

At Eternity's Gate

Half-finished picture



CN&R film critic's mid-year look at films of 2019

I've done some personal taking of stock on what is shaping up to be a very good and very interesting movie year, both in the theaters and outside them, via the multitude of digital resources available to movie fans.

by
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Of films to show in local theaters, I've especially liked the following (all of which are now available for streaming—except *Little Woods*, which goes online July 16): Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum*, an ironic coming-of-age drama from Lebanon; the tragic and folkloric epic from Colombia, *Birds of Passage*, by the directorial team of Cristina Gallego and Ciro Guerra (*Empire of the Serpent*); *The Mustang*, French director Laure de Clermont-Tonnerre's tale of a convict and a horse in a Nevada setting; Nia DaCosta's *Little Woods*, a modern-day "western" set in a dying North Dakota town; *High Life*, Claire Denis' sardonic inversion of the masterpieces of cinematic space travel (2001: *A Space Odyssey*, for example); *Sunset*, László Nemes' stylized tour de force, a phantasmagorical sort of roving vision quest set in pre-World War I Budapest.

Also of note from the big screen, Jim Jarmusch's recently released *The Dead Don't Die*, a dark-humored, self-reflexive yarn about

zombies in Pennsylvania.

Among recent films encountered via digital media, the special stand-outs include: Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* (South Korea), about a multifaceted, socially complex romantic triangle; Ali Abbasi's *Border* (Sweden), a wildly off-beat and extraordinarily effective fantasy about human and animal nature; Marielle Heller's *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* with Melissa McCarthy's Oscar-nominated performance as literary forger Lee Israel; John Lee Hancock's *The Highwaymen*, with Kevin Costner and Woody Harrelson as ex-Texas Rangers charged with tracking down Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker in 1934; Julian Schnabel's *At Eternity's Gate*, with Willem Dafoe superb as Vincent Van Gogh; Bruno Dumont's 2017 film *Jeanette: The Childhood of Joan of Arc* (France—now streaming in U.S.) done as a rock musical with a youthful cast (a nonmusical sequel, *Joan of Arc*, premiered at Cannes in May).

At this stage in the movie year, I'm inclined to say that *Birds of Passage*, *Sunset*, *Burning* and *Border* loom as the best of the best. And for me at least, there's also something of exceptional value in the ways that *Little Woods*, *The Mustang* and *The Highwaymen* extend elements of the supposedly moribund western genre into the

realities of the modern West and life in the 21st century.

There's something to be said as well for the fleeting epiphanies and stray beauties that turn up in the general drift of movies to which we're otherwise pretty indifferent. For instance, there's the ravishing oddness of the hulking way of walking that Nicole Kidman has devised for her character in the thoroughly discouraging *Destroyer*.

Likewise, Clint Eastwood's exquisitely minimalist nonperformance in *The Mule* will never be confused with "great acting," but for me it remains a walk-through for the ages (as well as the aged). The Martin Scorsese/Bob Dylan *Rolling Thunder Revue* is a monumental production, but the part that I'd be glad to go on watching again and again and again is footage of Patti Smith improvising poetry on a small stage and bouncing and revving her words directly into something like a cappella rock 'n' roll.

There's heavy-duty zeitgeist stuff to be found in those stray beauties as well. There are the off-handed portraits of social and moral paralysis in Jarmusch's zombie farce, for example. And *The Highwaymen* has a dark, ferocious underlayer of tragic Texas history running just beneath its poker-faced revisions of the Bonnie and Clyde legend. □



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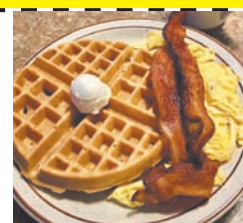
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