

CHANNEL 4 Film Reviews

Alan Parker



The Life Of David Gale

130 minutes

USA (2002)

15

starring Kevin Spacey , Laura Linney , Kate Winslet , Gabriel Mann , Matt Craven , Rhona Mitra , Leon Rippey , Melissa McCarthy , Jim Beaver

written by Charles Randolph

directed by Alan Parker

Anti-capital punishment thriller starring Kate Winslet as a journalist investigating the death row incarceration of - ironically - anti-death penalty campaigner Kevin Spacey. Director Alan Parker and writer Charles Randolph's *The Life Of David Gale*, though an able film that uses an elaborate thriller plot to stage a commentary on the death penalty, suffers somewhat from the casting of Kevin Spacey as the titular fallen academic.

Like Jack Nicholson, Spacey is an actor very much associated with a certain type of role. If Nicholson is best remembered as 'Crazy Jack' (see *The Shining*, *Batman*, *The Witches Of Eastwick* etc), Spacey is 'Creepy Kev', despite Hollywood's best efforts post-American Beauty to transform him into a wholesome leading man. Roles in *Seven*, *The Usual Suspects*, even *Swimming With Sharks*, hang over his career; his every screen appearance has a whiff of weirdo. So when he's cast as the figure we're supposed to believe is a loving father and a avuncular, popular university lecturer, it's immediately problematic.

The casting does work in the film's favour to a certain extent. The plot has 'News' magazine (a 'Time' clone) reporter Bitsey Bloom (Winslet) being given three exclusive interviews with Gale, on three consecutive days in the run up to his execution in a Texas jail. Bloom, the audience's access point into the narrative, begins believing not just in Gale's guilt but also in the system: "He did it, now he's going to die - maybe he deserves it." We're meant to doubt Gale's innocence too. This is, after all, a thriller. Where would the thrills be if the case was clear-cut?

The interview sessions segue into flashbacks, as Gale describes how he came to be on death row, progressing from ordinary academic family man (on the verge of a perfectly ordinary divorce) and anti-death penalty campaigner, to alcoholic bum ruined by an unfounded charge of rape (an ex student, Mitra, seduced him). He's subsequently found guilty of raping and murdering his colleague and best friend Constance Harraway (Linney), who was found naked, handcuffed and suffocated -

with his semen inside her. So why does he want to talk to Bloom? Because there's something very suspect about the crime and the charges. "Ms Bloom - I used to be the state's leading death penalty abolitionist and now I'm on death row. Doesn't that strike you as a little odd?". He doesn't expect her to save him, he just wants to save his reputation: "All I can tell you is that by this time tomorrow I will be dead. I know when, I just don't know why. That's for you to find out."

Bloom takes on a sort of heroic role, as someone who, through her investigations, has a chance to save Gale. Although the plot gets convoluted, the sense of anticipation as Bloom races against time is effectively handled. Who is the mysterious opera-loving cowboy trailing Bloom and her colleague Zack Stemmons (Mann) in a pickup? Is Gale's lawyer (Rippy) dodgy? Where does Harraway's "friend" Dusty (Craven) fit in? Ultimately the film is concerned with Gale's redemption, and though its combination of thriller and questioning of the death penalty (the film explores the potential for the system to kill innocent men) isn't entirely comfortable, it works well enough. But there's just that little matter of Spacey coming across as a bit suspect.

Verdict

Earnest, well-crafted, tense and for the most part well-acted (supposedly Spacey was a third choice after Clooney and Cage, who produces instead), *The Life Of David Gale* is intelligent entertainment, if somewhat overlong.

Angela's Ashes

145 minutes

UK/USA (1999)

15

starring Emily Watson , Robert Carlyle , Ciaran Owens , Joe Breen , Michael Legge , Ronnie Masterson

written by Laura Jones , Alan Parker

directed by Alan Parker

Emily Watson and Robert Carlyle star in Alan Parker's adaptation of the autobiographical bestseller

Alan Parker directs this adaptation of Frank McCourt's award-winning novel, a book justifiably ripe for film treatment. The result is a solid rather than spectacular piece, hardly surprising given that there's seldom any let-up in the material; those who like to wallow in movie misery have ample chance to do so here, the material is so unrelentingly bleak.

Emily Watson, one of the UK's most exciting actresses, should have landed another Oscar nomination for her portrayal of McCourt's mother, Angela. It's her struggle to raise a family in the face of abject poverty and the alcoholism of her husband Malachy (Carlyle) that provides the main theme. There's also a plot dynamic provided by the family's move back to poverty-stricken Ireland from the US.

Verdict

A movie that in technical terms is top quality, offering a handsome look and top-notch acting. In emotional terms, it's quietly impressive.

Evita

134 minutes

USA (1996)

PG

starring Antonio Banderas , Jimmy Nail , Madonna , Jonathan Pryce , Julian Littman , Victoria Sus , Peter Polycarpou

directed by Alan Parker

Alan Parker produces musical magic with his impeccable film version of the Lloyd-Webber classic, starring Madonna

With Alan Parker as director, Oliver Stone helping with the screenplay, and a ready-made audience of faithful Lloyd-Webber fans, the transformation of 'Evita' from stage to screen surely could not fail. Parker, whose first foray into musical cinema *Bugsy Malone* was an unmitigated success, delivered a visually stunning movie, a critical and popular success.

The compelling tale of Eva Duarte - "the greatest social climber since Cinderella" - covers her rise from poverty to superstardom as the darling and scourge of 50s Argentina. It stars musicals stalwart Pryce as Perón, Banderas as Ché (as in Guevara) and, in a smart casting move, Madonna as Eva. The title role suits the leading lady well and she doubtless identifies with Eva's take-no-prisoners approach to fame. Impeccably costumed and unleashed on the rousing ballads for which the musical is known, Madonna shines in the role, producing her best performance since *Desperately Seeking Susan*. Banderas is also effective as the narrator, with a rasping, lusty voice.

The choreography of cameras and cast alike is masterful and the story unfolds with a sense of fluidity and inexorability mirroring Duarte's own steady rise. The film's evocation of period is impeccable, its sets breathtakingly dressed and lit, but, disappointingly, this often jars with the vintage Lloyd-Webber soundtrack. The pop-rock histrionics consistently undermine the classiness of the production. As the film is entirely sung, it would be unwise for anyone adverse to Lloyd-Webber fare to attempt a viewing without their fingers firmly in their ears.

Verdict

Intelligent and visually impeccable translation of Lloyd-Webber and Rice's classic pop-rock musical. Unmissable for fans.

The Road to Wellville

120 minutes

United States (1994)

18

starring Anthony Hopkins , John Cusack , Dana Carvey , Matthew Broderick , Bridget Fonda , Michael Lerner

written by Alan Parker

directed by Alan Parker

Turn of the century Michigan, home of corn flake creator Dr John Harvey Kellogg's sanatorium, a place where unconventional methods are used to clear customers' bodies of impurities. Parker frequently surprises us with his choice of projects, but those choices are not always rewarding. This is an uneven, silly film, with too many distracting sub-plots to have any real focus, and too many puerile jokes about enemas and stool samples to be particularly funny. A weird performance from Hopkins, almost unrecognizable as the good doctor, elevates proceedings a little, but ultimately as tasteless and witless as a dirty seaside postcard.

Commitments, The

118 minutes

United States (1991)

15

*starring Robert Arkins , Michael Aherne , Angelina Ball , Maria Doyle , Dave Finnegan , Bronagh Gallagher
written by Dick Clement , Ian La Frenais , Roddy Doyle
directed by Alan Parker*

Adapted from the best-selling novel by Roddy Doyle, Alan Parker's BAFTA-winning musical comedy-drama follows the fluctuating fortunes of a Dublin rock 'n' roll band. Convincing films about rock 'n' roll are scarce. There's something about the territory that resolutely refuses to be captured. However Alan Parker's *The Commitments*, which features a cast of unknowns, a brace of R 'n' B standards and a glamour-free Dublin setting, ranks among the very best.

Benefiting from novelist Roddy Doyle's sharply observed source material and a slick script by British comedy stalwarts Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, not only did the film spawn a minor industry in spin-offs, it also conveys much of the joy, pain, hope and ridiculousness that goes with life in a working band.

The story follows tireless entrepreneur Jimmy Rabbitte (Arkins) as he assembles a band of motley musicians in the hope of bringing soul music to Dublin. There's singer Deco (Strong), a grubby teenager with a voice the size of Wembley Arena. Aging session player Joey The Lips (Murphy) proves remarkably adept at persuading young girls to blow his trumpet, and Rabbitte himself inspires the band with his own reductive logic: "The Irish are the blacks of Europe. Dubliners are the blacks of the Ireland. North Dubliners are the blacks of Dublin."

The film's first half is both comic and affectionate, Rabbitte auditioning some increasingly unsuitable applicants, then leading his lily-white protégées through James Brown's 'I'm Black And Proud'. But the drama grows pleasingly bittersweet as the band, so impressive on-stage, are torn apart by rivalries off-stage. Crucial here are performances which feel absolutely spontaneous, the exuberance of the musical numbers (Strong's 'Mustang Sally' enjoyed chart success for real) and the vividness with which Parker brings his Dublin setting to life. A convincing, heartfelt hymn to ambition in the face of adversity and, like the music that drives it, always worth revisiting.

Verdict

Sharply written and executed with real verve, this is an enduring and enjoyable comedy-drama that showcases some great performances both on off-stage.

Come See the Paradise

138 minutes

United States (1990)

15

*starring Shizuko Hoshi , Dennis Quaid , Sab Shimono , Tamlyn Tomita , Stan Egi , Ronald Yamamoto
written by Alan Parker
directed by Alan Parker*

Parker's melodramatic account of Asian-American internment after Pearl Harbor, is strangely dispassionate. Jack (Quaid), a fiery union organizer falls in love with a Japanese girl (Tomita) in LA's 'Little Tokyo'. Against fierce opposition from her family, they marry and have a child. When America enters World War II, mother and child are sent to an internment camp and Jack is drafted. Of course, before long he's gone AWOL and returns to try and find his family in the camps. Parker wrote as well as directed, but somehow fails to wring an ounce of truth from the whole thing.

Mississippi Burning

128 minutes

USA (1988)

18

starring Gene Hackman , Frances McDormand , Willem Dafoe , Bard Dourif , R Lee Ermey , Gailard Sartain

written by Chris Gerolmo

directed by Alan Parker

Hard-hitting - if somewhat simplistic - tale of hideous racism in America's Deep South. Stars Gene Hackmand Willem Defoe as FBI investigators

This powerful movie represents Parker's best work and remains pertinent, although the events it borrows from occurred in 1964.

Two FBI investigators, the bright, by-the-book Yankee Ward (Dafoe) and the older, calmer Southern boy Anderson (Hackman), visit a small Mississippi town after the disappearance of three civil rights workers (two of whm were white). Their clash over working methods provides the subplot as they reveal the extent of the racism and brutality simmering in the town - especially from the wife-beating, black-baiting law enforcers (headed up by Dourif).

No recent film has generated such convincing Southern atmosphere. It's like a fly-on-the-wall observation wrapped inside a handsomely mounted thriller, and ensures that the message, told in potent but arguably simplistic terms, reaches a wide audience.

Angel Heart

113 minutes

United States/Canada/UK (1987)

18

starring Robert De Niro , Charlotte Rampling , Mickey Rourke , Lisa Bonet , Stocker Fontelieu , Brownie McGhee

written by Alan Parker

directed by Alan Parker

Blood, dead bodies and the devil himself. Director Alan Parker's foray into the world of horror movies is packed with stylish and atmospheric thrills

Next to Rumblefish and Diner, this was Rourke's best vehicle - a violent, sweat-drenched psycho-thriller with a neat twist (shamelessly lifted by Fight Club).

Rourke plays a grizzled private eye, hired by egg-munching Robert De Niro to search for a lost singer in post-war Mississippi. But, this being the deep south, his quest is hampered by much voodoo nastiness, and attendant chickens.

Also featuring that other forgotten 80s figure, sauce-pot Lisa Bonet, here romping with Rourke in a bed of blood. Sticky with New Orleans heat, she spends the whole movie simmering.

Birdy

120 minutes

United States (1984)

15

starring Matthew Modine , Bruno Kirby , Nicolas Cage , Sandy Baron , John Harkins , Karen Young

written by Sandy Kroopf , Jack Behr

directed by Alan Parker

Alan Parker directs this compelling story of two Philly kids scarred by the Vietnam War

The friendship between 'a couple of crazy Philly kids', who both become scarred by the Vietnam War. One is locked away in an army mental hospital, having taken on the mannerisms of the birds that have been his obsession, where he is visited by his fiercely loyal friend, his face swathed in bandages, who is desperate to reconnect with this man who has always fascinated him.

Raising issues about the nature of madness and what constitutes true freedom, this is a curiously arty film from Parker, a frequently unsubtle director, usually so dismissive of any kind of pretension, but a gripping one, nonetheless.

Shoot the Moon

123 minutes

United States (1982)

15

starring Albert Finney , Diane Keaton , Peter Weller , Karen Allen , Dana Hill , Viveka Davis

written by Bo Goldman

directed by Alan Parker

Jean Cocteau's observation that 'bawling leads to laryngitis' should have been heeded by the noisy protagonists of this film, a choppy and largely uninvolved portrait of the marital collapse of an affluent writer and his wife (mother of their four daughters).

The glossy setting is Marin County, California, and the story follows the couple's dismal decline until their decision to split up. Naturally he wants access to the four children, but happiness after his new freedom is not consequential. Finney is loud and Keaton, in understandably subdued form, is oddly unconvincing.

Pink Floyd the Wall

99 minutes

UK (1982)

15

starring Bob Hoskins , Eleanor David , James Laurenson , Bob Geldof , Christine Hargreaves , Kevin McKeon

written by Roger Waters

directed by Alan Parker

"We don't need no education..." Alan Parker directs Pink Floyd's tale of rock music, memory and madness

Even Alan Parker (post-Fame, pre-Birdy) can't illuminate the oppressive air of futility, self-pity and despair that is suffocating the central character in Floyd's ambitious and seriously self-indulgent rock fantasy.

Pink Floyd The Wall successfully contrasts reality and fantasy by cutting between live action and Gerald Scarfe's savagely satirical animation to dissect the mind of a burnt-out rock star (Geldof) in disintegration. But it's as entertaining as eavesdropping on a manic-depressive in analysis.

The story is apparently based on the experiences of scripter and Pink Floyd founder member Roger Waters, who must have been a miserable sod if this is anything to go by. Floyd aficionados will also recognise elements of the story of Syd Barrett, Pink Floyd's original genius, who left/was ousted from the band in 1968 because of drug-addled, erratic behaviour.

Better to buy the original 1979 concept LP 'The Wall' and a crate of Prozac.

Fame

134 minutes

USA (1980)

15

starring Barry Miller , Irene Cara , Lee Curreri , Laura Dean , Antonia Franceschi , Paul McCrane , Albert Hague , Maureen Teefy , Gene Anthony Ray

written by Christopher Gore

directed by Alan Parker

Alan Parker's popular musical mixes troubled teens with infectious musical numbers to award-winning effect - even if it was eclipsed by its soundtrack and spin-off TV series

Somewhat darker than the TV series it spawned, musical drama Fame punctuates its bright and breezy song and dance sequences with gloomy observations on inner city life.

No less than eight central characters compete for the limelight as they enrol at the New York City High School for the Performing Arts: there's ambitious singer Coco (Cara), who forms a hesitant bond with sensitive pianist Bruno (Curreri); there's downtrodden Doris (Teefy) who gains confidence through friendship with troubled gay Montgomery (McCrane) and romance with troubled straight Ralph (Miller); then there's rebellious dancer Leroy (Ray) who gets it on with spoiled ballerina Hilary (Franceschi), and - out on her own - Lisa (Dean), whose dancing ambitions are questioned by her teacher.

Alan Parker's film attempts to cram all their stories into brief, dramatic scenes rarely prepared for by sufficient characterisation - although Doris and Montgomery are introduced more thoroughly and are subsequently at the centre of some of the film's more effective plot strands. Fame is at its strongest, though, when pushing the feelgood buttons: the spontaneous jamming session in the lunch room is winningly uplifting, ditto the street dancing scene - if you're able to suspend your disbelief even further.

Verdict

It's telling that this film is best remembered for its music and dancing: its attempts at serious ensemble drama have mixed results. Not exactly an 80s classic, but a memorable film that won awards for its songs and kicked off something of a phenomenon (the series, the audience participation screenings, the stage shows).

Midnight Express

120 minutes

UK/USA (1978)

18

starring Bo Hopkins , Brad Davis , Randy Quaid , John Hurt , Paul Smith , Irene Miracle , Paolo Bonacelli

written by Oliver Stone

directed by Alan Parker

Despite its dubious racist overtones, this is a powerful account of the experiences of Billy Hayes, unlucky enough to be caught smuggling hash in Turkey

Here's the granddaddy of every 'harrowing true story'. US tourist Billy Hayes (Davis) is caught trying to smuggle drugs out of Turkey. Big mistake. The authorities are under international pressure to crack down on the trade and he's sent down to serve time, to serve as an example.

The ensuing prison experience is enough to make you retch on those smack-packed condoms. Physical and mental torture abound as Hayes and fellow inmates Jimmy (Quaid), Max (Hurt) and Erich (Weisser) suffer humiliation at the hands of the terrible Turks and, in particular, the grotesquely evil Hamidou (Smith).

When his father fails to spring him through diplomatic channels, it becomes clear that Davis's only chance for survival is to escape via the perilous "midnight express".

Mid-1970s racial stereotyping causes alarm, but the sweatbreaking tension and sheer rectal horror that the film depicts are curiously irresistible. Based (loosely) on the experiences of Billy Hayes, the film won Oscars for Stone's script and Moroder's score.

Bugsy Malone

93 minutes

United Kingdom (1976)

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starring Jodie Foster , Paul Murphy , Scott Baio , Florrie Dugger , John Cassisi , Albin Jenkins

written by Alan Parker

directed by Alan Parker

other credits

Kiddy gangsters fire splat guns instead of real bullets in Alan Parker's all-singing story of Bugsy Malone's fight for power against Fat Sam and Dandy Dan. Stars a young Jodie Foster

Alan Parker's first feature is a curious novelty, a knowing gangster spoof that casts children in adult roles and gives them guns that shoot rounds of ice cream instead of bullets.

That it works so well is due to a combination of Parker's invention as writer-director, Paul Williams's memorable song-and-dance numbers ('My Name is Tallulah', 'Fat Sam's Grand Slam', 'So You Want to Be a Boxer', etc) and the necessary precocious performances from its cast.

Verdict

Frivolous and sugar-coated this may be, but everyone involved is clearly having a ball, which makes for an entertaining confection.