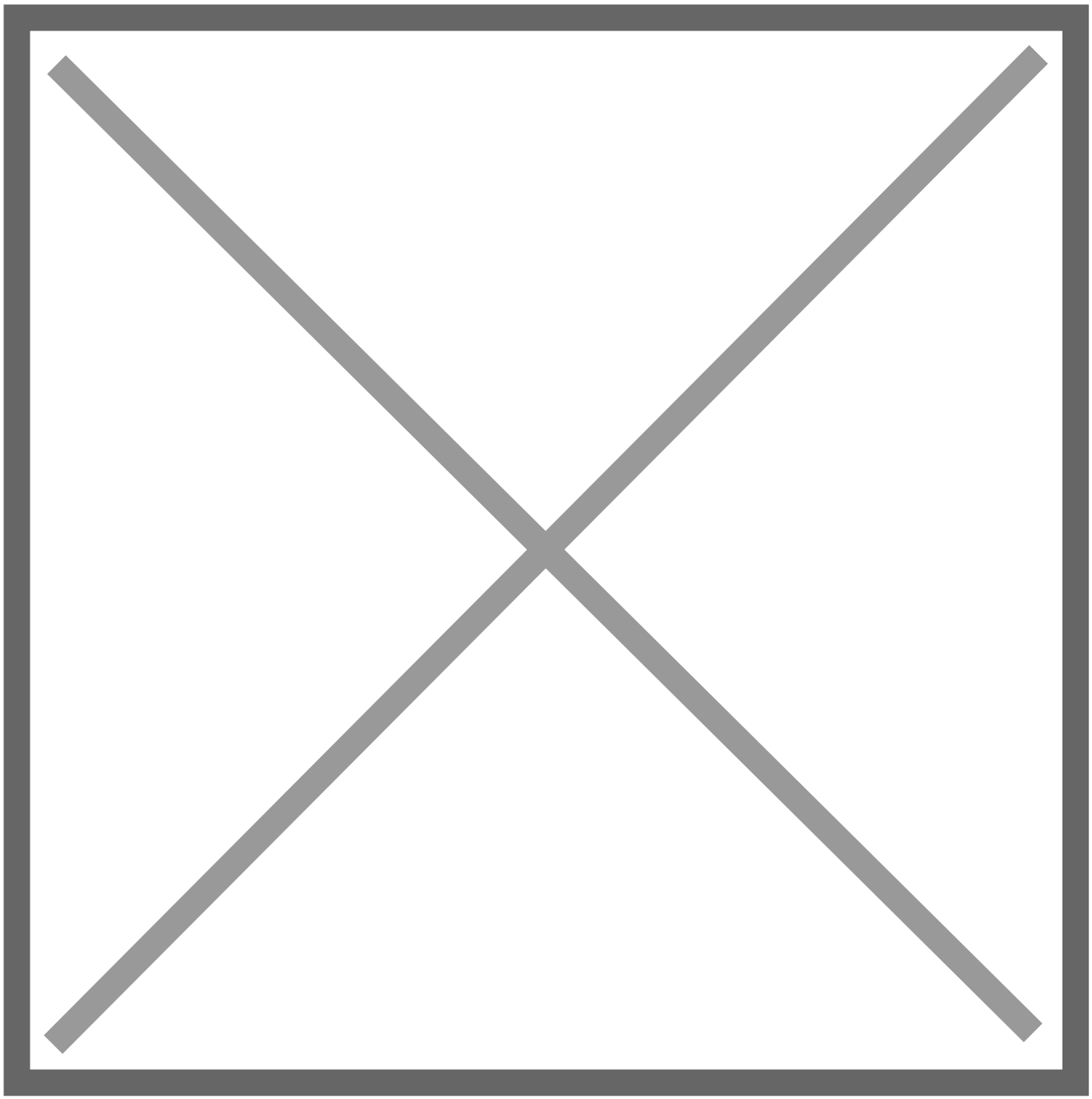
Culture



Dr. Tom Cartena in "The Heart of Nuba," a documentary from director Kenneth Carlson and executive producer Maria Shriver. (Courtesy photo)



by Rose Pacatte

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For some reason the end of March and the beginning of April is filled with the release of many movies that filmmakers hope will be of interest to people with a social conscience and/or people of faith. There were too many to review individually, so here are shorter reviews that may guide your moviegoing experiences this weekend. "The Heart of Nuba" is my No. 1 pick.

"The Heart of Nuba" — This incredibly moving documentary, directed by Kenneth Carlson and executive producer Maria Shriver, tells the story of Dr. Tom Catena, the only doctor at the only hospital for a million people in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan.

Catena, whose brother is a priest in the diocese of Albany, New York, played football for Brown University and graduated in 1986 with an engineering degree. After changing course and deciding to become a doctor, Catena got his medical degree at Duke University. He spent several years in the military and then worked among the poor in Nairobi. In 2008, he made his way to Sudan to help with the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Since 2011, he has been on duty at the Mother of Mercy Hospital in Gidel because indicted war criminal President Omar al-Bashir ordered the bombing of his own people. The foxholes that pockmark the land are where everyone hides when they hear the sound of old Russian Antonov cargo planes approaching from which soldiers drop bombs.

The Heart of Nuba is remarkable, to me, for Carlson's ability to show how a Catholic layman lives his faith in a world of conflict with almost no humanitarian aid and is able to support his team's efforts to help the sick, wounded and dying. Catena

sleeps on a mattress on the floor of a small room stacked with unpacked boxes. He starts each day with Mass, the breviary and rosary before he heads to the hospital. By the end of the day he has seen 300-400 patients and performed numerous surgeries. He trains local people to help him but he is the one on call 24/7.

Catena's respect for the dignity of the Nuba people is profound, his love deep and his commitment lasting.

"The Heart of Nuba" opens April 6 in New York and on April 27 in select cities.



Erin Moriarty and Helen Hunt star in "The Miracle Season" (LD Entertainment/Mirror/Cate Cameron)

"The Miracle Season" — Caroline "Line" Found (Danika Yarosh) is a kind, fun-loving and powerful Iowa City West High School volleyball player who is the life of the party. She and her best friend Kelly (Erin Moriarty) are focused on their team winning the 2011 state finals for the second year in a row, a feat never accomplished in Iowa. But one night after Bible study, Caroline is killed in an

accident on the way home. The impact of her death on her family was made more acute when her mother Ellyn (Jillian Fargey), succumbs just days after her daughter's funeral.

The team's hopes for another championship plummet but with the encouragement of their coach Kathy Bresnahan (Helen Hunt) and the support of Line's father Ernie (William Hurt), the girls power on under Kelly's leadership.

Sean McNamara, who directed the true life story "Soul Surfer" (2011), directs "The Miracle Season" with so much empathy that it compels me to give the film a B.K. rating (bring Kleenex). Hurt's performance is by far the most finely tuned.

McNamara told journalists that he endeavors to make movies about role models and he discovered one in Caroline Found. A female cast that is sure to engage a younger, sports-minded audience populates "The Miracle Season." Perseverance, working through grief, and team work are major themes of the film.

The film opens in theaters April 6.

"Chappaquiddick" — In July 1969, Sen. Ted Kennedy (Jason Clarke) organizes a reunion of staffers from his brother Robert F. Kennedy's presidential campaign. His cousin Joe Gargan (Ed Helms) rents a house on Chappaquiddick Island near Cape Cod. Paul Markham (Jim Gaffigan), an appointee as the assistant U.S. attorney for the District of Massachusetts and attorney general under President John F. Kennedy, is also present.

Mary Jo Kopechne (Kate Mara), 29, worked on Robert's campaign and is still devastated by his death the previous summer. She and Ted do not know each other but she senses his sadness and spends time talking with him as he consumes alcohol. They go for a drive, spend time chatting, and she asks to go back to the house. Instead he drives toward the beach too fast, misses the turn onto a bridge without rails and the car plunges into the water. He escapes, Mary Jo does not. He calls out to her but flees the scene. He never calls the police even though Gargan and Markham encourage him to do so.



Jason Clarke and Kate Mara in "Chappaquiddick" (Entertainment Studios/Claire Folger)

In the morning, Ted contacts his father Joe (Bruce Dern) who can barely speak, yet he manages to say, "alibi." It's obvious he holds little regard for Ted but still wants him to run for president someday. Ted then begins to spin his version of the truth about what happened, eventually turning to the people of Massachusetts on television, asking them to let him know if he should stay in office.

I had just graduated from high school in 1969 and was living in Boston. I watched that television special and was surprised at how readily the citizens of Massachusetts forgave Ted Kennedy for his cowardice and lack of character — everyone knew it was his fault that Kopechne died and that he fled the scene. I question why director John Curran decided to tell this story and make this film now. I guess the term "alternative facts" — made popular by the current administration — explains it all. Chappaquiddick is actually a morality tale about truth as a flexible commodity.

The film opens in theaters April 6.

Advertisement

"The Dating Project" - This documentary from Paulist Productions and Family Theater is compelling and inspiring.

It features Boston College philosophy professor Kerry Cronin who realized a few years ago that her students didn't date — they didn't know how. They did, however, take part in the hook-up culture mostly because that's what everyone else was doing. Cronin decided to teach her students how to date and assigns them to ask someone out on a date twice during the term.

The film follows five young people, 17-40, as they learn how to date, go on dates, and come to appreciate what meaningful relationships are. The film has heart and humor and shines a light on a phenomenon created by the hook up culture, texting and social media.

"The Dating Project" opens in select theaters April 17.

Paul, Apostle of Christ — It is 67 A.D. and Christians think that the Roman emperor Nero has set Rome on fire as a rebuilding scheme and conveniently blamed them. He is now setting on fire captured Christians to light the alleys of Rome; others he is feeding to the lions in the coliseum.

The Christian community, led by Aquila (John Lynch) and Priscilla (Joanne Whalley), is in hiding. Making them more anxious is knowing that the aged Paul (James Faulkner) is in a Roman prison, condemned to death.

A visitor makes his way to through an underground labyrinth to find Paul. It is Luke (Jim Caviezel), who has come to Rome to find his friend. The Roman procurator Mauritius (Oliver Martinez) allows them to spend time together. Paul dictates to Luke the story of his conversion and the growth of the early church. This account will come to be knows as the Acts of the Apostles.

Meanwhile Mauritius' daughter becomes ill and Aquila pressures Luke to ask Paul to tell them if they should stay in Rome and perhaps be captured and killed or to flee.



Jim Caviezel and James Faulkner in "Paul, Apostle of Christ" (© 2018 CTMG)

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Director/writer Andrew Hyatt (with co-writer Terence Berden) once again imagines key scriptural figures later in life as a way to look back and retell stories from scripture.

Hyatt's previous film "Full of Grace" (2015) showed Mary as a wisdom figure to the apostles. Here, Faulkner's Paul owns the film with generous dignity and wisdom. Caviezel gives an animated performance as Paul's fellow traveler and scribe. I think the film is a richer experience if you already know the story.

"Paul, Apostle of Christ" is already playing in theaters.

Ready Player One — Steven Spielberg's latest film is a parallel back-to-the-future story that happens among people who live in a trashy park with trailers stacked high

in a dystopian Columbus, Ohio. The story takes place simultaneously in actual reality and in a MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) virtual reality game world.

Ernest Cline ,who co-wrote the script with Zak Penn, bases it on his novel. I found the film's love affair with pop culture ranging back to the late '70s engaging, entertaining and fun with a tidy message about living a balanced life at the end.

Halliday (Mark Rylance), an early video game developer, created the virtual world and planted an "Easter egg" (film industry term for an inter-textual reference) in the virtual game that players can only find once they discover three keys. If you are paying attention, you get a major hint at the beginning of the film.

The posse of young players, headed by Wade — his avatar's name is Parzival (Tye Sheridan) — work together to unlock clues and discover the Easter egg. They have to go up against Sorrento (Ben Mendelsohn), who wants to buy Parzival's success at the game.

But the team pushes back against Big Gaming, advertising and dehumanizing profit (Sorrento says at one time that he can guarantee that advertisers can take up to 80 percent of the screen before causing seizures in the players) to win the day.



John Michael Finley and Dennis Quaid have a confrontation in the film "I Can Only Imagine" (Courtesy of Lionsgate and Roadside Attractions)

"I Can Only Imagine" — An excellent biopic about Bart Millard (John Michael Finley), head of the Christian rock group MercyMe, that starts at home when he is a young boy in the 1970s in rural Texas.

His abusive father Arthur is played incredibly well by Dennis Quaid (he deserves award recognition). After Bart's mother deserts the family, unable to take her husband's abuse any more, Bart only has his grandmother (Cloris Leachman) for support.

When he is unable to play football, Bart gets involved in his high school's music scene and finds that he has talent. He leaves home for college, starts a Christian rock group and eventually breaks through with the song, "I Can Only Imagine." To date it is the best-selling Christian single of all time, crossing over to adult contemporary and charting No. 5 on the Billboard.

This is a painful yet moving coming-of-age story. Key themes are perseverance, hope, and reconciliation. The film is already open in theaters.

"Isle of Dogs" — In the imaginary Japanese city of Megasake, the dictatorial mayor (voiced by Kunichi Nomura) exiles all dogs to Trash Island because he is definitely a cat person. One dog is left there in his cage where he eventually dies while the other dogs roam in packs.



Bryan Cranston voices "Chief" and Koyu Rankin voices "Atari Kobayashi" in "Isle of Dogs" (Photo courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures)

One day a plane lands. It is a young orphaned boy, Atari (voiced by Koyu Rankin), who had been adopted by the mayor and then hidden away. He is looking for the long lost dog that was assigned to watch over him. The long and short of this tale is that the dogs help out Atari, the runt-of-the-litter head dog Chief (voiced by Brian Cranston) finds out the truth about his, well, litter, an American exchange student Tracy Walker (voiced by Greta Gerwig) helps bring down the mayor, saves the day, and the dogs get to come home and the cats are out.

This stop-action highly crafted visual treat of an animated film was directed and written by Wes Anderson. "Isle of Dogs" takes you on a long, fascinating journey but I was never sure what it was about. That it had a white woman savior of a Japanese city could be a valid critique.

I cannot recall what happens to Trash Island, though. Maybe it's floating its way across the Pacific Ocean to the U.S. mainland. It's interesting how often the orphan trope shows up in animated films. Maybe it was just a reference to "The Little Prince." The film opens April 13.

"Red Sparrow" — Dominika Egorova (Jennifer Lawrence) is a former ballerina conscripted into Russia's elite spy service by her nefarious uncle. She learns her trade craft very well and comes up against CIA spy, Nate Nash (Joel Edgerton) in her efforts to ferret out a mole in the Russian service.

This is a highly stylized thriller about double agents with all together too much graphic violence and sex to accompany its convoluted "who cares?" plot. Yes, Lawrence is very good in her role, but it once again begs the question, "who cares?"

It's based on the 2013 novel of the same name by Jason Matthews and it is doing well at the box office. But I ask again ... maybe the book is better.

"The Death of Stalin" — The most telling thing about this political satire film directed and co-written by Armando Iannucci, is that it has been banned in Russia! Is it making someone nervous? Perhaps not; it seems some Russians think it mocks

those who fought fascism and "offends the Soviet Union's World War II heroes" according to the New York Times.

It is a showcase of political terror inflicted by an authoritarian leader on people and political incompetence — the core of the humor — that still managed to allow Josef Stalin to kill millions of his people. When he dies, a committee is in charge with the expected comedic and dire consequences.

The ensemble cast is brilliant and includes Steve Buschemi as Nikita Khrushchev, Simon Russell Beale as Lavrenti Beria, head of the secret police, Rupert Friend as Vasily, Stalin's spineless son, Michael Palin as Vyacheslav Molotov, Jeffrey Tambor as Georgy Malenkov, and Andrea Riseborough as Svetlana, Stalin's daughter who is sent to Austria after her father's burial (she would end up in the U.S. eventually).

It's hard to imagine finding anything to laugh about in Stalin's Russia, but then he dies and what is old is eventually made new again. Maybe "Red Sparrow" and "The Death of Stalin" deserve each other.

"RBG" — This biographical documentary is about the life and legacy of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, or as she is known in popular culture, "The Notorious RBG."

It is a thoroughly enjoyable and informative film directed by Betsy West and Julie Cohen. Ginsburg was nominated for the court by Bill Clinton in 1993, only the second female appointee (following Sandra Day O'Connor) in U.S. history. The film tells of her early life and education as the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants growing up in Brooklyn. By the time she entered Harvard Law School, she was married to her college sweetheart, Martin D. Ginsburg, and mother to her first child, Jane (a son, James, would follow 10 years later). Of the 500 students in her class at Harvard Law, she was one of only nine women.

Early on, women's rights became Ginsburg's significant opinions, and often strongly worded dissenting opinions. She is pro-choice, one legal opinion that will disappoint Catholics in an otherwise brilliant career on the bench.

The film does a fine job of letting the audience see Ginsburg's personality, daily life, and quiet but persistent and lifelong effort for equal rights with men.

"RBG" will be in theaters May 4.

"Summer in the Forest" — This film is a beautiful, contemplative look at the life of L'Arche and its founder, philosopher Jean Vanier. It tells his story and follows the stories of four men with intellectual disabilities who were once locked away in asylums. Vanier invited them to join him beginning in the 1960s. Their home was a poor habitat outside of Paris on the edge of a forest that didn't even have running water.

Today, intellectually disabled men and women live in numerous L'Arche communities around the world. This film is not in a hurry and asks audiences to stop and contemplate the moments of the daily lives of those who live in L'Arche.

Peace and love flow from Vanier, now in his late 80s, and it becomes easy to see why people want to be part of accompanying our brothers and sisters who are intellectually disabled and greatly loved by all.

The film is already in theaters.

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