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December's Embers: Burning thoughts about new films

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

These past few weeks has seen the release of several surprisingly good films (though some will receive wide release in January). We could bicker about what makes a film "good" forever, but for the sake of argument, let's define say that a good film as one with images and sound so well integrated that the story satisfies, inspires, is through-provoking, entertaining, and sometimes offers a glimpse into the soul.



A Christmas Carol -- Comedic actor Jim Carrey ("Bruce

Almighty") gives voice to the character of Scrooge in Robert Zemeckis' animated version of Charles Dickens' (1812-1870) classic novel. The story of the miser Scrooge is always relevant and Zemeckis ("Who Framed Roger Rabbit," "Forrest Gump") presents another timeless Christmas film for families to watch together. His beautifully animated "The Polar Express" (2004) remains one of my favorites. What I liked about Scrooge this time around (this is at least the ninth time it has been made into a film, the first in 1910) is the theological dimension that emerges from the choice of Christmas hymns. They are almost all religious and together with Scrooge's story present the real story and meaning of Christmas -- the saving relationship of heaven and earth. This adaptation also avoids all sentimentality; Tiny Tim has a very tiny role to play indeed. The film is also dark; for example, "death" hangs around a long time in cinematic time, as it does in the book. One of the phrases that attracted my attention was, "Being a good man of business will not save your soul." I think we need "A Christmas Carol" now as much as the people of

industrialized Victorian England's rich and poor classes, as much as every era that remakes the story for film or television and then watches it. What is it about the meaning of "A Christmas Carol", and real Christmas carols, that we don't get?



The Last Station ? Michael Hoffman's (The Emperor's Club)

historic drama about the Russian writer and pedagogue, Lev Tolstoy (1828-1910), is the story of a marriage. After 48 years of marriage to Sofia (Helen Mirren; The Queen) and thirteen children, Tolstoy (Christopher Plummer; Syriana) is restive. He is torn between his longing to give up everything and live an ascetical life and the life of luxury on his family estate. Spurred on by his secretary and leader of his followers, Vladimir Chertkov (Paul Giamatti; John Adams), he signs over the copyrights to his works and flees his needy, loving, volatile wife. At one point she confronts him yelling, "I am the work of your life! And you are the work of my life!" It is one of the most powerful and sacramental moments in any film I have ever seen. This film is already on my list of top films for 2009. And just when I think Meryl Streep is the best actress of our generation, along comes Helen Mirren again.



Up in the Air -- is a strangely affecting movie -- in a good way,

even though it is about bad times and the dreadful things people do to one another in the name of "it's only business" and "don't take this personally." George Clooney is Ryan Bingham, a man who lives in Omaha who is hired to fire people when their positions have been eliminated. He spends most of the year flying from city to city. He has no personal life, no responsibilities and no goals, except to hit the 10 million sky miles mark. When a young woman, Natalie (Anna Kendrick, "The Twilight Saga: New Moon"), designs a way to fire people via video conferencing, Bingham convinces his boss to let him take her on the road to find out what it is really like to fire people (though really it is to find a way to keep flying.) Ryan meets Alex (Vera Farmiga, "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas") and they start a casual relationship that turns serious -- for Ryan. Alex objectifies Ryan just as Ryan is a functionary in a system that objectifies him and the people he fires. What does Ryan learn in this film that is both a comedy and a tragedy? There is no grand sweeping gesture but he seems to become a bit more human, more aware of others and himself. I laughed and felt like crying as I watched the film. Can one person make a difference in this soulless secular system? Maybe just a little.

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

Part One: A Christmas Carol, The Last Station and Up in the Air

Part Two: The Fantastic Mr. Fox, Brothers, The Road

Part Three: 2012, Me and Orson Welles and An Education

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

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

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