

Those Awards

di Murray N. Rothbard

The Oscars have increasingly taken on the dimensions of a racket. Since the eligible movies are those that emerge at any point during the calendar year, and since the producers fully understand the minuscule attention span of the typical Academy dimwit, all the Big Pictures, calculated to appeal to said dimwit, are held back until December 30 or 31. As a result, the experts were confidently predicting awards in late December to movies that no one *had yet* seen. The major studios have always had special previews for Academy members (i.e., Oscar voters) for the pictures they are hyping for the awards; now, that has been supplemented by videocassettes expressed to the homes of each voter.

To the average Academy moron, the only movie deserving an award is that reeking with pretension: slow, ponderous, boring and *therefore* inevitably pregnant with what the "Saturday Night Live" comic calls "Deep Thoughts." In recent decades, as Hollywood culture has gone sharply leftward, this has also meant a blend of leftish nihilism and what used to be called "social significance." 1993 was a year even more nightmarish for these attributes than usual. As far as Big Movies go, it was year to head for the storm cellar.

If the Pretentious Pictures come out in late December, the early summer is the time for movies that people may actually *enjoy*: a time for the fun movie. Last summer, even I was lulled into a false sense of security, for the summer movies, in recent years strictly for the teenage monster-loving crowd, were in 1993 a relatively superior lot. *The Fugitive*, my own personal choice for Best Movie of the Year, was magnificent; in pace, timing, and tight editing a throwback to the great suspense and adventure movies of the past. It's a taut thriller from beginning to end, with not a moment wasted. It's one of the best films in many years. Other movies of last summer were not as superior, but still noteworthy, especially Clint Eastwood's *In the Line of Fire*, about a veteran Secret Service agent blocking the villainous John Malkovich from assassinating the president. Also excellent was *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, an unusual film that catches the spirit of the chess world and centers on a remarkable child actor who is himself a chess prodigy. Further down the list but still worth seeing as what used to be called "good hot weather fare": *Jurassic Park*, a fun movie if not taken seriously. (Can anyone imagine that billionaire Richard Attenborough and his team of crack scientists and computer mavens would construct a dinosaur park (a) in a hurricane belt, and (b) without a protective backup if the electrified fence went out?) Also *Sleepless in Seattle*, which however was a pathetically far cry from the romantic comedies of the 1930s and 40s it imitates. It's one thing to meet by accident, lose your love, and then find her again; it's quite another, however, to fall in love very intensely *without ever having met*. The movie also lacks the crackling wit that is usually the hallmark of director Nora Ephron.

But don't worry: none of these movies will come anywhere near the Oscar bullseye. (Except for the marvelous actor, Tommy Lee Jones, who will get the Best Supporting Actor prize for *The Fugitive* when he really deserves *Best Actor*.) For, as we said, the fix is in, and the winners will be the most repellent lot of Politically Correct cinema in many a moon: Best Picture: *Schindler's List*; Best Actor: Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia*; Best Actress: Holly Hunter in *The Piano*. Best Supporting Actress will probably be Winona Ryder, in the *Age of Innocence*, a movie which is indeed pretentious but not repellent, although La Ryder scarcely deserves the honor. The only suspense left in the Oscars is whether the sainted Steven Spielberg will get the Best Director spot for *Schindler's List*. (The problem is that while the entire Academy votes for the other spots, only directors vote for *Best Director*, and the veteran schlockmeister Spielberg is less than popular with his peers.) The only other suspense at this writing is who will get the coveted spot as comic MC to keep the interminable award ceremony going, now that Billy Crystal has withdrawn after several years in the post.

Since I am not a professional movie critic I am not obliged to see what I know in advance I will dislike, so I haven't seen either *Schindler's List* or *Philadelphia*. *Schindler's List* is a movie which has become not only Politically Incorrect but even taboo to be less than worshipful about, since it purports to enable us, for the umpteenth time, to Learn About The Holocaust.

And yet anyone who tries to Learn About History by going to a Hollywood movie deserves to have his head examined. Did we really learn the true story of Moses by watching Charlton Heston, or by seeing the great Yul Brynner, as Pharaoh, say finally, in his Siberian accent, after being visited by the plagues, "Go, Moses, take your people and go"? Or did we learn the facts about the monster Cromwell by seeing Richard Harris in the hagiographical movie of the same name? And yet, we are supposed to sit respectfully and in awe, *as if we were in church*, for over three hours, to watch what is admittedly a fictionalized version of a novel, and to act as if this is new and shattering History we are imbibing! While Thomas Keneally's novel was fiction loosely based on fact, the Spielberg movie is far more loosely grounded fiction based on the shaky foundation of a novel: fiction-squared, so to speak.

Apart from that, watching a concentration camp for three hours is not exactly my idea of a fun evening at the theater; anyone who enjoys watching concentration camps is better advised to watch the French film *Shoah*, which is a full nine-and-a-half hours long, to be topped off by Hans-Jurgen Syberberg's absurdist seven-hour German film, *Our Hitler*. Then, if your appetite for watching Nazis hasn't yet been slaked, you can segue to the fifteen-and-a-half hour German film *Heimat*. And then, maybe, as they say these days, we "can put it all behind us," and get on to other topics. Or is that too much to ask?

And yet, the only criticism of the film has come from reviewers who claim that the movie is not pro-Jewish or anti-Gentile *enough*, since the protagonist Oskar Schindler, a contractor who saved Jews in his employ, was a Gentile. At this point it is difficult to see how Schindler could have been made to be Jewish, since if he were he would undoubtedly have been an inmate of the camp rather than a contractor.

The idea that watching *Schindler's List* should be treated as a religious experience led to an amusing culture clash in Oakland, California (*L.A. Times*, January 21). In celebration of Martin Luther King Day, a group of black high school students in Oakland were shepherded to see a showing of the movie, presumably to Uplift them from their usual movie fare. The result: disaster. The kids acted the way they usually do in a movie: making noise, laughing and giggling in the wrong parts, generally not treating the picture with the reverence that the more elderly folk there thought it deserved.

As a result, as the theater owner puts it, "About 30 outraged patrons poured into the lobby, complaining about the derisive laughter and offensive comments during the atrocities when Jews were murdered on screen. I've never seen such furious, hurt customers. Some were Holocaust survivors and one woman was sobbing." The owner thereupon stopped the movie, and ordered all the high school students ejected.

The four teacher-chaperons who had herded the kids there were themselves outraged at the ejection. One, Dean of Students Tanya Dennis, claimed that the students were "evicted unfairly, with no warning," and she hinted that the cause was racism: "Some elderly white people were wondering what black kids were doing at the movie. Our kids have seen more violence and suffered more oppression than these people."

Perhaps the most interesting defense of the young lads and lasses was by one of their chaperons, math teacher Aaron Grumet, who, according to the *L.A. Times*, had "lost relatives in the Holocaust." "Most of my students have seen people shot, so they laughed when the shooting didn't look realistic. They're not Afro-American kids laughing at Jewish horror, they're the inner-city, hip-hop generation, desensitized to violence because they see it everyday."

So what does Spielberg expect, if he won't make shooting scenes sufficiently realistic?

Shalon Paige, aged 14, one of the black students in question, set forth the student point of view: "When the Jewish girl got shot in the head, she moved weird so some kids laughed. They didn't

have to kick nobody out. Maybe they're so upset at us, prejudiced because they're white." Ms. Paige went on to explain the student disaffection: "They didn't want to see a three-hour movie in black-and-white. We don't know about the war. It was long ago and far away and about people we never met." So much for History! Other students explained that the only reason they went on the field trip was because it included ice skating afterward, and many of them took the opportunity to duck out of *Schindler's List* and sneak into the adjoining *Pelican Brief* and *Grumpy Old Men*. Smart kids, even though budding historians they ain't!

As for *Philadelphia*, what do you need to know about it except that its hero, Tom Hanks, is an AIDS Victim?

This brings me to *The Piano*, a movie which I fell into in a weak moment. *The Piano* is far and away the Worst Movie I have seen in many years, perhaps since what may well be the Worst Movie of All Time, the absurdist-nihilist Fellini monstrosity, *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965). (Note: to qualify as a Worst Movie, it has to reek of pretension and deliberate boredom: therefore, Grade Z movies such as the latest teenage monster movie don't even begin to qualify.) *The Piano* has no redeeming feature: it is excruciatingly slow and boring; it seems to have been filmed in muddy brown, so that it could just as well have been in black-and-white; it is irrational and absurdist, with characters either having no discernible motivation or changing their motivations on a dime. And Holly Hunter, putative Best Actress of the Year, who has always been an irrational non-actress, reaches a nadir here, her ugly lantern-jawed face made even uglier by being framed by a black bonnet, and her face fixed in an unvarying expression of grim hostility. She is also accompanied by a daughter, conceived without benefit of a husband, of about twelve, who is equally ugly and also framed by a black bonnet, and who is also unusually irritating for a kid actor. (Kid actress might even cap the horror by winning the Best Supporting Actress award.)

Hunter is supposed to have come from Scotland to New Zealand as a mail-order bride to what might be called a "planter," except he and his tiny community seem to spend all their time wandering through the jungle. Hunter and many of the other émigrés are saddled with a phony Scottish burr so thick that it is difficult to make out much of the dialogue. (Considering the nature of the dialogue, however, that's probably a blessing.)

Crucial to the "plot" is the fact that Hunter is mute. Why is she mute? As she points out in her voice over narration, she stopped talking at the age of six with no idea why. So much for the comprehensibility of these besotted characters. The film critics, who, naturally, have all gone bananas over *The Piano*, gush about the fact that Hunter "expresses herself through her music," her music being the piano in question. Unfortunately, we hear a lot of her piano playing in the movie. Hunter, of course, played the piano herself (there was no dubbing in of Van Cliburn or his moral equivalent), and it shows. Let's face it, Holly Hunter is a lousy pianist, and without benefit of this excruciating movie, she would not have the opportunity of foisting her lack of musicianship upon the long-suffering public. But this is by no means all: the time is supposed to be around the 1840s. OK, there was a lot of great piano music current in that era. So is she playing Chopin, or Schumann, and at least giving us a glorious soundtrack? Not on your tintype. What she plays is newly composed New Age noodling, sans rhythm, melody, or structure. So much for the authenticity of this film.

And now we come to the toperoo of this move. The directress of this movie. The directress of the film is the New Zealander Jane Campion, and one of the reasons this movie has been getting a fantastic press is because: "At last! Now the movies are displaying *feminist eroticism*." And on and on, about how erotic and "sexy" *The Piano* is supposed to be.

Puh-leeze! Emetic, not erotic, is the proper term. About the only character in the movie who both acts well and whose motives are comprehensible is Sam Neill, the unfortunate husband, who is so Insensitive and Male Oppressive that he actually is interested in sleeping with his bride. Naturally, La Hunter is as surly as possible, and instead falls into a relationship with a thuggish, beer-belly Harvey Keitel ("How wonderful it is to see a naked male body that is not ideal!"). Keitel, even though another jungle-walking "planter," has Gone Native, hangs around with dancing, happy

Maoris, and has gotten *his* ugly puss covered with some kind of Aborigine Tattoo or Paint or who knows what. Keitel manages to win Hunter's favors in an elaborate kind of S-M game, where he will sell her back the Piano, which he, and not the husband, had paid the Maoris to cart through the woods to his hut, one "black key" at a time, in exchange for various degrees of seduction. Neill is also Insensitive enough to become enraged when he finds that his bride was fooling around with Keitel rather than himself.

In the end, the two "lovers" go off in a Maori canoe, carting the grotesque Grand Piano with them. For some unexplained reason, Hunter, who had spent the entire movie moping about her beloved piano, suddenly decides to tell the Abos to toss the piano overboard. Her foot gets caught in the rope, drowning her along with her damned piano. Unfortunately, however, even that small moment of delight was denied me, and she is rescued.

The famous erotic scene of the two principals naked is enough to get almost anyone to swear off pornography. Holly Hunter in addition to her pointy jaw, has shoulders like a linebacker, and she behaves just as grimly in the allegedly joyful sex scene as she does in the rest of the picture.

One of the many puzzling aspects of *The Piano*, indeed, is why two grown men spend so much of their time lusting after La Hunter. At first it seems that she is the only female in the region, except that's not true either, since there is a pointless skit put on at a church by some British settlers. But even if she was the only female, and even if Neill and Keitel's sensibilities had been dulled by years in the jungle, their enthusiasm for Hunter remains one of the unexplained, irrational motivations in *The Piano*.

As I said, *The Piano* has no redeeming feature whatever. Except for poor Sam Neill, who deserves far better things (Neill was Reilly in that grand British TV miniseries, "Reilly, Ace of Spies"), everyone connected with this picture: La Campion, the actors, the costumer, the cinematographer, the whole kit and kaboodle, should have been drowned along with *The Piano*.