Lost & Found: 10 Movies Proud to Be American

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on September 6, 2010 - 5:23pm

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CHICAGO – With the release of “The American,” it’s time to rally ‘round the flagpole and see if it waves. And that mix of metaphors conjures the great American film, the movies with American or America in their titles that have flown like an eagle soaring through red, white and blue skies on a starry night, punctuated by fireworks on the 4th of July.

American Beauty (1999)

American Beauty
Photo credit: Dreamworks

As unblinking and truthful story about the American Dream as any pre-9/11 film, AB rides on the performance of Kevin Spacey as a burnt-out corporate nebbish named Lester who is unloved by his ambitious real estate agent wife (Annette Bening) and is quietly desperate about the life that has passed him by.

When Lester is unexpectedly freed from his 9 to 5 hell, he embarks on a journey which includes workouts, weed and lust – for an unattainable teenage friend of his daughter.

Basically American Beauty portrays the hunger that most people have, unadorned by the social morality of authority. The adults are as lost as the adolescents in this drama, and obsession is always better than receiving the object of the obsession.

HIGHLIGHT: Second best performance is Chris Cooper’s smother father, so much so that it’s hard to believe that his son has a major retail operation in place right under Dad’s nose.

Lost in America (1985)

Lost in America
Photo credit: Warner Bros.

A classic Albert Brooks film, in the midst of his most fertile period (see also “Modern Romance” and “Defending Your Life”), Brooks does here what he does best, react hilariously to the slowly disintegrating situation around him. He plays an ad executive named David who suddenly has the idea that if he cashes in all his savings (the “nest egg”), then he and his wife Linda (Julie Hagerty) can drop out of society, ala “Easy Rider,” live in an RV and drive around to “find” America.

Everything is perfect until the couple takes a detour to Las Vegas, where Linda finds her repressed gambling addiction and loses most of the nest egg. With their security now lost, the couple needs to find a way out of the dream that has become a trap.

Albert Brooks has made a brilliant career out of the slow burn. His David character is indicative of all of his executive characters, successful at the surface but insecure at the core. His reaction to the loss of the money is letter perfect, down to admonition that Linda cannot use the words “nest” and “egg” again.

HIGHLIGHT: The scene with Garry Marshall where David tries to pitch a marketing campaign for Las Vegas in hopes of getting the nest egg back.

Americathon (1979)

Americathon
Photo credit: United Artists

A more presicient comedy than at first glance, Americathon is basically a look at the USA once it runs out of of oil and money (eek) in 1998.

The bankrupt country is taken from the brink after President Chet Roosevelt (John Ritter) approves a telethon to raise money, hosted by TV celebrity Monty Rushmore (Harvey Korman).

For a semi-stupid film that didn’t do any box office, here are some of the satirical points that accurately predicted the future – China embraces capitalism and becomes a world power, Native Americans would evolve to wealth (though not through casinos in the film), Vietnam would become a tourist attraction and the whole oil thing, which has cost us two World Trade Center buildings and one national consciousness.

HIGHLIGHT: The one of a kind cast: John Ritter, Harvey Korman, Peter Riegert, Fred Willard, Jay Leno, Chief Dan George, Meat Loaf, Elvis Costello and Dorothy “Star 80” Stratten.

American Teen (2008)

American Teen
Photo credit: Paramount Vantage

This very provocative documentary was a third by the master doc director Nanette Burstein. Going into a Warsaw, Indiana, high school, Burstein and her crew followed five members of the senior class as their lives were transitioning in that crucial year.

Even though they were categorized by the typical archetypes – jocks, nerds, popular and outsider – Burstein found other characteristics in each one of them that separated their expected actions from their own identities.

The film is relatable in the sense that everyone either went through the experience with these type of people or of course were one of the archetypes.

All the heartache, triumph and passion of youth is on display and although Burstein was criticized for sensationalism of the subject, it made up for any of that with its poignancy.

HIGHLIGHT: To paraphrase the Rolling Stones, “after all, it was you and me.”

American Pie (1999)

American Pie
Photo credit: Universal Pictures

In a world where four boys want to lose their virginity presents a movie where a man can make sweet love to a pie.

The very popular film, which spawned two official sequels and four more straight-to-DVD considerations, began with the premise of horny teenagers trying to navigate the maze of sexual conquest (and baked goods).

The film’s charm lies in what it was criticized for in the first place – its prurient nature, grossness and lack of maturity. Everything we want to go to the movies for. Launched several solid film careers, especially scene stealer Seann William Scott as the unforgettable Steve Stifler.

And speaking of forgettable, skip the sequels, unless seeing Eugene Levy reprise his Noah Levenstein role in all of them is full circle for the American Pie.

HIGHLIGHT: This is the film where the term MILF was invented, or simply a reference to “Stifler’s Mom.”

An American Werewolf in London (1981)

An American Werewolf in London
Photo credit: Universal Pictures

This strange, comical and almost beautiful film is basically a horror parody that dares to go further in its exploration of the genre. John Landis (”Animal House,” ”The Blues Brothers”) directed the film from a script he wrote ten years before while working as a production assistant on “Kelly’s Heroes.” David Naughton and Griffin Dunne are young travelers hiking in the Yorkshire moors.

After ignoring warnings in an odd pub about walking near the moors, they are attacked by a wolf-like creature. Dunne’s characters dies, but becomes a living dead ghost (hilariously decomposing) for Naughton, who survived the attack.

When Naughton begins to display werewolf tendencies, it’s time to figure out where to find a silver bullet. Giving the horror film a post modern snarky feel is genius, and the humor nicely balances the dread. This smaller film has become a major cult hit.

HIGHLIGHT: The love making scene to the Van Morrison song “Moondance” pretty much sums up the film’s altitude.

The Last American Hero (1973)

The Last American Hero
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

The great Jeff Bridges spent the 1970s playing young anti-heroes and outsiders in such films as “The Last Picture Show” and “Thunderbolt and Lightfoot.”

Here he plays Junior Jackson, a stock car racing man who cut his teeth driving moonshine for his Daddy and outrunning the law. Features a great cast, including Valerie Perrine at her peak, a young Gary Busey as Junior’s brother and Ned Beatty.

Interestingly hints at the future NASCAR nature of the sport by showing the evolution of Bridges character from backwoods boy to corporate sponsored “driver.”

Combines the innocence of a true fairy tale with the sharp grit of the 1970s rebel, which leads to the American ream…er…dream.

HIGHLIGHT: The racing sequences were done with a reverence toward that style of driving man.

Young Americans (1967)

Young Americans
Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

There are certain period films that have a it-came-from-another-galaxy vibe, and this documentary is one of them.

Filmed in the midst of the youth and counterculture explosion, Young Americans focused on a squeaky-clean group of choir singers who toured the country singing old fashioned standards for state fair-type audiences.

Notable because they were often booked on variety shows of the era (think Bob Hope), the contrast to what was really going on in society seems like opposite day, even within the pocket of today's red states. Featuring Vicki Lawrence, right before her foray into "The Carol Burnett Show."

HIGHLIGHT: WON the Oscar for Best Documentary for 1968 and then had it revoked because the film had premiered in 1967, making it the only film in Oscar history to have such a revocation. There is karma after all.

Everybody's All American (1988)

Everybody's All American
Photo credit: Warner Bros.

This is an all-American film, covering the glory years of the 1950s up to about 1980 through the filter of a heroic football player named Gavin Grey (Dennis Quaid).

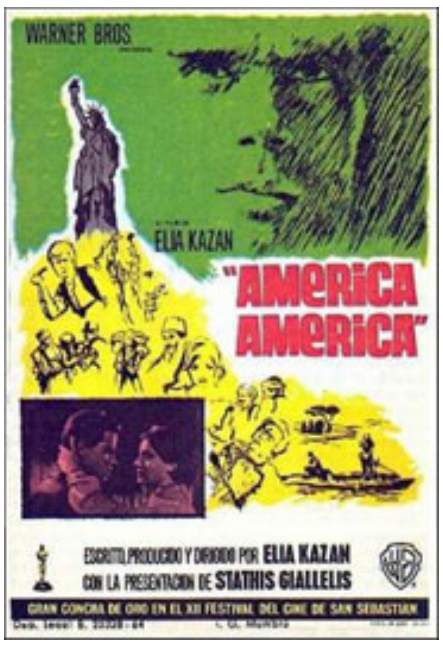
Co-starring Jessica Lange as Babs, Grey's long suffering girlfriend/wife, Timothy Hutton as Donnie and John Gooman as Lawrence, the film covered themes having to do with the era (civil rights, the sexual revolution, etc.) and the life of the football star in glory and decline.

Spotty as a narrative, but fascinating in what was attempted, the film relied on the strong performances of their leads to bring it to the end of the game.

Directed by Taylor Hackford of "An Officer and a Gentleman" in the same episodic style.

HIGHLIGHT: John Goodman trying to look like a young athlete in the early day depiction of the 1950s.

America, America (1963)



America, America
Photo credit: Warner Bros.

An epic vanity project, as Elia Kazan wrote, directed and produced a film based on his own autobiographical book. Based on the life of Kazan's uncle, Stathis Giallelis plays Stavros Topouzoglou, a Greek living in Turkey who longs to go to America. He begins his journey by donkey and travels to Istanbul to work for his cousin's carpet business.

When he arrives penniless, his cousin attempts to salvage the situation by setting up a marriage with a wealthy merchant's daughter. Thinking that this would squelch his dream, Stavros runs away from the situation and ends up involved in menial work and tragic street fighting. Left for dead, he capitulates to his cousin's wishes and seems destined to stay in Turkey.

A chance encounter with an Armenian comrade gives Stavros another shot at his American dream with a job offer overseas. This time, another romantic liaison could stifle the journey, with the father of his original marriage set-up threatening deportation. It takes the kindness of a friend and the luck of the circumstance to keep the dream alive.

America, America was nominated for Best Picture, direction and writing, and became slated for official preservation by the United States National Film Registry.

HIGHLIGHT: The Statue of Liberty beckons. It is America for the potential American.

Want more HollywoodChicago.com connections to the films listed above? Director Nanette Burstein was profiled twice, here [15] and here [16] . Chris Cooper of "American Beauty" was interviewed here [17] and Seann William Scott was featured here [18].

[19]

By PATRICK McDONALD [20]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [19]

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[19] mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com
[20] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#PAT