles Russell, the counsel briefed to defend Parnell in a Parliamentary Commission of Enquiry's consideration of letters purportedly written by him in support of terrorist atrocities. Good.



LOVEJOY (TV, 1991)



Jobbing actors generally needs to take what comes, and for TW in 1991 it was on from *Parnell* to *Lovejoy*, Series Two, Episode Six, entitled *One Born Every Minute*. His character, Ashley Wilkes, a peripatetic painter cum Lothario whom Lovejoy is hired to find, proves a little different from his more sober-sided norm. Based on the fun novels of Jonathan Gash and adapted for television by Ian La Frenais, *Lovejoy* ran for six series between 1986 and 1994, with Ian McShane's tongue in cheek, roguish charm in the title part (not to mention his occasional asides to the camera) popular with viewers. 48 minutes.



PRIME SUSPECT (TV, 1991)



Between 1991 and 2006, Granada aired nine episodes of multiple BAFTA and Emmy Award winning police procedural *Prime Suspect* (some in two parts). The series was devised by Lynda La Plante (*Widows*, *Trial and Retribution*) who also wrote the teleplays of the first and third episodes, as well as the story of the second. Helen Mirren (above) plays Jane Tennison, one of the Met's first female Detective Chief Inspectors, who has to endure sexism and prejudice whilst doing a difficult and stressful job. TW appears in the first episode of the series only, as Jane's partner Peter. Though not explicitly stated, we can assume they are not married (he has a child from a previous relationship) and before the end of the story he has packed up and gone, never to return, his role in the narrative being to show that, for a dedicated senior policewoman, a stable home life is nigh on impossible - made so by a job that, day and night, demands most of her time, her energy, her attention, her *self*. This first episode also includes the screen debut of Ralph Fiennes. 200 minutes. Exceptional.



RESNICK (TV, 1992-3)



Between 1989 and 2014, Crime Writers Association Silver and Diamond Dagger winning author John Harvey published twelve novels and other fiction featuring saturnine, Nottingham-based, cat, jazz and sandwich-loving Detective Inspector Charlie Resnick. The first two - *Lonely Hearts* and *Rough Treatment* - were dramatised by the author and produced by the BBC, with *Lonely Hearts* screened in three 53 minute parts in the Spring of 1992 and *Rough Treatment* in two 75 minute parts fifteen months later. Presumably the development of a character-driven series such as *Taggart*, *Inspector Morse* or *A Touch Of Frost* was considered, though, after the first brace, no more Resnick stories were adapted for television, by the BBC or anyone else. In the two episodes that were made, the part of Resnick is played by TW, whose no doubt faithful portrayal of a phlegmatic Notts County supporting melancholic hardly shouts "Series front man!" off the screen. Neither did a pair of mundane stories (the second in particular) help the cause. Indeed, the contrast between this lack-lustre fare and a genuinely first rate police procedural such as *Prime Suspect* (see above) is stark and there can be little wonder that two instalments of *Resnick* proved more than enough. In *Rough Treatment*, seasoned pros Tom Georgeson and Jim Carter turn up as a pair of housebreakers and TW's real-life missus Diana Hardcastle plays his potential love interest (so described because she tries hard but he won't bite). Drama East Midlands style - provincial and slight. A byroad, leading nowhere, to forget.

AN EXCHANGE OF FIRE (TV, 1993)



This flawed but still compelling thriller was shown on Channel 4 in two parts on the sixth and seventh of July 1993. The first episode, *Walking On The Moon*, runs 85 minutes and the second, *Running On The Water*, 82 minutes. Sporting another dodgy moustache (see also *The Woman He Loved*, *A Business Affair*, *Scales Of Justice* etc), TW plays Czechoslovakian President Vladimir Slajek, who receives a ransom demand from Slovak separatists after they have kidnapped a seventeen year old girl in London thinking her to be his daughter Olga. In fact, the victim's father is British left wing writer and commentator Michael Shanks. As a result of some decidedly iffy plotting, a switch is made that delivers the real Olga into the kidnappers' hands in exchange for the girl nabbed in error. But do they have the President's daughter even yet?

There is much to enjoy here and more than enough to maintain interest throughout, though with known kidnappers on the loose, it's a stretch to accept that Olga would be so carelessly guarded or that, once snatched, there would be so little (indeed, no) comeback for those concerned. Two suicides (one in particular) also strain credibility, as does the action of the separatist at the end who, in helping Olga to escape, brings about his own death. Why not, having been handed the gun, simply use it on his fellow rebels? TW is splendid, seeming as ever to become, chameleon-like, the man he plays. There are solid performances too from Frank Finlay as the dissidents' father figure and David Hayman as Inspector Sharrock, though James Fleet, miscast in the role of Shanks, is disappointingly weak.

STAY LUCKY (TV, 1993)



A small screen regular for more than fifty years (he started young, playing William Brown in *William* as early as 1962), Dennis Waterman has made a little talent go a very long way. Between 1989 and 1993 he made four series of *Stay Lucky* for Yorkshire Television - 27 episodes in all - starring opposite Jan Francis through Series 1-3 then Susan George replaced by Leslie Ash in Series 4. The premise has Waterman's character, Thomas Gynn, a Cockney small-time crook and ex-con, looking to quit The Smoke and start afresh Up North - and the ten episodes of S4 (I can't speak for the others) are every bit as formulaic and forgettable as that makes them sound. In the seventh, entitled *Gilding The Lily*, TW plays businessman, leader of a local Masonic order and all round bad lot Chris Allon, a character who smokes, sets fire to a swimming pool, participates in a medieval mace fight, licks toads for kicks and prefers nookie with green flippers on both parties' feet. Strange but true. 51 minutes.

IMDb: Though lacking the charm and wit of *Minder*, starring George Cole and Dennis Waterman, *Stay Lucky* is entertaining at a certain level, with spunky Jan Francis, a great foil for Waterman, the principal asset of an otherwise mediocre series / According to Waterman's autobiography *ReMinder*, Susan George's character Samantha was written out of Series 4 after a few episodes because Waterman and executive producer David Reynolds decided the actress was not capable of doing the job. After hasty re-writes, Leslie Ash's character Jo was introduced as a replacement love interest / Series 4 was alright but not as good as 1-3 / Great to see Susan George on screen. We don't see her enough. I love her vibrancy, and the camera does too.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER (1993)



Jim Sheridan's *In The Name Of The Father* tells the story of the wrongful arrest, conviction, imprisonment and eventual exoneration of "The Guildford Four" - three Irish men and one English woman charged with two 1974 pub bombings in which five people were killed and 65 injured. The film, driven by powerhouse performances from Daniel Day-Lewis as Gerry Conlon and Pete Postlethwaite as his father Giuseppe, is potent and provocative. Emma Thompson plays Gareth Peirce, the young lawyer whose dedication to the cause of justice leads to the quashing of all four convictions. TW, back in a wig (see also *Parnell And The Englishwoman*) gets just a few lines and a few minutes of late-on screen time as a nameless Appeal prosecutor. 133 minutes. Very good.

IMDb: A highly political film, but still very effective on a personal level. The central performance of Daniel Day-Lewis is riveting and the soundtrack adds brilliantly to the atmosphere / Though much of this film is exaggerated and perhaps fabricated for the purposes of entertainment (as all movies "based on a true story" tend to be), it's so finely done that it doesn't seem to matter / Superior acting, great direction - a truly astonishing movie / Riveting but biased / Its obvious Irish sympathies make this film unwatchable / Factually inaccurate since Gerry and Giuseppe were never actually imprisoned together / *In The Name Of The Father* is a movie that will make you angry. It will also move you as a tremendous portrayal of a relationship between father and son / A warning of what can happen when blanket stereotyping is allowed to influence the course of justice / This film damns the British Justice system in a way seldom seen before on film. It does not in any way glamorise the IRA, nor is it "out to get" the British Government or the Crown Prosecution Service. It simply tells the story of people who, in the wrong place at the wrong time, had their lives destroyed just so the police could say that they had caught the Guilford bombers - who where never found. Serious stuff! / An emotionally wrenching and immensely powerful true story / Heart-breaking and shocking / Beautifully constructed. I challenge you not to be moved.

SCREEN TWO : ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL (TV, 1994)



Set in the small village of Eglish, County Tyrone in 1954, this mildly engaging BBC/RTE co-production tells the story of Father McAteer (TW), a priest so keen on building a grotto to the Virgin Mary outside his church that he persuades himself (and others) that an impressionable ten year old altar boy (Ciaran Fitz-gerald, above) has been visited by her. Both a mild poke at religious zealotry and a coming of age tale, this period piece lacks bite and ends clumsily, while managing just barely to hold attention throughout. Gabriel Byrne has a small part and Lorraine Pilkington (*Human Traffic*) also features. 86 minutes.



PRINCE OF JUTLAND (aka *Royal Deceit*) (1994)



Prince Of Jutland is a retelling of the Hamlet story, not only pleasantly well realised but also allegedly more accurate than Shakespeare's somewhat fanciful version because based on historical records. TW plays the prince's father King Hardvendel. His first entrance (in the film's opening scene) is on horseback, within five minutes he's back in bed with Helen Mirren (see *Prime Suspect*), within fifteen is dead - murdered by his usurping younger brother Fenge - and within thirty burnt to a crisp. Hamlet (here Amled) is Christian Bale and his scheming uncle Fenge Gabriel Byrne. Key message: beware Danes with daggers! 103 minutes. A worthy effort from all concerned.

IMDb: Soap opera quality production values, leaden writing and a handful of extras standing around with nothing to do make this an exercise in boredom / A terrible waste of some very talented people stuck with a screenplay that hasn't an ounce of poetry and cinematography that wouldn't do for a TV movie of the week / This steadily paced re-telling of the original Norse legend is not for everybody but I found the combination of bleak Jutland scenery, calm voice-over narration and the momentum of the Royal intrigues fascinating and hypnotic, with good acting by the principals / Wonderful / The battle scenes appeared to be "re-enactments" from a low budget history documentary / Brilliantly acted throughout and well worth a watch. An unusual low-budget film that remains one of my favourites / A must for any Christian Bale fan or, for that matter, any fan of true artistic film / Bland and unremarkable filmmaking, boring and inept / A well crafted, tightly directed gem of a film, especially for those whose tastes run to the historical / If you prefer Hollywood productions, this is not for you It has absolutely nothing to do with Shakespeare. Nor is it a film about Hamlet. It is, however, definitely

a film about Amled, Prince of Jutland and follows, as such, the narrative by Saxo Grammaticus. The director has fully understood this and has carefully adjusted the tone and atmosphere of the film to match the ancient Viking saga. Life was simple in those days, as were the words. There is no melancholy, brooding and doubting prince in this film, there is only a prince with his heart set on calculated revenge with more than a spot of quick wit and humour. So, if you want to dive in and give this film a chance, you have to keep an open mind. If you do that, you're in for a unique experience that will broaden your horizon and teach you to appreciate alternative filmmaking. IMO, one of the best saga films ever made / Excellent. Young Bale is a knockout!



(1) Christian Bale as Amled (2) Gabriel Byrne and Helen Mirren as Fenge and Geruth (3) Mark Williams and Andy Serkis as Aslak and Torsten

A BUSINESS AFFAIR (1994)



This engaging film about self-realisation is particularly well cast. Jonathan Pryce (bottom right) and Carole Bouquet (top right) play husband and wife authors. He's well established but suffering from writer's block. She's about to write her first novel. The catalyst is brash, Brooklyn-born but London-based publisher Christopher Walken (bottom left), who signs and promotes Pryce, publishes his wife, liaises with and finally marries her, before all are driven to understand what matters to them most. Walken's secretary is played by Sheila Hancock and Pryce's best friend Bob (a "bull ranch owner in Malaga") by TW, who has just two brief scenes in the middle of the film. 98 minutes. Good.

IMDb: *A Business Affair* is not a "comedy" but more a light (and sometimes heavy) hearted drama. Walken, though superb as usual and despite top billing, is not the main character. That is Carole Bouquet, whose portrayal of a modern woman struggling with some old problems is marvellous. She is held down by an egotistical husband (Pryce) until being swept away in an exciting and all too plausible affair with Walken, her husband's publisher. There is enough heart-wrenching done during this part of the film to show that each character is all too human. And while we may not identify or approve of what each one ends up doing, we can understand it. By the end, some mistakes are repeated (sometimes unexpectedly) by the character I was rooting for. And while it wasn't the ending I would have chosen, it was "right" because this is a film about a woman, her life and career and not about my favourite actor / Delightful, sexy and romantic, with a theme that is still a sad truth in our society / Funny and lovely.

ALLEYN MYSTERIES : SCALES OF JUSTICE (TV, 1994)



Ngaio Marsh's Inspector Alleyn made his television debut in December 1990. In this ninth and last outing, *Scales Of Justice*, TW plays "pompous ass" Gerald, a meaty part he inhabits with that sure-footed conviction that has become his trademark. These period mysteries are invariably cut from the same cloth: five or six loosely connected characters are introduced with one in particular having strained relations with several of the others such that when, half an hour in, that person meets a violent end, it's not immediately obvious whodunit. Enter the sleuth - Alleyn, Marple, Poirot, Campion, Wimsey, Foyle, it doesn't matter which since they're all interchangeable - and on we go. BBC production values are satisfyingly high and the cast is strong, with old favourites Frederick Treves and period stalwart Elizabeth Spriggs (see also *Sense And Sensibility*) always welcome. Patrick Malahide (below, left) takes the title role. 98 minutes.





PRIEST (1994)



This fraught drama, scripted by Jimmy McGovern, produced by the BBC and set mostly in a Liverpool Catholic diocese, concerns an earnest young priest's spiritual torment over (a) a case of incest he becomes aware of but, for reasons of confidentiality, is unable to do anything about and (b) his unmasterable desire for a gay lover. The priest is played by Linus Roache (above, right) and the lover by Robert Carlyle. TW is Father Matthew Thomas, an older, wiser and less troubled cleric not averse to a bit of karaoke, and Paul Barber's presence in the cast makes three of *The Full Monty* five-to-be. Lesley Sharp also features. Well staged, shot and performed, but insubstantial. 98 minutes.

IMDb: If nothing else, this ambitious and powerful feature makes us painfully aware that, like we laity in the pews, no one lives in a vacuum. Love, sex, controversy, pain, anger, injustice and all the natural and unnatural twists and turns of life affect the clergy in ways that we who have not taken the vows cannot possibly understand / Great acting, a typical gritty script from McGovern and a series of taboo subjects that many would not wish to see dramatised / *Priest* is a rabble-rousing, offensive new feature film by British television director Antonia Bird. Sickeningly smarmy, with unappealing, unconvincing characters and situations, the film is almost a textbook case of the forsaking of craft, aesthetic sense and love for humanity in favour of an imperceptive, sensationalistic, vulgar, divisive exercise in liberal politics and unnecessary trouncing on a religion that is still real for many people in the world - and I'm not Catholic or even religious / Fine cast, poor script / The film ends with a beautiful example of forgiveness and empathy / Controversial? Absolutely. It's a riveting story that will open clogged minds. The dialogue is taut, precise, acerbic and witty. The screenplay runs the ranges swiftly without a hint of pretension. *Priest* does not shrink or shirk from the unsettling portrait it paints. The ending propels an emotional blow that is worthy of a WBA champ. A remarkably fine motion picture.

SHAKESPEARE - THE ANIMATED TALES : KING RICHARD III (TV, 1994)



> *Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son of York. But I that am deform'd, unfinish'd, have no delight to pass away the time, and therefore, since I cannot prove a lover, am determined to prove a villain ...*

The BBC produced a series of six award-winning condensed animated Shakespeare adaptations in 1992 and a further six in 1994, with graphics (in a range of styles) by Russian animators over voices provided by a host of top acting talent. In *Richard III*, the title part is taken by Anthony Sher, Eleanor Born is the Duchess of York, James Grout plays Catesby and TW is Buckingham. "Swords our law," says Richard - and so it proves as, intrigue and treachery abounding, daggers plunge, heads roll and enemies young and old are serially removed. But a night of bad dreams and the Battle of Bosworth await. TW's twenty or so lines would have been a day's work for him, probably soon forgotten - yet the end result, to which he makes a small but distinguished contribution, is a minor triumph. 26 minutes.

IMDb: This show does an amazing job of adapting Shakespeare into an animated format. Each chapter is done with a different animation style in order to capture the mood of the play concerned - the tragedies and serious works have a dark atmosphere and more realistic visual style while the comedies and dramas are more colourful and cartoonish. This works well. Though the original plays are abridged, every chapter in the series captures their essence, with all the lyricism and subtext of the masterpieces retained. Notable episodes include *Hamlet*, *King Richard III*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Winter's Tale* / Superb / These animated versions of Shakespeare's plays

are, in a word, divine. The characters are beautiful and extremely well made. It is easy to fall in love with the style of the films and, if you get the chance, you should watch them. They make a fantastic way of introducing younger children to the world of Shakespeare, though go down well with an older audience too. The stories stay true to the original plays, but with a little animated extra on top. I love them / Shakespeare has never been told so well for kids / Brilliant / The whole series is a must-see.





(1) Buckingham (2) The Battle of Bosworth Field

PERFORMANCE : MEASURE FOR MEASURE (TV, 1994)



Duke Vincentio turns over the control of his dystopian, vice-ridden state to his deputy Angelo then returns, disguised as a friar, to see what happens. Claudio is arrested and sentenced to die for impregnating his fiancée. His sister Isabella is summoned from her nunnery to intercede for his life. Angelo tells her he'll pardon Claudio if she'll agree to sleep with him. Claudio urges her to accept, but the friar, his counsel, advises her to arrange a tryst but then have Angelo's former fiancée Mariana keep it in her place. Angelo lies with Mariana (thinking her Isabella) but reneges on his promise to pardon Claudio, for fear that, if allowed to live, he would surely seek revenge. Meanwhile, Vincentio ensures that Claudio is spared, though sends a dead man's shaved head to Angelo to make him believe Claudio killed. The next morning, the friar has to leave town but Duke Vincentio is due to return ...

Though this powerful BBC production of Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure* incorporates modern dress and technology, including TV cameras, it might just as easily (perhaps more comfortably and certainly more conventionally) have done without, for the sensibilities on offer and the language in which they're worked through remain archaic as the age they sprang from. What's more, the fact that some sections of the play are not noticeably "modern" lends to the whole a curious schizophrenic inconsistency. But none of this can detract from the substantial merits on offer: an age-proof central theme, a fine cast who present their tale with clarity and passion and production values commendably high, giving the whole (police uniforms, nightclubs, Savile Row suits and TV monitors notwithstanding) a sober, tasteful, aesthetically pleasing look.

TW as the Duke is excellent, but so too are Corin Redgrave as Angelo and Juliet Aubrey (Dorothea in *Middlemarch*) as Isabella. David Bradley is always good, though his part here - that of Barnadine - is relatively small. Sue Johnson as Mistress Overdone and Ian Bannen as the Provost also feature. 111 minutes. Well worth finding.



(1) David Bradley (2) Juliet Aubrey (3) Corin Redgrave + TW

* * * * *

David Thacker's 1994 Measure For Measure *takes a very different approach from the BBC Television Shakespeare version of 1979. That was in Renaissance costume, but this is set in the present day, a world where the sexual revolution of the 1960s is threatening the very foundations of ... presumably Britain, since all verbal references to Vienna have been expunged from the text, along with much else (it runs more than half an hour shorter than its predecessor).*

The Duke (TW) is first seen watching a bank of video screens depicting the lurid upshot of his liberal policies, and much use is made of CCTV throughout, both as a witty modern update of the play's numerous eavesdropping scenes, and also to reinforce the impression of an all-seeing police state. Angelo (Corin Redgrave) is a bureaucrat par excellence, dapper and efficient where the Duke is rumpled and haggard. If his very appearance indicates that things are about to change drastically, the cynical Provost (Ian Bannen) provides reassurance: he at least has seen many similar regimes come and go, while Henry Goodman's not-quite-placeable Mediterranean accent as Pompey the bawd evokes the Maltese/Italian connection with the Soho sex trade.



There's a much bigger age gap between Angelo and Isabella (Juliet Aubrey) than there was in the earlier version, which emphasises the play's overriding theme of the abuse of power. These scenes are creepily convincing, though offset by the slightly forced subplot involving the Duke's disguise: though Wilkinson adds an imaginative touch in giving his Catholic priest an Irish accent, it stretches credulity that such a figure would have much influence in what is otherwise a very modern police state.

However, the other contemporary parallels are all too telling. This production was aired towards the end of 1994, a year that began with a whole series of tabloid exposures of wayward politicians (following Prime Minister John Major's ill-advised "back to basics" speech at the previous year's Conservative Party Conference, widely interpreted as a call for a return to traditional morality) and went on to see the passage of the notorious Criminal Justice Act, *which gave the police sweeping new powers. The play's opening scene, in which Mistress Overdone's premises are raided, would doubtless have been duplicated several times in real life on the Saturday night of the broadcast.*

Michael Brooke, *BFI Screenonline*, undated

MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT (TV, 1994)



There have been a number of notable Dickens adaptations over the years, from 1935's *A Tale Of Two Cities* with Ronald Colman through to 2005's *Bleak House* with Charles Dance, but arguably the finest of them all is this exemplary 1994 *Martin Chuzzlewit*, scripted by David Lodge and delivered in six wonderful 54 minute parts by a top drawer cast performing at the peak of their powers. Paul Scofield (see also *The Attic*) leads the way as both Old Martin and Anthony Chuzzlewit, Pete Postlethwaite (see also *In The Name Of The Father*) is a deliciously roguish Montague Tigg, Keith Allen makes a suitably brutish Jonas Chuzzlewit, John Mills a dreamy Mr Chuffey, Elizabeth Spriggs a dissolute Mrs Gamp and Julia Sawalha a ditzy then disillusioned Mercy Pecksniff. Even Steve Nicolson and Lynda Bellingham play the mutually attracted Mark Tapley and Mrs Lupin just so. Only Ben Walden as young Martin Chuzzlewit seems a little out of his depth, though, in a relatively small part, he gets by. The fringed latex headpiece that Philip Franks as Tom Pinch has to wear is also ill chosen, looking more like some form of roadkill than anything human, from the back especially. And then, as pernickety Seth Pecksniff, there's TW. It's no exaggeration to say that *Martin Chuzzlewit* proved a turning point in both his career and his life. On 9 November 2001, Emma Brockes wrote in *The Guardian*:

> [In] *the BBC adaptation of* Martin Chuzzlewit ... *Wilkinson was widely praised for his rendition of Seth Pecksniff. It was the first time in a long career that he had felt entirely happy with his performance. "I looked at it and I thought: I can't get it any better*

> *than that. It came out exactly as I meant it to come out. It won a couple of prizes and I thought: I can act, there's no question."*
>
> *It felt different while he was filming it, he says - more momentous. "There is a wonderful remark in the diaries of Kafka. He is talking about someone he admires and he says of this guy: 'He sits in himself like an experienced oarsman sits in his boat, or any boat.' And that was the feeling I had. I was an experienced oarsman, sitting in a boat, and I knew what to do."*

And, in May 2012, TW told *The Washington Post's* John DeFore:

> [After *Martin Chuzzlewit*] *"I'd gotten to a point ... where I'd done everything I could in Britain. I could more or less do what I wanted in theatre and I could certainly do what I wanted in television. Friends of mine were doing films, and I thought: 'I want some of that. I'm gonna go over there. I want to sit down and play with the big boys.' So I said to my agent: 'No more theatre. No more telly. We'll start again.'"*

A quite conscious decision, then, to move into cinema, when the easier, safer option would surely have been more of the same. And perhaps he was lucky to score popular hits *The Full Monty*, *Rush Hour* and *Shakespeare In Love*, which between them set him on his way, in quick succession. More likely it's a case of Talent Will Out. Either way, his instincts were proved right, and out it came.

IMDb: Wilkinson is marvellous as the pompous Seth Pecksniff and I would like to mention Elizabeth Spriggs whose Mrs. Gamp is unforgettable / The best adaptation of a Dickens novel I have seen. The entire cast seem to have inspired and brought out the best in each other. Allen's interpretation of Jonas Chuzzlewit lends to that character an even more profound air of gloomy desperation and twistedness than we meet in the novel. Likewise, Postlethwaite's portrayal of Mr. Montague Tigg is of such high class that it is almost an improvement on the book without being at all unfaithful to it. I cannot recommend this TV series enough / Almost perfect in every way. It succeeded in producing the exact atmosphere of novel as I recall it, with all the fine irony, the dark and the good sides of human nature, the description of the beautiful countryside as well as the ugly corners of the big city, the sumptuous costumes - everything seemed perfectly pitched and exactly right. Stunning, compelling, totally convincing and a feast to watch / A veritable joy. All the actors are brilliant with Wilkinson the pick / A really excellent and entertaining production with a fine cast giving full measure to the most memorable characters and scenes. It is difficult to imagine it being bettered / From lightest comedy to darkest crime. Superb! / Packed with character, humour and wit / A fine BBC production, impeccably cast, giving a good picture of the UK of the early Victorian years. Wilkinson stands out as Pecksniff, a character so well written that the word became a noun meaning "hypocrite" / The first Dickens full novel adaptation that has not greatly disappointed me. Far from it - this was wonderful! Oozing imperious arrogance and false modesty, a better Pecksniff than Wilkinson's cannot be imagined.

SCREEN TWO : A VERY OPEN PRISON (TV, 1995)



This bang-on, pitch-black satirical comedy, written and directed by Guy (*Drop The Dead Donkey*, *Outnumbered*) Jenkin concerns two eventful days in the life of Tory Home Secretary David Hanratty, a craven, incompetent, ruthlessly ambitious politician with responsibility for a prison service that, recently privatised (it's now the Alcatraz Reform and Rehabilitation Corporation) is proving less than fit for purpose. Inmates are given ladders and keys to create modern art and alarms are turned off because the pigeons keep tripping them. TW leads with aplomb, ably supported by Stephen Tompkinson (below, right) as a psychopathic convict on the run, Michael Hordern (below, left) as a halt Lord Longfordesque prison reformer, John Fortune as the PM, Julian Fellowes *et al*. Followed by 1996 sequel *Crossing The Floor*. 55 minutes. Good.





SENSE AND SENSIBILITY (1995)



TW appears in the opening, minute-long scene of *Sense And Sensibility*, speaks four sentences and, before the credits start to roll, is dead (though - see above - he doesn't look much like a dying man) - so the film can hardly be called his. That accolade must go to Emma Thompson, whose pitch-perfect adaptation of Austen's novel won an Oscar, making her the only person to receive one for both acting (*Howard's End*) and writing. She also plays the scrubbed, head-over-heart Elinor Dashwood (hers the *Sense* of the work's title) quite superbly, with able support from young Kate Winslet as impulsive, passionate Marianne (hers the *Sensibility* - both actresses' performances were Oscar and Golden Globe-nominated and BAFTA-winning), Hugh Grant as diffident Edward Ferrars, Alan Rickman as reserved Colonel Brandon, Robert Hardy, Elizabeth Spriggs, Hugh Laurie and Greg Wise (later to become Thompson's real-life husband). Directed by Ang Lee and running 131 minutes, *Sense And Sensibility* is a fine achievement by all concerned that should not be missed.

IMDb: A wonderfully acted period piece / An emotionally subtle masterpiece / That Emma Thompson is one of the greatest actresses working is no secret, but who would have expected such a miracle from her in the screenwriting department? Some of the most dramatic moments in *Sense And Sensibility* come from her pen rather than Austen's, difficult as that may be to believe. For instance, the scene in which Colonel Brandon carries home the ill Marianne, echoing the earlier scene in which Willoughby did the same, was Thompson's doing. Marianne's illness is also responsible for much more drama in film than book - and I'm an Austen fan! *S&S* is a classic for all time / Thompson should have a thousands Oscars for her beautiful deeds in this film, not only as an excellent actress but also as the one who changed the novel to a script. She did everything right - and could Ang Lee possibly have found any better actors for the parts? I doubt it. Winslet is stunning and Rickman wonderful. Who could ask for more?

ESKIMO DAY (aka *Interview Day*) (TV, 1996)



This second-rate, stereotype-stuffed BBC play, written by Jack Rosenthal and starring his wife Maureen Lipman (below right, with David Ross), deals with the anguish caused by the natural separation of parents and children - in this case, three teenagers hoping to go to university and an aged father whose son wants him to go into sheltered accommodation - with its one surprise at the end not enough to redeem all the flimflam that has gone before. Alec Guinness (below left, with James Fleet), making his 63rd and final screen appearance, having started back in 1934, still has what it takes. Cast as snooty Cheltenham cheese Hugh, TW does his best with wafer-thin material, supported by his screen wife Harriet (Anna Carteret, above) who matches him dig for dig. The story, such as it is, is continued in 1997's *Cold Enough For Snow* (see page 55). 84 tolerable but unremarkable minutes. Not recommended.





THE GHOST AND THE DARKNESS (1996)



This nonsensical but entertaining adventure yarn, set in colonial Africa in 1898, concerns a pair of man-eating lions that terrorise the camp of a railroad gang, killing dozens of African and Indian workers until all leave except Irish engineer John Patterson (Val Kilmer), American hunter Remington (Michael Douglas, in pop-eyed, manic mode) and native boss Samuel (John Kani), who stay behind to do or die. TW's two appearances as hard-nosed London financier Robert Beaumont give him about seven minutes total screen time. Bizarrely, after being well established, the character of Dr. Starling disappears from the story without explanation. Lots of pretty scenery. 105 minutes.

IMDb: Kilmer's performance is quiet, almost understated, but one of the best I've seen him give; Kani's, too, contained mostly in small moments that are so true they almost hurt. The cinematography is beautiful, especially when showing the lions' passage through the grass. No CGI could convey so much beauty and lurking menace / Kilmer and Douglas give the worst performances of their careers. This movie is a bust / One of the most fantastic films I have ever seen / Perfectly directed, superbly scored and beautifully shot / *Jaws* of the Jungle / While by no means great, this reminded me of the kind of movies I saw as a kid - a little action, an exotic locale and some historical basis. In all, a good Saturday flick when you want a no-brainer / An awesome show of effects and a spine tingling storyline. Kilmer is so cool as the bridge builder turned hero and Douglas really stretches his acting muscle with his not-so-clean-cut character. The visuals of the African Savannah are stunning. Gets better every time you see it / An extraordinary movie, original and nearly flawless, with stunning special effects, superb acting and cinematography and a smooth plot. One of my personal favourites / No theme, nothing to make you think, just infuriatingly bad dialogue and plot events that make you shake your head in disbelief at their stupidity. Oh well / A great adventure story with well drawn characters. Wilkinson makes Beaumont so despicable that you just want to throw *him* to the lions and let them have at it. Douglas is also very good but the film belongs to Kilmer and John Kani. Jerry Goldsmith's brilliant score perfectly

captures the essence of Africa. Director of photography Vilmos Zsigmond demonstrates here his mastery of the widescreen format. His shots of the African landscape (see below) are breathtaking. Then there are the lions themselves - the attack scenes are *very* well done and his shots of the lions' eyes are stuck in my head still.



(1) Michael Douglas (2) Val Kilmer (3) Africa

SCREEN TWO : CROSSING THE FLOOR (TV, 1996)



Eighteen months on from *A Very Open Prison* (see above), TW brings David "the ultimate political operator" Hanratty back to our screens, courtesy of another Guy Jenkin scripted and directed satire of the Westminster machine. Though *Prison* was particularly hard on the amoral, venal Tories, this time the focus is more on New Labour's obsession with spin, image and staying on message, though finally politicians of every stripe, as well as all concerned with their apparatus, are fair game. With his government holding a majority of just one and thirty points behind in the polls, Home Secretary Hanratty crosses the floor to join New Labour, so forcing a No Confidence vote and general election. More fine, close-to-the-knuckle, scattergun fun - though didn't those nineties politicos make it easy! 72 minutes. Good.



(1) Neil Pearson as Labour leader Tom Peel (2) Diana Kent as Alison Hanratty

SMILLA'S SENSE OF SNOW (aka *Smilla's Feeling For Snow*) (1997)



Copenhagen: a young boy falls to his death from the top of the apartment block he lives in. Though his are the only footprints on the roof, the sense of snow of his friend, neighbour and fellow Greenlander Smilla (Julia Ormond) tells her it was no accident. So begins an increasingly fraught one-woman investigation to uncover the truth. Based on a Peter Hoeg bestseller, the film is a broody, moody, Scandie sojourn that struggles finally in vain to make its improbably silly story fly. With Gabriel Byrne and Richard Harris in substantial roles supported by small but telling contributions from Jim Broadbent, Peter Capaldi, Vanessa Redgrave and, with total screen time of around five minutes, an aloof and coolly sinister TW. 121 minutes.

IMDb: *Smilla's Sense Of Snow* starts off with great promise. An opening sequence that's a terrific hook segues into an introduction of the character of Smilla Jasperson, played perfectly by the lovely Julia Ormond. For the first two reels, the film is a terrific mystery story with good pacing, fine acting and evocative cinematography. Characters with uncertain motives come and go as the story unfolds, most played by a fine stable of talented actors. But then in the third reel, the film collapses. I'm not talking about a slow descent into mediocrity here; I'm talking about a precipitous nosedive. Out of the blue, the story suddenly switches to an action-thriller format that is poorly written, directed, and edited. New, undeveloped characters are suddenly thrown into the mix, each a *deus ex machina* as the increasingly unrealistic plot requires. The film's denouement, in which the underlying mystery is revealed, is so scientifically ridiculous both in terms of biology and especially in physics that I felt thoroughly cheated. It's as if the entire enterprise were rushed to completion due to a looming shortage of time, money and interest. What a pity / In his review of this film, Ebert said it was "a triumph of style over substance." The style is definitely there, but just before it triumphs, something completely illogical is said or done that breaks the suspension of disbelief the film tries so hard to build up. As for the actors, I got the feeling that they just didn't know what to do with their characters, none of which were very well-rounded. While an aesthetically pleasing film, not enough attention was paid to developing a plausible story, well-drawn characters or a satisfying ending. Listen out for Smilla's little speech about numbers, which is unique and insightful / Evocative and poetic as the book.

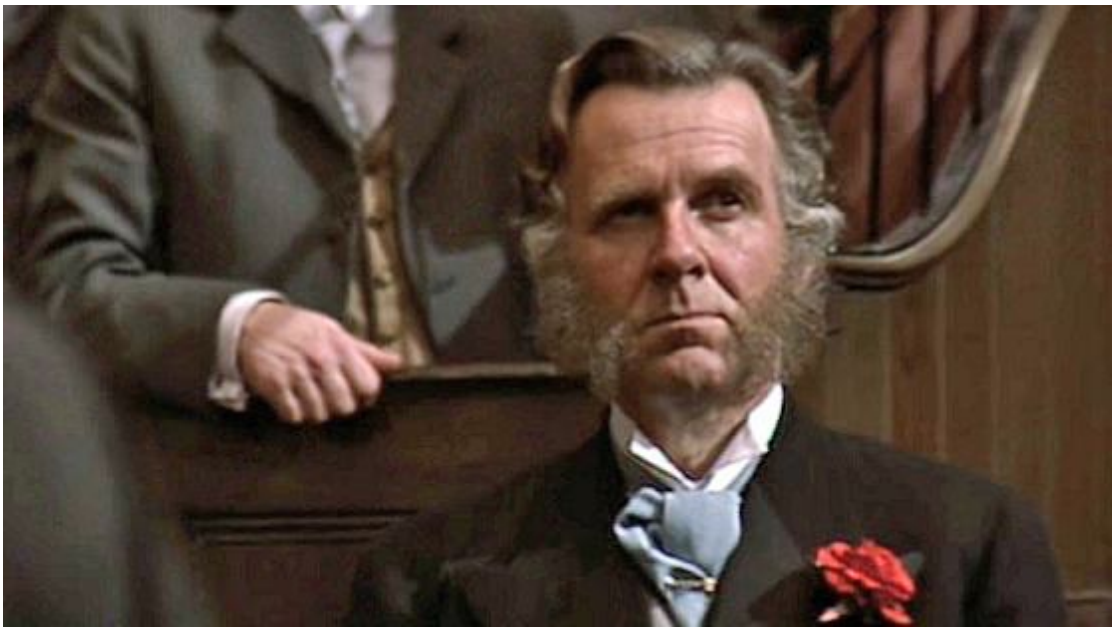
THE FULL MONTY (1997)



A surprise box office hit, *The Full Monty* was one of the films that helped raise TW's profile. He plays Gerald Cooper, a man who for six months hides from his wife the fact he's lost his job. Eventually he joins a group of similarly bereft souls who decide to strip for money on the basis that, if The Chippendales can do it, so can they. A piquant comedy drama starring Robert Carlyle (above, right - see also *Priest*), Mark Addy (above, left), Paul Barber and more, the film's uplifting message is that life's adversities (in this case long term unemployment) are no match for the irrepressible human spirit. 88 minutes. Very good.

IMDb: A small miracle of a movie, funny and touching / An enjoyable, straightforward, down-to-earth film looking at real life for real people and showing that, no matter what situation you are in, you can turn your fortunes around if you only have a little faith / Irish film *The Commitments*, with virtually the same plot, portrayed life on the dole as a bit of laugh and became tiresome in its smugness. *The Full Monty* is far superior as it takes the plight of its characters seriously. Simon Beaufoy's screenplay never loses sight of the damage unemployment can do to the working class. The cast is uniformly excellent, with Wilkinson - one of England's most underrated actors - a standout as Gerald. (He, Carlyle and the film all won BAFTAs.) Director Peter Cattaneo freewheels his camera through the parks, social clubs, job centres, supermarkets and abandoned steelworks of Sheffield, whilst the screenplay is rich in the authentic brogue of Yorkshire. (Carlyle, the only non-English cast member, speaks like a Yorkshireman born and bred.) The film's global success - in the cinemas in 1997 and on video in 1998 - is remarkable considering the utterly parochial Northern Englishness of it all. This isn't an especially great movie and it wears none too well on repeated viewings, yet, of its kind, it stands proud in a mainstream cinema so often obsessed with style, celebrity and materialism. It is also refreshingly cliché-free / Not merely funny but also wonderfully moving, *The Full Monty* is about six men who will go to extreme lengths for the ones they love / Broad and coarse but intensely pleasing. Its Best Picture Oscar nomination was richly deserved / Brilliant / Excellent - though *Brassed Off* is better.

WILDE (1997)



Though often written and produced with dedication, skill and flair, biopics tend to disappoint because the accounts they provide - decades distilled into hours - are inevitably all more or less superficial - and so here. Stephen Fry is well cast as Wilde, but this skim through the turbulent and depraved life of the Irish playwright and *bon viveur* offers no more than the bare bones of his story. Jude Law is suitably pretty and petulant as Wilde's lover Bosie Douglas. The part of Bosie's tyrannical brute of a father the Marquess of Queensbury is played with relish by TW. Vanessa Redgrave (see also *Wetherby*), Jennifer Ehle and Michael Sheen also feature. 112 minutes. Sincere but insubstantial.

IMDb: Fry - born to be Wilde - and Law are both outstanding / Sympathetic but rather dull / Amusing, intriguing, intellectually stimulating and capable of provoking a deep and healthy anger at Victorian society's hypocrisy / Fry is certainly eloquent in the title role, but also a little too long-suffering and magnanimous. Jude Law does everything the script requires, but, other than good looks, it's impossible for us to see the things in him that Wilde must have in order to be so in love. Why would such a man throw away marriage, career and reputation over this monstrous little twit? That, the great, tragic mystery behind the story of Oscar Wilde, remains one here / Wistful but indifferently paced and deficient in drama / Fry looks the part but acts like an overweight pudding / Redgrave's clever Speranza and Wilkinson's Queensberry are contextually devalued to sad caricatures / Competent and interesting but poorly scripted, with pacing that seems all wrong and trial scenes that should have been the centrepiece thrown away. The use of *The Selfish Giant* as a unifying conceit doesn't work and fans of the story will be disappointed by the omission of its conclusion. The character of Bosie is written so unsympathetically that we can't begin to understand why Wilde loved him so deeply, as opposed to simply lusting after his beauty. Queensberry is drawn as a crude cartoon. Poor Tom Wilkinson also has to battle against the handicap of the least convincing facial hair since Groucho Marx's moustache / Weakly plotted, though Fry shines as Oscar / Full of pathos and charm - a work of collective genius, worthy of its subject.

OSCAR AND LUCINDA (1997)



Presenting a simplified and revised version of Peter Carey's 1988 Booker Prize-winning novel, *O&L* tells the mid-Victorian story of Devon-born Oscar Hopkins, who rejects his father's Plymouth Brethren faith to become an Anglican priest and Lucinda Leplastrier, a young and impulsive Australian heiress who buys a Sydney glass factory. Meeting on board the *Leviathan*, outbound from London, the pair discover they have a shared passion for gambling. Eventually, Lucinda bets Oscar that he cannot transport a prefabricated glass church from Sydney to the remote Queensland settlement of Bellingen. This bet changes both of their lives forever. On the plus side, Ralph Fiennes and Cate Blanchett make a luminous and charismatic lead couple, with able support from Ciaran Hinds and TW as a brace of Reverends - one Lucinda's first (Platonic) love and the other Oscar's first Anglican mentor. But the story stretches credibility to breaking point and beyond, repeatedly taking turns and revealing character traits that make little sense. Allegory? Whimsy? Or just daffy? 126 minutes.

IMDb: The film has to do with love and gambling, yes, but also faith, guilt, family, destiny and survival. Fiennes is marvellous as a dishevelled and uncertain believer, with a boyish charm and utter purity difficult to portray without seeming slow-witted or unlikeable. Blanchett is a fountain of strength, charm, capricious abandon, intelligence and sensuality. As in *Paradise Road*, she steals scenes and breaks hearts with an undeniable charisma and resolve. The story is surprising and ultimately shocking in its contrast of the ideal and the real. I was moved and thoroughly impressed. This is a romance for those who are tired of the predictable, the trite and the overworked. The scenery is beautiful and the direction soft yet unflinching. A wonderful achievement.

Without doubt, there is no more eccentric story to be found on-screen right now than Oscar And Lucinda*, in which love, glass, Christianity and gambling somehow collide. As directed exquisitely by Gillian Armstrong in a headstrong spirit that recalls her debut feature,* My Brilliant Career*, this elliptical tale*

makes up in visual beauty whatever it lacks in universal meaning - which is a lot, given the quirkiness of Peter Carey's Booker Prize-winning novel. The book's descriptive elegance and richly peculiar imagination would give the film a pedigree like that of The English Patient *even without the presence of Ralph Fiennes, but this tale is much more remote. With the singularity of what might be a real family history, it lets a present-day male narrator tell of Oscar Hopkins (Fiennes) and Lucinda Leplastrier (Cate Blanchett), kindred spirits who shaped that narrator's ancestral past. Also vital to the story of his creation are a glass church and a bet on whether it can be moved from Sydney to the remote north of Australia. Red-haired, bashful Oscar is birdlike and shy, having been cowed early in life by a punitively devout father who disapproves even of such indulgences as Christmas dessert. ("Dear God," the boy prays, "if it be Thy will that people eat pudding, smite him!") Lucinda, equally delicate in her own way, is also an heiress who becomes fascinated with the manufacture of glass. As I said, this is one odd story.*

Before they meet, each has become addicted to gambling, although Oscar's eventual career as an Anglican minister does make it difficult for him to find suitable outlets. But this is a film whose offbeat charms include the sight of clergymen betting about whether a tablecloth can be yanked sharply without anything on the table spilling. In their own way, once they meet and develop an instant affinity, Oscar and Lucinda find winsomely unexpected ways to gamble on life and love. While Ms. Armstrong tells the long, rambling story of her characters with more than enough vigour to sustain interest, the film's most extraordinary aspect is its wonderfully luxuriant look. Gorgeously photographed by Geoffrey Simpson (Shine), *it offers a steady supply of visual surprises within compositions quite suitable for framing. Making rhapsodic use of natural light and of carefully chosen objects, this is a film that can find something gorgeous even in a boatload of cauliflower. Other strong visual assets are Luciana Arrighi's production designs, which lavishly transport the story from England to Australia, and the spectacular costumes by Janet Patterson* (The Piano, The Portrait Of A Lady). *The film often revels in its heroine's vivid personality by crowning her with something like a strikingly embroidered fez. Ms. Blanchett, whose strength and vivacity recall the young Judy Davis of* My Brilliant Career*, is appealingly well teamed with Fiennes, who manages to make Oscar as bashfully likable as he is quaint. Despite the story's various sidetracks (involving Ciaran Hinds as another clergyman who admires Lucinda and Tom Wilkinson, who will forevermore be remembered for* The Full Monty), *the film's essential sweetness and mystery come from two lonely people and the cosmic roll of the dice that brings them together.*

Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*, 31 December 1997

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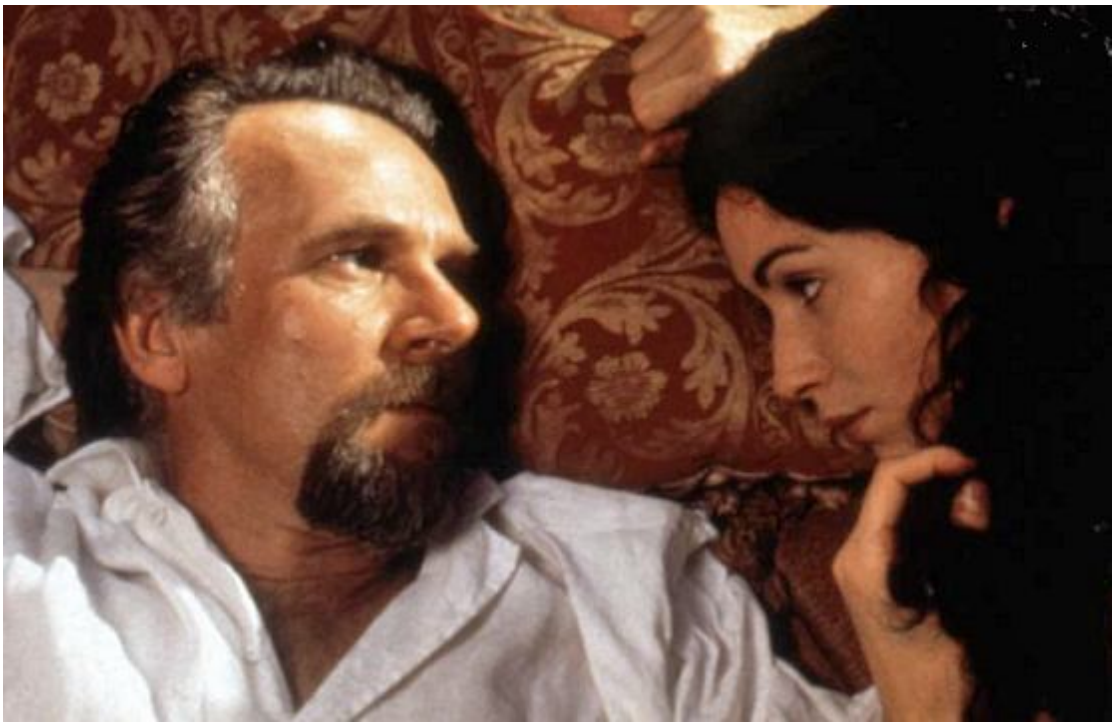
COLD ENOUGH FOR SNOW (TV, 1997)



Jack Rosenthal picks up his Empty Nest saga where it was left at the end of *Eskimo Day* (see above), continuing the stories of two of the four families previously featured, including the Lloyds played by TW, Anna Carteret and Laura Howard. In a DVD extra, Maureen Lipman reveals that her husband's intention had been to write a trilogy on this theme, but the BBC declined to commission part three - and perhaps it's just as well, for the dialogue here is no more engaging or the narrative any more original or convincing than before, which means, regrettably, another 90 minutes of hackneyed, lacklustre fare.

IMDb: I really liked *Eskimo Day* because it focused more on its characters than anything else, with dialogue that revealed a great deal while blending in with "normal" conversation. *Cold Enough For Snow*, in contrast, is more traditionally structured, with a plot spread over many months rather than just one day. This yields a stronger narrative but also writing that loses its insightfulness, resulting in a film that wanders at times but also has moments of greatness. David Ross as Bevis dominates whenever he is on screen, although Maureen Lipman more than rises to the challenge of their empty nest / empty lives subplot. Wilkinson is not as well used this time round and I wasn't totally won over by Carteret's thread, even though she played it well. Laura Howard and Benedict Sandiford are given more to do than previously, but their in-love / out-of-love storyline is less potent than Rosenthal should have made it. Happily the cast work well (if not as well as before) and the material is still strong enough to maintain interest. Overall, *Cold Enough For Snow* is a different film from its predecessor which proves a less than wholly good thing. The writing is much more about narrative than dialogue and it took me a while to settle into this idea. Despite this change, the film still does well enough to work as a one-off drama and, while bits of it are quite ordinary, some of it is great work from Rosenthal. And, if the plot makes too many jumps, I can forgive it because it still serves as a good conclusion to a story I enjoyed from the start of the original film through to the end of this one.

THE GOVERNESS (1998)



Following the death of her father, Rosina (Minnie Driver, above) takes a post as governess on the Isle of Skye under an assumed name - Mary Blackchurch - that hides her Jewish ancestry. There she falls in love with Cavendish (TW), a pioneer in the field of photography. Things don't become any easier when his feckless son Henry falls in love with *her*. An unusual coming of age film made more niche than need be by its exclusive religious framing. Good nonetheless. 115 minutes.

* * * * *

Passionate period drama has depth and intelligence the classics lack

Minnie Driver may have been Oscar-nominated for her role as The Girl in Good Will Hunting *but in* The Governess *her supernatural talent for becoming wholly enveloped in a character blossoms beautifully. In her role as a young Jewess posing as a gentile in order to find work in 19th Century London, Driver is handed a multi-faceted character that would likely sink most other actresses her age. Rosina Da Silva is a brilliant and impassioned eldest of two sisters, with a mind for science and lively debate that in this conservative age goes largely ignored because of her sex. But while she is capable of challenging the intellect of her elders, she is also curious, giddy, girlish and rather carefree until the murder of her deeply indebted father. Tapped to save the family through marriage for money, Rosina refuses and instead takes a well-paying position as a nanny to a Christian family on the Isle of Skye, hiding her religion by assuming*

the name Mary Blackchurch (she has quite an ironic sense of humour) and boning up on gentile etiquette. Directed by Sandra Goldbacher, a BBC documentarian who adapted the script from a fictitious diary she's written from Rosina's point of view, The Governess *is the most complex and intelligent story to come out of the recent resurgence in period drama film. Even though she has her hands full with Clementina, her young charge whom she describes as "a rodent in lace petticoats," Rosina is often bored in her duties with the idly rich Cavendish family and begins poking around the off-limits laboratory where Mr. Cavendish (TW) experiments with early photographic techniques. When her sleuthing is discovered, her interest piques Cavendish, who recruits her as assistant. Rosina brings an enthusiastic, artistic eye to his research and before long he becomes enraptured with her, leading to a torrid, clandestine affair.*

This is no prim and proper Jane Austen story. As much as I adore the joyous melodrama and romance of Sense And Sensibility (see above) *and* Emma, *this film has depth of emotion and a moral complexity that Austen is unlikely to have ever known, and if she did, she certainly would never have been so gauche as to write about it. What's more,* The Governess *conveys the Victorian era so effectively that, even to us, a glimpse of ankle becomes a libidinous sensation. So when the affair begins, the implications of such wanton acts are emblazoned on the audience. Wilkinson, a consummate chameleon of an actor, is so vital and fervent in the way his animal desire percolates just underneath a gentlemanly facade that he is completely unrecognisable from his role as the eldest and most reluctant of amateur strippers in* The Full Monty *(not to mention the vicious father of Lord Douglas he played in* Wilde*). Here he looks to be a youthful 45 year old overcome by a long-dormant, barely contained rapture. With the truth of her identity hanging over many scenes, Driver plays Rosina with a stirring mix of virtue, inexperienced lust, trepidation and, ultimately, a vulnerability that puts her heart at the mercy of Cavendish's ego. Goldbacher paints Rosina's life with a rich visual palate, from warm, golden hues in her comfortable familial home to icy, oceanic blues on the Isle of Skye and in the Cavendish mansion. Poetically cinematic, the film plays on the script's photography bent by equating Rosina's vision of her love affair to Cavendish's drive to discover a permanent method of fixing a photographic image on paper. The scientific becomes romantic in a most tantalising way. Despite its few faults - Rosina's struggle to adapt to rigid gentile manners is hardly addressed at all -* The Governess *is one of those picture so dynamic it makes your feel like running out of the theatre with a fresh exuberance for life, as if you haven't appreciated it enough recently. It's completely engrossing to the heart, the mind and the eye.*

Rob Blackwelder, *SPLICEDwire.com*, undated

* * * * *

RUSH HOUR (1998)



To a routine cops v. kidnappers yarn add Jackie Chan's impressive gymnastic and martial arts prowess and Chris Tucker's quickly irritating cool dude wise-cracking spiel. Stir well and serve warm. A culture clash buddy movie set in Hong Kong and LA. TW plays an English diplomat gone wrong. 94 minutes of by-the-numbers fun.

IMDb: The plot is just an excuse for Chris Tucker to bad mouth people and for Jackie Chan to display incredible stunts / Chan and Tucker's performances and chemistry are the beating heart of the film. Chan is renowned the world over for his incredible martial arts and stunt sequences and although *Rush Hour* is one of his tamer films in terms of stunts, he still does some amazing things in it. But what many people seem to ignore is that he is a also a great, expressive actor, able to deliver the thrills, laughs and suspense perfectly with Keatonesque appeal and style. He is a joy to watch in this film. Tucker is also lots of fun as wise-cracking, loud-mouthed, foolhardy Detective Carter. His more zany, cartoonish style complements Chan's stoic quality perfectly. Other performances are good all around. Wilkinson pulls a great role as a British diplomat and Tzi Ma is sympathetic as the father of the kidnapped child, grounding the film nicely, keeping the story centred with an emotional core. Ken Leung is great as Sang, an eerie, poker-faced villain. Elizabeth Pena shines as Carter's fellow officer. Everyone meshes well. My only slight complaint is that the film never quite escapes from the tropes and clichés of the "buddy cop" genre. Nonetheless, a blast to watch. Excellent entertainment / This is Jackie Chan's first big budget Hollywood film and I think it succeeds in what it sets out to do, which is to introduce Jackie Chan, a cult Hong Kong actor-director, into the mainstream movie world by serving up a successful mix of Hollywood sensationalism with the fight scenes and stunts we expect from Jackie Chan. As is typical with him, there is one deadly serious stunt which, as usual, involves falling from a great height / Throwaway stuff, tarnished by really awful sequels, but the fight scenes are great as expected / Formulaic fun / Chris Tucker is one of those actors where occasionally you have to stop and ask yourself "Why is this guy an actor?" Then you watch his eyes and remember. Tucker has the most expressive and chaotic eyes I've seen on film, and I love 'em. His acting is sub-par, but as long as he has eyes, I'm in.

SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE (1998)



Shakespeare In Love won seven Oscars - including Best Picture (beating *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*), Best Leading Actress (Gwyneth Paltrow), Best Supporting Actress (Judi Dench) and Best Screenplay (Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard) - plus three Golden Globes and three BAFTAs. But perhaps its most fitting award, bestowed by the Screen Actors Guild, was for Outstanding Performance By A Cast, for never was that more true or the result of their efforts (helped by authors and director) a more magnificent triumph. The story of how a writer's-blocked Bard (Joseph Fiennes) came to write *Romeo And Juliet* is wonderfully imagined and thrillingly realised. TW plays Hugh Fenny-man, a stage-struck moneylender. Geoffrey Rush (above) is promoter Henslowe. Jim Carter, Martin Clunes, Rupert Everett, Simon Callow, Ben Affleck, Imelda Staunton, Colin Firth and Mark Williams all pitch in. Top notch. 119 minutes.

IMDb: Manages to be profound and accessible at the same time / Romantic comedy does not get much better than *Shakespeare In Love*. Here is a movie that captures the feel of the England of four centuries ago. It is romantic yet light, funny yet complex enough for fans of literature to enjoy. The sets of Olde England, the costumes and makeup, including bad dental work, are just right. You can almost smell those streets. Deserving of its Oscar, this is a great movie / I love this film. It is cleverly written to include characters that we've read about for eons, now presented as living, lusty, real people. It gives us comic, romantic, sad and hopeful moments all at the same time. The performances by all of the actors are outstanding. Geoffrey Rush, Ralph Fiennes, Gwyneth Paltrow and Ben Affleck are superb. The supporting cast is equally excellent. Not to be missed is the performance by Judi Dench as Queen Elizabeth I. Her time on screen is short, but her impact is enormous. Bits and pieces of Shakespeare's work are evident throughout, and the tie-ins to Christopher Marlowe are inspired! Costumes, makeup, scenery, lighting and sound - all the technical and design elements are incredibly well researched and executed. This film gives us a wonderful look at life in the Elizabethan period, inside the theatre and out. From the ink-stained hands of Shakespeare to the contents of countless tosspots hurled from upper-story windows, we feel the grime and grit endured by Londoners during the 16th century / Glorious!

MOLOKAI (aka *Molokai : The Story Of Father Damien*) (1999)



This inspirational film tells the true story of Father Damien, a young Belgian Catholic priest who, in 1873, volunteers to establish a mission on the Sandwich Islands leper colony of Molokai when no one else would. Careless of his own health, he engages fully with as many of the colony's one thousand lepers as will entertain him. Before long, he has a church and small hospital built and some 600 souls converted to Catholicism. Inevitably, he catches leprosy, but, by the time he dies, a replacement priest is installed, along with six nuns to provide ongoing care - and all this in spite of a continued lack of support from both government and (to a lesser extent) his own bishop and staff on Hawaii. David Wenham (above, right) is perfect as Damien, with Leo McKern, Derek Jacobi and Sam Neill equally good as his church seniors and the Prime Minister. Peter O'Toole plays a dying leper who declines conversion and TW takes the small part of Brother Joseph Dutton, a penitent who arrives late on to provide the ailing Damien with help. 117 minutes. Very good.

IMDb: A stellar supporting cast, rich cinematography and a fine eye for detail punctuate this near-epic account of the trials and tribulations of the legendary cleric who devoted his life (quite literally) to the care and salvation of a doomed Hawaiian leper colony. Australian David Wenham's most important role to date is set in the nineteenth century, when ignorance and greed ruled most levels of secular government. This left the beneficent young priest to suffer alongside his charges while much-needed funding was going to higher profile healers in richer colonies. Peter O'Toole is wonderful in a brief appearance, as are Sam Neill, Leo McKern, Alice Krige, Derek Jacobi and even Kris Kristofferson but, ultimately, it is Wenham's chore to haul this beast ashore / Sad and slow but very moving / Well worth watching / Inspirational / Magnificent.

RIDE WITH THE DEVIL (1999)



The American Civil War was fought not only by the regular Confederate and Union armies, but also by independent militia groups called Bushwackers and Jayhawkers, supporting South and North respectively. Adapted from Daniel Woodrell's novel *Woe To Live On*, *Ride With The Devil* takes a rambling 132 minute sojourn with a Bushwacker band as they ride and raid, kill and are killed. The story centres on German-born, Missouri-raised Jake Roedel (Tobey Maguire) who starts out as an idealistic young farmboy and ends as a seasoned 19 year old husband and surrogate father. TW's part is a small one, that of Orton Brown, a farmer who offers refuge first to Sue Lee and later to Jake and Holt. Directed by Ang Lee (see also *Sense And Sensibility*). Good minus.

IMDb: I heartily recommend *Ride With The Devil*, especially to those who like action films with powerful messages / Surprisingly witty and engaging. Every element - plot, theme, character - manages to entertain in an original way / Rather slow with few redeeming moments / The film's major fault is that there is no real plot, just a series of vaguely related incidents / An unconventional historical drama, with some fine battle scenes. Maguire gives an excellent performance, and gets some pretty good back-up. The script is literate and original, and the film is kept mercifully free of heroes. That said, it does drag a bit and the last reel is too much like a TV mini-series. Still, Frederick Elmes' camerawork keeps one interested in the dull bits. Worth seeing / Very well made, very well directed, very dull / This movie does a good job of highlighting the conflicts and dilemmas faced by the people who lived through those times, when brother turned against brother, mate against mate. It also features some sweeping cinematography and interesting dialogue between the main characters. All that's missing is a more compelling storyline / Others might find this engaging, but I was only confused / Unusual and enthralling / Excellent in so many ways / Another wonderful showcase for Ang Lee's extraordinary talents as a director and his sensitivity to very different characters and attitudes. How many directors in history have successfully tackled so many different cultures in so few films in such a short time? / Breathtaking / A superbly authentic recreation of the period. One of the best films of the year.

DAVID COPPERFIELD (TV, 1999)



Co-produced by the BBC in two 87 and 93 minute parts, this Dickens adaptation ticks all the boxes - a tight script, a strong cast (Maggie Smith, Michael Elphick, Alun Armstrong, Bob Hoskins, Imelda Staunton, Trevor Eve, Nicholas Lyndhurst, Cherie Lunghi, Ian McKellen, Pauline Quirke, Zoe Wanamaker, Oliver Ford Davies *et al*.) and very easy on the eye. The part of young Copperfield is taken by ten year old Daniel Radcliffe (above), making his first screen appearance. The tale is pure soap - if Dickens was alive today he'd surely be an *Eastenders* scriptwriter - sheering swiftly between drama and sentimentality with characters flying on and off stage, some dying conveniently, others packed off as a job lot to Australia. Apart from some decidedly dodgy Norfolk accents, there's not much to quibble at here. TW lends his distinctive voice as narrator.

IMDb: When it comes to Dickens adaptations, the cinema generally wins hands down: those incomparable David Lean versions of *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist* for example and, more recently, Christine Edzard's masterly *Little Dorrit* which, although running for six hours, subtly utilised every minute by telling the tale from different perspectives. I never thought I would experience a TV adaptation to compare with these until the BBC came up with a *David Copperfield* so enchanting that it remains for me the most lovable of all visual translations of a Dickens novel. Admittedly there is little of the wonderful montage and atmosphere of the Lean films or the profoundly observed social resonances of *Little Dorrit,* but what makes the 1999 Copperfield such an overwhelming experience is the perfect casting. By some magic alchemy that I cannot begin to understand a cast of familiars was assembled that were somehow born to play their parts. The list extends far beyond the three I have chosen to mention but it is as if Pauline Quirke (Peggotty), Nicholas Lyndhurst (Uriah Heep) and Maggie Smith (Betsey Trotwood) became these characters in a way that no one else ever could. Fine actors that they are, it is difficult to imagine them achieving such perfection in other contexts / The best *Copperfield* adaptation / A must for Dickens fans / Brilliant!

THE PATRIOT (2000)



Another stirring Roland Emmerich epic in which Mel Gibson transplants his rabid anti-English *Braveheart* sentiments to the 1776 Atlantic seaboard to fight another war - the American War of Independence - against the dastardly British. With lugubrious Chris Cooper and black-hearted Jason Isaacs. Here TW plays, with suitable patrician reserve and austerity, outfoxed Royalist General Lord Charles Cornwallis. When cast in such a supporting role, TW is frequently, as here, last credited, but on a blank screen that reads "and Tom Wilkinson" - a cunning contractual ploy that confers a (wholly deserved) special status. Fine filmmaking let down only by its ludicrous pro-rebel bias. 158 minutes.

IMDb: *The Patriot* is technically a good movie, nicely made with rounded characters, excellent acting, a strong storyline and fabulous cinematography. But to say this film distorts history would be an understatement and that is extremely sad in a movie that sells itself as an accurate portrayal of events during the revolution. *The Patriot*, unfortunately, crosses the line and tries to portray as 'actual fact' a film which is predominantly fictional. Hence, the 'real life' equivalent of Benjamin Martin actually used to scalp Native Americans in his spare time - a fact neatly overlooked by the director. This 'rose tinted' view of history is at its worst during the church-burning scene where a British Army officer ordered the murder of many innocent civilians by locking them in a church and setting it alight. This event never took place and yet, thanks to *The Patriot*, a whole generation of Americans will believe that the British Army actually committed this horrendous act in South Carolina, when in fact history shows that it was not the British Army that burned a church full of people in 1776 but the Nazis during WW2. As a Brit, I don't so much mind Hollywood always portraying us as the 'bad guys' - after all, it is American money making these films - but I'm more concerned that some Americans actually believe what they watch. This is especially true in movies like *The Patriot* which 'pretend' to be real. It's a shame that a film can go to so much trouble to get right the period detail of costumes, props etc while at the same time thinking it quite all right for something as significant as the accuracy of the screenplay to pass so grotesquely overlooked / Boring, pretentious and manipulative. Avoid at all costs / A travesty / Some of you need to lighten up - this movie is good!

ESSEX BOYS (2000)



Loosely based on real-life events leading up to the December 1995 murder of three Dartford drug dealers, *Essex Boys* tells of a power struggle in the Thames Valley gangland community involving brutality, cross and double cross. TW plays Mr. D, a nasty piece of work (as are they all) who eventually gets his comeuppance. With Sean Bean and Alex Kingston. 98 minutes. Good though grim.

IMDb: Bean is poor but the rest of the cast make the best of a threadbare script / I really wanted to like *Essex Boys*, being a big fan of gangster cinema, but it just didn't do it for me. Every time I saw Tom Wilkinson, I thought "Gerald Cooper" (*The Full Monty*) rather than "John Dyke". I just couldn't take him seriously as a hard man. Similarly, Sean Bean, whom I normally find very entertaining, was only lukewarm in his portrayal of the psychotic gangster / This film looks cheap, features cheap low-life people and is shot in a nasty, depressing landscape. Furthermore, it's about drugs and dealers - yet is interesting to watch, probably due to a very convincing performance by Sean Bean as the revolting Jason / If you want to see what a drug-induced blank look really looks like, Sean Bean's bedroom scene half way through the movie is a must see. He ain't trying to look good or mean or anything other than just be in character, and he does that to the exclusion of the rest of the world. He's a git and he will make your skin crawl. The film's ensemble cast fit together wonderfully. The ways they come together and apart are believable. You may even feel compassion for some of them until you remember what everyone is doing / Kingston is superb and the actor playing Billy is smart. While not Academy Award material, *Essex Boys* is interesting nonetheless - a mixture of *Sexy Beast* and *Goodfellas* / The direction is fairly straightforward with some excellent editing in the shoot-out near the end as well as in the scene where Mr Dyke tries to kill Billy. (I, for one, found Wilkinson's gentleman gangster quite credible) / It is refreshing to see a film that portrays the underworld in all its vindictive pettiness - the little slights that turn into murderous feuds, dozens poisoned by a rogue batch of E, a young dead girl casually dumped at sea. *Essex Boys* is superlative / Imaginative and surprising. I recommend it, even though it's a tough watch.

CHAIN OF FOOLS (2000)



TW plays Bollingsworth, an embittered curator who instigates the theft from his boss of three ancient Chinese coins in this an amusing caper comedy that involves a suicidal barber, a Timber Scout, a hitman just out of school, a hood with learning difficulties, a wife, sister, nephew and pooch from hell, a Playboy centrefold policewoman, an amoral robber (Jeff Goldblum, above left) with a trannie girlfriend and more besides. 98 minutes of anodyne entertainment.

IMDb: Dark, wacky and sarcastic / A "laugh at the losers" episode flick in the vein of *Short Cuts*, without the pretension and with a healthy dose of Quentin Tarantino (sans the nastiness and macho violence). *Chain Of Fools* boasts the essential array of crooks and oddballs, from Goldblum's psychopathic rent-a-thief to Elijah Wood's adolescent aspiring hitman. Thoroughly enjoyable, with an endearing quality all of its own / Great cast + great script = great movie / Excellent though weird / Underrated / Very black and pretty funny / Predictable and dull / A nice little character caper B-movie.



IN THE BEDROOM (2001)



Set in the Maine lobstering town of Camden, *In The Bedroom*, starring TW, Sissy Spacek and Marisa Tomei, is a powerful film about grief and grieving, regret and revenge. Running 121 minutes, its plot is summarised in the press below.

* * * * *

The Actor Next Door Quietly Savours His New Fame

Some actors enjoy name recognition, others are remembered for the parts they play. Tom Wilkinson's destiny was to become an actor who enhances his roles rather than his star power. So even after his Academy Award nomination for Best Actor, he may still need to be identified as the good-natured Maine doctor in Todd Field's In The Bedroom*.*

In fact, when he was recommended to Mr. Field as the perfect Matt, the director struggled to place him. "I knew who Tom Wilkinson was, but I wasn't all that familiar with his work," Mr. Field recalled. "I had seen him but, as with many great actors when they do their job really well, you don't put a name to a face. It's sort of the curse of doing your job really well."

In person, Mr. Wilkinson is, not surprisingly, unassuming. Dressed informally and leaning against his battered BMW, he awaits a visitor outside the East Finchley subway station in north London. He has just been shopping at Marks & Spencer. At his apartment in a large Victorian house, which he shares with his wife, the actress Diana Hardcastle, and their two young daughters, he leads the way to a basement study cluttered with books, screenplays and the odd acting trophy.

He is, as Mr. Field said, "the kind of man who you believe could live next door to you." "You don't typically think that Robert Redford is going to live next door," he continued. "But you believe that Tom Wilkinson could live next door. That's the difference." This quotidian quality served the 54-year-old Briton well in his role as Matt Fowler, who is married to Sissy Spacek's more assertive Ruth, in In The Bedroom*. Mr. Field wanted an actor unfamiliar to American audiences. He also needed an actor who could convey the kind of intense introspection that hints at unpredictability. Mr. Wilkinson fit the bill.*

In the movie, Ruth is deeply alarmed - Matt seems less concerned - that their undergraduate son, Frank (Nick Stahl), is dating Natalie Strout (Marisa Tomei), an older woman and the mother of two young children. Natalie's estranged husband, Richard (William Mapother), jealous and wanting her back, kills her young lover. Richard claims it was an accident and is released on bail to await trial. It is then that the real story begins: can Matt and Ruth accept that Frank is dead and that Richard may escape punishment? And at what cost to their relationship?

"Its portrait of grief, rage, jealousy, flawed justice and revenge in a Maine lobstering town zeroes in on its characters' tragic flaws, yet refuses to condemn them," Stephen Holden wrote in The New York Times *when the movie was released in November. "It reminds us that, like it or not, the capacity to commit a crime of passion is part of being human."*



In The Bedroom *won five Oscar nominations. Ms. Spacek and Ms. Tomei (above) were nominated along with Mr. Wilkinson in their acting categories, and the film won nominations for Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay (Mr. Field and Rob Festinger based their script on a story by Andre Dubus). Typically, Mr. Wilkinson discounts the possibility of winning his Oscar race on*

March 24 against the likes of Russell Crowe (A Beautiful Mind), *Sean Penn* (I Am Sam), *Will Smith* (Ali) *and Denzel Washington* (Training Day). *But for an actor who decided only seven years ago to give up theatre and television and devote himself solely to movies, an Oscar nomination for his role in a low-budget independent film is no small achievement.*

Still, he is hardly a novice: he has been living off acting for three decades. Indeed, it was all he ever wanted to do once he reached his late teens. Born into a Yorkshire farming family, he was just four when his parents moved to Canada in search of a better life. Instead, his father ended up working at an aluminium smelter and, after six years, decided to return to England. His parents ran a pub in Cornwall, but after his father died, he and his mother went back to Yorkshire. Then, at the age of sixteen, Tom met Molly Sawdon.

"She was headmistress of King James's Grammar School at Knaresborough and she simply decided she would make something of me," Mr. Wilkinson recalled, "which meant being invited round to her house, being taught how to eat, which knives and forks to reach for first. We would go to the theatre together. Having wandered aimlessly through school, suddenly someone took an interest in me."

At King James's, Mr. Wilkinson directed his first play, Ionesco's Bald Soprano*. But when he went to the University of Canterbury in 1967, he was drawn to acting. After college, he attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, where he discovered that it was now possible for "working-class kids from the provinces" to open art galleries, run rock bands, become designers, be actors. "All the things that weren't cool became cool," he said. "I saw the young, provincial bohemian and thought, that role can be mine. I'll be in the arts. You can have a life in the arts. Why not?"*

For him, the arts meant doing theatre in the provinces. Mr. Wilkinson was fortunate. He was immediately hired by Richard Eyre, later an acclaimed director of the National Theatre, who was running the Nottingham Playhouse. After acting in a wide range of plays, from David Hare to Brecht and Shakespeare, Mr. Wilkinson did stints at theatres in Birmingham, Oxford and Edinburgh, as well as a couple of plays at the National Theatre in London. Only a two-year contract with the Royal Shakespeare Company left bad memories.

"It was disastrous," he said. "It almost finished me off as an actor. I was so frustrated and disappointed and full of, not self-loathing, but something like that. I didn't get the roles I felt I deserved. I hated the sort of snobby atmosphere." Still, he survived and, after First Among Equals, *a television mini-series that acquired something of a cult following, started building a reputation. More television followed, as well as supporting roles in movies. Then, from the*

mid-1990s, he began to appear in films that were actually noticed - Priest, The Full Monty, Rush Hour, Shakespeare In Love *and* The Patriot - *and he was noticed, too. But he was still not exactly famous. Thanks to admirers in the business, though, he was offered the role of Matt over the telephone and he only met Mr. Field and the rest of the cast when he showed up in Maine to start rehearsing. Mr. Field had been assured that Mr. Wilkinson could "do" accents, and that proved to be true. In fact, Ms. Spacek recalled by telephone, while Mr. Wilkinson soon sounded like a native New Englander, she struggled to bury her Texas twang.*

"He's so British," Ms. Spacek said, "and to have him play so convincingly and seamlessly this typical American man, it's just astonishing. He's a very present actor. Beside all of his wonderful training, his depth of emotion and all of that, he's just a very, very present actor. And he's a very inventive actor. He has a power. I could feel that power."

Mr. Field also spoke of Mr. Wilkinson's "power." "It's so interesting to watch him when he has what on the page is very little to do," Mr. Field went on, "because it's like an orchestra playing very quietly and you know that it can explode. But it's much more powerful when it does not explode."

Mr. Wilkinson, in contrast, makes it all sound simple. For example, he said, playing a father grieving for his son did not require him to become that father, in the tradition of Method acting. "I'm not acting me, I'm acting Matt Fowler," he said, "so I have very specific feelings about my son - and I, Tom, don't have a son, I have two daughters."

For him, the real challenge is to do a good acting job no matter what the role. Praise certainly boosts confidence, he said, but fame is not the objective. "I see myself as a utility player, the one who can do everything," he added. "I've always felt that actors should have a degree of anonymity about them." However, as soon as In The Bedroom *was well received in the United States and strongly promoted by Miramax for Oscar nominations, Mr. Wilkinson was thrust into the limelight. And, it transpired, he did not know the rules of this new game. In an interview with* Newsweek, *he disclosed undiplomatically that he had received a 10-point fax from Miramax advising him what not to discuss with reporters.*

"I have already had to apologise for my indiscretion," he said with a laugh, "so I don't want to add fuel to that fire. Suffice it to say that I think the suggestions were preposterous, as if we would talk about work in that way. One was that you weren't to refer to it as a tiny-budget movie, but an independent movie is by definition a low-budget movie. I think the publicity people believe that, for Americans, money equals quality." Spacek describes Wilkinson as "cheeky" and

perhaps this mini-incident explains why. "He's got a little bit of mischief in him," she said, "and I wouldn't give you two cents for anybody who didn't have that. He speaks his mind and he does it in a very clever and funny way."

Alan Riding, *The New York Times*, 10 March 2002

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Look! There's Julia Roberts!

> *Last time he was at a Hollywood awards ceremony, Tom Wilkinson got a little over-excited. Now he's tipped for an Oscar, will he behave himself?*

After he made The Full Monty*, Tom Wilkinson flew to Los Angeles to attend the Golden Globe awards. The film was nominated for best comedy. It didn't win, but Wilkinson and the rest of the cast got to present the prize for best song. "There was a woman standing next to me in the wings before we went on," he says. "I was jostling her. I wasn't paying much attention, too busy going 'Bloody marvellous, eh? The Golden Globes!' and 'Oooh, Jack Nicholson!' Then the announcer said: 'And to give the prize for the Best Supporting Actress, will you welcome ... Julia Roberts! And we were like: 'Look, that was Julia Roberts! Fuck! Fuck! We were right next to her!'"*

The moment was seized on by the film press as a turning point in Wilkinson's career - somewhat unflatteringly, since it worked on the assumption that standing beside Julia Roberts was an absurd elevation for him. Still, the 53-year-old British actor did undergo a modest lifestyle change. He spent more time filming in the States and less time at his home in Muswell Hill, North London, where he lives with his wife and two children. He met (and failed to recognise) Madonna. He was offered starring as opposed to supporting roles.

One of those roles was as Matt Fowler, archetypal American dad, in a film by Todd Field called In The Bedroom*. It co-stars Sissy Spacek, and Wilkinson is unrecognisable in it. He has often been cast as an uptight Brit, long-suffering and a bit hopeless, like Hugh Fennyman the theatre owner in* Shakespeare In Love*.*

It's an image he compounds in real life with a strain of elegant cynicism. Wilkinson doesn't strike one as the kind of man who is easily impressed. His take on the BAFTAs is typically down-to-earth: "Until recently," he said, "they have looked to all intents and purposes like they were set in a Greek restaurant in the Seven Sisters Road, with this slavish worship of any American who deigned to turn up."

In this latest film, however, a spot-on American accent and fine acting see Wilkinson transformed into a huge screen presence. Already industry mutterings are suggesting he'll be a strong Academy award contender come March next year. The film, the story of a couple coping with the death of their son, is terrific - thanks mainly to the painfully realistic portrait of the marriage between his and Spacek's characters.

Spacek was a bit of a "ball-breaker", he says. "It could have all gone terribly wrong. Sissy and I were coming from totally different ends of some sort of spectrum, but we just seemed to work together. What you see on screen is chemistry. We were friends, I would have thought."

This is a cautious admission. First impressions of Tom Wilkinson is that he is a bit of a curmudgeon, unhappy engaging in the dreary business of having to talk about himself. He frowns a lot, too. But the apparent surliness has more to do with the fact that he thinks hard before he speaks - and isn't frightened of silences.

I ask whether, if he didn't get more self-assured with age, then did he at least dismiss his early confidence as bogus? "When I very first started acting, at university, I thought I could do anything," he says. "Because you are so ignorant; you don't know what a good production should be. You don't know what the rules are. And then, when you start doing it professionally, you learn the rules and become more intimidated." There follows a long pause. "Then, when you get to my age - and I've been doing it for a lot of years now - you know what to do on any given job."

The big career low for Wilkinson was the 18 months he spent out of work more than ten years ago. "It was rather alarming," he says. "I had done a TV series [First Among Equals] *which was rather high-profile, although it wasn't very good, and then a play in the West End with Vanessa Redgrave, which had tremendous critical and popular support. I remember going on holiday with Diana, my wife, and thinking, when I get back there'll be a pile of scripts this high. And there was nothing."*

How did he structure his time? "I took up golf. I wanted something that would be absorbing. I didn't want to fester in front of daytime television and feel bitter like Coriolanus. You know, 'Fuck you all!' It's just one of those things. It happens. It keeps you honest, I suppose." Did he panic? "No. I'm temperamentally suited to the business of acting. I'm quite fatalistic. If it's not happening, it's not happening, and there's very little you can do. There is an element of 'Fuck them, I don't care, they can't hurt me'. You have to be confident that they can't take away your ability to act." It takes years, he adds, for this confidence to really kick in.

If there has been a genuine turning point in Wilkinson's career, it was not the razzmatazz that came with The Full Monty *but a more intimate experience he had when filming the BBC adaptation of* Martin Chuzzlewit, *the hit costume drama of 1994. Wilkinson was widely praised for his rendition of Seth Pecksniff. It was the first time in a long career that he had felt entirely happy with his performance. "I looked at it and I thought: I can't get it any better than that. It came out exactly as I meant it to come out. It won a couple of prizes and I thought: I can act, there's no question."*

It felt different while he was filming it, he says - more momentous. "There is a wonderful remark in the diaries of Kafka. He is talking about someone he admires and he says of this guy: 'He sits in himself like an experienced oarsman sits in his boat, or any boat.' And that was the feeling I had. I was an experienced oarsman sitting in a boat, and I knew what to do."

In The Bedroom *presented no particular challenges. The American accent came naturally to Wilkinson, who, though born in Leeds, grew up partially in Canada. He decided to do the accent all the time, off as well as on set. "I didn't talk English at all. Everything I said was in middle American, and it made me a slightly different person. The English locution you are familiar with, the body language and all those sorts of things, are denied you, because Americans don't talk in that highly nuanced, middle-class English way. That was very interesting." And he leaves a short, exquisite pause.*

Emma Brockes, *The Guardian*, 9 November 2001

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You lived in Canada as a child. Was that any help in tackling the accent you needed here?

Well, this was 4,000 miles from where we lived, but the general shape of the accent was okay. People are much better at accents than they used to be. There are plenty of actors who are quite good at accents, and I'm one of them. But a lot of actors now are just as fluent as Americans. Take Jude Law, in The Talented Mr Ripley *- what a fantastic performance. I did, though, keep the accent going between takes.*

Anwar Brett, *BBC Entertainment*, 28 October 2014

* * * * *

"The thing about acting (is) you've really got to have talent," Wilkinson says. "I have talent. I know it. I've been doing this for 30 years. But at the same time,

you not only have to be good, you have to be good in hits. [If you want to be singled out for awards] *It's no good being great in something that goes straight to video."*

So how did he tap into the kind of extreme grief displayed in this belatedly star-making performance?

"What I didn't do was think of my dead grandmother. Acting for me is not that quid pro quo," *Wilkinson says with a sardonic laugh. "You know grief. You've had it in your own life. But I don't use it directly. It's processed through my acting instincts, the bit of me that knows about those things, so when it comes out it's not my grief that you're seeing, it's the grief of that character. It's active imagination. It's not a conscience process. If I started* [thinking about] *what it would be like if my own children were killed, I'd go mad."*

Being an actor himself, Todd Field took a hands-off approach to directing his actors, Wilkinson says. "I think once he knew that we got it, that we got the hang of these characters, he did trust us. (He knew) he couldn't be at the actors all the time. He's got cameras to set up, other stuff to think about, other fish to fry."

Asked if he takes roles in movies like Black Knight *and* Rush Hour *for the money so he can afford to do small pictures he feels passionate about like* In The Bedroom, *Wilkinson is taken aback at the suggestion.*

"No," he says firmly. "You can't do things for money. You just can't act them. There's gotta be something about the script that you really want to do. I wouldn't do a job if I didn't think I could do the best work I possibly could. For me, at least, there's only one shot you have at a movie, and that's your best shot. If you can't give it that, don't go. They're paying you! You gotta do a job for them. They don't want somebody strutting around on the set going: 'I'd rather be somewhere else.'"

As for turning his current acclaim into more and better acting opportunities, Wilkinson says no matter what happens with the Academy Awards, it won't be a blow to his ego if he keeps on having to audition for roles.

"I don't mind going into rooms full of people who don't know who I am and don't give a fuck," he says matter-of-factly. "I'll read for them, I do a thing on video for them. Whatever it takes."

Contactmusic.com, undated

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ANOTHER LIFE (2001)



This fine film tells the true story of the last nine and a bit years of milliner's clerk and Ilford girl Edith Thompson - from Christmas Day 1913, her twentieth birthday, to 9 January 1923, the day she was hanged for the murder of her husband Percy. Edith was a spirited woman who, married a narrow man, found fulfilment - but, ultimately, not happiness - elsewhere. When he died, though hers was not the hand that killed him, she paid the price for daring to imagine - and partly realise - another life. TW plays the part of her employer with his usual understated elegance (and gets to sing a song at the piano). But all the cast do well: in addition to TW, Natasha Little (below) as Edith, Rachel Stirling as her sister Avis, Imelda Staunton as their mother, Nick Moran as Percy and Ioan Gruffudd (below) as Fred all emerge with credit. 101 minutes.

IMDb: Natasha Little deserves the highest praise for the emotional range of her acting. In fact the whole cast gel exceptionally well in a film that encompasses touches of light humour and extreme emotional pain. Costume, set design and make-up painstakingly recreate the era of the '10s and '20s. A modern day tragedy / It's a shame that this film really just crashes to a halt. Maybe it's the stage origin or the ultimate banality of the actual crime, which is, what, fifteen years coming? World War One seemed to last all of three minutes. *Another Life* is performance-led, and these are top class, but the obscenity of the merciless convictions is done too fast. It's just not tragic enough, in spite of Natasha Little's redefinition of the cliché execution scene. Somewhere among the period detail, emancipation of women and general air of repressed sexuality this film loses its focus on who's actually the villain - is it the abused but spoilt Edith or her pathetic husband Percy? How come Freddy Bywaters suddenly goes postal? Or is it just Edwardian society (strangely thinly populated but, hey, it's low budget) being dragged into the twentieth century? (Big ups at this point to Elizabeth McKechinie as the Mother-in-law from Hell.) If you enjoy atmospheric old British second features like *This Happy Breed, It Always Rains On Sunday* or the more modern *Scandal*, you'll enjoy *Another Life*, a dependable British period drama that will stand repeat viewing.

But don't expect it to thrill you all the way to the end / This is an interesting picture for several reasons. It is primarily a tale of jealousy and murder, but there is virtually no blood. English mysteries are like that. The film forces you to follow the story in order to understand it. You will have no choice but to develop conflicting feelings about the protagonist. The story is often told in the first person, and it's this introspection that gives us insight into Edie's character and creates the mixed emotions we have about her. Is she just a self-centred dreamer with no thought for the pain she causes those around her, or is she a calculating narcissist willing to sacrifice anyone or anything that gets her way? Is Fred the driving force in this tragedy or just a tool she uses to get what she wants? We come away from this film wondering, and that is what makes it worth watching.



The Thompson-Bywaters Case of 1922-23 was one of the great disgraces of British Justice. Edith Thompson was accused of inciting her boyfriend Frederick Bywaters to stab her husband Percy on a street in London at night. To his credit, Frederick denied her involvement - he claimed he killed Percy for mistreating Edith. Unfortunately for Edith (a woman with a big imagination), letters she wrote to Bywaters were preserved by him, and they suggested she had tried to poison Percy on several occasions. The problem was that the crown pathologist, Sir Bernard Spilsbury, never found traces of the so-called poisons. The prosecution's solution was to ignore Sir Bernard (normally trotted out at every major criminal prosecution at the time) and concentrate on the evidence that Edith and Frederic were committing adultery. Although ably defended by Sir Henry Curtis Bennett, Edith made the mistake of going into the witness box and she suddenly panicked inside it. It sank whatever chances she had. The jury found her and Frederick guilty and they were executed. The judge at the trial, Mr. Justice Shearman, had been junior to Edward Marshall Hall in defending the notorious wife murderer George Joseph Smith, and yet he made comments about how sickened he was by Ms Thompson - more sick than at any other killer he came across. The prosecutor was Sir Thomas Inskip. Whatever one says of his ability in railroading Mrs. Thompson, Inskip would disserve his country in the late 1930s when he purposely slowed down the rearmament programs of the Baldwin and Chamberlain governments in the face of growing Nazi aggression. These two were the defenders of English hearth and home in this case.

BLACK KNIGHT (2001)



In this Black Dude in Strange Environment time travel fantasy, African-American Jamal Walker (Martin Lawrence) falls into the moat of the medieval theme park where he works and disappears. When he resurfaces, he's in an English lake in the year 1328. The first person he encounters on emerging is down-and-out knight Sir Knolte of Marlborough, played by TW. Jamal fetches up at the local castle, only realising he's left his own time and is not just in another theme park when he witnesses a beheading. There's some love interest, some introduction of the rustics to jive talk and funky music and the small matter of a rebellion to restore the rightful queen to her throne. TW gets to wield a sword and bow and put himself about a bit, and the lakeside scene, filmed in North Carolina, gave him another nice trip from home. Still it's a strange choice for him - though something different, if nothing more. 92 minutes.

IMDb: By no means Lawrence at his best, but still a funny film. The culture clash jokes are well milked and there is even a little action in it. Martin is hilarious and Wilkinson is likable as a drunken knight / How an actor of Wilkinson's calibre got mixed up in this dog's dinner I just don't know - the money, I presume. A terribly predictable plot done many times before doesn't help. Lawrence works hard but just comes across as manic and unfunny. A turkey, I'm afraid - not the biggest around but clucking loudly all the same / Lawrence, funny sometimes, is lumbered here with poor material he can do nothing to improve. Wilkinson adds a little class, but nor enough / By the time the lame disco musical number comes round, Lawrence's humour is wearing thin. Fortunately, very little time goes by after that before Wilkinson enters the picture as an alcoholic knight trying to mend his reputation. His acting chops are what elevate this film beyond mediocre into the realm of just okay / You have to ask what was Wilkinson thinking when he signed on for this turgid mess? I mean, he was Oscar nominated for *In The Bedroom* this same year, which is far funnier than *Black Knight* all by itself / If you're a Martin Lawrence fan you might enjoy this film. Otherwise, it's a pretty safe bet that you won't / Not funny, not original, no plot, very disappointing / Bleccchhh!

THE GATHERING STORM (TV, 2002)



This HBO/BBC co-production recalls the life of Churchill in the five years leading up to WWII, during which time, it would have us believe, from the back benches and in the popular press, he forewarned a sceptical government and apathetic, war-weary country of Germany's rearmament programme and Hitler's hostile intent. In a strong cast including Albert Finney as Winston, Linus Roache (see *Priest*), Derek Jacobi (see *Molokai*), Vanessa Redgrave (see *Wetherby*), Ronnie Barker, Hugh Bonneville and Jim Broadbent, TW plays Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office. Followed by *Into The Storm*, dealing with Churchill's war years. 96 minutes. Good though specious.

IMDb: Pretty pictures but bogus hindsight with gaping omissions: no Abdication, no Munich (!), no Chamberlain and no Eden. It's high time we stopped letting Americans sentimentalise WSC as an infallible seer / Absorbing and insightful / Finney simply *is* Churchill, a perfect blend of imitation and incarnation. Thank god Redgrave more than holds her own. As Churchill adaptations go, this is probably as good all you'll get / I am an historian by profession and whilst I readily concede that there are aspects of this superb drama that play fast and loose with historical fact, those that cannot see beyond this simply have no heart. The film primarily exists to portray Churchill's private life and emotions rather than the *real politik* of the time and this it does wonderfully. Winston's relationship with Clemmie (or, indeed, Mrs Pussycat) is so touching and sweet. Churchill was never a classic romantic and to see this side of his character is so rare. Needless to say the acting is superb and Finney as Churchill is utterly convincing - so much so that it becomes increasingly difficult to watch him in anything else. The only part of *The Gathering Storm* I take issue with is its portrayal of Baldwin who was by all accounts a thoroughly decent chap. Overall, however, it is magnificent and those who cannot see beyond its inaccuracies perhaps miss the point / It is unfortunate to see such fine talent wasted on such a trivial script / Finney brings Churchill to life in a most excellent way, giving us a thoroughly realistic image of his speeches, his beliefs, his narcissism, his strengths and his weaknesses / A fine film, worthy of roses all around. A sumptuous screenplay that even Labour could support. Highly recommended.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST (2002)



After successfully bringing Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* to the screen in 1999, director Oliver Parker next tackled the same author's *The Importance Of Being Earnest*. But while liberties taken and revisions visited upon the first, less familiar work might pass unnoticed, to tinker with the second - a well-loved national treasure - was always going to prove tricky. Some necessary pruning might be accepted as inevitable, and minor reconfiguration understandable to liberate the action from its stage or drawing room-bound constraints and so exploit cinematic advantage. But to second guess and embellish Wilde merely in hope of improving upon him sounds like misguided, not to say arrogant folly. Thus the addition of serenade and fantasy sequences, the tattooing of names onto backsides and an arrival by hot air balloon all smack of near sacrilegious depredation. An A-list cast led by Colin Firth, Rupert Everett, Judi Dench and Anna Massey (above) deliver the screenplay with accustomed slick style and verve. The trouble is, it's a sadly diminished version of Wilde's original. Viewers unfamiliar with that may well enjoy this - otherwise, probably not. *Lady Windermere's Fan* might have been a better (and surely a *safer*) pick for Parker. TW plays Rev. Dr. Chasuble. 90 minutes.

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OK, but Was It at Least a Designer Handbag?

In translating a play into a movie, a filmmaker can easily lose sight of the fact that the essence of a great play resides in its language and not in a movie's ability to go on location or add cinematic frills. In opening up Oscar Wilde's 1895 comic masterpiece, The Importance Of Being Earnest, *the director Oliver Parker, whose more straightforward adaptation of Wilde's* An Ideal Husband *three years ago found an agreeable balance between period lushness and linguistic precision, has gone overboard.*

What would Wilde have made of the embellishments Mr. Parker has tacked onto the play like a reckless dressmaker tarting up a Chanel suit to resemble a Versace gown? Those additions include fantasy sequences, a ragtime band, a hot-air balloon and a horse-and-carriage traffic jam. An aggressively buoyant score (by Charlie Mole) washes through the movie, giving it a perky vo-dee-o-do flavour that feels more 1920s than 1890s. As much as possible, the play has been moved outdoors to intoxicate us with the rarefied air of an English country estate.

And what of the language in a work where the refinements and ambiguities of speech are everything? Wilde's famous epigrams remain intact and are reasonably well spoken. But the extra visual accoutrements have a profoundly distracting effect. They interrupt the rhythm and retard the momentum of brilliantly silly banter that could be described as incisive nonsense. When Lady Bracknell (Judi Dench, below), the play's uber-snob, declares, "Ignorance is like a delicious exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone," she conjures a privileged, cucumber sandwich world where a devotion to the superficial is a code of behaviour and proof of social superiority.



The genius of the play is the brilliance with which it simultaneously embodies and sabotages its concept. While celebrating brittle badinage as a comic art form and wilful superficiality as the ultimate revenge on a cold cruel world, it makes its garrulous, dissembling aristocrats look ridiculous. Its twisty artificial plot, in which the characters' assiduously cultivated lies turn out to be true, and the putting of the concept of "earnestness" through the comic wringer support Wilde's contention that "we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality."

Half a century ago, The Importance Of Being Earnest *was made into a classic, unabashedly stagy movie, directed by Anthony Asquith, with a cast led by Edith*

Evans as Lady Bracknell. It dispensed Wilde's aperçus with a brittle insouciance that is largely missing from this souped-up version. If this film has a blue ribbon cast that more than matches its forerunner in name value, it misses its high-toned elegance.

Rupert Everett, that pouty, spoiled princeling who exudes a Wildean hauteur tinged with a Wildean depravity, is Algernon Moncrieff, the debt-ridden charmer who spends half his life evading creditors by dashing off to the bedside of an imaginary friend. Colin Firth exudes a bogus stolidity as Algernon's friend and comic adversary, Jack Worthing, a foundling discovered in a handbag, who is now the legal guardian of Cecily Cardew (Reese Witherspoon), the dewy granddaughter of the man who adopted him. When visiting London, Jack plays his own charades, passing himself off as his own nonexistent brother, Ernest, to win the hand of Lady Bracknell's daughter, Gwendolen (Frances O'Connor), who is fixated on the name Ernest.

But Jack's obscure origins become an insurmountable obstacle. As Lady Bracknell famously puts it, "You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter - a girl brought up with the utmost care - to marry into a cloakroom and form an alliance with a parcel."

Ms. O'Connor plays Gwendolen as a mischievous refugee from screwball comedy, while Ms. Witherspoon, affecting a passable English accent, is every inch the simpering rosy-cheeked ingénue. Since Cecily is also fixated on the name Ernest as the only suitable name for a husband, Algernon also lies about his name, and the confusion between the bogus Ernests sparks more than one hissy fit.



But the movie is so romantically insecure it inserts over-decorated fantasy sequences in which (above) Cecily imagines Algernon as a knight in armour. Its

biggest gaffe, which lasts barely a second, is a flashback revealing Lady Bracknell to have once been a music-hall floozy dandled on the lap of her future husband. As tantalising as it may be, the suggestion that many of the world's grander dames have shady pasts simply doesn't belong here.

Dame Judi's Lady Bracknell is certainly redoubtable. But her level-headed, realistic portrayal of the play's comic linchpin and ultimate mouthpiece only hints at the absurd grandiosity that can make Lady Bracknell laugh-out-loud funny.



I kept wishing I was hearing Maggie Smith reel off the same speeches edged with the acid she infused into her curdled aristocrat in Gosford Park*. Rounding out the principal performances, Anna Massey, as Cecily's tutor, Miss Prism and Tom Wilkinson (above) as Dr. Chasuble, a discreetly enamoured clergyman who fawns over Miss Prism, give careful understated performances in the same realistic key as Dame Judi's. The whole tone of the film needed to be ratcheted up a note or two higher.*

For all its distractions and additions, The Importance Of Being Earnest *is still a reasonably entertaining costume comedy. Wilde's satirical voice may be muffled, but at least it is audible.*

Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*, 22 May 2002

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BEFORE YOU GO (2002)



Adapted for the screen by Shelagh Stephenson from her own Olivier Award-winning play *The Memory Of Water*, *Before You Go* centres on the lives of three sisters who return to the family home for their mother's funeral. A dull film with a banal script. TW plays Frank, husband of eldest sister Teresa (Julie Walters, second left above). With John Hannah (second right). 91 minutes.

IMDb: Considering the quality and quantity of its featured 'names', *Before You Go* is mediocre. The plot is dire, the script dreadful and the acting poor. The cast labour over the unfunny dialogue as if it was the first read-through. It has about as much oomph as a local Am Dram effort / The cast list suggests better, but the performances across the board are weak, the characters one-dimensional and the story just not interesting. This failed completely to engage / Pitiful / I can't understand why somebody would bother assembling such an amazing cast and then waste them on such appalling material / Overall this was a disappointing film that didn't fulfil its potential, failing to deliver on the promise of complex relationships. The cast offer much but aren't given anything to work with. Not worth a look to be honest / Completely lacklustre. By downplaying all the humour in the play and the witty and bickering tension between the sisters, the director has succeeded in turning it into one long, boring non-event. I would highly recommend *The Memory Of Water*, but give the film version a miss as you will only be disappointed / Understated, poignant, funny, an absolutely wonderful film that engages from the start and never waivers. The acting is faultless as is the direction. The three sisters played by Victoria Hamilton, Julie Walters, and Joanne Whalley are completely convincing as sisters, particularly Whalley, whose interaction with her mother's ghost (Patricia Hodge) is well handled / At no time do you care whether any of the cast are swept under a bus. The script is laboured and as each character enters they become more irritating than the last. Labelled a comedy drama but is neither / These are early days yet for author Shelagh Stephenson, but she would do well to remember that audiences need to empathise with at least one of the cast in some way. I could not wait to see the back of them all / Beautifully crafted / Trite, aimless, middle class nonsense.

AN ANGEL FOR MAY (TV, 2002)



This lovely 96 minute film, adapted from a Melvin Burgess novel, tells the story of Tom (admirably played by thirteen year old Matthew Beard, above), a young lad who travels back from the present to 1941, with far-reaching consequences for a number of people including himself. TW plays a struggling Yorkshire farmer, which is what he was born to and, had things gone differently, what he might have become. With Anna Massey (see also *The Importance Of Being Earnest*) and Geraldine James. Highly recommended.

IMDb: An original, refreshing, beautifully filmed piece of drama - a breath of fresh air / A unique story with acting of a really high standard from actors so young. I also liked the way it shows how young and old can feel for each other without writing each other off because of the generation gap. Truly moving / A great story that sweeps you off your feet / A real gem for all / A sweet film, very well made and worth the viewer's time with its important message / The two young actors, Matthew Beard and Charlotte Wakefield, are wonderful in their roles. They are intelligent children and a delight to see. Any film that has Tom Wilkinson and Anna Massey in can't be bad. Wilkinson does a great job in his short appearance and Massey is lovely in that tender scene at the end / Intriguing, inspiring and inviting, a study in contrasts - 21st century vs. WWII, young vs. old, tough vs. gentle - and coming of age / If you've allowed yourself to take this journey with Tom, you will be rewarded at the end with one of those extraordinary emotional experiences for which we watch films / The acting is very genuine, which helps the viewer to get lost in the plot. More important, however, is the way the film engages the heart by gently leading the viewer to consider the impact that one person's life can have on others, if they only take a moment to consider the frailty of the lives around them and sacrifice a little. Beautiful. You will cry / A very fine family film, not stuffed full of artificial and mawkish sentimentality and all the more effective for being 'straight up'. Well-known character actress Dora Bryan has a bit part and it is a shame we see so little of her. *An Angel For May* is entirely wholesome: its coarsest scene the milking of a cow / A dear, sweet movie, imaginative and warm. Treat yourself.

NORMAL (TV, 2003)



The best actors like to challenge themselves and TW does so here, playing Roy Applewood, a Midwestern farm machinery plant worker, 25 years married and father of two, who announces that he's really Ruth, a woman trapped inside a man's body, and intends to have sex-change surgery. Jane Anderson adapted her own play, *Looking For Normal*, for the screen and then directed this HBO production. TW and Jessica Lange (above) are excellent in the lead roles and the strength and depth of their mutual love is persuasively portrayed. Sadly, however, their pastor, their son Wayne and Roy's boss and workmates are all cardboard stereotypes, such that not much of the wider narrative rings true. Despite running 113 minutes, it all feels a bit shorthand and superficial, also too bland, too little edge or grit. Fair but ultimately unconvincing.

IMDb: Perfectly implausible / Beautifully written and graced with a stunning, brave and transcendent performance from Tom Wilkinson, *Normal* proves that a sensitive subject can be handled tastefully, humorously, respectfully and with breathtaking subtlety. At the heart of this labour of love is the subject of the tediously restrictive and ultimately damaging nature of gender labels, but this is never depicted in a heavy-handed way. Writer Jane Anderson instead creates genuine characters, human, struggling and all too painfully real / A funny, lovely, touching love story in which Lange once again displays her extraordinary talent. She portrays strength and vulnerability like few in her class / The viewpoints and reactions seem abbreviated - typical of a movie - but the issue seems covered / The plot makes little sense / Brilliant and brave / Such an important subject deserves sensitive and imaginative treatment. This film offers neither. Its plot is implausible, giving no evidence of how a marriage which must have been under the most extreme stress could not only have survived for 25 years but be regarded as the happiest in the area. The portrayal of the religious representatives is laughable in its superficiality. The lengthy process that has to be gone through before anyone can be accepted for gender re-alignment is ignored. All told, a badly handled disaster.

GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING (2003)



Colin Firth (above, left - see also *The Importance Of Being Earnest*) and Scarlett Johansson star as Jan Vermeer and his servant girl Griet in this beautifully reverent film, based on Tracy Chevalier's book, about the creation of the eponymous painting. TW plays the artist's libidinous patron Pieter Van Ruijven. A lyrical, languorous 96 minute delight. With Cillian Murphy.

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Girl With A Pearl Earring is a quiet movie, shaken from time to time by ripples of emotional turbulence far beneath the surface. It is about things not said, opportunities not taken, potentials not realised, lips unkissed. All of these elements are guessed at by the filmmakers as they regard a painting made in about 1665 by Johannes Vermeer. The painting shows a young woman regarding us over her left shoulder. She wears a simple blue headband and a modest smock. Her red lips are slightly parted. Is she smiling? She seems to be glancing back at the moment she was leaving the room. She wears a pearl earring.

Not much is known about Vermeer, who left about 35 paintings. Nothing is known about his model. You can hear that it was his daughter, a neighbour, a tradeswoman. You will not hear that she was his lover, because Vermeer's household was under the iron rule of his mother-in-law, who was vigilant as a hawk. The painting has become as intriguing in its modest way as the Mona Lisa. The girl's face turned toward us from centuries ago demands that we ask, who was she? What was the thinking? What was the artist thinking about her?

Tracy Chevalier's novel speculating about the painting has now been filmed by Peter Webber, who casts Scarlett Johansson as the girl and Colin Firth as Vermeer. I can think of many ways the film could have gone wrong, but it goes right, because it doesn't cook up melodrama and romantic intrigue but tells a story that's content with its simplicity. The painting is contemplative, reflective, subdued, and the film must be too. We don't want lurid revelations breaking into its mood.

Sometimes two people will regard each other over a gulf too wide to ever be bridged, and know immediately what could have happened, and that it never will. That is essentially the message of *Girl With A Pearl Earring*. The girl's name is Griet, according to this story. She lives nearby. She is sent by her blind father to work in Vermeer's house, where several small children are about to be joined by a new arrival. The household is run like a factory with the mother-in-law, Maria Thins (Judy Parfitt) as foreman. She has set her daughter to work producing babies while her son-in-law produces paintings. Both have an output of about one a year, which is good if you are a mother, but not if you are a painter.

Nobody ever says what they think in this house, except for Maria, whose thoughts are all too obvious, anyway. Vermeer's wife Catharina (Essie Davis) sometimes seems to be standing where she hopes nobody will see her. It becomes clear that Griet is intelligent in a natural way, but has no idea what to do with her ideas. Of course she attracts Vermeer's attention; she's a hard worker and responds instinctively to the manual labour of painting - to the craft, the technique, the strategy, even the chemistry (did you know that the colour named Indian yellow is distilled from the urine of cows fed on mango leaves?).

In one flawless sequence, Griet is alone in Vermeer's studio and looks at the canvas he is working on, looks at what he is painting, looks back, looks forth, and then moves a chair away from a window. When he returns and sees what she has done, he studies the composition carefully and removes the chair from his painting. Eventually he has her move up to the attic, closer to his studio, where she can mix his paints, which she does very well.

And then of course they start sleeping together? Not in this movie. Vermeer has a rich patron named Van Ruijven (Tom Wilkinson). If Vermeer is too shy to reveal feelings for his maid, Van Ruijven is not. He wants a painting of the girl. This of course would be unacceptable to Catharina Vermeer, whose best-developed quality is her insecurity -- but it is not unacceptable to her mother, who must keep a rich patron happy. Thus Griet becomes a model.

There is a young man in the town, Pieter (Cillian Murphy), a butcher's apprentice, who is attracted to Griet. He would make her good husband, in this world where status and opportunity are assigned by caste. Griet likes him. It's not that she likes Vermeer more; indeed, she's so intimidated she barely speaks to the artist. It's that - well, Griet could never be a butcher, but she could be a painter.

Mankind has Shakespeares who were illiterate, Mozarts who never heard a note, painters who never touched a brush. Griet could be a painter. Whether a good or bad one, she will never know. Vermeer senses it. The moments of greatest intimacy between the simple peasant girl and the famous artist come when they sit side by side in wordless communication, mixing paints, both doing the same job, both understanding it.

Do not believe those who think this movie is about the "mystery" of the model, or Vermeer's sources of inspiration, or medieval gender roles, or whether the mother-in-law was the man in the family. A film about those things would have been a bad film.

Girl With A Pearl Earring is about how they share a professional understanding that neither one has in any way with anyone else alive. I look at the painting and I realise that Griet is telling Vermeer, without using any words: "Well, if it were my painting, I'd have her stand like this."

Roger Ebert, 26 December 2003



I hated this movie! The book was fantastic and the film is in fact a very faithful adaptation - in form, but not in spirit. Immaculately made, completely soulless, like someone reading the book in a monotone. First of all, Scarlett Johansson was a pretty poor choice. Not only does she look nothing like Griet, but she is also completely charmless in the role. Second, and this is my biggest peeve, it was really hard to engage emotionally with the movie. The poverty and desperation of Griet's position were never obvious, the interpersonal rivalries and her difficult position in the Vermeer family had little impact on the story, her emotions and compulsions were never shown. Where's the poignancy in a random woman looking at a painting and speaking to the artist? There were no emotional contrasts between Vermeer's oblivious gruffness and Griet's emotional turmoil, between her poverty and her aspirations, between Vermeer's and her social positions, between Vermeer's waspish wife and the artistic Griet. So much potential wasted, when better dialogues and soundtrack would have made all the difference. This movie could have been a dramatic masterpiece. Instead we just have an unimaginative ho-hum book adaptation.

Skippy Kincaid, July 2015

IF ONLY (2004)



TW and his wife Diana Hardcastle both have small parts in this film - she as the secretary of male lead Paul Nicholls and he as an unnamed taxi driver who has four scenes and around three minutes of screen time. *If Only* starts out well enough, borrowing from both *Sliding Doors* (the concept that one step this way or that can irrevocably change your life forever) and *Groundhog Day* (getting to relive a day and, by using foreknowledge, doing things better the second time around). But in its second half it comes hopelessly off the rails with a series of ludicrously impossible events - like travelling by train then foot from London to the top of a remote Lakeland fell and back again, with visits to an implausibly well furnished abandoned shack and a pub thrown in, all in four and a half hours, or reproducing a three minute song, fully scored for orchestra, on one sheet of paper. All in all, sub-par schlock. 96 minutes.

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If Only *this weren't one of the sappiest, stupidest, silliest, and most vacuously meaningless romantic comedies I've ever had the misfortune to waste 96 minutes of my life upon ... I'd have some nicer things to say about* If Only.

Starring and produced by Jennifer Love Hewitt, a gal who can presently only make it into multiplexes by way of Garfield *sequels,* If Only *aims to be one of those "ethereal" rom-coms not unlike* Chances Are *or* Just Like Heaven, *but to say it fails on every conceivable front would imply that a whole lot of effort was actually made. This flick looks like it was shot before it was written and released before it was finished.*

Love plays aspiring musician Samantha Andrews, who is currently knee-deep in love with her very busy British boyfriend. Ian seems to take Sam for granted a whole heckuva lot these days, but when she interrupts a crucial meeting at work (in a painful sequence that runs thrice as long as it should because the screenplay is so bad), the guy's at the end of his rope. But just as Sam and Ian look like they're about to call it quits ... a car comes out of nowhere and smashes Sam to death. Ian, obviously, feels a little crappy about the situation.

Until tomorrow morning, that is! Because that's when Sam pops back up, looking perfectly perky in her strategically placed skivvies. But wait a minute! Didn't this chick just get smashed to death by an errant automobile? What gives? Well, it seems that Ian's been given a second chance to realise how amazingly flawlessly perfect and dreamy Sam really is, and the guy uses the opportunity to get all lovey-dovey and kissy-face. Pure oestrogen-laced wish-fulfilment all the way, If Only *feels like the movie version of the statement "One day I'll be dead and you'll wish you were nicer to me!" And all I can say to that is,* Oh shut up! *Plus for a romantic dramedy, there's no sense of sincere romance or compelling drama, and there's even less in the wit and comedy department - unless you consider Ms. Hewitt's consistently inept performances a special form of entertaining. Which I sorta do.*

Scott Weinberg, *DVD Talk*, 17 June 2006

IMDb: I recently saw this on cable, and I don't know what was worse - the story, the acting, Jennifer Love Hewitt's shameless self promotion, the dialogue (both in the script and as executed with varying accents) or the message (strong attraction = true love = proving your love with the ultimate sacrifice). You'd be better off seeing *Groundhog Day* for the umpteenth time rather than this vanity movie-of-the-week / Whatever is Wilkinson doing in a film as poor as this? / Avoid like the plague. People who make films this bad should be shot / So unbelievable, stupid, unromantic and boring. None of the actors were at all convincing, except maybe Tom Wilkinson, although I do think slightly less of him for taking part in this putrid rot / I watched this with my wife and by the end we were both in tears of pain due to the awful cheesiness of the direction. I can honestly say I have never seen anything like it. It makes *Love Actually* look understated! The script is terrible and the storyline average at best / As a musician I am disgusted that a plot like this should get through and make it to the screen! / Painfully stupid / I do enjoy romantic films, but this one goes a couple of miles too far. Sometimes you know minutes in advance what the characters will say or do. The performances are horribly overdrawn and unnatural. If you're a fan of moist and distorted faces, go watch this movie, subtle as a demolition ball / Tragic / Anybody who says this film is any better than dire is not your friend. The scene with her in the conference room must be the saddest I hopefully will ever see. The singing is your average white girl soul stuff and, okay, she can look kinda cute but, *man*, she sure can't act! / Even the very able Tom Wilkinson struggles to look competent when faced with acting into a rear-view mirror, a technique which fails to hide his obvious disdain / The story was a waste, the writing was a waste and the so predictable ending was a waste. The one good thing about *If Only* is that, after a while, it ends.

ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (2004)



In the capable hands of charismatic leads Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet (see also *Sense And Sensibility*), Charlie Kaufman's Oscar and BAFTA-winning screenplay becomes a pleasantly engaging 103 minute flight of whimsy that I remember enjoying thoroughly on its release and somewhat less so on revisiting a dozen years on, when it struck me as, while novel, too elaborate and confusing for its own good. TW plays chief memory eraser Dr. Mierzwiak. Left field fun.

* * * * *

Memory is a harsh mistress. The same human characteristic that serves to preserve all of our happiest moments can also haunt us with our tragedies and troubles. But what if that could be changed? What if you could selectively eliminate any memories you wanted to forget? And what if it was surprisingly affordable? Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind, *written by red-hot screen-writer Charlie Kaufmann* (Being John Malkovich, Adaptation), *explores this very question through the lens of a failed romance. The result is a fascinating film, one that raises deep philosophical issues without turning into a turgid lecture on life. Largely overlooked by moviegoers (but not critics) during its theatrical release, this is unquestionably one of the best films of the year. It moved me in a profound way; a way no other film has ever moved me. I'd like to beg your collective indulgences while I commit the cardinal sin of bringing too much of the reviewer into the review. Of all the traits that make us human, memory is the most mixed of the "gifts" from our Maker. It gives, but can take as well. Whether or not it was their intent, Charlie Kaufmann and director Michel Gondry have managed to illustrate this brilliantly, in a way that only poets usually accomplish. For this is a film all about memory - about the cruel tricks it can play on us and the profound joys it can simultaneously bring.*

Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind *is nominally a comedy, albeit a dark comedy. And indeed, it is a funny movie (albeit darkly funny). But it is so much more than that. It is a psychological autopsy of a relationship gone wrong; a relationship that goes awry despite the burning desire of both parties to make it work. We first learn of the trials and ultimate collapse that the Joel / Clementine relationship undergoes. All of this comes as a shock, because we've seen how ... well,* cute *they are together on the train in the opening act, and suddenly they're obviously coming apart at the seams. Once we figure out the underlying plot - Joel is having his memories erased after Clementine had hers done - we start to understand the narrative. We're going backwards through their relationship, on a journey through Joel's memories; something they themselves did not have the opportunity (or desire) to do. Ultimately Clementine herself becomes our guide. But who is she, really? Is it the real Clementine, who has forged some kind of psychic or Jungian connection with Joel? Is it Joel's conscience, calling him out for his failures? Or is it Joel's conscious self in disguise, finally analysing his life and recognising the turning points he missed? And, in the end, does it really* matter *who is guiding us, as long as the journey is made?*

Eventually the journey leads us back to the beginning - the time when Joel and Clementine first fell in love. All is well at this point; Joel's knowledge of what we know was to come for them makes these scenes all the more melancholy. But it also demonstrates something important: these two fell in love for a reason*. It was not something that lacked a basis in reality; these people meshed. And then, it is gone. The entire relationship, good and bad, has disappeared. This is Kaufmann's deftest play in the script: he forces each of us, in our own way, to ask ourselves whether Joel has done the right thing. And it's a question many of us should - or even must - answer in our own lives as well. I doubt there's a single person out there who wouldn't consider this kind of mental erasing procedure if it were a reality, especially in the context of romantic relationships. Nothing is more personal, nothing is more sensitive, and nothing burns deeper into our memories, with more violence, than a love affair gone bad (with the probable exception of parental abuse at a young age). Some people are gifted with short memories - they live for the moment, and memories have no place in their psychological makeup. But, for the rest of us, memories linger. Personally, I'm one of the sorriest lot. I've been cursed with a good memory. It's not an intrinsically bad thing - after all, it helped me skate through grade school and high school with a minimum of effort. But it also haunts me, storing details of not just the good times but also all of the petty failures, moments of transitory pain or shame, and, of course, all the major catastrophes from my 34 years of existence. All of them right there, waiting, ready to spring out when most unwanted and most unexpected. Alexander Pope, the great English poet, knew of what I speak.* Epistle From Eloisa To Abelard, *which gives this movie its title, is the tale of a woman haunted by the memory of love, who runs to a*

convent in an attempt to replace her love of Abelard (whom she cannot be with, for societal reasons) with her love of God. She fails, and lives out her days unable to shed the memory of what might have been.

Like many (perhaps all) people in the world (save for the most fortunate among us), I have my own Abelard; my own Clementine in my past. I doubt I'll ever feel quite the same about another person ever again. Despite two years of our best efforts to remain close friends after failing in romance, things finally ruptured once and for all over the umpteenth pointless fight caused by miscommunication and stubbornness. We haven't spoken for nearly three years. There are a lot of painful memories in my head, the foremost being the knowledge that a once-wonderful friendship seems to no longer exist. But the good times are still in my memory as well; and through memory, she still makes me smile and laugh. And yet, like Joel wandering among his memories of Clementine, I realise that none of this is real. The true person has moved on from me; I know nothing of her life today - who she loves, from whom she seeks comfort, who makes her *laugh. All I know is that it ain't me, and all I have is the echo of someone who once was, but who no longer may be the person I knew.*

And then I watched Eternal Sunshine *and, as Bob Dylan said, every one of them words rang true and glowed like burnin' coal. I was with Joel every step of the way, because I, too, have often secretly wished I could erase my Clementine from memory.* Of course *that would be a good idea, that would get rid of the bad memories and solve all my problems - right? But eventually, the movie confronted me with its key question: was it a good idea for Joel to erase Clementine? And therefore, would I be right to erase my own Clementine if I could? I found, to my surprise, that I couldn't answer the question. I thought about the subtext of the film; the idea that Joel and Clementine, after the procedure, were fated to just repeat their original relationship. Does that change the calculus? Are things truly inalterable, rendering the erasure pointless? After a long period of thinking, I came to my own personal conclusion about the film, and its message: Whatever pain and suffering Joel and Clementine may have had, there was also great joy in their relationship. That joy is valuable. Was Joel right to erase Clementine? Ultimately, I think the answer has to be no. In doing so, he lost the part of her that had become an intrinsic part of him, and therefore diminished himself. But only at the end of the film do we realise the message that was there for all to see right at the beginning: there is* always *hope for change, even if we can't see how it could possibly happen. It's an uplifting message; one that (ironically) was not intended in the original script (as Kaufmann discusses in his commentary) and probably isn't intended in the final product. Yet that's what I took away from the film and that is why it is a great film: it doesn't spoon-feed us trite Dr. Phil-level solutions to virtually unsolvable problems. It gives us the naked facts of*

this relationship, and lets us *decide who's "right" and who's "wrong," if those terms are even applicable in this instance. And it does so via a unique narrative, in a brilliantly photographed picture, with subtle and nuanced performances from its stars. How many films today make you* think *- make you actually sit down and ask yourself "How does this relate to my life, and my personal situation?" Films that achieve this, and that do so without insulting the audience's intelligence, are true gems of cinema.*

Jim Carrey is shockingly good in this role. Carrey has made his name as a rubber-faced over-the-top slapstick comedian, but here he shows tremendous dramatic skill and - gasp! - subtlety. This role, for him, is the equivalent of Bill Murray's Oscar-nominated turn in Lost In Translation *- a performance that will forever change our views of him. Winslet, whose acting skills are often over-looked, is unexpectedly perfect as Clementine. She even manages to pull off a flawless American accent. Wilkinson, Ruffalo, and Wood don't really have large roles, but do bring life to their characters. The only weak link is Kirsten Dunst who plays Mary Svevo, Lacuna's receptionist. She's the key figure in the film's primary subplot, but her performance left me a bit cold. There could have been more substance in her character, but there wasn't. Still, I wouldn't call her performance "bad" - just disappointing.*

Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind *is a powerful and fascinating film that deserves powerful praise. It is more true-to-life than any similarly-themed film has ever been, despite its "sci-fi" plot. It is strikingly different in style, but crystal clear in its message. It is a story that is movingly told and to which virtually every viewer should be able to relate somehow. If you are a movie fan, or someone who has had your heart broken, you owe it to yourself to investigate this shining gem. I struggled for nearly two weeks to come up with a good, non-routine way to review it. Then, I unexpectedly received an email from my Clementine - the first contact in nearly three years. Suddenly, I was thrown into Joel's shoes all over again, but this time with direct urgency - and suddenly I knew what I had to write. Joel discovered, buried in the depths of his memory, some messages he should have been able to communicate directly to Clementine, but which probably would have fallen on deaf or unwilling ears had he done so, because the time for them had long since passed. Will that happen to me? Am I metaphorically sitting on that train back from Montauk now, about to rediscover the things that once established a strong friendship? I don't know. All I know is that I'm not going to wish my Clementine out of my memory any more, because* Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind *showed me the true costs of that action. That, my friends, is the mark of a powerful motion picture - one I wholeheartedly recommend.*

David Ryan, *DVD Verdict*, 15 November 2004

STAGE BEAUTY (2004)



In 1999, having been inspired by a comment in Pepys' diary about Edward Kynaston, mid seventeenth century London's pre-eminent interpreter of female theatrical parts, Jeffrey Hatcher wrote *Compleat Female Stage Beauty*, a stage play he subsequently adapted for the screen. Directed by Richard Eyre (*Iris, Notes On A Scandal*) and starring Billy Crudup and Claire Danes, the resultant 106 minute film is splendid, redolently recreating the period while managing to remain wholly fresh and accessible, which is no mean trick. TW plays actor-manager Thomas Betterton, alongside Rupert Everett as Charles II, Ben Chaplin (*Mad Dogs*) and Hugh Bonneville as Samuel Pepys. Recommended.

IMDb: Those who have something invested in keeping the boundaries of gender and sexuality rigid will be offended by this film. I think it's a mistaken angle, however. My only complaints were minor, involving poor editing, unnecessary dialogue and a couple of unlikely scenarios (e.g. the carriage ladies' hyperbolic reaction to Ned's petticoat surprise). Otherwise, I loved it. For me, this story was about identity, authenticity, the malleability of gender and sexuality and the difference between love and projection. At the bustling outset of the film, Ned (pitch-perfect Billy Crudup, ravishing in any incarnation) is arrogant and narcissistic, his self-regard balanced precariously on a constructed self that relies on the applause of others. Alone with Maria, we get a glimmer of something else in him when he pauses contemplatively to quote his mentor: *Never forget that you are a man in woman's form - or is it the other way round?* This hint of an awareness (on his or the film's part) of the essential duality of human nature is echoed by Maria: *You would make as fine a man as any woman*. When Ned loses his role and his audience to Maria, he loses his very identity - in this way, she "kills" him. The theme of killing and dying is cleverly woven throughout the narrative, both onstage and off. Lost and literally beaten, Ned turns to his former lover, who spurns him with droll indifference. Ned is no longer the shallow Duke's glittering projection but a raw, needy and very messy human being. Ned's disastrous last-ditch attempt to play Othello for the king in order to save his livelihood is the final humiliation. Maria watches his disintegration onstage and grasps his utter vulnerability for the first time. It's a credit to Claire Danes' talent that she can speak volumes without uttering a word:

in this scene and the inn scene her unexpressed love bleeds from every pore. The almost-sex scene between the two at the inn is one of my favourite love scenes in any film. The gentle role-switching from "man" to "woman" leads to a passionate confusion. But do the roles really matter? The harrowing climax of the film has the viewer wondering, along with the theatre audience, if the newfound Othello's murderous passion is real. And it is, which is why Ned is so good at it. In "killing" Maria onstage, he manages at once to work out his Othello-like ambivalence and rage toward a woman he also loves, to "kill" her affected stage persona and to give birth to himself as an authentic actor in his own male body. It's damn near perfect. "Finally got the death scene right." Ned may not yet know who or even what he is, but he finds expression of his innermost being with a person who loves and accepts him for whomever he may turn out to be. We should all be so lucky / We sat for the first few minutes wondering whether we'd come to the right film (expecting a formulaic period romp). And for a little while I was prepared to spend the rest of the evening apologising to my partner for the slowness and oddness of the film. But once our disbelief had been suspended and we'd got used to its cramped feel (more like a staged version than cinematic at times), we both loved it. Danes acted well (though the hyperventilation happened once too often) and Crudup brought a complexity to his role that I rarely see. *Stage Beauty* is frequently compared to *Shakespeare In Love*, and while I enjoyed the light snack of Gwyneth, Fiennes and assorted luvvies in the latter and have sat through the DVD time and again, that film has a predictability that *Stage Beauty* lacks. Even as we watched it, we didn't know whether its 'love element' would ever work out. I do not see the development of the relationship between Danes and Crudup as a conversion from gay to straight. Instead I see a problematic progress from an imposed gender identity (perpetuated through sexual fantasy by Buckingham) to an unknowing but more satisfying state, where it's being yourself (whatever that is) rather than performing a role that counts. I think that this is relevant to all of us as we perform the roles created by ourselves and those with influence over our upbringing. We can't easily escape them (and some are more hammy than others in their performance) but the knowledge that life is performative and complex is, for me, liberating. And all that from a costume drama! / Everett's performance as Charles II is his best (and that is saying a lot) in many, many moons. Comparisons with *Shakespeare In Love* are unavoidable but not helpful. See *Stage Beauty* for what it is and you'll enjoy it thoroughly / The play is the thing and the acting here is uniformly engrossing, indeed superb: Crudup is penetrating as a man whose whole strange persona is transformed in an instant by a monarch's command. Everett as the Stuart monarch is disarmingly foppish but in a critical scene reveals his deep, lasting resentment over his father's and his dynasty's fate as he orders women to be allowed to perform. Edward Fox is splendid in short takes as Charles's key minister, Sir Edward Hyde. Feature film debutante Zoe Tapper may well have studied the life of "The Protestant Whore" - crude, raw, vulgar, sentimental, loyal and cunning, she *is* Nell Gwyn. Bonneville plays the randy, compulsive diarist Sir Samuel Pepys, father of the Royal Navy, here a stage door Johnny, a voyeur, Chaplin as the Duke of Buckingham is just the right admixture of randiness and a healthy regard for the penalty that can be incurred by going too far over the edge of conventionality and Wilkinson as Ned's and then Maria's impresario combines business acumen with a soft human touch. But special kudos to Danes - this is her best performance to date. She runs the gamut of emotions from helpless subservience to repressive laws to sprightly awakening of her worth to deep confusion about her priorities and needs. She inhabits the role of Maria with skill and grace - an Oscar-worthy display / A tour de force.

A GOOD WOMAN (2004)



This screen adaptation of Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* relocates the action from London to Italy's stunning Amalfi coast but otherwise sticks pleasingly close to both story and style, resulting in a frank examination of relationships within a cliquey, gossipy expat society, served with oodles of sparkling repartee and aphorisms galore. Helen Hunt is fine as American adventuress Lady Erlynne and Scarlett Johansson (see *Girl With A Pearl Earring*) makes a suitably ingénue Lady Windermere. TW plays Tuppy, a man content to accept Erlynne for what she is. His wife Diana Hardcastle also features. 84 minutes. Very good.

IMDb: The real star here is Wilkinson, so endearingly silly that you can't help but care for him more than the others / Wilde's wonderful wit is placed squarely in the hands of Wilkinson and Stephen Campbell Moore (Lord Darlington). Wilkinson is humorous and believable and by far the most enjoyable character in the film. Campbell Moore seemed at first somehow too clean cut for his part, but definitely grew on me. His dissipated air was nicely done / I enjoyed the beauty of this film and would urge people who particularly enjoy cinematic imagery to see it / Truly great / This is entertainment of a type hardly seen nowadays - intelligent, genuinely funny and all put into gorgeous pictures. A minor masterpiece / When it comes to playwrights who can manipulate the English language with flair, endless *double entendres* and clever dialogue, few can match Oscar Wilde. In this wholly entertaining and luxurious adaptation of his play *Lady Windemere's Fan,* screenwriter Howard Himelstein and director Mike Barker have created a bright confection of film that is bubbling with sex, scandal, seduction, secrets and all manner of romantic subterfuge. It is a winner all around. The setting has been updated very successfully to the 1930s and the costumes and extraordinary views and vistas of Amalfi are a perfect marriage. Hunt gives a fine portrayal of a character at first difficult to like, Johansson once again proves that her dramatic skills are equal to her beauty and Wilkinson and the cast toss Wilde's wonderful lines into the air like butterflies. This very special film touches the brain, the heart and the sense of humour in a most delectable manner. Highly recommended / A must see movie / Hurray!

PICCADILLY JIM (2005)



The problem with adapting Wodehouse for the screen is that his superlative books are an impossible act to follow. Screenwriting is a reductive medium that extracts plot, characters, sense, perhaps even some of the dialogue, but then throws the rest away - and, in the case of Wodehouse, that "rest" is where the magic lies; is what makes the books so unique and even the best screen treatment (1995's *Heavy Weather*) fall short. This one, written by Julian Fellowes (see also *Separate Lies*) and performed by an experienced cast including Hugh Bonneville, Brenda Blethyn, Geoffrey Palmer and, as Bingley Crocker, TW, is the usual frothy concoction of butlers, cocktails, flappers, aliases and transatlantic buffoonery, but all to precious little end. Coarse, crass and insubstantial. 90m.

IMDb: A hugely misguided effort that backfires in all departments. Even the likes of Brenda Blethyn and Alison Janey fall short, while Frances O'Connor is completely out of her depth. Only Sam Rockwell, though miscast, is terrific. Steer clear / I love P.G.'s books and they are all eminently adaptable to film, yet, somehow, the makers if this fiasco failed in what should have been a simple and enjoyable endeavour. This could have been either a period piece or a modern adaptation, yet is neither - instead it is a mishmash of references best suited to some sort of high school dramatic review. Do not pay money to see this! / This film has no redeeming features whatsoever - no wit, no style and no fun. Piccadilly Grim / PG must be turning in his grave / If you are a Wodehouse fan looking for a faithful adaptation of *Piccadilly Jim* then avoid this film at all costs. The director has bastardised the book's clear historical period so that all sense of nostalgia is lost - the sets are cheap, bland reproductions of Art Deco, the cars a strange and offensive fusion of modern and vintage, the camera angles and lighting are self indulgent to the extent that houses are made to look like night clubs for so called dramatic effect, the costumes are ghastly, and don't get me started on the hairstyles. Worse still, the script is frankly insulting to any true Wodehouse fan, with all of his uniquely beautiful language scrapped in favour of a simplified, dumbed-down, consumer-friendly screenplay in which much of the original magic is lost. But never mind. Forget about this film. Do yourself a favour and pick up the book instead.

BATMAN BEGINS (2005)



Apart from its surfeit of first reel cod Eastern philosophical hogwash, this well-turned hokum is fun. It's also impressively star-studded: Christian Bale (see also *Prince Of Jutland*), Morgan Freeman, Linus Roache (*Priest*), Cillian Murphy (*Girl With A Pearl Earring*), Gary Oldman, Liam Neeson, Ken Watanabe, career bad dude Rutger Hauer and even Michael Caine as an unlikely Cockney butler all feature. TW plays Gotham City crime lord Carmine Falcone - neither his first such characterisation (see *Essex Boys*) nor (*RocknRolla, Fury* etc) his last. Does what it says on the tin. 134 minutes.

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Batman Begins *at last penetrates to the dark and troubled depths of the Batman legend, creating a superhero who, if not plausible, is at least persuasive as a man driven to dress like a bat and become a vigilante. The movie doesn't simply supply Batman's beginnings in the tradition of a comic book origin story, but explores the tortured path that led Bruce Wayne from a parentless childhood to a friendless adult existence. The movie is not realistic, because how could it be, but it acts as if it is.*

Opening in a prison camp in an unnamed nation, Batman Begins *shows Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) enduring brutal treatment as a prisoner, as part of his research into the nature of evil. He is rescued by the mysterious Henri Ducard (Liam Neeson), who appoints himself Wayne's mentor, teaches him sword-fighting and mind control, and tries to enlist him in his amoral League of Shadows ("We burned London to the ground").*

When Wayne refuses to kill someone as a membership requirement, Ducard becomes his enemy. The reclusive millionaire returns to Gotham City determined to fight evil, without realising quite how much trouble he is in. The story

of why he identifies with bats (childhood trauma) and hates evildoers (he saw his parents killed by a mugger) has been referred to many times in the various incarnations of the Batman legend, including four previous films. This time, it is given weight and depth. Wayne discovers in Gotham that the family Wayne Corp. is run by a venal corporate monster (Rutger Hauer), but that in its depths labours the almost forgotten scientific genius Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), who understands Wayne wants to fight crime and offers him the weaponry.

Lucius happens to have on hand a prototype Batmobile, which unlike the streamlined models in the earlier movies, is a big, unlovely juggernaut that looks like a Humvee's wet dream. He also devises a bat-cape with surprising properties. These preparations, Gotham crime details and the counsel of the faithful servant Alfred (Michael Caine) delay the actual appearance of Batman until the second act of the movie.

We don't mind. Unlike the earlier films, which delighted in extravagant special effects action, Batman Begins *is shrouded in shadow - instead of high-detail, sharp-edged special effects, we get obscure developments in fog and smoke, reinforced by a superb sound-effects design. And Wayne himself is a slow learner, clumsy at times, taking foolish chances, inventing Batman as he goes along.*

This is at last the Batman movie I've been waiting for. The character resonates more deeply with me than the other comic superheroes, perhaps because when I discovered him as a child, he seemed darker and more grown-up than the cheerful Superman. He has secrets. As Alfred muses: "Strange injuries and a nonexistent social life. These things beg the question, what does Bruce Wayne do with his time?" What he does is create a high profile as a millionaire playboy who gets drunk and causes scenes. This disappoints Rachel Dawes (Katie Holmes), his friend since childhood, who is now an assistant D.A. She and Lt. James Gordon (Gary Oldman), apparently Gotham City's only honest cop, are faced with a local crime syndicate led by Carmine Falcone (Tom Wilkinson). But Falcone's gang is child's play compared to the deep scheme being hatched by the corrupt psychiatrist Dr. Jonathan Crane (Cillian Murphy) who, in the tradition of Victorian alienists, likes to declare his enemies insane and lock them up.

Crane's secret identity as the Scarecrow fits into a scheme to lace the Gotham water supply with a psychedelic drug. Then a superweapon will be used to vaporise the water, citizens will inhale the drug and it will drive them crazy, for reasons which the Scarecrow and his confederates explain with more detail than clarity. Meanwhile, flashbacks establish the character's deepest traumas, including his special relationship with bats and his guilt because he thinks he is responsible for his parents' mugging.

I admire, among other things, the way the movie doesn't have the gloss of the earlier films. The Batman costume is an early design. The Bat Cave is an actual cave beneath Wayne Manor. The Batmobile enters and leaves it by leaping across a chasm and through a waterfall. The Bat Signal is crude and out of focus. The movie was shot on location in Chicago, making good use of the murky depths of lower Wacker Drive and the Board of Trade building (now the Wayne Corp.). Special effects add a spectacular monorail down La Salle Street, which derails in the best scene along those lines since The Fugitive*. Bale is just right for this emerging version of Batman. It's strange to see him muscular and toned, after his cadaverous appearance in* The Machinist, *but he suggests an inward quality that suits the character. Rachel is at first fooled by his facade of playboy irresponsibility, but Lt. Gordon figures out fairly quickly what Batman is doing and why. Instead of one villain as the headliner,* Batman Begins *has a whole population including Falcone, the Scarecrow, Asian League of Shadows leader Ra's Al Ghul (Ken Watanabe) and a surprise bonus pick.*



The movie has been directed by Christopher Nolan, still only 35, whose Memento *(2000) took Sundance by storm and was followed by* Insomnia *(2002), a police procedural with Al Pacino. What Warner Bros. saw in those pictures that inspired them to think of Nolan is hard to say, but the studio guessed correctly and, after an eight-year hiatus, the Batman franchise has finally found its way. I said this is the Batman movie I've been waiting for; more correctly, this is the movie I did not realise I was waiting for, because I didn't realise that more emphasis on story and character and less emphasis on high-tech action was just what was needed. The movie works dramatically in addition to being an entertainment. There's something to it.*

Roger Ebert, 13 June 2005

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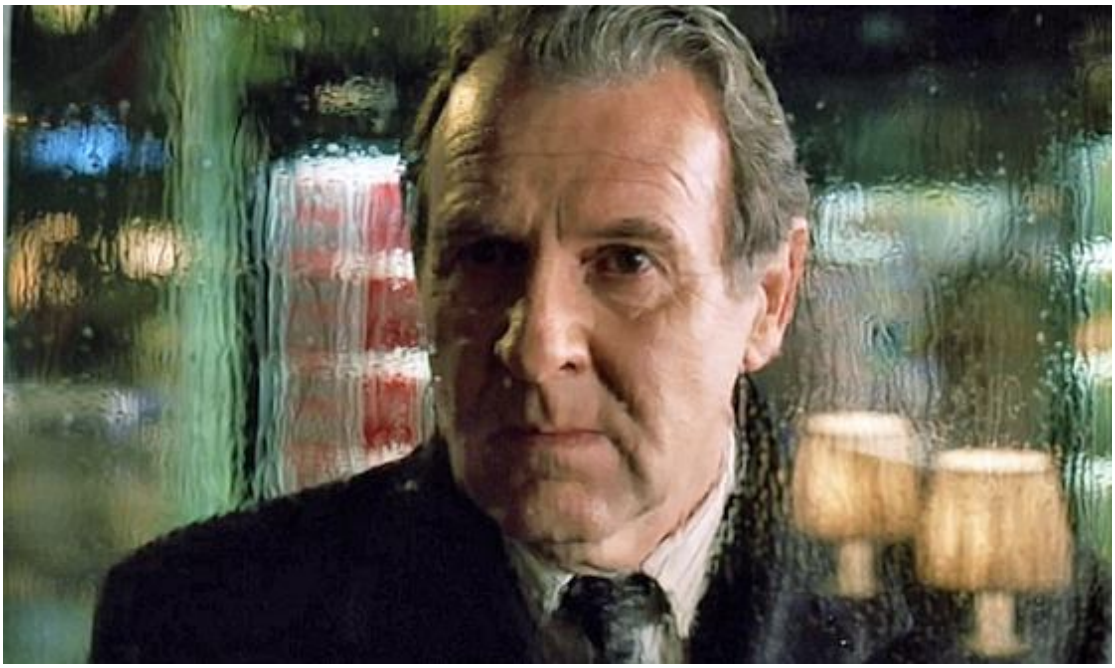
THE EXORCISM OF EMILY ROSE (2005)



After *All Things Bright And Beautiful, Priest*, *Oscar And Lucinda* etc, TW dons the dog collar yet again to play Catholic cleric Father Moore, on trial for negligent homicide after an allegedly possessed girl dies soon after his attempted exorcism of her six demons. Based on a true story, the film is a satisfying if scarcely credible gothic courtroom drama with Laura Linney. 117 minutes. Good.

IMDb: A lesson in filmmaking. I know a lot of people won't be able to see it for what it is because of the supernatural/horror elements (usually a turn-off for film snobs), but the movie is extremely well made / While not very frightening, the film's juxtaposition of courtroom drama and the exorcism scenes is intriguing. I found it to be less of a stereotypical demonic possession movie (e.g. *The Exorcist*) and more of a film that leaves you pondering the possibilities and questioning our more modern perspectives and scientific rationales for things that sometimes can't be adequately explained through these means. And the fact that it's based on the reported possession of Anneliese Michel (circa 1970, Germany) does make it more unnerving / Linney and Wilkinson give strong performances, bringing many layers to their characters. Quite the quality piece overall, well worth seeing / One of the most unsettling, disturbing and thought-provoking dramas of the last few years. Highly recommended / The film presents both sides quite well and there are times when you have to really make an effort to avoid switching perspectives. In the end, it's very clear what the writers and filmmakers set out to do, but it's an intense and very emotional two hours. The film works very well because of Wilkinson's fiery priest and the outstanding work of Campbell Scott as Emily Rose - but it belongs to Laura Linney in what might be her most powerful performance yet / If you ignore the assertion that this has all happened in reality and just accept that you're in for a supernatural movie, you'll have a gay ol' time with *Emily Rose*. The first thing to mention is that there has never been a combination of horror movie and courtroom drama before, and while some reviewers have stated that the two genres don't go together well, I disagree. The courtroom setting added a lot of suspense to the story and horror movies always work best when there is suspense added to the spooky and creepy elements. And, boy, does this movie have some creepy scenes / A modest masterpiece / Wow! / A horror film with class.

SEPARATE LIES (2005)



Separate Lies is a cracking drama freely adapted by the prolific Julian Fellowes (the Oscar-winning *Gosford Park*, all of *Downton Abbey* and more) from a Nigel Balchin novel called *A Way Through The Wood*. Fellowes (who appears in both *A Very Open Prison* and *Crossing The Floor* - see above) also directs for the first time, and conspicuously well too. Of course, it doesn't hurt to be blessed with a troupe led by seasoned pros TW and Emily Watson as childless couple - he a City solicitor, she a trophy wife - James and Anne Manning. In 1999's *An Ideal Husband*, Rupert Everett played frivolous Lord Goring to perfection and he reprises with equal success a darker, edgier version of that portrayal here. Jeremy Child (see *First Among Equals*) pops up briefly. The narrative tackles issues of guilt, responsibility and obligation via a simple but wholly effective plot elegantly performed and stylishly captured. 81 minutes. Recommended.

IMDb: This stunning film, raw and sublimely moving, felt like a very gripping stage play (minus the overly theatrical feeling one gets from actually watching people on a stage) about everyone's terror of a white lie escalating to monstrous consequences. All of the main players are mesmerising. Wilkinson broke my heart at the end - as well as everyone else's, judging by the amount of fumbling for hankies and hands going up to faces among men and women alike. Julian Fellowes has triumphed again. He's a national treasure. *Gosford Park, Vanity Fair, Mary Poppins* and now this. Can he do no wrong?! / Fellowes' directorial choices are superb. The linear plot is easy to follow, but the beauty of the film lies in each player's metamorphosis as a single incident ignites a minefield of disasters. This is ensemble playing at its finest / Elegant, intelligent and thought-provoking. I could have watched Wilkinson forever / Authentic, intellectual, brilliant! / With his best performance since *In The Bedroom*, Wilkinson holds the film together. He's used so often to fulfil the stereotype of a self-satisfied suburban or upper crust executive that one forgets it can be done with such subtlety and verve.

RIPLEY UNDER GROUND (2005)



Patricia Highsmith wrote five Ripley novels, the first three of which have been filmed: *The Talented Mr Ripley* in 1960 (as *Purple Noon*) and 1999, *Ripley Under Ground* in 2005 and *Ripley's Game* in 1977 (as *The American Friend*) and 2002. In this cracking adaptation, a tempestuous young artist called Derwatt kills himself on the cusp of fame, leading his agent plus Ripley and two others to conceal the fact of his death until they can jointly cash in on his breaking reputation. TW plays Scotland Yard detective John Webster who (a feature of the Ripley yarns) fails to get his man. Despite a couple of minor plot holes, this is fun. With Willem Dafoe and a Simon Callow cameo. 97 minutes. Good.

IMDb: If you liked *The Talented Mr. Ripley* because it was so dark, you probably won't like this, which is more of a noir comedy with some mystery aspects / It is clear that this is a (second) sequel that has lost budget and quality. The few effects are simply not good enough and the story, not really believable or engaging, is a little over the top with too many accidents or random events that are just too convenient. And Tom Ripley is hard to sympathise with / Though entertaining, this film is not true to the character of Ripley as conceived by Highsmith and portrayed in the previous two films. Ripley is not an accidental psychopath but a professional one who is completely conscious of all his actions and perfectly comfortable with them. He has excellent taste and a vast knowledge of everything beyond his means, so he cheats, steals and kills to satisfy his desires. Ripley never protests or acts against the mainstream but simply has his own ways and means and executes them effectively. The Ripley that Barry Pepper portrays in this film is not even close to that interestingly complicated case study, but, rather, boringly human, ordinary and commonplace. If your wish is to penetrate the mind of Ripley - one of the literature's most unique characters - watch *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Ripley's Game* instead. This film does not get it / I liked it, not as a Highsmith, but as a fine and entertaining movie in its own right / Intriguing plot, strong acting and the ending - just perfect! All in all, a very pleasant surprise.

THE NIGHT OF THE WHITE PANTS (2005)



No Oscar winner, but, despite its clunky title, moderately entertaining fare, not as radical or cutting edge as it thinks it is, but all the better for that. Reunites TW and Nick Stahl (previously father and son in *In The Bedroom*). For more detail, see review attached. 84 minutes.

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The dysfunctional family comedy The Night Of The White Pants *marks writer-director Amy Talkington's first feature-length effort and it's an admirable achievement given the production's low-budget constraints. This tale, set in Dallas, Texas and its indie music scene, receives a big boost from the strong acting talents assembled. With a touch more polish to the script, this would have been a little gem.*

Dallas business tycoon Max Hagan (Tom Wilkinson) is having a bad night. Recovering from a heart attack and the sale of his company, he's also in the middle of divorce proceedings with his second wife. On the night when his daughter Beth (Selma Blair) brings home her punk rocker boyfriend Raff (Nick Stahl) for dinner, Max loses possession of his house. With nowhere to go, Max accompanies Raff - who is also a part-time marijuana dealer - on a night of sex, drugs, rock 'n roll and a little breaking and entering too.

The reliable British actor Tom Wilkinson puts in a nice comedic performance as the down-on-his-luck millionaire. He's a charming old guy trying to hang on to his crumbling world. When we first meet him, Max still owns his big house where he lives with his sister Lolly (Geri Jewell), who is impaired by cerebral

palsy, and his drug-addicted son Millian (Fran Kranz). Max continues to ignore the legal papers that he's been served and he barely has the energy to get dressed in the morning. But note how he puts on an apron in lieu of pants before answering the door. The man still has some *dignity. As he spends the night cruising around the city with Raff, Max learns to cut loose. Horny and high, he remains a charmer behind slightly crazed eyes.*

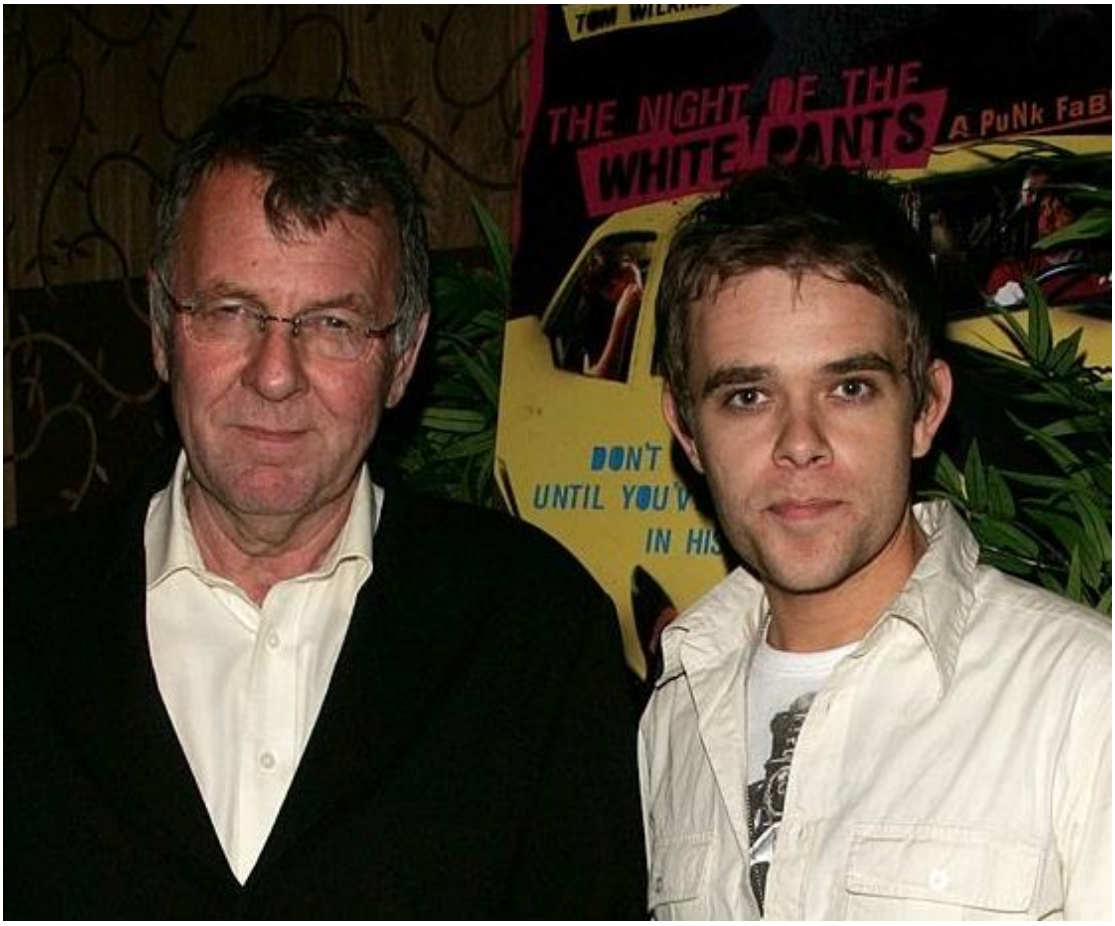
The problem, however, is that Max is a very likeable character throughout the movie. Introduced in a voice-over narration, we're told that Max was a typical rich asshole who only cared about his big house and trophy wife until his health and fortune changed. Consequently, the character's biggest transformation has already occurred just as this story is beginning. Viewers who have seen Wilkinson in Guy Ritchie's RocknRolla *know the actor can play a villain who invites our scorn and pity simultaneously. In* The Night Of The White Pants, *he's not required to display that same range so Max's renaissance is a pretty modest journey over the course of this movie.*

With consideration to the budgetary and logistical restrictions of the production, Amy Talkington crafted a story that sticks to her locale. Dallas is her hometown and Talkington makes good use of real locations, including her mother's house as the Hagan family's home. Many favours and freebies were wrangled and the movie owes a lot of its rich, convincing detail to the goodwill of the community. The independent music scene is also close to the director and she makes good use of pre-existing source music on the movie's soundtrack. However, her characterisation of Raff as a punk rocker with a "Screw everything!" attitude is unconvincing.

Nick Stahl is good as a young musician trying to find his big break. He sells some pot on the side but he also has an idea for a legitimate business. That he makes an honest effort to get along with Beth's family makes him a very likable, if slightly dull, character. The shortcoming of the character is that he's not a very threatening element to Max's world. We know right away that Max will benefit from Raff's influence and vice versa. Raff also doesn't appear to be desperate or daring enough to be a pot dealer. Where Talkington takes her biggest misstep is the portrayal of Raff's band. After establishing Raff as a punk rocker and hearing his band mates explain the punk scene to Max, when we finally hear them perform, their sound turns out to be very pop-rock safe. Admittedly, I've never attended a club act in Dallas, but you'd have to really open up the "punk" label to include Raff's band. Looking past these qualities that don't ring true in Raff, Stahl and Wilkinson play off each other nicely. The surprise in this comic pairing is that the young dude is the straight man.

It isn't easy to make a movie under the best conditions, but Talkington's low-budget debut feature demonstrates strong and confident filmmaking skills. She

makes good use of the resources she's given and the result is a handsome and detailed production that features some good Dallas locations. Though I feel her story is too "safe," it may be the sensibility that appeals to other viewers. Aside from the language and drug content that earned it an R rating, the brand of light dysfunction in this movie could be suited to broader family viewing. The mild sex and drugs references make this the kind of wild and crazy night you can bring home to meet your mother.

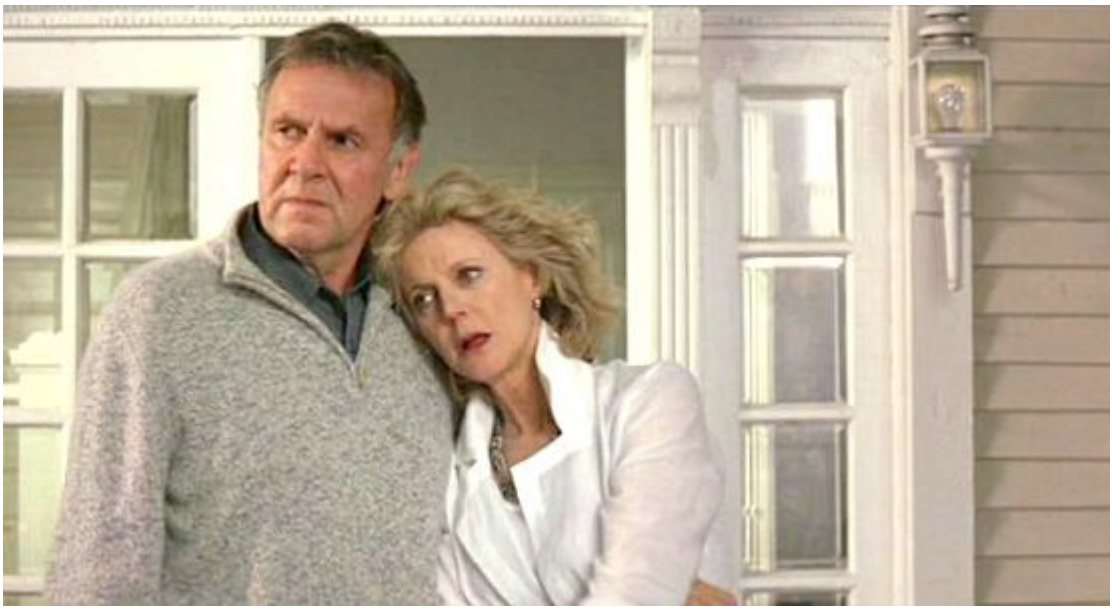


TW and Nick Stahl

Raff's voice-over narration states: "It was one of those nights when crazy shit that just cannot be explained happens." Disappointingly, that's a promise that doesn't pay off. By the standards of the average wild and crazy night in the movies, Max's adventures are really quite tame. The story lacks a convincing level of danger and it never feels like anything is put at risk. The role of villain is given to Max's greedy soon-to-be-ex-wife Barbara (Janine Turner) but she isn't given much to do besides pacing around an empty house looking irritated. (It's nice to see Turner on screen again, though, and she's perfect in the part of a trophy wife.) As for Max's pants, they play a negligible role in the action. The title, like Raff's intro narration, gets your attention but doesn't deliver the goods.

William Lee, *DVD Verdict*, 6 November 2008

THE LAST KISS (2006)



In tackling the broad theme of dysfunctional relationships, *The Last Kiss* focuses on four 29 year old men - one a single Jack the Lad, one obsessing on his ex-girlfriend, one with a pregnant partner and one with a very stressed wife and young son. All are quailing in their various ways at the prospect of marriage, children, commitment, responsibility - of *growing up*. Additionally, the pregnant girl's parents (TW and Blythe Danner, above), though thirty years wed, are having marital troubles of their own. Not bad, though why do so many American kids especially feel that they have to act like adults from the age of twelve years on while managing never to grow up - i.e. to think and feel about anyone other than themselves - at all? At least TW shines, as usual. A remake of Italian film *L'ultimo Bacio*, relocated to and filmed in Madison, WI. 104 minutes.

IMDb: Mature, thoughtful, unpretentious and sometimes even difficult, but gratifyingly good / If you're looking for a moderate movie - nothing too serious, but then nothing too fluffy - something that you can watch, maybe chuckle over a few times, or maybe something that might get you to think more deeply about relationship (and in particular if you're considering entering a long-term relationship or if you're not sure about one you're already in) then this would be just the ticket. You get into the minds of the characters - and there are quite a few you come to know - which lets you empathise with them. Some questions that I pondered watching this: Is avoidance an option in life? Is truth always the best policy? / Will probably appeal more to women than men / Overall the movie goes a lot further than your average romantic comedy or buddy film, shoving the afflictions and austerities of modern-day relationships in your face. This is not the greatest of date movies, like the trailer would have you believe, and should be perceived as more earnest and thought-provoking than it appears / While the film has a chillingly bizarre problem with its tone, the performances and story more than make up for it. This is an excellent and poignant coming of age movie, and yet another vehicle to show off the work of Zach Braff (Michael) and Oscar-winning writer Paul Haggis. And with a superb supporting cast to boot, what more can one ask?

DEDICATION (2007)



After impressing in *Stage Beauty*, Billy Crudup returns here in an uninteresting and unpersuasive love story in which he plays Henry Roth, a psychologically challenged young writer of children's books. After the death of his illustrator and mentor Rudy Holt (TW), his publisher assigns a young female replacement who struggles valiantly to cope with his deep-seated neuroses. With the help of a pebble, love, of course, conquers all. With Dianne Wiest, Martin Freeman and sometime director Peter Bogdanovich. Dreary and dull. 95 minutes.

IMDb: A story of mental disorders and people falling in love in unlikely circumstances. At times it can get scary as the writer does a great job of keeping you guessing. It's an amazing movie that I'd recommend to anyone / Predictable and disappointing / Barely watchable. If you liked this movie, God help you / In true indie fashion, this film - from first time director Justin Theroux - creates a romantic comedy with jarring bits of editing, amazing music that you'll either love or kinda hate (it's as jarring at times as the editing) and a lead performance that begs you to hate the guy. But its eventual path to being an odd romantic comedy makes it stand out from the pack / This is a wonderful film with characters that will touch the heart of anyone who has ever known or been close to someone with a severe depression, anxiety disorder or real neurosis. Although *Dedication* can be considered a romantic comedy genre film, and may follow a some-what conventional type of narrative, the actors breathe life into a story that is also a love letter to NYC / Complex and rewarding / This movie stinks / One of the most endearing films I've seen in a long time / An uncaring protagonist, choppy script and indie film flourishes can't mask a weak love story. Wilkinson easily steals his scenes both pre- and post-mortem / Watch this if you want a romance with quirky and intelligent characterisation. Considering, it is both the writer's and the director's debut feature film, it is fantastic / An easy film to recommend. Moore and Crudup are infinitely watchable and Theroux is good enough to deserve more directorial jobs. In the end, the collective talent in front of and behind the camera elevates the middling plot into a very enjoyable movie / Wilkinson huzzah! / Quirky / Weak / Perfect.

CASSANDRA'S DREAM (2007)



In need of money (one to invest in a "sure-fire business deal" and the other to pay off a loan shark) brothers Ian and Terry (Ewan McGregor and Colin Farrell, above) turn to rich Uncle Howard (TW). He surprises them by agreeing to help on condition that they murder a man (Phil Davis) about to provide damning testimony against his business interests. They do so, and then find out what price conscience and destiny will exact. While slightly less polished than the superlative *Match Point*, this third consecutive London-based film from the sure-footed Woody Allen is nonetheless engaging throughout and much better than critics would have you believe. Includes a brief Jim Carter cameo. 104m.

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In Over Their Heads, With Destiny Looming

Cassandra's Dream, *Woody Allen's latest excursion to the dark side of human nature, is good enough that you may wonder why he doesn't just stop making comedies once and for all. Perhaps that's heretical, but it's the view of someone who has accompanied Mr. Allen on all his recent follies,* The Curse Of The Jade Scorpion *included, and has too often heard her own laughter die gurgling in her throat from a lack of inspiration. There's nothing remotely funny about* Cassandra's Dream, *save perhaps that immodest title.*

As with his last two films, Match Point *(black as pitch and very fine) and* Scoop *(an amusing goof),* Cassandra's Dream *takes place in a movie-made London where the picturesque streets can turn into noirish dead ends. A well-matched*

Ewan McGregor and Colin Farrell play Ian and Terry, brothers in blood and deed. Somewhat flash, with natty suits and a jaunty walk, Ian helps run their father's struggling restaurant. Terry, in turn, works in a garage where the grease creeps under his nails and stays there. Ian dreams of making it big in real estate while Terry banks on the dog races and the poker table. They're good boys, nice guys, eager to please, fast to smile and as dedicated to each other as to the idea of family.

That idea is put to the cruel test when each brother exceeds his grasp - Ian by sleeping outside his class, Terry by losing large at cards - and both turn to their elusive, wealthy uncle for help. Dropped clumsily into the drama, Uncle Howard (Tom Wilkinson) is a classic deus ex machina *who exists simply to push Terry and Ian toward their fates. He doesn't make much sense (he swings into London abruptly), but he doesn't have to; he just has to provide the means for two ordinary men to transform into tragic characters. It's an old story and it fits Mr. Allen's pessimism nicely, in part because it's the kind of old story that predates the modern condition and the therapeutic jabber of which he has been so fond.*

Cassandra's Dream *owes more to* Oedipus Rex *than to the Oedipus complex (and something to Claude Chabrol), which doesn't mean that you can't put Ian and Terry on the couch. By all means, do. But the pleasures of this modest film are right on the surface, in the upward curve of Mr. McGregor's lips and the reverse lines of Mr. Farrell's anguish. Like Mr. Allen's instrumental visual style - lots of two-shots, simple moves - Mr. McGregor's easygoing turn takes time getting used to, partly because, as is almost always the case with this director, the actor seems to have been left to his own devices. But the performance sticks like a knife. It delivers force and feeling, as does Mr. Farrell, whose gentleness has rarely been used so effectively.*

The rest of the cast fares less well, including Mr. Wilkinson, who never finds the right pitch for his character or the monstrous fury that his most pivotal scene demands. Mr. Allen sets this scene during a rainstorm, which echoes the similarly climactic moment in Match Point, *when the secret lovers kiss and set destiny on its brutal path. Like all filmmakers, Mr. Allen steals from himself like a magpie, which wouldn't be grounds for criticism if he were a more dedicated and careful thief. Like many of his later films, though,* Cassandra's Dream *feels too lightly polished and often rushed, as if he had directed it with a stopwatch. That's too bad, because while Mr. Allen may feel as if he's running out of time, he has scarcely run out of ideas.*

Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*, 18 January 2008

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MICHAEL CLAYTON (2007)



A wonderful directing debut from Tony Gilroy, who (having previously written *Dolores Claiborne*, *The Devil's Advocate*, all three *Bourne* films and more - see also *Duplicity*) puts his own script onto the screen with sufficient style to garner seven Oscar nominations (including TW's second) resulting in just one win (for Tilda Swinton). As well as those two plus the ever dependable George Clooney and Sydney Pollack in front of the camera, a strong production team included Clooney, Pollack (also heavily involved with nursing HBO's *Recount* to fruition), Steven Soderbergh and Anthony Minghella. As troubled lawyer Arthur Edens, TW is terrific, but then it's hard to pick fault on any front - perhaps the only false step being the idea that, by tossing watch, keys and phone into a fiercely burning car, you could convince anyone that the flames had wholly consumed a human body. Not only fine, but improves on re-watching. 120 minutes.

IMDb: If you like suspense, unflinching realism, stories of moral conflict, criticism of corporate America or George Clooney - or if you're just in the mood to see that kind of film - you'll love it. On the other hand, if you're in the mood for a film to wash away the cares of the day, choose something else / Everyone involved in this movie deserves praise for producing a challenging, grown-up, movie-with-a-message in the face of a torrent of mindless nonsense. Highly recommended / As all-round entertainment to a thinking audience, *Michael Clayton* is one of this summer's better movies / A satisfying suspense flick, though you need to pay attention / Starting with a tight, stunning script by Tony Gilroy, this movie has every cylinder firing in perfect sync. The acting, first and last, is exceptional. Tom Wilkinson blazes across the screen as Arthur Edens, who has finally seen the evil within himself and wants to make it right but who, despite all his legal brilliance, is still naive enough to think he can get away with it. The direction

is taut and the cinematography and editing are cool and precise, all at the service of an elegant work that uses the suspense genre to illuminate a filthy world that has been glossed over by money and power. Magnificent in every way.

'The thing you can't fake is that he has a moral authority ... he brings a sense of gravity, detail and intelligence'

An Oscar nomination may bring the actor's actor the recognition he deserves

It is fitting, for a man often called an actor's actor that, just out of RADA, Tom Wilkinson auditioned with Hamlet's advice to the players monologue, in which the prince sets out his stall on acting and his injunction to "o'erstep not the modesty of nature". The man listening to it remembers being blown away. "It was the best audition I had ever seen," said Sir Richard Eyre. "It was startlingly real and authoritative." The audition was easily good enough for Eyre to give Wilkinson his first job as part of the ensemble at Nottingham Playhouse in 1973, where Eyre led a remarkable period of new writing - including David Hare and Howard Brenton's *Brassneck* and Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians* - and it was the start of a remarkable career in which Wilkinson has proved himself to his peers, if not necessarily to the public at large.

Most film fans would recognise Wilkinson, even if not all could not put a name to him. They would know him from his breakthrough movie, *The Full Monty*, in 1997 and they might remember him being nominated for an Oscar seven years ago. On Sunday he is a contender again, nominated in the Best Supporting Actor category for his role as the deranged, guilt-ridden lawyer in *Michael Clayton*.

In Hollywood and British film circles everyone knows Wilkinson's name. "When other actors know he's involved in a project they are always interested," said his agent of 25 years, Lou Coulson. "I just think he's one of the best. I just do. Even after 25 years I stand back and look at what he does and I'm always amazed. His performances are never the same, he will always bring something new to a part, he has an intangible instinct for it and will always bring something exciting."

According to Eyre, "He is very, very detailed. He is very intelligent, he cares about the world. The thing you can't fake is that he has a moral authority, which is why he's very good at playing particular parts. He brings a sense of gravity and detail and intelligence." Wilkinson is also respected by his peers because he just gets on with his job, turning in some stunningly good perform-

ances with the minimum of fuss. He learns the script, perfects the accent, acts, finishes the job, does publicity if asked and moves on. He won't work in August because that is his family's holiday time. He is not an actor who immerses himself, Daniel Day Lewis-style, in seemingly endless research.

The publicity for his last Oscar-nominated film, *In The Bedroom*, said he spent time on a Maine lobster boat to prepare for his role. In interviews Wilkinson was exasperated. He had just spent half a day on the boat because he had to handle a live lobster. "I don't do much research. If you have to do it, if you're playing someone who makes pizza dough, you have to learn how to do that. But I've never played anyone who makes pizza dough," he said.

Wilkinson was born in Leeds into a farming family, and was a student at Kent University before going to RADA and embarking on a busy stage and TV career. In the mid-1990s he decided that he wanted to concentrate on film - a decision in part based on money. In one interview he recalls earning £250 a week doing *King Lear* at the Royal Court. "I was broke, and in a position I'd never been in before - phoning people up to ask: 'Have you got anything for me, anything?' I knew lots of actors who were making movies and I thought: I'll have a piece of that, please." Since *The Full Monty* there have been more than 30 movies, covering the whole gamut - the money-earning villain roles in *Rush Hour* and *Batman Begins*, the historical parts in *Shakespeare In Love* and *The Patriot* and the smaller-scale, such as Todd Field's *In The Bedroom* and his Golden Globe winning role in the TV movie *Normal*, in which he plays a midwestern US factory worker who announces he wants a sex change.

Wilkinson is also someone known as being funny and easy to get along with. Film and TV producer Sue Birtwistle (*Cranford*) remembers directing him in a stage version of *Paddington Bear* where he played the bear's elevenses friend Mr Gruber. After that they had the idea of writing a children's play together. "The only time we could do it was in these little two-hour windows at about 5pm. We used to go and have poached egg on toast and we came up with this play about a kung fu hero who had a one-man band as a sidekick. It was pretty bizarre. We just kept saying anything is possible. It was such fun. I used to look forward to those two hours. I look back and I always see Tom giggling."

Birtwistle also agreed with the actor's actor tag. He is enormously respected but why is he not more of a household name? "I'm not sure that if you could wave a wand and make him into a major star, whatever that means, that he would thank you for it. I don't think he has the appetite for the trappings of major stardom," said Eyre. According to Coulson, "he has managed to keep a balance of a really interesting career with a low profile. He is ambitious but it's not an ugly ambition. It's not an ambition for fame, which is what's so prevalent at the moment: he wants to be in line for the good scripts." If he

wins the Oscar at the weekend - up against the formidable competition of Javier Bardem, Casey Affleck, Hal Holbrook and Philip Seymour Hoffman - even better scripts will surely come his way.

Mark Brown, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2008

* * * * *

TW talks about *Michael Clayton* and other things ...

[Unknown interviewer]: You were doing television and theatre a lot in Britain. Is the work similar? Is it a different set of muscles that you develop doing movies?

TW: *No, no. Same job.*

Is it script, is it character, is it the director? What draws you to stuff now?

Script.

So you get through the story, think "That's a story I'm interested in." The thing has to grab you?

It's very simple and very quick. Occasionally, you get a script when they don't tell you which character they're interested in you playing and it's unreadable. You don't quite know. They send you a script and tell you they want you to play the role of James and you read it, it needs to fulfil just two criteria: whether the story is a good story and whether you think you can shine in the role of James and if the answer to both of those is yes, you're on the way to doing the film.

Did you know from your character's first speech in Tony's script that something cool was going to happen? ["Tony" is *MC's* writer and director Tony Gilroy.]

I was tempted by them but I read to the end and liked what I saw.

Because it's such an amazing opening. Was that the original script that you got?

A version of that - a much longer version of that, which he insisted on filming, so I had to learn it.

It's pretty amazing.

It's good, yeah.

You've become a leading man, a very well known actor here. Does anybody want to put you in a box? Do you find that pressure at all?

I'm not at that level of fame or stardom, whatever you like to ... so I have a much freer hand. I was very pleased when I talked to George [Clooney]. *He said:* I do two sorts of films. When I do *Ocean's Twelve*, I make sure I get paid for it and that allows me to do these sorts of films where I don't need to be paid those stupendous amounts of money *and I think that's very good. Years ago - it doesn't happen so much nowadays, but it does happen - you read the salaries that these people, that certain people get, film after film after film and you just kind of think from time to time: "How much money do you need? You know, you've already got enough money, you couldn't spend it in ten lifetimes, so why don't you say: 'Okay, I've got this and now I'll start developing films that are different. A different sort of quality. A different sort of appeal.'"? Not everybody does.*

No. Well, very few. I think it's true of most wealthy people ... The more you have, the more you want, I guess.

The thing is about big studio, big budget movies - and I've done a few but not many - the thing is, they're just not as much fun to make as the smaller movies. Not as well written. Smaller budget movies are just more fun to make. I don't know why people stick with doing these huge ...

Do you know when you're shooting a picture, do you have a sense of whether it's gonna work out as well as you hoped or not, or is it a surprise when you finally get to see it?

No.

Each time it's a surprise?

You never know whether it's gonna be a hit. I like to believe that I do decent scripts. Decent to good scripts. No, better than that - good scripts. I'm doing this because it's a good script. Okay. Now, the chances are that that good script will remain ... will just be a good film, for all sorts of reasons. All the things that can go wrong during the course of making a film, a lot of them will and you're gonna have to kind of sort them out. And if it's a bad script, it will always be a bad film. Always. And only about 12% of good scripts ever get to the level of being better than good - you know, excellent to remarkable to masterpiece level. So the rate of failure is pretty high. So you can't tell. All you can tell is, I like the script.

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JOHN ADAMS (TV, 2008)



Spanning the years 1770 to 1826, this award-winning HBO mini-series recalls the life of lawyer, Congressional delegate, foreign envoy, British Ambassador, first Vice-President and second US President John Adams. The political machinations surrounding the birth of the nation, in which he was a prime mover, are closely covered, followed by the delicate nursing of relations with France and Britain as the new republic struggled to find its feet while avoiding potentially ruinous war. The title role is played persuasively by Paul Giamatti (see also *Duplicity*) with staunch support from Laura Linney (*The Exorcism Of Emily Rose*) as his wise and steadfast wife Abigail, Stephen Dillane as his sometime friend and third President Thomas Jefferson and Rufus Sewell as Alexander Hamilton. TW appears in episodes two, three and four as Pennsylvania Congress delegate and later French Ambassador Ben Franklin, here portrayed as a sly and self-aggrandising old roué. Adams and Jefferson died on the same day - 4 July 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the 1776 Declaration of Independence. The country's then President was none other than John's son John Quincy Adams - the first such father/son dynasty, though not the last. The mini-series comprises seven instalments running 68, 88, 66, 63, 61, 76 and 60 minutes. Good.

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I'm somewhat cautious when approaching historical dramas. When they are done well, they can provide us with a valuable and engaging look at the past, but the genre can easily become insufferably bloated and self-important when handled poorly. We've certainly seen more than enough stuffy dramas about America's founding fathers that have focused on sentimentally memorialising our nation's key figures to the strains of noble trumpet music. The deservedly acclaimed John Adams *distinguishes itself by providing a no-holds-barred*

portrait of one of the most important men in American history. This seven-part miniseries simultaneously pays tribute to the considerable accomplishments of the second President while also unflinchingly demonstrating his human weaknesses. The result is a compelling drama that should prove satisfying to both history buffs and those who simply enjoy a good story. The likes of Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin are still widely acknowledged for the roles they played during America's early days, but it does us good to see or read something that reminds us of just how much their ideas and values inform this country (for better and for worse) to this very day. It is somewhat astonishing to consider that some of this nation's unshakable principles and functions were simply hammered out between a handful of men in one room over 200 years ago. I was particularly struck by the depiction of the events surrounding Congress' approval of the Declaration of Independence, in which a poorly-phrased statement by Adams or someone else of similar significance could have so easily undone the foundation of this country.



The scope of John Adams *is both broad and intimate. It does not simultaneously attempt to be a picture of this nation's founding and an intimate study of Adams himself, but it does glides back and forth between both with relative ease. When Adams is involved in something vast and significant (as he so frequently was), so is the miniseries. However, when Adams is forced to turn his attention to something else, the film follows him. This leads to an intriguing story structure that offers a very detailed look at certain noteworthy aspects of our nation's history (the Declaration of Independence, Washington being named the first President) while pushing others into the backgrounds (the Revolutionary War itself mostly serves as a backdrop to Adams' misadventures as a diplomat in France).*

Paul Giamatti might seem a somewhat unusual choice for the role of Adams, but he turns in a very fine performance that gets better and better as the series proceeds. Giamatti is decent enough as the earnest lawyer and politician depicted early on, but he really excels as the frustrated diplomat and constantly-troubled national leader. Laura Linney essays Abigail Adams remarkably well, matching Giamatti's work at every turn. She is clearly the intellectual equal of her husband, but too frequently restrained by the old-fashioned societal values that prevented women from being able to accomplish much without having the ear of powerful men. Tom Wilkinson is a playful delight as the witty Benjamin Franklin, serving as both a valuable ally and exasperating antagonist for Adams. David Morse brings a strength and dignity to his very successful turn as George Washington. Stephen Dillane does beautifully understated work as Thomas Jefferson, providing a very compelling character arc that contrasts nicely to that of Adams. Great actors abound in noteworthy smaller roles: Danny Huston as the feisty Samuel Adams, Justin Theroux as John Hancock, Zeljko Ivanek as John Dickinson and Rufus Sewell as a particularly obnoxious Alexander Hamilton.





With a budget of over $100 million, this series seemingly spares no expense in terms of creating historical authenticity. Costume and set design are frequently praised aspects of historical dramas such as this, but John Adams *genuinely exceeds even the high standards expected of this sort of production. Considering that this series was aired on HBO, it is unsurprising that the miniseries does not gloss over some particularly disturbing historical elements (unsettling depictions of barbaric medical procedures, a cringe-inducing scene in which a man is tarred and feathered), but I was quite surprised by the way the film stays accurate in terms of personal hygiene. Dirty teeth, untreated sores, and ungainly blemishes of all sorts are present to a certain degree in most characters here; simple aspects of life that are so easily forgotten about in the modern era.*

Clark Douglas, *DVD Verdict*, 17 June 2009

RECOUNT (TV, 2008)



A strangely uncompelling account of the tied 2000 US Presidential election and subsequent 36 day fight, mostly in the courts, over which candidate won the decisive Florida ballot. What comes through most potently is the abject failure of most of the key players to stand up for the fundamental principle of democracy in action - i.e. *that every vote must count*. After his Ben Franklin in *John Adams*, TW-as-American-statesman moves on here to former Secretary of State James Baker with Joe Kennedy (*The Kennedys*) and President Lyndon B. Johnson (*Selma*) to come. An HBO production with Kevin Spacey, Laura Dern, Bruce McGill and John Hurt. 111 minutes. Fair.

IMDb: You're in for a bumpy ride so fasten your seat belts. *Recount* deals with the emotionally charged issues confronting the nation after the 2000 election. Spacey is in fine form as a Gore operative. A beautifully realised film / Few movies have the ability to suck an audience so deeply in, even though they know what is going to happen. This is one / Whatever thoughts on the issues one may have, this is a worthwhile TV film with an impressive cast. Director Jay Roach, usually responsible for silly comedies like *Austin Powers* and *Meet The Parents*, tackles the drama with a firm hand (if not camera - hand held, of course) on his large group of thespians. Spacey hasn't been this good in years and Leary is a welcome presence as a Gore campaign member. Also noteworthy are small parts for John Hurt, Ed Begley Junior and Bruce McGill. But best of all are Laura Dern in a harrowingly funny turn as dumb belle Katherine Harris and Tom Wilkinson as tough lawyer James Baker, who comes off as icy as one might expect playing a loyal cadre of the Bush family. They make *Recount* compulsively watchable, even as the details of the case - the dimpled chad, the discrimination, the BS protester problem in Miami Dade and ultimately the ruling of the Supreme Court - make one pig sick about the madness unravelling / This film is heavily biased against the Republicans and against myself and others who supported Bush, and that I find offensive. It also makes Katherine Harris look like a bimbo, which she is not / A well made docudrama with a heavy anti-Bush bias / Accurate and on target / Excellent.

ROCKNROLLA (2008)



TW is back in gangland boss mode (see also *Essex Boys* and *Batman Begins*) for this third rate Guy Ritchie-directed rot about mindless larceny, macho thuggery and double dealing that adds up to an empty zero. With Mark Strong and Idris Elba. The most relevant thing stolen here is 110 minutes of your time.

IMDb: *RocknRolla* is a film with no redeeming qualities. I would warn about spoilers except I honestly don't know that there's anything I can spoil. Here we have a film that tries to be both *Pulp Fiction* and *The Departed*, but a writer/director who is too far up himself to hear the absurdity of the dialogue, or to fix the over-complexities of a simplistic plot with an underwhelming climax. It's an ensemble piece, but the actors fail to mesmerise and the characters fall short of memorable. Rather than aiding the narrative, the brief moments of non-linear storytelling tend to drag rather than aid it. I'm a moviegoer who is willing to forgive a weak script provided there are moments of intense action. I'm also a moviegoer who can thoroughly enjoy a well-acted, thought provoking film without a single special effect or action sequence to speak of. However, *RocknRolla* contains mediocre acting, mediocre action, horrendous dialogue, a terribly pompous script and uninspired direction. The way this film is structured, I wouldn't be surprised if Guy Ritchie fancies himself as the English Tarantino or Paul Thomas Anderson; after all, the massive amount of characters and subplots are both reminiscent of the aforementioned writer/directors. But, at the end of the day, all of these things need to come together in the final act. While in a way they do in *RocknRolla*, there are several plot elements that are far from being necessary, which leaves the viewer asking themselves *What the hell?* All throughout the dialogue is painful, and the actors fail to strengthen it for the most part. Even though I giggled at some moments, those moments were hardly worth the time and effort spent watching the film. I spent much more time rolling my eyes and trying to wrap my mind around the excruciatingly over-complicated and scatterbrain plot. Coming in at just under two hours, *RocknRolla* felt more like three and a half. By the time I hit the halfway mark, I didn't care if I ever found out where the plot went, I just wanted it to end, and for all the characters to die together in an apocalyptic meltdown of some sort. What made everything worse is that during the end credits the promise of a sequel is made! (The good news is, there isn't one, nor ever will be.) If you take my advice, you'll avoid this rotten film.

A NUMBER (TV, 2008)



Based on a Caryl Churchill play, this BBC / HBO two-hander, with TW and Rhys Ifans (above), is a 69 minute cloning riff that, shallow, laboured and uninspired, and despite the actors best efforts, dies a-borning. Disappointingly poor.

IMDb: Unsurprisingly (as it was formerly a play) the piece works best as an actor's film, with its three or four enclosed scenes, emotionally charged and delivered in tight locations, allowing the two leads to focus on their characters and their interactions more than movement or camera locations. In this regard both Wilkinson and Ifans are excellent. Ifans appears to get the better of it by having more varied characters to play, but as the film goes on, the real impact comes from Wilkinson. Because his character is constant throughout, it allows him to develop it over time in a way that Ifans can't - he just has step changes as he moves between cloned versions of himself. But both performances are strong and this makes it more of a shame that the material is not quite as engaging or compelling as I would have liked. The specific dialogue scenes play well by giving the actors plenty to work with, but it is in the bigger picture that the script disappoints. We understand what happens to each clone we meet and also get a sense of time passing, but the bigger picture never engages or plays out for me as I would have hoped. The script doesn't link the scenes effectively or play to the heart of the piece as a whole in the way that it does play to the heart of specific scenes. The film is interesting nonetheless with Wilkinson in particular doing great work through-out / *A Number* is a clever play, so you can see why someone would think it was a good idea to transfer it to television. The question, though, is whether you can put up with (i) its slow pace and (ii) author Churchill's style of leaving so many sentences unanswered or spoken over - a valid technique, perhaps, but one that grates after a while / Not much action or spectacle. Mainly just lots of chatting between Wilkinson and Ifans / I'm so glad I never have to watch that again. Absolutely horrible dialogue, horribly delivered / It was plain from the off that the work was written originally for the stage, with progression and dialogue unclear in many places / Nothing special.

VALKYRIE (2008)



Twenty years on from *The Diary Of Anne Frank*, TW is back serving the Third Reich, this time as General Friedrich Fromm. *Valkyrie* reconstructs the July 1944 last of several plots from within to kill Hitler and stage a coup, with Fromm one of those remaining loyal to the Fuhrer. Though a strong cast including Tom Cruise, Kenneth Branagh, Bill Nighy, Terence Stamp and Eddie Izzard put the story over with conviction, that its outcome is never in doubt is problematical. Good nonetheless. 115 minutes (including nine of credits!).

... Pretty much all the actors walk around with an equal stiffness, working their lines with a regimental sameness that seems almost ironic given the subject matter. Only Tom Wilkinson manages to retain his personality, playing General Fromm, a dissenter who could be the swing vote in any plot. Just as in his cameos in films like *Cassandra's Dream* or even larger supporting roles like *Michael Clayton*, the moment Wilkinson steps into frame, his command of the set is clear. If the troops were going to get in line behind anybody, it should have been this Tom and not the other one.

Though considered unfairly maligned prior to anyone seeing an inch of film, *Valkyrie* probably deserved the tepid response it got from audiences and critics. Though some obviously loved it, I found the Bryan Singer-directed, Tom Cruise-starring World War II picture to be lost in a middle wilderness and, as a result, kind of dull. Wooden performances next to a plot that can't get around the fact that we know how it's all going to turn out means this movie about the patriots who tried to save Germany from being kicked under the allied bus by Hitler never gets going. It may be long on facts but it's short on drama and thus disappointing.

Jamie S. Rich, *DVD Talk*, 19 May 2009

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Valkyrie *is a meticulous thriller based on a large-scale conspiracy within the German army to assassinate Hitler, leading to a failed bombing attempt on July 20, 1944. At the centre of the plot was Col. Claus von Stauffenberg, played here by Tom Cruise as the moving force behind the attempted coup, which led to 700 arrests and 200 executions, including von Stauffenberg's. Because we know Hitler survived, the suspense is centred in the minds of the participants, who call up the Reserve Army and actually arrest SS officials before discovering that their bomb did not kill its target.*

Considering they were planning high treason with the risk of certain death, the conspirators seem remarkably willing to speak almost openly of their contempt for Hitler. That may be because they were mostly career officers in the army's traditional hierarchy and hated Hitler as much for what he was doing to the army as for what he was doing to the country. Realising after the invasion of Normandy that the war was certainly lost, they hoped to spare hundreds of thousands of military and civilian lives.

Von Stauffenberg was known to be "offended" by the Nazi treatment of Jews in the 1930s and considered the Kristallnacht *a disgrace to Germany, which possibly disturbed him as much as the fate of its victims. In any event, little is said among the conspirators about the genocide then underway - although, being alienated from the SS, perhaps they didn't know what was happening. Perhaps.*

They repeatedly tell each other that, even should they fail, at least the world would know that not all Germans supported Hitler. And so it does. And whatever their deepest motives, they gave their lives in trying to kill the monster. The film, directed by Bryan Singer, works heroically to introduce us to the major figures in the plot, to tell them apart, to explain their roles and to suggest their differences. The two best supporting performances are by Kenneth Branagh, as a major-general who smuggles a bomb into Hitler's inner circle and then must smuggle it out again, and Tom Wilkinson, as a general who artfully plays both sides of the fence, treating the plot with benign neutrality while covering himself should it fail.

Tom Cruise (below, with Bill Nighy) is perfectly satisfactory, if not electrifying, in the leading role. I'm at a loss to explain the blizzard of negative advance buzz-fired at him for the effrontery of playing a half-blind, one-armed Nazi hero. Two factors may be to blame: (a) Cruise has attracted so much publicity by some of his own behaviour (using Oprah's couch as a trampoline) that anything he does sincerely seems fair game for mockery and (b) movie publicity is now driven by gossip, scandal and the eagerness of fanboys and girls to attract attention by posing as critics of films they've almost certainly not seen. Now that the movie is here, the buzz is irrelevant, but may do residual damage.

If I say that Cruise is not electrifying, I must add that with this character, in this story, he cannot and should not be. This is a film about veterans of officer rank, with all the reserve and probity that officers gather on the way up. They do not scream or hurry and do not care to be seen that way. They have learned not to panic under fire, and they have never been more under fire than now.



A key element of their plot is to use Hitler's "Valkyrie" plan against him. The reserves were held back to defend Berlin and Hitler in case of an Allied assault, so von Stauffenberg conceived the strategy of killing Hitler, ordering up the reserves to ensure stability and making its first order of business the immobilisation of the SS. We see that the plan might well have worked. Indeed, it did - until the news arrived that Hitler was still alive. So much did the Fuhrer command the fanatical loyalty of troops and civilians with an almost mystical grip, that merely his voice on the radio could defeat the plot, even with Germany clearly facing ruin.

The July 20 plot is an intriguing footnote to history, one of those "what if" scenarios. If it had succeeded, one of the hopes of the conspirators was said to be an alliance with the Allies against Russia. Given the political realities of the time, when Russia was seen as our ally, that would have been insane, but it shows the plotters continuing to dream of a reborn professional German army with roles for them. The question of the liberation of the death camps is a good one. Even the Allies did not bomb the rail lines leading to them. There were so very, very many people who did not know.

Roger Ebert, 22 December 2008

DUPLICITY (2009)



In Tony Gilroy's lacklustre follow-up to *Michael Clayton*, TW and Paul Giamatti (see *John Adams*) play rival NYC cosmetics company CEOs who share a mutual loathing and Julia Roberts and Clive Owen CIA and MI6 field agents who leave government service to team up and go private in an effort to scam forty million corporate dollars to fund their "retirement". Like *Clayton*, the film is densely plotted, but unlike *Clayton*, it concerns characters we don't empathise with or care about doing stuff that is neither credible nor compelling, making for a long and disappointingly pedestrian 120 minutes. A smart but soulless no-no.

IMDb: A confusing and mind boggling mess / It's aiming for Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn but fails on all counts. And I really think that Hollywood needs to call a moratorium on flashbacks as a major plot device / A harmless but loquacious exercise in silliness that you'll forget in no time / I loved *Michael Clayton*, but this is clearly a director with one successful film allowed to go off the deep end on his sophomore effort. The opening credits telegraph what you are in for: two hours devoid of actual content and delivered with mediocre style. Scene after scene is too long and ultimately the screenplay is about nothing / In a movie that could be called *Ocean's Two*, the strength of the work is also paradoxically its weakness. The constant flashbacks are essential to Gilroy's calculated and entertaining - if utterly implausible - narrative but after a while they come to feel somewhat convoluted and contrived and the hair-raising plot has an ending that is thin to the point of baldness / Despite brilliantly over the top performances from Giamatti and Wilkinson, the film is a disappointment / A cool, sexy caper? No. Confusing and incoherent? Yes / Leaves you feeling cold and angry / Writer-director Gilroy tries to be too clever and cute for his own good. After landing two perfect leads and two of the best character actors of their generation, he offers up a tedious, bungled mess that is really never that clever and certainly gives the feeling of holding back those four fine actors. The multi-frame look, non-linear timeline, repeated dialogue and smirky exchanges between Clive and Julia are just some of the clichéd tricks used to make this seem more interesting and complicated than it really is.

44 INCH CHEST (2009)



This profane but unusual study of the grief attending the sudden collapse of a 21 year old marriage is sometimes tender, sometimes bizarre and finally perhaps a bit too telescoped for its own good, but Ray Winstone impresses as Colin alongside Ian McShane (see *Lovejoy*), Stephen Dillane (*John Adams*), John Hurt and TW as Archie, a part that, while hardly a stretch, he plays with typical perfectly pitched assurance and authenticity. 91 minutes. Good.

IMDb: While agreeing that the plot could be summarised in the two words *nothing happens*, very much the same thing could be said of *Waiting For Godot* and half the plays of Pinter. Indeed the style of dialogue is very reminiscent of Pinter, with the five main characters each portraying an archetypical personality type. The main point of the film is that the five characters are operating in a moral vacuum, and having to make their own decisions without influence from the law of the land or any other moral compass. It would seem that the Law is simply non-existent in their world: in front of many witnesses and in broad daylight they snatch a man from a restaurant and bundle him into a van without troubling to disguise the number plate, and finally let their victim go having inflicted on him an ordeal which would earn them each a long prison sentence with only the slightest word from John Hurt's character that they don't want to hear any more about it. No, the whole point is that they, like the characters in *Lord Of The Flies*, have to work it out for themselves. And this freedom allows them the range to each demonstrate their character with the finest of English acting. Some of their characters are rather hackneyed, like Tom Wilkinson's who moves seamlessly from discussing with his mother about her favourite TV show into being a heartless thug, in a manner reminiscent of the second scene of *Pulp Fiction*, but the John Hurt character is beautifully drawn, by scriptwriter, actor and director alike. Hurt plays an elderly man who clearly fancied himself as a ruthless thug in his younger days, and defines himself by his association with a psychopath gang leader. He is now treated with amused but slightly wary contempt by his friends, but is still determined to show his teeth by egging Colin, the Ray Winstone character, into terrible and sadistic acts of

revenge. The irony is that, in one of Winstone's psychotic daydreams, when given the opportunity to offer violence himself, his dentures fall out and he backs off, showing him for the toothless windbag he is. The other major archetype is a louche gambler and homosexual predator played beautifully by Ian McShane. In a scene reminiscent of *The Dice Man* he agrees that life and death decisions are too hard for an individual to take, and accordingly persuades Winstone that the decision between flaying alive and release should be taken on the toss of a coin. The two main protagonists of the film are Winstone, whose drink, shock and schizophrenia induced ramblings form the backbone of the script and Melvil Poupaud, who never says a word and barely moves a muscle throughout the film. However, among a group of psychopaths, it is he, playing the kidnapped French waiter, who is the only one that the audience can relate to, and it is a tribute to director Malcolm Venville that we know exactly what is going through his mind, despite his almost complete lack of expression. This is a film about the struggle between revenge, blood lust and evil on the one hand and justice, decency and humanity on the other. It is about a man working through a psychosis and returning to rational thought. It is about how people can reach their own moral selves without influence from Church, Law or Society. It is far from an action film, and if you want simple plot this is not the film for you, but it is a beautifully crafted set piece delivered by a very fine set of actors, performing a fine script under subtle but powerful direction / *44 Inch Chest*, from *Sexy Beast* writers Louis Mellis and David Scinto, boasts one of the best casts around and, for much of it, that's exactly the point. What they deliver is talky and stagy, but works if you're into tough guys dealing with sensitive issues of marriage, love and infidelity to name a few. The dialogue is hilarious, expletive-filled and at times kinda moving (a long speech about love given by Colin especially). But the real joy is watching these actors work together. Hurt viciously growls his dialogue as the group's meanest and oldest, McShane is polished and soft-spoken as a single-life-loving homosexual and, despite having less showy roles, Wilkinson, Dillane and Joanne Whalley (as Colin's wife Liz) play them well. Unfortunately the second half drifts when a confusing bout of madness from Colin leaves the supporting cast little to do. But Winstone, going *mano-a-mano* with the mostly-silent Loverboy, finds the tortured soul within the domineering tough while keeping you guessing how all will end. Director Malcolm Venville creates suspense but can't overcome the condensed setting, no matter how many flashbacks or clips of old movies (in this case *Samson and Delilah*) he uses. He also fumbles the end's emotional climax. Nonetheless top-notch actors make *44 Inch Chest* worth seeing / *44 Inch Chest* is a very dark, brooding, cynical, fairly static, stagy film that allows a platform for some of England's finest actors to deliver a *tour de force* in roles they likely chose because of the opportunity to work together. Aside from a few out shots (scenes where the audience is allowed a bit more information about he background of the story and its characters) this film feels like a stage play, so finely wrought is the dialogue and the pacing of the piece. For those who saw and appreciated *Sexy Beast* (also written by Mellis and Scinto and using some of the same actors), this film will reward. For those easily offended by filthy language and physical violence, this may be a film to pass / Despite a script that is foul as dirt and powerful as a corpse-crushing machine, not much happens - yet the sterling company bring vividly to life characters who, while terrifying on one level, show incredible support for their abused friend on the other. *44 Inch Chest* is a taut actors' piece, beautifully executed by players and director Venville alike. Not for the faint of heart but definitely for those who relish superb theatrics / Simple but fantastic / Dark and intelligent / Clever, brilliant, moving / Class / Winstone at his very best.

THE GRUFFALO (TV short, 2009)



Written by Julia Donaldson, illustrated by Axel Scheffler and published in 1999, *The Gruffalo* was the UK's best selling picture book in 2000, has won several children's literature prizes, been translated into 35 languages and adapted for both stage and screen. The 27 minute BAFTA and Academy Award nominated BBC adaptation premiered in the UK on Christmas Day 2009, attracting almost ten million viewers. The story concerns a mouse, journeying through a wood, who fends off potential predators by inventing an imaginary monster called the Gruffalo, who then proves to be not so imaginary after all. A beautifully rendered animation, with voices from Robbie Coltrane as the Gruffalo, Helena Bonham Carter as Mother Squirrel, Rob Brydon as Snake, John Hurt as Owl and, as Fox, TW, whose contribution amounts to fourteen lines of dilaogue plus an assortment of sneezes, growls, laughs and gulps spread across circa three minutes of screen time. Followed by 2011 sequel *The Gruffalo's Child.*

The Gruffalo isn't a particularly ambitious animated short nor a remarkably inventive one, but it's a perfectly charming little tale that should keep the youngsters spellbound. Older viewers will be two steps ahead of the game from the beginning (and I imagine that even the young kids will have figured out the final twist by the time it arrives) but this is a sturdy example of how to bring a children's storybook to life. The story is classical in style and stays free from the pop-culture snark that runs through so much children's entertainment these days. The animation is low-budget but distinctively designed, which is more or less essential if you don't have the funds to dazzle with technical polish. The voice work from the very overqualified cast (most characters only have a small handful of lines) is exceptional and the music by Rene Aubry has an appealingly breezy quality. There's not much else to say about this 27 minute short (which moves at such a laid-back pace that it somehow feels even shorter) save for the fact that it probably deserved its Oscar nomination, but also deserved to lose out to *The Lost Thing*. (Clark Douglas, *DVD Verdict*, 24 July 2011)

THE GHOST (aka *The Ghost Writer*) (2010)



A good story engagingly told. Ewan McGregor is given the job of finishing the ghost-writing of an ex-Prime Minister's memoirs after the previous author died in mysterious circumstances. TW plays Paul Emmett, a senior US academic with a secret. Adapted from a Robert Harris novel by that writer and director Roman Polanski and set mostly on the Massachusetts seaboard. With Pierce Brosnan and a sprightly 94 year old Eli Wallach. 123 minutes. Well worthwhile.

IMDb: Has Polanski made the perfect movie? The writing is impressive, with no false moves, no red herrings, no unnecessary distractions, no manipulations to sway you one way or another. What we have is a mix of intrigue, action, Shakespearean drama and performers who might never be this good again / *The Ghost Writer* is a stylish, edge-of-your-seat political thriller that, on the basis of suspense, twists, corruption and an ensnared hero unable to grasp the enormity of what he's up against, can be looked on as a contemporary companion piece to *Chinatown*. It's Polanski revelling in the art of skillful storytelling and, at age 76, it's clear he has not lost his touch. In collaboration with author Robert Harris, he has fashioned a real nail-biter that, thanks to the solid performances and deft plotting, plays extremely well whether you like politics or know much about foreign policy or not / A near flawless, beautiful film with an engaging story, interesting characters, incredible mood and sense of place (locations in Germany substituted brilliantly for Martha's Vineyard) and more implied violence than any real screen violence, it's all about suspense and intrigue. Every shot is gorgeous and there are even fun references to Polanski's own *Chinatown* and Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*. Lovely performances by Olivia Williams, who is sexy and vulnerable, Pierce Brosnan, the always brilliant Tom Wilkinson and an extraordinary cameo by Actors Studio legend Eli Wallach. (He still has the chops!) The ending caps a perfect film perfectly, and the MacGuffin is great fun. If you like vintage Hitchcock, and especially if you like the best work of Polanski, don't miss it / Classic filmmaking at its best. Compelling and visually stunning / Brosnan strikes the right balance between fear and arrogance and McGregor is also pitch perfect / Masterful / Cinematic genius / An old fashioned, well crafted noir thriller / The word 'entertainment' means 'to hold in between' which is what *The Ghost Writer* does from beginning to its haunting and inevitable end.

JACKBOOTS ON WHITEHALL (2010)



This juvenile stop-motion puppetry WWII fantasy is, while mildly amusing here and there, finally neither funny nor clever enough to warrant 88 minutes of your time. After the Germans have invaded by tunnel, taken London and driven the English back across Hadrian's Wall, it's up to Braveheart and the Scots to lend a helping hand ... TW voices an old yeoman called Albert (second right above) and also (in a squeaky voice, with just a few lines) Goebbels (below, right). Timothy Spall is Churchill (second left above) with other voices provided by Alexander Armstrong, Ewan McGregor, Dominic West, Pam Ferris, Stephen Merchant, Richard E. Grant *et al*. When, in a 2013 TV interview given to publicise *Felony*, TW was asked about this film, he could recall nothing about it, which, given its merit, is hardly surprising. But what is rather more curious, given his supposed fastidiousness over scripts, is why he would accept such an unpromising assignment in the first place. Well paid and relatively easy work would be my guess. Another, like *Duplicity*, to forget.



THE DEBT (2010)



In 1965, three Mossad agent go undercover in Soviet East Berlin hoping to kidnap Dieter Vogel, the Surgeon of Birkenau and get him back to Israel to stand trial. After a successful snatch, their exit strategy goes wrong, forcing them to hold him while alternative arrangements can be made - but, on New Year's Eve, he escapes to freedom. Since, as a war criminal, he will not be heard from again, the three agree to say he was shot while trying to escape - a story accepted by their families and countrymen; by posterity. Then, in 1997, an old man in a Ukraine institution claims he is Dieter Vogel ... An excellent film in which the three agents in later life are played by TW, Helen Mirren (see also *Prime Suspect*) and Ciaran Hinds. 109 minutes. Should be seen.

IMDb: This is one of those movie gems hiding away waiting for the true film lover to appreciate. Even though it features some lesser known actors, they seamlessly portray the whole bag of emotions all great films contain. *The Debt* is captivating throughout with ever-changing turns and twists. Prepare for a perfect blend of action and drama involving a trio of Israeli agents chasing a once notorious Nazi war criminal in hiding. Though normally not a fan of switching between present and past, in this case the director does this in a totally inspired way, telling the story in well-connected chunks and leaving each time step with most questions answered. This allows the story to flow seamlessly into its unexpected finale. *The Debt* is a lengthy film you will never want to end / The nervousness and suspense I felt throughout are unmatched by any other film I've seen this year. Believe me, *The Debt* is insanely well written / As good a spy thriller as you will ever see / Will those whom you love most prefer your trophies or your truth? Mirren's character choice was clear. I enjoyed this film very much. It does actually make you think - and how often does that happen these days? / Dramatic and gripping / Intellectual and riveting / *The Debt* is that rare thriller that grows on you as the narrative progresses by providing different perspectives of the three lead characters and the huge baggage each has to bear through a joint pact made. It severely questions just how we can live with lies, and the guilt that comes associated with that, before recognising that only the truth in unadulterated terms, can set one free. Highly recommended / An edgy post-WWII thriller / Better than *Munich* / Outstanding / Fantastic.

THE CONSPIRATOR (2010)



The conspirator of the film's title is Mary Surratt, who kept a boarding house in Washington DC at the time of Lincoln's assassination in which John Wilkes Booth met Mary's son John and others to lay his nefarious plans. In the absence of her son (then in hiding) and despite any evidence to prove her awareness of what was going on, Mrs Surratt stood trial before a military tribunal with seven others and was sentenced to hang. Robert Redford's account of this alleged miscarriage of justice is earnest but unimpassioned. James McAvoy plays Surratt's attorney Frederick Aiken and Kevin Kline Secretary Of War Edwin Stanton, prime mover behind the rigged trial. TW is Senator Reverdy Johnson, who delegated responsibility for the case to Aiken to protect his own reputation. More educative than entertaining. 117 minutes.

IMDb: Any fan of American history and the Civil War will enjoy this / Should you see this movie? If you are looking for accuracy, no. If you are looking for what it might have looked like, yes. If you are looking just for pure entertainment, it will probably bore you / Another technically great film that rewrites history. Mary Surratt was guilty. She was not unjustly convicted / To my mind this is another of those Hollywood "pro-Confederate" movies, prevalent since the 1940s, featuring former Confederates as poor souls abused by those bad Yankees. Let us remember that Southern slave owners were the experts at abusing people and civil liberties in the Confederacy were severally abused / In an era where Hollywood has increasingly moved away from movies driven by story, dialogue and plot, *The Conspirator* tells a powerful, nearly unknown story - that of Mary Surratt and Frederick Aiken - within one that is widely known - Lincoln's assassination. *The Conspirator* keeps you on the edge of your seat as it purposefully builds to its intense conclusion. With fine performances, direction and cinematography it is a gripping and important work well worth seeing. Stand-out performances include those by the movie's headliners, but also Kline and Wilkinson / Flawed but fascinating / A decent courtroom drama / Truly excellent / Clumsy and mediocre / Timely without being preachy / Superb acting, despite the script, but short on historical accuracy / A heavy-handed historical drama saved by handsome production and able acting that rise above the slog that is James Solomon's adaptation of Gregory Bernstein's story.

BURKE AND HARE (2010)



Edinburgh, 1828: TW plays Dr. Knox, teacher of anatomy, and Simon Pegg and Andy Serkis the bodysnatchers who keep him supplied with suspiciously fresh specimens at five pounds a pop. Though based on historical figures at the centre of a potentially fascinating tale, its overbearingly frivolous treatment here (personified by Ronnie Corbett as wee Captain McLintoch leading the Edinburgh Militia) squanders the opportunity to tell it more persuasively than this. With Hugh Bonneville, John Woodvine *et al*. 88 minutes. Poor.

IMDb: Black comedy is a tricky one to get right, and this mess doesn't get close to funny. All that's missing (apart from a funny script and good editing) are the incidental comedy noises used in many *Carry On* films. *Burke And Hare* is beyond the pits and further confirmation that Landis hasn't made a decent film in years / An utterly awful, dreadfully dreary tale with zero soul, passion or enthusiasm. Avoid like the hangman's noose / What rhymes with bite, might, fight, and white? You guessed it / Paint-by-numbers comedy - a true opportunity lost / *Burke And Hare* just isn't funny. Neither is it properly 'black' or scary. What it is is boring and offensive in roughly equal measure - the former being quite an achievement considering the sensational subject matter. The real Burke and Hare were by all accounts two of the most unpleasant characters you'd ever hope not to meet. They murdered for money seventeen people, many old or infirm, and I for one fail to see the humour in that / Get drunk before viewing / A well made yet completely unfunny watch centred around the crimes of a notorious murderous duo in 19th century Edinburgh. So what exactly went wrong here? With the cast including the talented Pegg and Serkis supported by Tim Curry, Tom Wilkinson, British TV favourite Ronny Corbett and even Christopher Lee in a small cameo, and with John Landis directing, this should have been a hell of a lot better than it actually is. The first problem is that it starts by claiming to be an Ealing Studios production, and not once in the entire film did it ever remotely capture the feel of that once great name. It may have the darker edge you'll find in something like *The Ladykillers*, but lacks any sort of soul or heart. Also, it doesn't help that the true tale of Burke and Hare isn't actually that comedic. I defy anyone to truly enjoy this half baked effort / This is what happens when you give lead roles to actors who shouldn't be anything but support / Second rate.

THE GREEN HORNET (2011)



Stand by for high-octane, brain in neutral, comic book mayhem, stuffed with thrill a minute action and Bond-style gadgetry but (bar token totty Cameron Diaz) a telling deficiency of star power. TW's role as an old school independent city newspaper proprietor and editor is a minor one. Of limited (mostly juvenile) appeal. 114 minutes.

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The Green Hornet *is an almost unendurable demonstration of a movie with nothing to be about. Although it follows the rough storyline of previous versions of the title, it neglects the construction of a plot engine to pull us through. There are pointless dialogue scenes going nowhere much too slowly, and then pointless action scenes going everywhere much too quickly.*

Seth Rogen deserves much of the blame. He co-wrote the screenplay, giving himself way too many words, and then hurls them tirelessly at us at a modified shout. He plays Britt Reid, a spoiled little rich brat who grows up the same way, as the son of millionaire newspaper publisher James Reid (Tom Wilkinson, who apparently remains the same age as his son ages from about ten to maybe thirty). After his father's death, he shows little interest in running a newspaper, but bonds with Kato (Jay Chou), his father's auto mechanic and coffee maker. Yes.

Kato is the role Bruce Lee played on the TV series. Jay Chou is no Bruce Lee, but it's hard to judge him as an actor with Rogen hyperventilating through scene after scene. Together, they devise a damn-fool plan to fight crime by impersonating a criminal (The Green Hornet) and his sidekick. This they do while wearing masks that serve no purpose as far as I could determine, except to make them look suspicious. I mean, like, who wears a mask much these days?

The crime lord in the city is Chudnofsky (Christoph Waltz). That provides the movie with a villain but hardly with a character.

The war between Chudnofsky and the Hornet is played out in a great many vehicle stunts and explosions, which go on and on and on, maddeningly, as if screenwriter Rogen tired of his own dialogue (not as quickly as we do, alas) and scribbled in: Here second unit supplies nine minutes of CGI action.


Cameron Diaz

There is a role in the film for Cameron Diaz as Lenore Case, would-be secretary for young Reid, but nothing for her to do. She functions primarily to allow the camera to cut to her from time to time, which is pleasant but unsatisfying. Diaz has a famously wonderful smile, and curiously in her first shot in the film, she smiles for no reason at all, maybe just to enter the smile on the record.

The director of this half-cooked mess is Michel Gondry, whose Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind *is as good as this one is bad. Casting about for something to praise, I recalled that I heard a strange and unique sound for the first time, a high-pitched whooshing scream, but I don't think Gondry can claim it, because it came from the hand dryers in the nearby men's room.*

And, yes, it was in 3-D. The more I see of the process, the more I think of it as a way to charge extra for a dim picture.

Roger Ebert, 12 January 2011

THE KENNEDYS (TV, 2011)



A miniseries comprising eight parts of 42-43 minutes, *The Kennedys* is slick but superficial. Played by TW, domineering, manipulative patriarch Joseph Kennedy is described early on as "one of America's richest men" - but there's no word of how his vast fortune was acquired (actually in stock and commodity trading then by merging and selling Hollywood studios then, post-Prohibition, in liquor importation). He was also the father of nine children - but only four are named here, with the youngest - Ted - a very significant omission, for his name is well known to history via the 1969 Chappaquiddick incident (he also ran for President in 1980 and served for 46 years in the US Senate). The series deals with the death in 1944 of Joseph's firstborn son Joe, very sketchily with Jack's early political career, Jack's 1960 election to the Presidency, the Bay of Pigs incident, the James Meredith U Miss affair, the Cuban Missile crisis, Jack's assassination in Dallas in 1963 (again with far too little detail) followed by Bobby's in LA in 1968. Joseph's unsuccessful ambassadorial career and thwarted political ambitions (later transferred to his more or less reluctant sons), his dalliance with Sinatra and (indirectly) the Chicago Mob and Jack's liaison with Marilyn Monroe are touched on briefly. TW's wife Diana Hardcastle plays his screen wife Rose, a devout and put-upon Catholic who, like her husband, lived to see three sons meet a premature end and the fourth (though not here) sink his chance at high office and besmirch the family name at Chappaquiddick. Greg Kinnear as JFK, Barry Pepper as Bobby and Katie Holmes as Jackie Kennedy all do good work, but the whole, while fair, lacks substance.

IMDb: *Thirteen Days* is much better / Does what I imagined no-one could do to the Kennedy story: render it boring / I was impressed with Greg Kinnear's portrayal of JFK and while Katie Holmes was a bit insipid at times, her resemblance to Jackie is uncanny but, to me, the exclusion of Teddy pretty much negated the entire series.

Following a botched bid for the presidency and the death of his oldest son, Joseph P. Kennedy (Tom Wilkinson) pushes an apathetic John F. Kennedy (Greg Kinnear) into politics. With the help of little brother Robert (Barry Pepper) and wife Jackie (Katie Holmes), JFK is elected president of the United States. Everything comes at a cost, however, and every member of the Kennedy clan pays with blood, sweat and tears while running the free world.

In the making-of documentary accompanying this screener, Katie Holmes discusses how the producers pitched the show. Their approach was not to create a historically meticulous document of the family's dynamics and pivotal moments, but to construct a Greek tragedy around their story. The Kennedys *is only partially successful, however, shooting for high drama and landing somewhere around a big budget soap opera.*

That said, it's a damn good soap opera. I was hardly ever bored during this eight-hour miniseries, mostly due to the fact that it is so well acted. Pardon my cliché, but Greg Kinnear is John F. Kennedy. If you had told me a month ago those words would be pouring out of my keyboard, I would've said you were insane. Yet the guy perfectly embodies the speech, mannerisms and physicality of our country's most beloved (and mythologised) 20th century President. It is easily the finest performance of his career (at least of those I've seen). He gives a great deal of depth to JFK, making us sympathise with what could have been the caricature of a cocky, philandering, rich boy turned politician. Kinnear plays JFK as a flawed man racked with disease (physical and psychological) who's willing to sacrifice everything to elevate his country and the free world in general.

As Robert Kennedy, Barry Pepper is every bit Kinnear's equal. His character is far more complex than the straightforward JFK. As such, Pepper pretty much steals the show. Bobby is the goody-goody of the piece, a staunch moralist, cutthroat politician, fiercely loyal family member and self-loathing Catholic. He spends the series collecting enemies and cleaning up his brother's messes, building to a very subtle slip into his brother's habits later in the series. Even when Bobby is falling short of his lofty morals, Pepper keeps the character innocent and idealist, making for the most magnetic performance of the mini-series.

Katie Holmes never quite brings down the house like Pepper and Kinnear, but she makes a strong impression. While her accent is very, very shaky in spots, her onscreen persona is perfectly suited to Jackie Kennedy. Holmes' chemistry with Kinnear and Pepper is palatable, making for some subtle, sensuous scenes than imply more than they show (befitting the rather uptight character). I don't want to be underhanded about Holmes (she's a fine actress when cast right) but her ability to sink into the role was the most pleasant surprise here.

Tom Wilkinson is always good, and he delivers the same sort of screen-commanding performance here that he does in just about everything he's in. Joseph is a booming, theatrical character; more than a bit of a bully to his family, he's corrupt and callow. Wilkinson knows just when play him as an over-the-top monster and when to keep him grounded as a stern, if loving parent. Diana Hardcastle (who appears alongside him in The Good Wife *etc) delivers an equally theatrical, yet finely grounded performance as Rosemary Kennedy, and the scenes where each struggle to keep power over the family makes for some of the most riveting material in the mini-series. The quality of their performances should come as no surprise, as they are the most seasoned professionals in the cast. Their refusal to phone it in, even at the script's cheesiest moments, is a testament to that fact.*

And, believe me, the script is extremely cheesy at times. The dialogue is decent on the whole, but there are at least five to ten cliché, clunker lines per episode that threaten to sink the whole boat (and make you howl with laughter). The writers then top off those groaners with a handful of derivative dramatic tropes, including-but-not-limited-to: the pre-requisite slinging-the-papers-off-the-desk-in-anger scene, a number of weepy hospital set pieces and some of the worst attempts to match archive footage with newly shot material I've ever seen.

It gets worse, though. While the overall rise-and-fall arc of the series is well crafted, the miniseries is chock full of tangential subplots that range from cliché to ridiculous. All of them ham-fistedly try to work some aspect of the Kennedy mythology into the story. This way, Kennedy gets to mentor an African American Secret Service agent, Herbert Hoover gets to torment the family like a one-dimensional sociopath and Marilyn Monroe (a poorly cast Charlotte Sullivan) kills herself off-screen as a result of being rejected by JFK. I don't mind when a story plays fast and loose with historical facts, but most of this stuff is just beyond ridiculous and carried out in the most milquetoast way possible. It takes the punch out of the lurid thrills associated with the Kennedy history and sort of defeats the entire purpose of the series - to show a gritty, raw take on the family. As is, we're treated to the portrayal of a Marilyn whose idea of seduction is pawing men while using the phrase "butt nekkid."

If you can deal with the cheesy dialogue, corny tropes and needlessly melo-dramatic subplots, you'll find The Kennedys *to be a pretty classy, well-produced piece of trash television. Hey, if Abraham Lincoln can become a vampire hunter in the movies, why can't JFK be a pill popping, sex addicted martyr?*

Ike Oden, *DVD Verdict*, 28 May 2011

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THE BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL (2011)



For economic and other reasons, a group of superannuated Brits choose to live out their golden years in Jaipur's Best Exotic Marigold Hotel for the Elderly and Beautiful. Blessed with a thoroughbred cast - Bill Nighy (*Valkyrie*), Judi Dench (*Wetherby*, *Shakespeare In Love*), Maggie Smith, Penelope Wilton, Celia Imrie and TW are all superb - this delicately spiced confection ticks plenty of boxes. TW plays Graham Dashwood, an ex High Court judge in search of a fondly remembered love of his youth, with his wife Diana Hardcastle once more (see *Resnick*, *A Good Woman* etc) taking a small part. 119 minutes. Good.

IMDb: The most entertaining, colourful and uplifting film I've seen in a long time. Apart from India itself - a star in its own right - it is the performances from its stellar cast that really make this film. The central characters are all wholly believable and, to be honest, I find it impossible to single anyone out, although, if I had to, my vote would probably go to Bill Nighy, who is wonderful as Douglas, the apologetic, hesitant, hen-pecked husband of the self centred, bitter, scolding Jean portrayed by Penelope Wilton, who is also excellent. In the scene between the two when Douglas for once bites back, Nighy's emotion is mesmerising to watch. When you add to the mix the likes of Dames Smith and Dench, the delicious Celia Imrie, Tom Wilkinson and Ronald Pickup, you can't go wrong. The younger cast members and all the supporting players do a fine job too, but it is the oldies who steal the show. That doesn't mean it's an old folks' film - far from it. I took my sixteen year old daughter and she laughed, cried and loved it as much as I did / If you liked *Four Weddings And A Funeral* (and who didn't?) then you will love this. It's good to see a film that doesn't treat retirement aged people as idiots. These characters are intelligent, funny, curious and I would willingly share a G&T with any of them. An absolute gem / A story with racism, snobbery, love, joy and sadness in just the right amounts throughout. The film is two hours of escapism with just a small undertone of moral fibre thrown in. It will probably make the move to DVD and TV quite quickly - in this case a good thing for the right reasons / The range of emotions this movie drags out of you, and the speed with which it does it are incredible and I have to thank the scriptwriters and director for that. It is a while since I saw a film that made me laugh out loud so much and so frequently. Dev Patel's character is one of the most likable you will ever come across, but then all, bar one, have characteristics that

just grow on you. It's a shame that Ronald Pickup and the beautiful Celia Imrie aren't shown on the poster as they are just as responsible for the enjoyment I got from this film as the other "more famous" members of the cast / British cinema at its best.

Tom Wilkinson : The Full Tommy

> *Hadley Freeman wants to talk to Tom Wilkinson about awards, exotic locations and hanging out with Johnny Depp. But he just wants to talk about failure, lying low - and their shared hatred of jeans.*

"Maybe I want to pack acting in," says Tom Wilkinson, one of Britain's best-loved actors, in an endearingly rumpled voice. Why would you do that? You've been nominated for Oscars and you're about to fly off to start filming *The Lone Ranger* with Johnny Depp. Acting seems to be working out pretty well for you. "Oh, I don't know," he replies, as casually as if he's just commented on the weather, as opposed to telling a journalist something that would give his agent a fit. "I haven't really thought about it in any coherent sense. I'm not a good traveller. I never used to mind all the time away from home, the hanging around, but now I think, 'Oh, what *time* is it? Come on!'" He ponders for a minute then says: "No, I can't quit. What would I do? Maybe I should just make movies in Muswell Hill, then I could go home for lunch. That would be good."

But the movie you're making with Depp is in New Mexico, right?

"Oh, don't start!"

As well as the travelling, Wilkinson also finds doing publicity wearisome. Although he has been twice Oscar nominated (for *In The Bedroom* and *Michael Clayton*), been in some of the best small films (*The Full Monty*), the biggest blockbusters (*Mission Impossible : Ghost Protocol*, *Batman Begins*) and the finest TV serials of recent years (*Martin Chuzzlewit*, *John Adams*), the film that best demonstrates the nature of both his career and his personality is a clip that can be found on YouTube. It dates from 2009, right after Wilkinson won the Golden Globe for his performance in the US miniseries *John Adams*. He is shunted out before a press battalion looking more like a professor than a lauded actor, with his skew-whiff spectacles and disobedient hair. He stands there, waiting for a question. Eventually, after several painful moments of silence, one comes. "Congratulations," says a journalist. "Can you tell me what the real Tom Cruise is like?" Wilkinson stares at the questioner. "He's very charming," he deadpans.

"That was a pity question!" cries Wilkinson. "I was taken out there and someone said, 'Tom Wilkinson, best supporting actor for a miniseries', which is

fucking meaningless, of course. And then - absolutely nothing! So that guy asked his pity question. But I didn't care."

I hope it didn't ruin your mood. Winning a Golden Globe is a big deal.

Wilkinson looks up with an expression that suggests boredom with awards, and surprise that his should be a source of pride. "Is it? I don't know."

Wilkinson is not your typical actor interviewee. For a start, today he seems far more interested in talking about the interviewer than about himself, kicking off proceedings with the announcement that he heartily agrees with an article I recently wrote vilifying jeans. "All that clinging to your youth," he says. "It's no good for me!" Wilkinson's Eeyore tendencies, his innate groundedness (which he puts down to his northern upbringing) and his complete disinterest in toeing the PR line reflect someone delightfully unaffected by success. It's like talking to an enjoyably grumpy neighbour, rather than someone who is - albeit reluctantly - about to make a big-budget film with Depp. As his agent Lou Coulson once said: "He's ambitious, but it's not an ambition for fame. He wants to be in line for good scripts."

"That's true," Wilkinson says. "The fame aspect has never interested me. I can see it in other actors who love being famous. Me, I don't care for it at all. If I can sidestep doing publicity, I will."

So you won't be appearing on *Jonathan Ross* any time soon? "Oh don't! I happened to catch a few minutes of that the other night, and it was horrible! He had David Beckham on the sofa and it was just awful. Trying to be sort of ... *matey*," he says, spitting the word out. "Beckham handled it very well, not being drawn into this 'Tell us how big your dick is, David?' But it makes you go, 'Shut up!'"

Unfortunately for Wilkinson (but fortunately for me), he wasn't able to sidestep the publicity for his latest film, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. A larky yet dark soap about a group of pensioners relocating to India, the film features a slew of British actors routinely described as national treasures: Bill Nighy, Judi Dench, Maggie Smith. While it may not be Wilkinson's finest film, he is marvellous in it, playing an elderly gay man looking for a lost childhood love. Needless to say, Wilkinson did not particularly enjoy the exotic shoot. "I never got over the trauma of being in India, really," he says. At times, the film's Indian characters, particularly Dev Patel's portrayal of a hotel owner, veer uncomfortably close to Indian stereotype, a point Wilkinson partially concedes. "I think some people will take severe, or some, exception to the way India could be seen, the treatment of some of the Indian characters." But what do you think? "What do I think? Hmm. What *do* I think?" He ponders. "I'm going to have to say that I think it pulls it off. It's meant to be a comedy, after all."

Another problem is that the group are supposed to have travelled to India as part of a holiday for the elderly, yet Wilkinson is only 64 and Nighy 62. Diana Hardcastle, Wilkinson's wife, appears in the movie, too, looking downright youthful. Wasn't he a little insulted by all this "elderly" talk? "I did feel that, but there is a convention that once you get past 60 you're in elderly territory. Maybe that's a weakness of the film, that you don't quite buy the premise. Maybe that's true."

The subject of ageism really gets him going. He talks, with passion, about the injustice of Marks & Spencer staff trying to help him pack his groceries. "Well, I bristle! Do they think I'm incapable? They say, 'We ask everyone.' But I say, 'Well, you didn't do it with that woman over there!'" Wilkinson was born in Leeds into what he describes as a family of "northern farmers". After studying at the University of Kent, he went to RADA and spent the next few years working in TV and theatre. It was on a TV job that he met Hardcastle. "It was a not very good TV series called *First Among Equals*, a Jeffrey Archer adaptation. It was not," he repeats, in case the point was lost, "very good." Well, you got something good out of it. "Yes, that's true."



After his fantastic performance as Mr Pecksniff in the BBC's 1994 *Martin Chuzzlewit* ("Yes, I was good in that. I was good!") he crossed over to film and came to prominence as an unemployed factory boss in *The Full Monty*. Wilkinson has played so many different characters - from enjoyably cheesy villains in blockbusters to historical figures, not to mention his extraordinary turn as an American factory worker who decides to have a sex change in 2003's *Normal* - that it would be reductive to say he is known for any one type of performance. But his delicate portrayals of grief and shame in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, *In The Bedroom* and even *The Full Monty* are particularly fine.

"When I read a script I want to do," he says, "there is an act of recognition, one of 'I can do this - in fact, I can do this better than anyone in the world.'" The

thought makes him look almost content, but then the clouds encroach again. "That doesn't happen with every job. The job I'm about to do doesn't have that 'I can do this' element." Still, at the next awards show, it will give journalists something to ask you about. "Yes! I'll be asked what it was like working with Johnny Depp. And I'll say: 'It's okay.'"

Hadley Freeman, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2012

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The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, may be an unabashed feel-good film, but you won't catch Tom Wilkinson trying to make you laugh in it. The actor, best known for plumbing serious depths in *In The Bedroom* and *Michael Clayton*, has rarely made comedies since 1997's surprise hit *The Full Monty*. And when he does, he tends to play gruffly serious bystanders to the action. "Comedy's tough," the actor says when asked if he pursues such parts. "Ninety percent of the stuff that passes for comedy is just not funny."

"What do you think is funny?" he asks, beginning a digression into other performers' careers. He thinks Ricky Gervais's version of *The Office* was "a work of genius - just so truthful, well observed" but isn't sure what to think about his more recent work. Although he enjoyed Bob Hope in movies like *The Paleface*, he says "I never found him funny as a stand-up comedian." Speaking of the short shelf life of today's laugh-makers, he observes: "People like Jack Benny went from 25 until they were in their grave and still had their TV shows. They didn't let comedians die in those days."

Soon it's clear that Wilkinson is doing something other writers have accused him of: interviewing his interviewer, taking an enjoyable detour that has nothing to do with the movie that Fox Searchlight has flown him in to promote. It seems an effective habit for an actor who accepts how little control he has over what winds up onscreen. Asked how he knew that *Marigold*, the kind of calculated crowd-pleaser one might expect to turn smarmy, would depict its more emotional elements (like the search his character makes for a long-lost lover whose life he may have ruined) without devolving into cheese, he matter-of-factly says: "I guessed. And it wasn't any of my business."

Could he really be saying he doesn't care if the movies he's in turn out lousy? "No, no, no - you don't get me that easy, kid!" he says with mock outrage. Wilkinson's simply realistic enough to know what happens in front of the camera is just one part of the process: "You turn up on time and know your lines, you do the best you possibly can and then you finish and go away. What happens then is when the real work starts on a movie." All he asks of a script is that the part he's being offered is good. If that's true, "chances are the rest of it

is good, too." But embracing a film is a leap of faith: "You wanna look at a script and [envision] the finished product [being] better, and nine times out of ten that doesn't happen. The alchemy" - of music, editing and a thousand and one technical-artistic details - "doesn't come off."

Wilkinson will admit to only one or two instances in which he exercised deliberate control over his career. One was the decision to abandon reliable stage and TV work to make movies in America. "I'd gotten to a point," he recalls, "where I'd done everything I could in Britain. I could more or less do what I wanted in theatre and I could certainly do what I wanted in television. Friends of mine were doing films, and I thought: 'I want some of that. I'm gonna go over there. I want to sit down and play with the big boys.' So I said to my agent: 'No more theatre. No more telly. We'll start again.'" Thus, two decades into his career, he again found himself submitted to the indignity of auditioning for roles. He scored early on, lucking into a diverse trio of hits - *The Full Monty*, *Rush Hour* and *Shakespeare In Love* - that made him seem less of a gamble on the big screen. But central to Wilkinson's career, and what sets him apart from heavyweight *Marigold* co-stars Judi Dench and Maggie Smith, is his freedom from the pigeonholing expectations that audiences have of Famous British Actors. He has played so many American characters, and so effortlessly, that a casual moviegoer might not even realise he's British.

That might not always be an asset. "As you've seen, I've featured very largely in the *Harry Potter* series," he notes sarcastically, having not been in any of them. ("They need the proper English people.") But it represents a conscious choice and has opened the door to acclaimed performances in *Michael Clayton* and *John Adams* and a co-starring role with his wife, Diana Hardcastle, as Joe and Rose Kennedy in *The Kennedys*. "When I made *In The Bedroom*," he explains, "I thought: 'This is going to work, but say it doesn't take off. At least it proves two things: I can play a leading role and play an American leading role.'"

It also proved he could be nominated for an Oscar. And if *Bedroom* made such an impression that Wilkinson will forever be the go-to guy for characters weighing impossible moral questions, living with consequences, even when those around him are having fun? Better that than being on the other side, trying to get laughs in a faddish world where comedic actors "are there, and then suddenly you think: 'I haven't seen that guy in 10 years. What's happened to him?' Comedy is really tough," he says again. "You can see how people want to get out of it pretty damn quickly and start to establish their credentials in other areas."

John DeFore, *The Washington Post*, 4 May 2012

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MISSION IMPOSSIBLE : GHOST PROTOCOL (2011)



More *Boy's Own* adventure centred around the seemingly indestructible Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise), not as good as *MI I* or *III* but at least better than the terrible *II*. The story is difficult to follow, making it hard to care about the characters in it, but the chases, crashes, shoot-outs, escapes, explosions, fights and techno-geekery come round every few minutes to meet the genre specification and keep the punters (reasonably) happy. In an uncredited part with a job-title (IMF Secretary) but no name, TW plays a single three and a half minute scene that ends in his death. 127 mindless minutes. Not one to see twice.

IMDb: Some fella wants to blow up the world or something. We don't know why, but it doesn't matter, 'cos it's that guy from the Millennium films, therefore your argument is invalid. No explanation is needed. And now Tom Cruise is driving his amazing flashy Xenu 500 to some posh European cocktail party - or something - where all the doors have been unlocked by that British dweeb who used to be funny. We don't learn how he was able to do any of it, but no explanation is needed because OMG did you see that car. Now let's pause briefly for another snippet of a weird, uninvolving and unresolved subplot about the wife ... and straight back to Tom, faffing about on the outside of a big building, scampering around with a pair of customised washing-up gloves. Snore. No-one looks to *Mission Impossible* films for detailed character studies, but there's literally nothing here to make us understand the motivations of the baddies or care on even a shallow level about the goodies. This is a crack-force team of androids for whom nothing seems much of a challenge. They have carbon-fibre bones that cannot break and an electro-magnetic forcefield that repels bullets. And they're not programmed with personalities. Tom Cruise is a strange one. He makes these hugely narcissistic films but doesn't seem to be offering any performances worthy of his own faith in himself. He polarises public opinion and doesn't have the broad groundswell of support to be able to afford to churn out such a lazy film at this point in his career. This franchise will self-destruct in - ooh, there it goes now! Nice sandstorm though / I'd watch the *Bourne* series again ahead of this / Poor / For the easily amazed.

THE GRUFFALO'S CHILD (TV short, 2011)



After the huge success of their 1999 children's picture book *The Gruffalo*, Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler followed up in 2004 with *The Gruffalo's Child*, another deceptively simple, rhyming, repetitious, brains-over-brawn allegory reprising the same menagerie of woodland creatures (plus, of course, the eponymous monster - now a parent). Similarly, after the very positive reception (see page 128) given to the animation of the first book, it was inevitable that its sequel would receive the same treatment. Thus Christmas Day 2011 saw the UK television debut, again on BBC One, of *The Gruffalo's Child*, featuring the same team of writers, animators and actors as the first film including, back as Fox (though with even fewer lines and screen time), TW. More (fairly) innocent fun for all. 27 minutes.



FURY (aka *The Samaritan*) (2012)



Samuel L. Jackson stars in this bleak but potentially satisfying tale that simmers promisingly until a sentimental and silly last five minutes throws it all away. TW goes into gangland Mr Big nasty mode once more, though he appears at the two ends of the film only. 89 minutes of squandered opportunity. A shame.

IMDb: Whilst the plot seems rushed at times and the execution of the story the same you can't help but like the noir elements. There's also a clear love of mood - the film is soaked in atmosphere helped by a fantastic soundtrack, brilliant lens work and strong performances by the two main leads. With a bit of tweaking this could have been a genuine neo-noir classic / See *Oldboy* (this film's far superior template) first. You're only cheating yourself if you don't / *The Samaritan's* plodding, meandering storyline with its improbable and illogical plot points does not hold anything to the film noir of yesteryear / Not bad but strangely unengaging / Director David Weaver has given us an expertly drawn character study and well plotted film about a confidence game and the players in it. Jackson underplays nearly every second. Kirby, Negga and the rest of the cast are also at their peak here. Unfortunately, Weaver gets just a bit "too cute" at the end of the film, giving us a wild time that is not terribly necessary. Still, what has gone before is so terrific that I can forgive the last several moments / Any true Sam Jackson fan has sat through some really dire movies. This is nowhere near the bottom, but it's somewhat frustrating in that you can see how much better it could have been if only they'd tried a bit harder / It may not be everyone's cup of tea but I thoroughly enjoyed it / *The Samaritan* represents a dying breed of crime thriller in which character and plot take precedence over action and special effects. Only its ending made me take pause, with everything leading up to it immensely satisfying / The major sticking point for me was that neither characters nor story engaged me enough. Believability also went out of the window about halfway through / An old school action thriller with a film noir soul / The plot is full of holes and the acting wooden / *The Samaritan* rarely manages to exert any emotional grip, relying rather on Jackson's geriatric foul mouth and masculine omnipresence to poke home the story / Hackneyed / Wilkinson does a convincing job.

THE LONE RANGER (2013)



Epic filmmaking from Disney with Armie Hammer as Lone Ranger John Reid, Johnny Depp as Tonto, TW as wicked railroad tycoon Latham Cole and Helena Bonham Carter as Red, a feisty madam with an ivory leg. The whole is decidedly tongue-in-cheek but none the worse for that. Though the 1937 linking passages feel superfluous, they are probably necessary to set the characters' mythological aspects (related to their comic, radio and TV manifestations) in perspective. Despite the criticism it receives from many quarters, *lots* of fun. 143 minutes.

IMDb: Director Gore Verbinski has delivered a film that moves leisurely along peppered with rousing action sequences, comedy, villainy and pathos. It is solid entertainment. I would place this movie alongside *Waterworld*, *The Last Action Hero* and *John Carter* as unfairly panned movies that deserve to succeed / Fantastic. What film did the critics watch? Depp is terrific and Hammer pitch perfect / This is an origin story, a tale of how John Reid became The Lone Ranger, and of course how the noble steed Silver and Indian sidekick Tonto became integral to his villain-fighting ways. Tom Wilkinson and William Fichtner file in for polar opposite badass duties, the former a weasel business man trying to mould the West in his own image, the latter a repugnant psychopath with a penchant for eating human hearts! Then Helena Bonham Carter wanders in from some grindhouse movie for a couple of cameos resplendent with sexual energy. It's all very wacky and wild, and rightly so, but this is not at the expense of very good story telling. Some of the narrative could have been trimmed but as the bromance builds between our two heroes and Silver gets up to all sorts of comedy horse escapades there's nary a dull moment. Producer Bruckheimer and director Verbinski throw in all the action staples - chases, fights, swinging from ropes, shoot-outs, people dangling from speeding train (the pic is bookended by awesome train sequences), grisly deaths and on it goes / A real hoot / Wonderful / Delivers action and comedy while bringing up serious issues regarding the unfair treatment of Native Americans without being a drag. The two and a half hours went by very quickly and the soundtrack is amazing / One of the few films I have seen twice in forty eight hours, enjoying it just as much the second time through for its beautiful visual effects, intelligence and humour. A brilliant and thought-provoking reinvention of the two main characters - and what powerful imagery with echoes of classic Westerns, Buster Keaton and even Samuel Beckett. A

film for kids and adults, the innocent and the sophisticated. True popular cinema with a heart and brain / The jaded critics are dead wrong. This movie will make you cringe, laugh, maybe cry and certainly smile / A superb homage - well done!



Q (to TW): You've mentioned being a fan of Westerns. Did you have any idols within the genre?

The Western is about my favourite genre and at the top of my list of Westerns - in fact, very near the top of my list of all time great films - is The Wild Bunch *by Sam Peckinpah. So there's something about that energy that made me say yes indeed to Gore Verbinski when he asked me to be in this one.* [And idols?] *Sam Peckinpah.*



Armie Hammer and Johnny Depp as The Lone Ranger and Tonto

BELLE (2013)



Belle is a mixed race West Indian-born girl whose story starts in 1769 when, after the death of her mother, her naval officer father takes her back to England where she's accepted into the household of his uncle, Lord Mansfield (TW), who just happens to be the Lord Chief Justice. When she's grown into a beautiful young heiress - though widely scorned because both illegitimate and "a mulatto" - he becomes involved in a landmark fraud case concerning the deliberate drowning of 142 slaves at sea by owners who thought them more valuable as lost cargo (thus covered by insurance) than sickly living beings. Her implausibly mature, informed and intelligent outlook critically influences the thinking of both her guardian and others. TW pairs up again with lovely Emily Watson (*Separate Lies*) and Penelope Wilton (*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*). Heaving bosoms abound. Not bad, though, despite a basis in truth, feels overly manipulative and contrived. Director Amma Asante's first film. 100 minutes.

IMDb: Much to learn here and much to think about / Overly earnest and cliché ridden, which is a pity because the story itself is inherently interesting / Beautifully layered, touching issues of equality and slavery, but not preachy / A crowd pleaser, giving us a happy ending, a sense of hope and satisfaction that things will get better, that love can conquer plenty and that maybe there's goodness in most of us / Whether your tastes lean towards sumptuous recreations of an era or the exquisite use of the English language in historic arguments, you will not easily forget the impressive new star Gugu Mbatha-Raw or the beginnings of civilization's rejection of slavery. It's all what cinema does best / Enjoyable but unfortunately a far cry from historical reality, for Lord Mansfield was a brave key figure in the Abolitionist movement in his own right rather than the 'reluctant' reformer portrayed here / If you're willing to overlook some of its major plot contrivances, *Belle* has some good things going for it. Wilkinson as Lord Mansfield steals the show, conflicted over the values of a conservative society on the threshold of change / The movie could have focused on the relationship between cousins Dido and Lady Elizabeth, or on the unusual complexities raised by the illegitimate, mixed-race Belle being raised among the British Aristocracy. Still another option would have been digging into the historical impact of the *Zong* massacre and the

subsequent arguments, trials and appeals. Instead, we are offered a spoonful of each, which leaves the viewer wanting more on all fronts / Sophomoric / Superb.

How does Tom Wilkinson - star of The Patriot, Valkyrie and Belle - maintain a low profile?

Few actors were put on this earth to stand, six feet tall, in a periwig, a white stock, a long and straining blue satin waistcoat and a belligerent expression, and say the words "Do you have in mind my position?" convincingly, but Tom Wilkinson is one of them. For casting directors, he is the go-to guy for gravitas, hard-won wisdom, battered decency. Almost any lines of dialogue that issue from his thin lips carry a freight of moral seriousness. In a movie universe dominated by ageless action heroes and charmless juvenile leads, he is an authentic grown-up. He's never really seemed young. He arrived on the big screen in the mid-nineties already middle-aged, and has remained that way ever since. His sharply appraising eyes, set in that strikingly knobbly face, can express utter contempt, shrewd intelligence and huge tenderness.

Although not everyone thinks so. "I had a Bulgarian taxi driver on the way here," says Wilkinson, plonking himself down on the sofa at a photographic studio in Soho. "He said, 'I seen you on TV haven't I? You have very ... annoying face'." Wilkinson raises both eyebrows in resignation. "Perhaps he meant 'memorable'." You get the impression that Wilkinson would rather not be memorable. Before our meeting he stipulated that this article shouldn't be the magazine's cover story. Why? "Oh, it's just not my style," he said. "I like to go to Waitrose and not be recognised. Being on the cover - it's not really me."

He's good at power. He has played veteran US politicians (Benjamin Franklin, Joe Kennedy, Lyndon B Johnson) and historic English milords (Lord Queensbury, Lord Cornwallis, Lord Mansfield) but he can do a murderous gangland boss in a Guy Ritchie film and put the frighteners on villains and audiences alike. In the past decade, he's turned up all over the place, from Batman Begins *to* The Lone Ranger, *from* Valkyrie *to* The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Movie audiences can catch the shy-but-ubiquitous Wilkinson this month in full grown-up mode in the movie* Belle, *an unusual hybrid of period-drama-romance-meets-slavery-flick, set in 18th century London. It's the story of Dido Belle Lindsay, a mixed-race 'mulatto' girl (played by Gugu Mbatha-Raw) fathered by a young aristocrat and a slave woman, and accepted into the household at the famous stately home Kenwood by her father's uncle, Lord Mansfield, who happens to be Lord Chief Justice of England. Now an heiress - the only black heiress in London high society - she encounters snide remarks, racist sniggers and outright hostility from the family's posh acquaintances, and protestations of love from a young lawyer campaigning to force English slavers to relinquish their grisly trade.*

Playing Lord Mansfield, both the girl's adoptive patron, and the judge in the slavery trial, Wilkinson is at the centre of the action. Asked why he wanted the part, he's all self-deprecation. "I read the script and thought, this is good, not least because it's set half a mile from my house. But I really was taken by the story. It's not about slavery - slavery is in the background and gradually comes to the foreground. The story is about this girl being introduced into this house, and growing into intellectual and emotional maturity. It does what art should do, it tells you how society works. It's accurate and truthful, especially about the sexual politics of that society, with the suitors sniffing around the money."



Gugu Mbatha-Raw as Belle

Did he think Lord Mansfield was unusual in his attitude to Belle? Wilkinson frowns. "There are rules in the family where they say to Belle: 'You can eat with us - but if we have guests, you can't eat with us'. I think they were right not to make Mansfield out to be a wonderful, I'm-not-a-racist, come-and-join-the-family kind of guy. It's important to have those little checks and balances. He's shocked when he's first introduced to her - you get a sense of him saying, 'But she's black, you can't leave this girl here'. He's a nice guy, but a stickler about her not marrying a young lawyer. In those days, if you married a rich woman, her money immediately became yours. So Mansfield and his wife look at her potential relationship with a vicar's son as catastrophic."

The climax of the movie sees Lord Mansfield making a moving speech about the Zong *massacre, when 142 slaves were flung over the side of a slave ship so that their owners could claim insurance, as if they were mere cargo. It was a key moment in the history of the English slave trade and the judge was an eloquent voice for abolition - but the film implies that his views become liberal-*

ised as a result of having the gorgeous Belle under his roof. Is it okay for movies to mess about with historical facts?

"Yes I think it's okay," he says. "Shakespeare buggered around with the truth all the time. And a film is not a documentary." He frowns again. "And truth is such a difficult thing to pin down. I was doing jury duty four or five years ago. The central element of one case was the truth of what had happened in a small room. There had been seven people sitting in the room - and the witnesses couldn't agree about who'd been sitting there. So a writer, 300 years later, can certainly fool around with stuff. Maybe you can bugger around with something that happened in the 18th century, but not the 20th century."

Wilkinson was in The Patriot, *the 2000 Mel Gibson film about the American War of Independence, which landed the makers in trouble for, among other things, its portrayal (by a German director) of British atrocities that seemed to recall the worst excesses of the SS in the Second World War. How did he feel about it? "I've never seen the actual film," he says, "but I saw the scene in which the English herded people into a church and set fire to it. That never happened. But the English were ruthless and cruel in that war, no question, and there are certain things you can do to show cruelty."*

Wilkinson was born 66 years ago in Yorkshire. He spent his earliest years on a farm outside Leeds. He remembers "hearing people say 'That were t'night they bombed Kirkstall Forge' and thinking: 'What a wonderful name for a place.'" At four, his family moved to Canada. His father, a farmer, hoped to buy a farm on Vancouver Island, "but the woman who lived there wouldn't sell it to him, so he went to work in an aluminium smelter instead, as did my brothers."

Young Tom went to school in British Columbia. Did the kids laugh at his accent? "No - in the early 1950s, that part of Canada was full of immigrants. Nearly half the population was from Europe - Italians, Germans, English, Russians, the fall-out from war. I don't recall anyone saying, 'My Gahd, you speak weird...'."

He was the baby of the family by ten years. When he was in junior school, all his siblings were working at the smelter. Then a brother decided to go into computers instead. A sister got married. The smelting business declined - "and my mother decided she'd never liked Canada anyway". So the family returned to England and Tom's parents bought a pub in Cornwall.

Your father, I observe, sounds a very passionate, impetuous man. To up sticks, tear away from his roots, leave the country, relocate the family thousands of miles away - then turn round and come home again. "No," says Wilkinson, "he wasn't impulsive at all." He says it in a way that discourages further enquiries. Does he feel much connection with the North of England? "Well yes, I suppose,"

he says. "But I'm not sentimental about the place. It's certainly part of who I am, but I'm not conscious of which bit. It's not unrelated to the fact that I don't want to be on the cover of the magazine. There's a feeling of 'No, that's not for you. Don't get ideas above your station. A built-in reluctance.'"

After university in Kent, he joined RADA, "and I went straight into a part the day after I left. It was in The Mother *by Brecht, at the Half Moon in Old Street. You didn't get any money, but you got Thursday morning off to sign on the dole."*

His late twenties and early thirties saw "the usual progression that most actors had at that time - up and down the reps. I played leading roles: Hamlet in Coventry and Birmingham, Lear at the Royal Court, Henry the Fifth at Nottingham Playhouse." He spent a "fruitless" couple of years at the RSC, during the reign of John Barton and Terry Hands. "It was very inward-looking. People measured success by what other RSC people thought, as opposed to what the world thought." He began appearing on television: Inspector Morse, Prime Suspect*. In Jeffrey Archer's* First Among Equals *he played (appropriately) the MP for Leeds North. At 46, he was widely acclaimed for playing Seth Pecksniff in a TV version of Dickens's* Martin Chuzzlewit*.*

"I'd got to the point where I could do more or less what I wanted on stage and TV," he reflects. "I wasn't offered soap operas, only heavyweight drama. The top echelons of TV would come to me." What did they see in him? He thinks for a moment. "What I was good at was making bad scripts seem good. I could do that. I don't mean producers said: 'Look, here's a piece of shit, can you make it seem good?'. I'd look at it and think: 'I've seen better writing than this but let's pretend it's really worthwhile'."

One day, he decided to give up theatre and TV. He saw friends crossing the pond, making films in America, forging a new movie career. "I said to my agent, 'I don't want to do any more TV or stage. I just want films'." He'd appeared in a few movies, albeit briefly (in Ang Lee's Sense And Sensibility *he dies in the first scene), but then he went ballistic.*

From 1996 onward, he appeared in three or four films a year. His range was hectic: he was Gerald in The Full Monty, *Oscar Wilde's nemesis Lord Queensbury in* Wilde*, Hugh Fennyman the theatre owner in* Shakespeare In Love, *Dr Chasuble in* The Importance Of Being Earnest, *Dr Howard Mierzwiak, the brains behind the memory-shredding system in* Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind, *Carmine the Mafia boss in* Batman Begins *...*

Two movies stand out from his torrential film CV. One is Todd Field's In The Bedroom, *where he played a Maine doctor whose beloved son is killed by his*

girlfriend's ex-partner. Wilkinson's viciously destructive scenes with Sissy Spacek (playing his guilt-tripping, passive-aggressive wife) tore up the screen and knocked the critics for six. He won three Best Actor awards and was nominated for an Oscar. Speaking about it now, he'll only say "Sissy is a fantastically professional actress, we'd rehearsed the scenes a lot and it was a fucking good piece of writing."

The other high point is Michael Clayton, *Tony Gilroy's 2007 legal thriller starring George Clooney. Wilkinson was a revelation as Arthur Edens, a senior lawyer who goes crazy in public and threatens to expose one of the company's crooked clients. His scenes with Clooney brought something wild, raging and very unsettling from this calm and contained actor. Where does it come from, his capacity for rage?*

He sighs. "I've been doing this for about 40 years! People write stuff down, and I act it and I'm fucking good at it. I can be saying 'Hello darling, how are things?' one minute, and do King Lear's rage the next, like that!" He snaps his fingers. "It's no good when a director like Todd [Field] says, Okay, Tom, whenever you're ready...' I said, 'Todd, you have to say "Action!" You have to say "Now!"' Because then you can go: 'Click! I'm angry in this scene, or annoyed, or suppressing something.' It has to be like a light switch going on."

His next film is, a little surprisingly, a road comedy, Unfinished Business, *with Vince Vaughn and Dave Franco, younger brother of James. How ambitious is he still? "I can't be bothered as much as I used to be. There's lots of stuff about filming I enjoy - I like the bit when somebody says 'Action', but the waiting around in hotel rooms, no. And they don't give you your envelope full of per diem dollars like they used to. Now it goes straight into the bank."*

How does he feel about stardom? This is the man who famously failed to recognise Madonna when they met, and Julia Roberts. "Yes, it happens a lot," he ruefully admits. "But when you go up a red carpet, like at the Golden Globes or the Oscars, it's a fantastic experience." His eyes widen with genuine excitement. "You get to see really, really famous people and I still have this thing that I'm not really one of them. I just think: 'Fucking hell, so that's what Rupert Murdoch looks like,' or 'My God, Elton John's head is so big! It's huuuuuge!'."

And the self-effacing Mr Wilkinson spreads his hands to indicate the dimensions of a real superstar cranium, so unlike his own.

John Walsh, *The Independent*, 14 June 2014

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FELONY (2013)



After drinking with colleagues, Detective Toohey knocks a nine year old boy off his bike while driving home. He then reports the accident but does not admit responsibility. Another detective, old hand Carl Summer (TW), one of the first on the scene, persuades Toohey to say nothing. Three days later the boy dies and Toohey struggles to cope with his remorse. Meanwhile Summer's idealistic young colleague Melic suspects a cover-up. A decent drama, unpretentious but slight, in which TW gets to try out his Aussie accent. 107 minutes.

IMDb: From Australia comes a tense drama, well written and acted, that is particularly attuned to our times. Written by actor Joel Edgerton who also stars, this is storytelling on the first order, well worth viewing and pondering. Wilkinson is brilliant / The duplicity of right and wrong is highlighted in this moody psychological police drama when an accident evokes conflicting responses from each of the people concerned / Detective Summer is the best part of this movie - great acting from Wilkinson as usual, though the movie itself falls a touch flat at the end / A great picture dealing with humane issues / The truths of the plot are accurate and revealing. Brilliant / A credible fail. With more reality and tension and less of Joel Edgerton's "acting" this could have been world class / Utterly lame - so clichéd and predictable / *Felony* doesn't do enough to leap from the pack even though it has some nice moments / It's not that *Felony* is bad, it's just slow and lacks the action a police drama should have. That being said, if you're into watching people battle their inner demons and fight their conscience, you might enjoy this film, but I found it somewhat boring / Edgerton approaches his role in an internalised way, probably not to everyone's taste, but his performance is solid. Courtney comes off in his role as a determined detective who is able to keep his emotions in check until the very end, sort of inwardly seething. Good but not great / I wasn't thrilled with the ending, but overall this was an engaging police psychological drama / Subtle and gripping. Australia shows Hollywood how to do it / Authentic in its simplicity, with terrific performances from Wilkinson and Edgerton / Ends weakly.

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To help promote *Felony*, TW appeared at an unspecified date on Canadian talk show *George Stroumboulopolous Tonight*. Here's how the interview went:



GS (left, above): Hello. How are things?

TW: *I think they're all right.*

Congratulations on *Felony*.

Yes. Thank you. It works very well. I saw it for the first time last night, which was a thrill.

Is it unnerving to watch a film at this stage of your career?

It's always unnerving and increasingly as I ... You know, you look and you think "Who is that old, fat man?" [audience laughs] *"Oh, it's me!"*

It's incredible how the brain keeps you preserved at some age. What age are you in your mind?

In my mind I'm about 39. There's a thing in one of the newspapers in England which is called What You See When You Look In The Mirror and then people describe the aging and "I think I've aged quite well" and stuff like that, and I

always think if I was ever asked to do that ... When I look in the mirror, it's not what I look like I'm interested in, it's who I am*. You look in the mirror and think "Who is this person I've been looking at fairly continuously for a long time, and he's still a bit of a mystery?" Anyway, that's another question.*

A mystery? Seriously?

Yeah. I think maybe that's probably why acting is a good thing to do.

I was working with [*Felony's* writer, producer and leading man] Joel Edgerton and he said he was very grateful to have you in the show. Is it simply a case of you read it and you wanted to do this?

Yeah. I didn't want to do it. Y'know, another thing that happens as you get older is you don't want to leave home so much. I was on holiday and the last thing I wanted to do was get in an aeroplane and go to Australia. I mean, it's tough enough going around the corner to the local hardware store for me. And I read it and within three seconds I thought "I'm gonna do this. It's just too good to pass up."

Are there certain kinds of stories you're looking for?

No, but you intuitively recognise something that you think is somehow going to be good, good, and it's good for you. If by the end of the first reading you've already decided how you're gonna do it, the chances are you're going to say yes.

Looking at the scope of your career, it doesn't seem like a big deal, that eighteen months or so when you weren't working, 'cause you had so much success. When you were in the eighteen months or so, what did it feel like?

I was always fairly optimistic. I would never get depressed. I just used to think ... You know, I'd go for a job and didn't get it, but I always used to think like Coriolanus, which is "There is a world elsewhere. If you don't hire me for the job, you've made the mistake." I always felt sort of confident, not in an arrogant way but in a ... You know, I just thought "It'll work out. It's got to."

Where do you suspect that came from?

What?

That confidence in the moment?

Haven't a clue.

Family?

It's not confidence, it's just the cast of your mind. One of the things that being an actor - you know, talent is important and all that, but it's not the most important thing. The most important thing - and it may be true for other jobs as well, but certainly you've got to be able to take setbacks. You've got to have a thick skin if you're an actor. You've got to be able to sort of go for a job that you think you're perfect for and not get it and not feel bitter at the end of it - just think "Okay. That's alright. The next one I'll get."

Many do, and many claim that that's what drives them - the need to be accepted.

Yeah, but some people get crushed by not getting a job, feel disappointed and hurt and "What's wrong with me?", y'know? No, that's not the right way to deal with that.

You've never felt that, even in the early days?

No. Never. Never. I've never been disappointed.

You had to play Goebbels once, didn't you? *Jackboots On Whitehall?* Were you in that? Looking at the long run of films that you've been in, that's one of your pictures, isn't it?

[Looking perplexed] *Is it?*

Yes!

What's it called?

Jackboots On Whitehall. Maybe they renamed it?

Oh, that's right. Yeah. Yeah. I remember, yeah.

And you played one of the most hated of the group.

Yeah. Was it a cartoon film or something?

It was ... the idea being "Let's say the war ended differently and suddenly ..."

That's right. That's right. Dear God, I haven't thought of that for ages.

What does this particular movie mean to you? Take a look at this clip. [Plays an

excerpt from *The Kennedys*] One of the most controversial figures in American political history, for sure - Joe Kennedy. Tell me about that scene.

[Pause] *I can't remember it. I mean, I ...* [Pause] *But that's my real wife in that scene.*

[Chuckles] I know.

That scene - "Finest wife a man could have" - that's another one of those ... [Pause] *It's interesting playing Joe Kennedy because he was such an interesting guy, and I didn't research him that much. I mean, I'd seen, I'd seen him on TV, because he was filmed very little because he was just of that era where there wasn't an awful lot of them that was filmed. So, in a sense, I made him up. Like I played, a few years ago, Benjamin Franklin. Completely made up! I don't know whether he was like that at all, but I just thought: "No one's around gonna say 'Actually, I knew Ben Franklin. He didn't talk like that.'" I just thought "Go on, make it up. I think he's probably like this. It's a good idea, I'm gonna ... Bit of a guess and it's gonna have to work. You're gonna have to buy it."*

When you say that "Finest wife in the world" line and you're looking at your wife, are you aware that it's her you're talking to?

Yeah. I love working with my wife. When I first worked with her, we did a film a few years ago, and I thought: "Ah, I'm not going to have any fun." I don't mean have affairs and stuff. I just thought: "Oh, my wife is here, it's going to be like at home." It was the best ever. I couldn't believe that we had such a good time together. It was such a liberation to get away from home and cooking and the kids coming round and putting out the garbage and stuff like that. It was just ... In a hotel, in Italy. How lovely.

[Resumes after a commercial break] ... It's a fun job. I love the fact that you sit there and your answers are so ... You're not precious about it. There's almost no bull from you at all as it relates to acting. There's no pretence, in a way.

No - or, at least, I've sold you ...

There must be some, at some point, and you've obviously grown up around it, because in theatre or in films you're going to come across it. A lot of who we are as a person, I find, is defined by what we don't want to be, when we see it acted out in other people. Is that part of your story as well?

Do you know what? I wasn't listening to you. I was thinking of something you said earlier on about ... I'm so sorry, but I was ... The English acting scene is

very different. The acting scene that I was brought up in is very different from the one in North America, which is very much oriented around movies, and the mystique *of being a movie star and stuff like that. When I first started doing theatre, which was in the '70s basically, it was just work. And you did it. And it was fun. And your colleagues wouldn't stand for any of that crap. And so you grew up like that. That's one of the things that's characteristic of most English actors. They're pretty straight and don't do the kind of movie star mystique-y grandiosity.*

Tell me about Molly Sawdon. Is it Sawdon? Is that how you pronounce it?

How do you know about her? How do you know about her? She was ... I was sixteen. I lived in Devon. And my father died and we moved to Yorkshire, which is where I was born, which is in England - in the north of England. And I went to a school which was called King James's Grammar School, Knaresborough. And I had a less than glittering academic record. In fact, it was awful. And I went and I arrived at this school and I had to do English - I was doing what we called A Levels then - I don't know what they're called now, but you just do two or three subjects as opposed to lots of different ones and one of them was English and the woman who taught me was this rather scary, diminutive woman called Molly Sawdon who started teaching me on her own. I didn't have anybody else in the class. It was just her and I. And I would have been, of course, sixteen, seventeen and she would have been maybe fifty. And she saw something. And she invited me to her home with her partner, who was called Paddy, who was a woman, who wore suits and a monocle ...

A monocle?

A monocle! And they would say to me - I remember Molly said to me, "Okay, now you come to supper and you must bring a present - doesn't have to be expensive, but you must bring a present." I bought her a little box of chocolates. She said, "Now, here's what happens. The first course, which will be soup, you start on the outside. Those are the things you use. You use the spoon - not that spoon, that's for dessert - the spoon on the side." And she taught me all these things. You know, I'm a working class kid. I didn't know from anything.

In a same-sex couple house.

Yeah. But there were other ... About every four or five years they would pick somebody out and change their lives.

Do you think it was that she'd known your father had passed and saw ... and was trying fill a hole?

I don't know. I never asked her. It was just one of those sort of things that just changes your life. There was no question that it changed my life. I thought "What am I gonna do?" With my glittering academic career, I might end up being a teacher - a gymnastics teacher. Y'know, sports. I was good at sports.

You were?

Beyond that ... Not only that, she made ... With her connections, she talked to people in universities and said, "You've got to see this kid," so I sort of got into university through Molly.

But by the grace of others, right? How important it is to take an interest in somebody.

Yeah. Absolutely astonishing.

Do you want to go back and answer that question I was gonna ask when you weren't listening or should I ...

Ask it again.

Just kidding. We've moved on to such a lovely place. You're really great in telling me. I really appreciate your time today.

That's lovely. Thank you. Thank you.

* * * * *

Tom Wilkinson is one of Britain's best and most versatile actors. So why did he come to Australia to make Felony*, a police drama where he plays a corrupt old school Sydney detective together with burly young Aussies Jai Courtney and Joel Edgerton?*

Achieving recognition late, Wilkinson has twice been Oscar nominated - for In The Bedroom *and* Michael Clayton *- so there are no pretensions here. Adept at both comedy and drama on both sides of the Atlantic, he has portrayed real life US politicians (Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Kennedy, James Baker, Lyndon B. Johnson), English aristocrats (the Marquis of Queensbury, Lord Cornwallis, Lord Mansfield), regular Joes (a journalist in* Spyship, *a working class stripper in* The Full Monty), *men of the cloth (in* All Things Bright And Beautiful, Priest, Oscar And Lucinda, The Exorcism Of Emily Rose, The Importance Of Being Earnest *and* Molokai) *and hardened criminals (in* Essex Boys, Batman Begins, RocknRolla *and* Fury). *Of course, the retiring Wilkinson regularly acts his younger co-stars off the screen, as is somewhat the case in* Felony.

HB: I want you to talk 'Strayan, mate!

TW (very convincing Aussie accent): *Oh, right!*

Were you nervous playing an Australian in an all-Australian cast?

I've done a lot of going into an American cast and being the only English guy and playing an American, so it's okay. The only thing to fear is fear itself. They were a particularly welcoming bunch of Australian people on Felony *and I was so enthusiastic about the project.*

What were the best and most difficult moments making the film?

There were some nice scenes with Joel and Jai that were very well written from an actor's point of view. Our characters represented three particular aspects of the moral dilemma and that was very skilfully done.

How do you choose your movies?

By the script. With Felony, *I was on holiday, they sent the screenplay, I read it and said, "I'll do it". It's very rare that I read a good script that I won't do. I usually don't care about the cast; most actors are generally all right.*

Did you get out and about when you were in Australia?

I didn't go out much. I stayed in because I was concerned about the film's very long speeches, so I thought I'd better make sure I knew the bloody things. I stayed in a luxury flat overlooking the world's most pretty harbour with all the ferry boats going in and out and everyone would phone me up and invite me to dinner and that would be very nice.

Do you recognise how people view you as a great actor? At *Felony*'s Toronto premiere, even though you're playing a potentially reprehensible type, you received more claps than anyone on stage. You remind me of Stephen Frears; you're dismissive of adulation.

Yes, it's not a card I've ever played. I don't really respond to it and I find it slightly baffling, because it's not why I started doing what I do.

Where does your acting talent come from?

I don't know. I don't think there is a proper answer to that. It's just a quality that you have that you don't have a lot of control over. But what you have to do when you're acting is to absolutely see it from the point of view of your

character. You can't morally disapprove of a character and build that into a performance. If he's a bad guy you have to think what's he thinking and ask what he thinks he's going to achieve by this. You can't comment on it.

In *The Debt* and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, you worked with actors of your generation.

It's fun. I mean, you know them. I've done a few like that. It's kind of like being back in the theatre, having a group of people who are on your team. Again, they were good scripts.

What is left that you would like to do that you haven't done? You've already played such a wide variety of roles.

It's much less specific than that. I remember years ago doing a job with Alec Guinness and at one point he asked me to go and have supper with him. That was the only time I ever met him and you still had the feeling, and he was in his late 70s then, that he still thought his best work was in front of him. All actors have that vague sense, but they don't know what it is. I'd like to do a pirate film! (Laughs) But I want to do something really good and I'll recognise it when I see it.

Is theatre your be all and end all, like so many British actors?

No, I haven't worked there for thirteen years and I will not work there again. No, no, no. I'm done with the theatre.

Is it too exhausting?

It is, yeah.

You acted together with your wife of 26 years, Diana Hardcastle, in the 2011 mini-series *The Kennedys*, as Rose and Joe Kennedy.

We've worked together a few times. [In eight productions to date, from *First Among Equals* in 1986 through to *Jenny's Wedding* in 2015]*. She was in* Marigold Hotel*, actually. I love working with my wife.*

Why?

We get on terrifically well when we work together and she's happy because she loves to work and I'm happy because I'm with her. Generally, we're away from home and having fun without the terrible responsibility of running a household and having to cook for ourselves.

Dramatic films, independent films, are now struggling to make it into cinemas. Do you bemoan the way things have gone?

It's sad that those kinds of movies don't get the acknowledgement they used to. There's a big change. Sometimes they get through and they work for you. But it means you have to keep doing them because I generally do independent movies - I don't do an awful lot of studio stuff - so it's nice when they do break out, like Marigold Hotel*. That film was made for a small budget and became very popular.*

Why did you start acting?

Because I was good at it. It was the one thing that I could do. I didn't discover it until I was about eighteen when I directed a play at school. I knew exactly how it worked. I knew exactly what to do. It was like a religious conversion, finding something you just love doing. And I've been really lucky. Really lucky.

How did you get into the business?

I went to university then I went to RADA. In those days, of course, every town had its own permanent repertory theatre and I went to Nottingham for two years. That was quite a high stature rep and generally we performed new plays and classics - no potboiler populist stuff. Two years of that and I was off and running.

What gave you your break?

There wasn't one. It was all done in slow gradations. I didn't have any breakthrough where you suddenly become the flavour of the month. Never happened.

In the Bedroom was quite monumental even though it was a small movie.

Well, it had all the Oscar kind of stuff, which is good.

Have you ever been tempted or asked to move to Los Angeles?

No. When I first started making movies my children were very, very small and I was not going to uproot them and take them to a place I never wanted to live. I would hate to live in Los Angeles.

Helen Barlow, *SBS Movies*, 15 August 2014

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THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL (2014)



I thoroughly disliked *The Royal Tenenbaums* and this tedious 96 minute turkey is no better, despite spurious claims to the contrary. TW participates minimally, speaking a 65 second monologue to camera at the start of the film and adding just eight seconds more at the end. The cast includes a number of high profile names, among them Ralph Fiennes (*Oscar And Lucinda*), Jeff Goldblum (*Chain Of Fools*) and a barely recognisable Tilda Swinton (*Michael Clayton*), but saving this pointless, charmless mess is beyond any one or all of them. Very poor.

IMDb: A great film? I'm not sure. It doesn't attempt to cope with issues of despair, love, death, the big ones. On the other hand, it seeps with nostalgia, a bittersweet yearning for an age long past and the fascinating characters it produced. Technically it is a detective comedy, and one has to note that the genre seems to suit Anderson's peculiar brand of filmmaking very well - and never before has Hitchcock's MacGuffin been as explicitly embodied as by "The Boy with the Apple". The plot is merely a mechanism that allows Anderson to transport his vision onto the screen, a vision of a peculiar world seemingly different from our own but filled with just as much loss and human compassion. There is comedy, but it is either very subtle or incredibly over the top, and most viewers are uncomfortable with both. There isn't a single 'ordinary' shot - pretty much every image is out of place to such an extent that they begin to form one coherent film, and a fantastic one at that. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is brilliant / So full of "Hey look how clever I am" moments that it makes your head hurt / A rank case of style over substance / Wes Anderson must have been high as a kite when making this film. The onslaught of colour and architecturally questionable locations could only have been thought a good idea by someone who has just consumed a truckload of industrial strength LSD. Frankly watching the mentally unstable characters bounce around the screen was an experience I can only compare to being repeatedly hit in the face with a sock full of sick. The script seemed like something that would spring from the mind of a dog sat at a typewriter. Ralph Fiennes was good, though / Some films just shouldn't have been made - and this 'comedy' is one of them / I couldn't wait for it to end / Stunning and spectacular / Film as an art form / Sterile and idiotic / Shite.

GOOD PEOPLE (2014)



A struggling couple find a large amount of cash and are faced with a dilemma: do they keep it or hand it in? It's the premise of *Shallow Grave*, *A Simple Plan* and probably several other films too, including this one. TW, looking old and tired, is back on the Force (see also *Marple*, *Resnick*, *Ripley*, *Felony*) playing D.I. John Halden. His real-life wife Diana Hardcastle has a small part, again (see *The Kennedys*) as his screen wife, here Marie. James Franco and Kate Hudson lead in a thriller that, while not bad, is also derivative, formulaic and predictable, first to last. Adapted from a 2008 Marcus Sakey novel. 90 minutes.

IMDb: This movie had a lot of potential, with an interesting plot and good acting, but suffers from predictability, underdeveloped characters and probably the action genre's biggest cliché. The first half is good but then stupid things start happening / True to its genre / Lacklustre. Watch with low expectations / Idiotic cheapo thriller with some well known actors / The acting by all is professional and effective, with the bad guys coming across as acceptably nasty pieces of work. The movie also has reasonable production values. The trouble is, you can't help but feel you've seen it all before / Lazy writing. Convenience, convenience, convenience plus stupidity = too bad / I don't know who created this pile of garbage, but it's either propaganda of some sort or they were doing heroin when they wrote and directed it. I can't blame the actors, who were good, but everything else? My God, the horror of it! This film makes me want to start a website called Reallybadmovies.com / Zzzzzzzzzzzzz / The plot is mundane and full of holes / A cliché-ridden phone-in / Goes from your typical direct-to-video thriller to just plain absurd. Solid performances and a good start aren't enough to save this hard to swallow nonsense / Stupid people doing stupid things. Stale as month-old bread / Not boring but nothing special / Mediocre / Just watch *Shallow Grave* instead, to remind yourself that Britain *can* make good thrillers / Poorly crafted, falls apart at the end / If you don't take it too seriously or expect too much, *Good People* will prove worth your while / Decent or a time waster, depending on your threshold / Forgettable / Gloomy, dull, unimaginative, abysmal and downright boring. Incredibly bad / Disappointing.

SELMA (2014)



Oxford-born David Oyelowo stars as Dr. Martin Luther King in this sometimes slow but always engaging account of the Civil Rights Movement's 1965 pursuit of Southern black voter registration rights (already given in law but commonly denied), a campaign that turned upon non-violent protests in front of Selma's courthouse followed by attempts - first blocked but ultimately successful - to march from Selma to Alabama state capital Montgomery. Heads are cracked, blood is spilled and lives (black and white) are lost before justice (of a sort) prevails. TW plays bluff Texan President Johnson with winning conviction, with Tim Roth equally good as obnoxious Governor Wallace. 123 minutes.

IMDb: Everything about the movie was excellent, from the casting, costumes and sets to the script, directing, filming, lighting and music. I was moved and upset in all the right places, from the shocking beginning to the triumphant yet also foreboding close. The insertion of archival documentary footage towards the end was welcome and not overdone - kind of like "Let's slip the audience back into reality now. This was real. It really happened and people kept on fighting and dying for civil rights in America after the events shown." It's hard to believe that the actors who played Martin and Coretta King are not Americans. Nicely done accents. Tom Wilkinson as Johnson was also very good but, being from Texas, I was not as convinced by his accent / *Selma* is a good but not great film about the civil rights movement. It is flat, the lead actors are not very interesting and the script, in particular, seems half-finished. It comes across as a rough draft of an idea for a film rather than a fully realised end product / Sad but way too long and boring. Very disappointed / Provides a history lesson, but doesn't feel like a history lecture. Not one bit. *Selma* is heavy, but always grabs your attention, often in the hands of Oyelowo's performance. The 7th March Bloody Sunday sequence is brutal to watch but director DuVernay and cinematographer Bradford Young deliver quite an intense and impactful set piece that hits you in the gut as history is forged in flesh and blood before your eyes. By the time the film's postscript rolls round, revealing the fates of several of those chronicled, it's almost impossible not to be moved by their courage and sacrifice / Well acted but dull - and LBJ is very unfairly slandered.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS (2015)



TW, Dave Franco and Vincent Vaughn (above) share top billing in a potentially pleasing comedy marred by an unnecessary larding of smut. In *Night Of The White Pants*, TW's businessman turned hedonist Max Hagan was a mild and amiable caricature. Here, his similar Timothy McWinters crosses the line, not so much winning and warm as coarse and crude (and the less said about glory holes, the better). *Why*, Tom? 91 minutes. Approach with caution.

IMDb: A very watchable "B" comedy that does not try to over-achieve / Charming and amusing. Recommended viewing for the non-churchgoing set / Wonderful Wilkinson brings depth to completely shallow character / Some good laughs, the naked people are pretty attractive, and Wilkinson (not naked, thank goodness) is refreshingly funny in a rare comedic turn - but the crude, rude humour and bullying subplot are an uneasy mix / Adequate brain-off entertainment / Superficial, marginally funny, predictable / I can't give any guarantee that you'll enjoy it, but I did / A comedy comprising equal parts of heart, brains and soul. A scruffy underdog of a film that may not be perfect but thanks to its innate sweetness and delightful performances will have you in its corner cheering it on / I loved it, the wife hated it / Lazy / Feels like it needed more work.





Travelling Man (1985)



Black Knight (2001) with Marsha Thomason



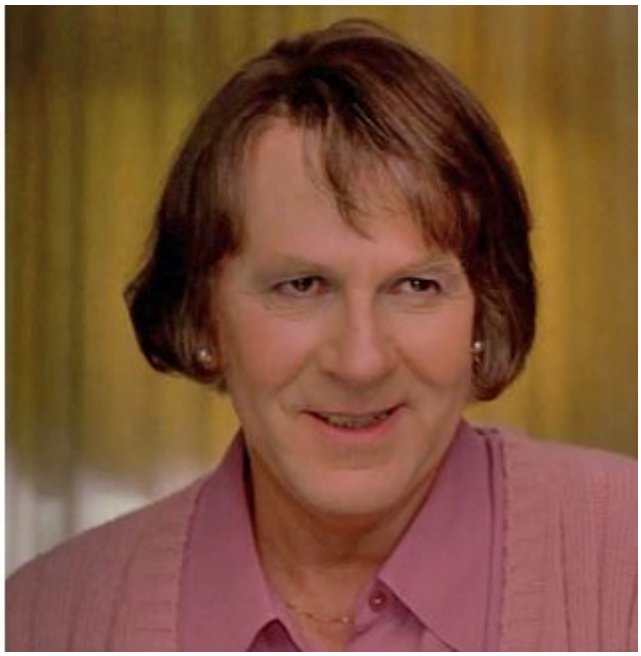
The Patriot (2000)




Oscar And Lucinda (1997) / *Separate Lies* (2005)



Selma (2014)

Normal (2003)



The Importance Of Being Earnest (2002) with Colin Firth



Dedication (2007)



Michael Clayton (2007)



John Adams (2008)



Burke And Hare (2010)



The Kennedys (2011): Greg Kinnear as JFK, TW and Barry Pepper as Bobby







(1) *Belle* (2013), (2) *Felony* (2013), (3) Husband and wife TW and Diana Hardcastle as Joe and Rose Kennedy (*The Kennedys*, 2011)

Tom Wilkinson is a talented and versatile actor. He has played solicitors bent and straight, barristers, a High Court judge and a Lord Chief Justice, policemen staunch, incompetent and corrupt, politicians, mandarins and statesmen both home-grown and foreign, doctors and gangland bosses, business chiefs and underlings, clerics and German army / Gestapo officers. He has played a Danish king and a Shakespearean duke, a petty criminal and a murderer, an inventor and a stripper, a campaigning journalist and an itinerant sailor, a cuckold and a transsexual, a loopy lawyer and a Yorkshire farmer, a taxi driver and a teacher, a peripatetic painter and an Oxford don, a fourteenth century knight and a seventeenth century actor - yet still, in 2015, he told Oprah: "I don't know who I am. I look in the mirror to figure out who I am and it's always a mystery."



Maybe that's how it is with the best actors - when not some writer's character, they're no one. Only when acting a part, cloaked, masked, invisible, do they truly live. Wilkinson's upbringing in Leeds then Canada then the West Country must have helped his ear and confidence with accents (Irish, Scouse, Yorkshire, standard American, Southern American and Australian are all in his repertoire). And if the types of role he's offered start to become repetitive, pose less and less of a challenge, perhaps that's only to be expected after more than forty years in the business. He has talked more than once of retiring, yet works on, industrious at 68 (if screen credits are any guide) as ever. He has spoken of his sniffiness over scripts, yet takes on projects such as *RocknRolla* or *The Green Hornet* surely as obviously bilge on the page as they would prove on screen? His body of work is a distinguished one - his performances in *Martin Chuzzle-wit*, *In The Bedroom* and *Michael Clayton* fine enough to place him in the top rank of contemporary actors - but, at the same time, his magnificent talent seems to have been insufficiently mined. Does he feel dissatisfied? Probably not, for the loss is less his than ours; than posterity's. And there remains a wealth of outstanding work to savour. So, never mind this maundering - go to it. Joy awaits. And, besides, he's not done yet. Lucky us.