

Dr. Ed's Movie Reviews 2018

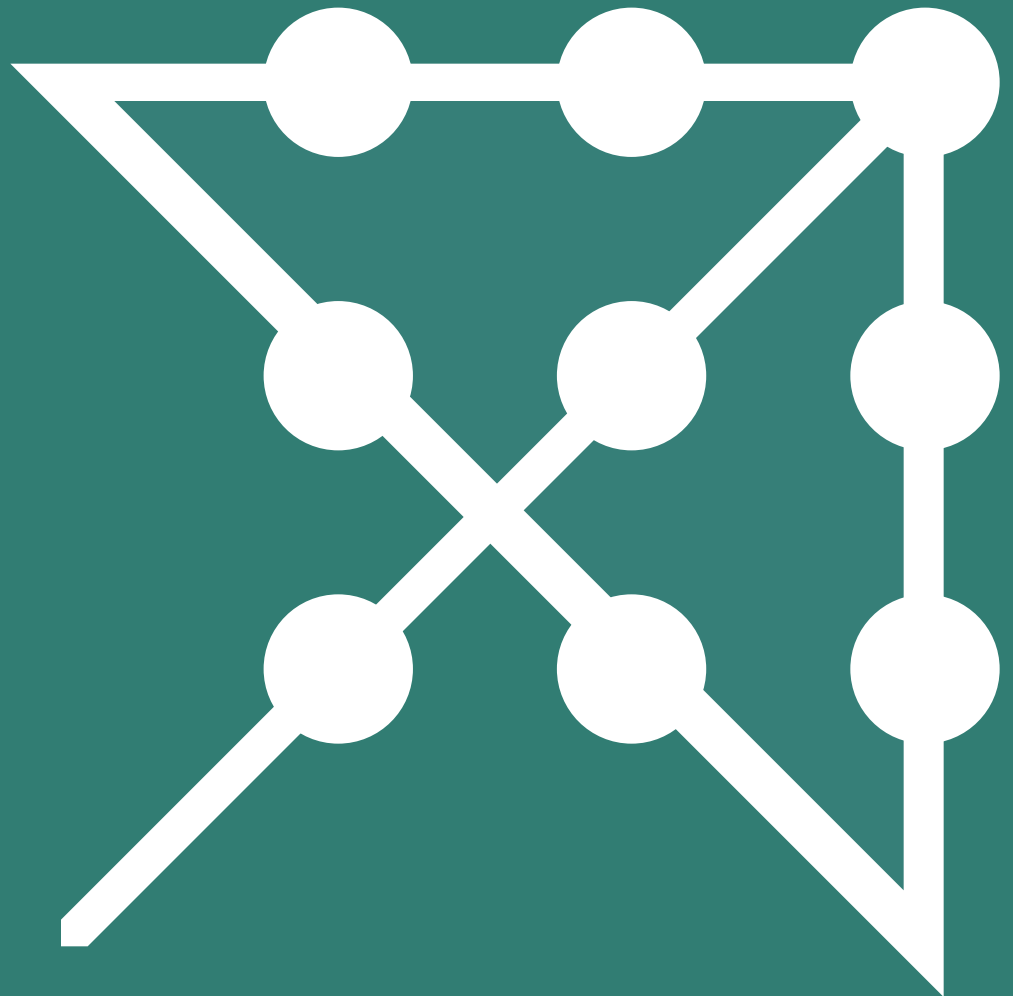
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thinking outside the box

“A Quiet Place” (- -) is a very odd film combining aspects of a sci-fi thriller and a horror movie. It is neither thrilling nor horrifying. Aliens invade our planet and devour any human that makes a noise. They have a great sense of hearing, but are blind as bats. It would be great if every movie theater had one of these aliens to terminate anyone talking during the movie.

“A Simple Favor” (+ + +) is a really clever and entertaining movie. Stephanie is a widowed, single mum who runs a mommy vlog. She seeks to uncover the truth behind the disappearance of her best friend. Anna Kendrick plays the part as a quirky nerd with lots of bravado and comic energy.

“A Star Is Born” (+ +) is a remake of the 1954 classic with Judy Garland and the 1976 remake with Barbara Streisand. It stars Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper, who also directed the film. The movie is a bit slow at times, but Lady Gaga really is an amazing singer, and also a very good actress in her first movie role. Cooper is convincing as a self-destructive rock star heading toward oblivion. Coincidentally, FRBNY President John Williams recently suggested that the star quality of the neutral rate of interest, or r-star, is fading: “[A]t times r-star has actually gotten too much attention in commentary about Fed policy. Back when interest rates were well below neutral, r-star appropriately acted as a pole star for navigation. But, as we have gotten closer to the range of estimates of neutral, what appeared to be a bright point of light is really a fuzzy blur, reflecting the inherent uncertainty in measuring r-star.” Williams had been one of the biggest promoters of the star; now, he’s saying it’s a has-been!

“Adrift” (+ +) is based on the true story of a young couple hired by the owners of a sailboat to bring it across the Pacific Ocean from Tahiti to San Diego. A terrible storm damages the ship. I won’t spoil the ending. But I do see parallels between the movie and the stock market last year and so far this year. It was certainly smooth sailing last year through late January of this year, when we ran into some significant storms. Will we survive them? I think so, if we keep our wits about us.

“All the Money in the World” (+ +) is a docudrama about the kidnapping of 16-year-old John Paul Getty III in Italy during 1973 and his mother’s desperate struggle to convince his billionaire grandfather, J. Paul Getty, to pay the ransom. At first, he refused to pay, arguing that complying would increase the chances that his 14 other grandchildren would be kidnapped too. He relented after the kidnappers sent an envelope with the boy’s ear. However, the skinflint negotiated a deal to get his grandson back for about \$2.9 million. He paid \$2.2 million—the maximum amount that was tax deductible—and he loaned the remainder to his son, who was held responsible for repaying the sum at 4% interest.

“Beautiful Boy” (+) is a disturbing film about the terrible consequences of drug addiction, not only for the addict but also for the addict’s family. The movie is based on the actual experience of a teenager who had a very bright future that turned very dark very quickly as he experimented with drugs until his addiction to crystal meth almost killed him. In this case, the “beautiful boy” had a very supportive father played very convincingly by Steve Carell. Sadly, many families can’t cope with such stress, and the addicted become homeless people, often with mental illnesses. Just as sad is that our communities haven’t done enough to help the desperate people who are living under blue tarps on the streets of Los Angeles and other metropolitan centers.

“Beirut” (+) takes place in Lebanon during 1982, when the country was in a civil war and just before the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon. Jon Hamm plays the part of Mason Skiles, who is brought into Beirut to negotiate the release of a kidnapped US operative. The movie is a good reminder of why the Middle East is so messed up. Today, Syria is in the throes of a similar mess, with many more casualties. It doesn't seem the US can do much about it other than lob some cruise missiles into Syria every now and then when red lines are crossed.

“Black Panther” (+) is an action hero flick that takes inspiration from other types of movies in the action genre, including the “Star Wars” and “Bond” series. Good triumphs over evil, and undoubtedly will continue to do so in sequels and prequels. I've tended to stay away from action hero films because they are so cookie-cutter, but I wanted to see what the hype over this one was all about. It is one of the better action hero films, but it was predictable.

“BlacKkKlansman” (+ + +) is Spike Lee's remarkable movie about a black undercover cop who infiltrated a local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado Springs during the early 1970s—a true story. He did so with the help of a white surrogate, who eventually became head of the local branch. He has several phone conversations with the KKK leader, David Duke, and acts as Duke's bodyguard at one event. Lee makes a compelling case along the way, especially at the end of the film, that race relations in America haven't improved much, if at all, over the past half century. That's very sad and reflects that all too often race issues have been politicized with the aim of exacerbating rather than ameliorating the problem.

“Bohemian Rhapsody” (+ + +) is an extremely interesting and entertaining biopic about the rock band Queen and its lead singer Freddie Mercury, brilliantly played by Rami Malek. Freddie was a musical genius, and Queen is renowned for such great classic rock hits of the 1970s and 1980s as “We Will Rock You,” “Another One Bites the Dust,” and “We Are the Champions.” The movie has been criticized for not doing full justice to Freddie's amazing story and legacy because the musical rights were owned by two of the surviving band members, who made sure they were properly depicted. Freddie tragically died of AIDS at the age of only 45. He certainly lives on in the incredible music he helped to create.

“First Man” (-) is a very disappointing movie. It is very slow and undramatic for a film about the US space program. Perhaps that's because the story is well known. Not so well known is that Neil Armstrong, who was the first man to land on the moon, was emotionless and wasn't a great husband or father. That's if the movie's depiction of him is true, as played by Ryan Gosling, who is especially good at playing unemotional roles. The film does raise the question of what was accomplished by the program, but doesn't attempt to answer it. We learn that the moon's surface is covered with a fine white powder. Elon Musk wants to go to Mars. We already know that it is covered with red dust. Perhaps we should stay on the Planet Earth and make it a better place so we don't have to leave on short notice.

“Gotti” (- -) is about the life of Mafia boss John Gotti, played by John Travolta. The press called Gotti “Teflon John” because he was indicted several times by the government's prosecutors and beat them each time. He was finally found guilty and went to jail, dying there of cancer. The film has been widely panned as the worst gangster movie ever made. That's true for the jerky first half. It got better in the second half, but

too late to save the movie. I've seen a much better documentary about Gotti featuring his son "Junior," who has breakfast every morning at the same bakery in my neighborhood in Long Island. He never sits with his back to the window.

"Green Book" (+ + +) is a very entertaining and mostly comic movie about Dr. Don Shirley, an African-American classical piano virtuoso played stoically by Mahershala Ali. Shirley hired Italian-American Tony "Lip" Vallelonga, a night club bouncer played by Viggo Mortensen, to drive him through southern states on an eight-week music tour before Christmas in the 1960s. It's funny notwithstanding the ugly reality of racism the two encountered. The script was written mostly by Tony's son, so his character is more fully developed than is Shirley's. Still, Tony remains a knucklehead during the entire film, though he overcomes some of his racism as a result of the road trip. Shirley's patrician character also connects with Tony, but remains mostly disconnected from all but his music, though his tour de force in the South at that time was clearly gutsy.

"Hostiles" (+) is the slowest paced Western I've ever seen. There's plenty of fighting between US soldiers and Indians, and lots of people die in this woeful 1892 tale about Army Captain Joseph Blocker reluctantly escorting a dying Cheyenne war chief and his family back to their tribal land. During the long trek, even the horses proceed at a slow pace, suggesting that they know that the trip is pointless. Christian Bale plays the Army captain, mumbling most of his lines, though in a thought-provoking way. At least the scenery is nice.

"I, Tonya" (+ +) is the true story of an aspirational young lady. Hamstrung by her redneck upbringing, Tonya was barred from the respect of the ice skating elite. Yet she was a great skater and could have been an Olympian contender but for her presumed involvement in an attempt to break the kneecaps of her top US competitor.

"Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom" (- -) is the fifth of the Jurassic film franchise. It's entertaining if you like visiting Disney on a regular basis and riding the same rollercoaster ride over and over again. The novelty does wear off. There's still lots of debate about what caused the extinction of dinosaurs. There's no debating Spielberg's great success in bringing them back. The film raises an interesting ethical question: Is killing dinosaurs akin to cruelty to animals and a violation of their rights? Let's wait for the next installment to see how Spielberg resolves the debate.

"Molly's Game" (+ +) is another true story of an aspirational young lady. Molly Bloom ran high-stakes poker games in LA and NYC for celebrities as well as scoundrels, many of whom were one and the same persons. She was extremely successful. Her downfall came when the FBI arrested her for racketeering with the expectation that she would rat on her high-stakes clientele, which she refused to do.

"Operation Finale" (+ +) depicts the true saga of how Israeli intelligence officers captured former SS officer Adolf Eichmann in 1960 and brought him to trial in Israel. He claimed to be a patriot and overworked accountant for the Nazi regime rather than the architect of the Final Solution. He was hanged for his crimes against humanity. In 1963, Hannah Arendt published a book about the trial, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. She wrote that Eichmann declared "with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life ... according to a Kantian definition of duty." Arendt considered this so "incomprehensible on the face of it" that it confirmed her belief that he wasn't thinking at all, just mindlessly following orders, thereby establishing his banality. She argued that moral choice remains even in a totalitarian regime.

“Red Sparrow” (+) stars Jennifer Lawrence as a Russian spy. Hollywood is clearly looking for ways to make more money by diversifying its action hero and spy movie genres to include non-white, non-male lead actors. Last year, in “Atomic Blonde,” Charlize Theron played a spy working for the MI6 British intelligence agency just as the Berlin Wall was coming down. Lawrence’s character works for the Russian intelligence service. Both movies leave plenty of room for sequels. Since the genre is getting stale, predictable, and boring, why not combine them into “Two Atomic Blondes” to generate more box-office receipts?

“Sicario: Day of the Soldado” (+) is a timely movie about the border between the US and Mexico. Its central premise is remarkably Trumpian: The drug cartels are making lots of money trafficking in people desperate to come to America to escape violence in Central America. That violence is perpetrated by the cartels to drum up their human-trafficking business. So the movie suggests that the cartels should be included on the US’s list of terrorist organizations and dealt with accordingly. The movie doesn’t dwell very long on this intriguing thesis. Instead, it gets bogged down in a rogue, clandestine operation sponsored by the US government to start a war among the cartels.

“The Death of Stalin” (+ +) is an uproarious satire based on the true events surrounding the death of Josef Stalin. The film has a great cast playing the grisly cast of characters who composed the ruling committee of the Soviet Union back then. Steve Buscemi has lots of fun playing Nikita Khrushchev, whose masterful power play against the depraved Lavrentiy Beria put him in charge of the Soviet Union.

“The Equalizer 2” (+ +) stars Denzel Washington as Robert McCall, a former CIA operative who hides in plain sight as a Lyft driver. It’s a genre movie where the good guy is a vigilante who does bad things to bad people, inflicting often-lethal justice on them for their crimes against the exploited and oppressed. Robert De Niro was among the first to play this role in “Taxi Driver” (1976). The problem with genre movies is that they become increasingly predictable. However, Denzel Washington remains a class act.

“The Mule” (+) was directed and produced by Clint Eastwood. He is also the film’s star. He plays Earl Stone, an elderly horticulturist who is broke, alone, and facing foreclosure of his business. He turns into a drug runner for the Mexican cartel. It’s funny and entertaining, but disappointing. It seems almost like a bittersweet reflection on Eastwood’s own life. His daughter is in the movie, playing Earl’s daughter. The problem is that it is full of clichés. The movie could have been titled “Make My Day Lilies!”

“The Post” (+) is a movie about fake news. However, it is about fake news concocted by the US government about its goals and actions during the Vietnam War, rather than by the press. The New York Times and The Washington Post exposed the government’s systemic lying about the scope of its involvement in Vietnam by releasing the Pentagon Papers, which was a history of the Vietnam War conducted by the Defense Department. The movie features Meryl Streep as Katherine Graham, the owner of the Post, and Tom Hanks as Ben Bradley, the editor of the newspaper. It was produced by Steven Spielberg. It’s a cri de cœur for freedom of the press, which has plenty of freedom today as well as a very loud critic in the Oval Office.

“The Shape of Water” (+ +) is a very unusual movie that harkens back to lots of previous unusual movies such as “Beauty and the Beast” and “E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial.” Nevertheless, it fits in a fairly conventional way into the genre of films that show how love conquers all. During the Cold War, while Americans were watching Dobie Gillis on TV, evil-doers in the American army had captured an intelligent reptilian alien from the sea. Evil Russian spies aimed to kill the life form before the Americans learned his secrets. Good American and Russian folks aimed to toss him back into the sea.

“Three Identical Strangers” (+ + +) is a truly remarkable documentary about triplet boys who were separated at birth. The true story is as suspenseful as any fictional tale. It should be at the top of the list labeled “You Can’t Make This Up.” It delves into the nature-versus-nurture debate among psychologist and psychiatrists. The ethical and moral questions raised are truly profound. I don’t want to spoil it for you. See it to believe it.

“White Boy Rick” (+ +) is based on a true story about a teen growing up in a very rough neighborhood in Detroit during the 1980s. It stars the talented Matthew McConaughey as the father of Richard Wershe, Jr., who is played well by Richie Merritt. Richard became an undercover informant for the FBI and was encouraged by the agency to get involved in the local narcotics trade. Yet he was ultimately arrested for drug trafficking and sentenced to life in prison. He’d thought he had a deal with the FBI, but he was wrong. The moral of the story: When you cut a deal with the FBI, get it in writing.

“Widows” (- - -) is a great way to get a snooze at a movie theater. Viola Davis stars as the ringleader of four women who are forced to commit a heist to pay off the debt of their four husbands, killed after their last botched robbery. This is an action movie without much action or any action hero. From now on, I think I will pass on any movie starring Liam Neeson (who plays Viola’s husband); he has been appearing in lots of forgettable low-wattage action movies of late.

“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” (+ + +) is a remarkable documentary about Fred Rogers, the creator, host, music composer, and director of “Mister Roger’s Neighborhood” from 1968-2001. It was a television program aimed at preschool children. Instead of bombarding his target audience with clowns (slapstick) and superheroes (violence), he focused on themes of self-esteem, kindness, and love using mostly hand puppets. The rarity of his approach is a stark reminder of how these pillars of civility have crumbled in recent years.