

Film Feature: The 10 Best Films of 2016, By Patrick McDonald

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on January 5, 2017 - 4:08pm

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CHICAGO – It's that time of the film year, the "Ten Best" lists. In representing my 2016 picks – as "Patrick McDonald" – I looked for the emotional experience as much as anything. I think every filmgoer, from the most casual to the ardent buff, adhere to their favorites through that feeling of connection.

There are honorable mentions all over the place, often just missing the 10th spot – I like to characterize them as all tied for eleventh. My favorite superhero film was "Captain America: Civil War," for the Marvel Comics angst that works best in this genre of movies. The dramas "Arrival," "Elle," "Little Men" and "A Monster Calls" were excellent and heartfelt experiences. I loved the wacky tribute that writer/directors Joel and Ethan Coen gave to 1950s Hollywood in "Hail, Caesar!" And after watching it again after initial reservations, I realized and connected to the ardent celebration in the musical "La La Land." Want more verse and chorus inspiration? Try the 1980s-loving rock gods of the brilliant "Sing Street."

There were three standout documentaries in 2016. "First Monday in May" breaks down the highly anticipated costume exhibit at New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and celebrated creativity at its highest and weirdest levels. "Tower" was a superb document of a horrid event that used a distinctive animation form, to tell the story of a mass shooting in the 1960s, and "O.J.: Made in America" is a must-see doc on the man and America. It was also an exceptional year for animation, with Walt Disney Studios "Finding Dory" and "Moana," in addition to the bright fun of "Storks," "Trolls" and "Sing."

Below each film description will be a link to full reviews and/or interviews, when applicable, that are associated with the tributes. Within the mindset of whoever Patrick McDonald is, here are my 10 Best Films of 2016...



Don't Think Twice



Don't Think Twice

Photo credit: The Film Arcade

This is a comedy, but it generates its laughs through poignant realism. It is writer/director Mike Birbiglia's second film, and it is part backstage show business story, part exposition of creative (and other types of) partnering. "Don't Think Twice" blends these elements through a group of improvisation performers – a particular kind of comedy that relies both on stage partners and an individual's ability to make a quick decision. Sometimes – like in life – those partners have your back, or can just as quickly and suddenly leave you behind. Birbiglia also performs as one of the improvisers, but Keegan-Michael Key (of "Key & Peele") and Gillian Jacobs ("Community") gave stand out performances. The authenticity of the relationships and situations reveals lessons that go beyond the story.

HIGHLIGHT: Gillian Jacob's character, stuck down a well.

[Click here](#) [22] for the full review of "Don't Think Twice."

[Click here](#) [23] for an interview with writer/director Mike Birbiglia of "Don't Think Twice."



Kubo and the Two Strings



Kubo and the Two Strings

Photo credit: Focus Features

In an “A+” year for film animation, “Kubo” goes to the head of the class. Produced by Laika Entertainment (“Coraline,” “ParaNorman”), it combines simple moral lessons with ultra creative uses of a Japanese-style animation tableau – utilizing origami, Kabuki theater masks, samurai tradition and scroll-style art stylings to establish a stunning foundation. Also it’s a completely new story, by screenwriters Marc Haimes and Shannon Tindle, that feels like a thousand year old legend. “Kubo” creates its magic by sticking to what is best for the main character and capturing what he needs to do – with a conjured illusion that packs both an emotional wallop and a luxurious state of awe. It reminds us that the happiest of times occur when the simplest of dreams come true.

HIGHLIGHT: How colored paper becomes origami formed stories, and remains a theme throughout the journey of the characters.

[Click here](#) [24] for the full review of “Kubo and the Two Strings.”

[Click here](#) [25] for an interview with writer/director Travis Knight of “Kubo and the Two Strings.”

★ Neruda



Neruda

Photo credit: The Orchard

Director Pablo Larraín (“Jackie”) has had the year of a lifetime, as “Neruda” is his second biography film of the year. And like “Jackie,” it takes a specific event of its subject’s life – in this case, Chilean poet laureate Pablo Neruda (Luis Gnecco) – and creates a whole new feeling of image and intuition. It is the story of Neruda’s time as a fugitive starting in 1948, as Chile outlaws his Communist political party. The pursuit for his arrest is represented by police inspector Peluchonneau (Gael García Bernal), and the two play out a cat-and-mouse game, that may be just cat or just mouse, depending on how your point-of-view interacts with the story. The film is finely tuned, literary and artistically cinematic, and ends up being much more than “just a moment” in a man’s life.

HIGHLIGHT: Actor Gael García Bernal, who throughout his career has always performed beyond the characters he portrays.

[Click here](#) [26] for the full review of “Neruda.”



Christine



Christine

Photo credit: *The Orchard*

This film was a bit under the radar in the onslaught of the fall movie season. It was based on the true story of a Florida “local news” TV reporter named Christine Chubbick (Rebecca Hall), who in 1974 killed herself while appearing live on the air. But this is more than just that event, as it explores mental health issues in a less enlightened age, the workplace for women in the 1970s – it presented a more crassly realistic Mary Richards/Lou Grant type relationship – and the strange environment for adults in the era of Watergate. Even though “Christine” is a period film, it feels contemporary, and features a career-defining performance by Rebecca Hall, intensely supported by Tracy Letts as a bizzarro Lou Grant-like station manager and Michael C. Hall as the anchorman.

HIGHLIGHT: The recreations of the strange local news stories of the era, wherein Rebecca Hall uncomfortably tries to assert her character.

[Click here](#) [27] for the full review of “Christine.”



Indignation



Indignation
Photo credit: Summit Entertainment

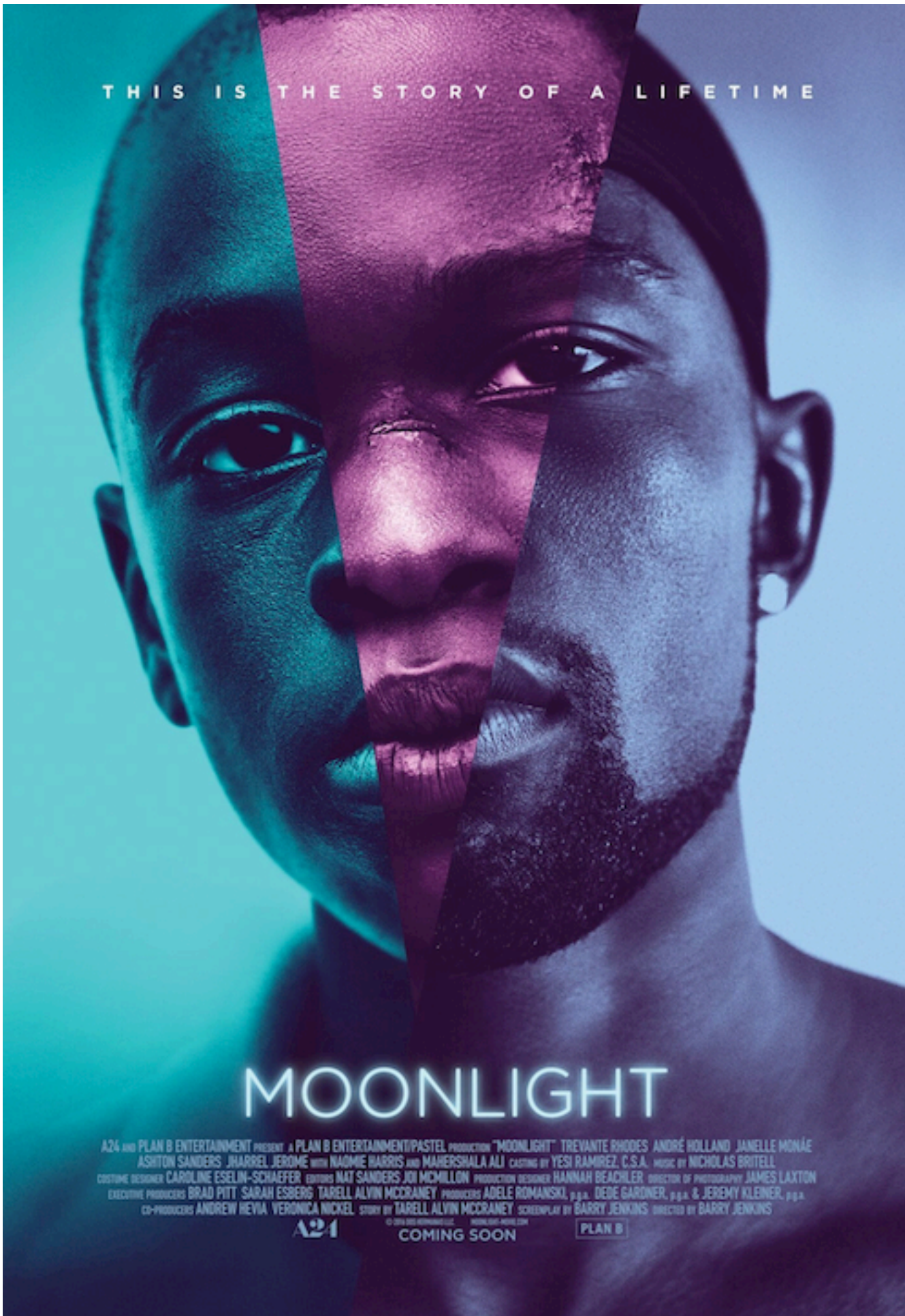
It's a Tracy Letts two-fer – Letts is a Chicago actor and playwright who had a breakout year in character roles, and portrays the “Dean of Students” in an unforgettable turn in this film. Set in 1951 America, “Indignation” is an adaptation of a Phillip Roth novel by writer/director James Schamus, and involves a middle class Jewish college student from New York City named Marcus (the underrated Logan Lerman), who is the fly in the ointment at a conservative Ohio school. He starts dating Olivia (Sarah Gadon), who has a bipolar condition that 1950s healthcare cannot treat. Her highly charged sexuality confuses Marcus, and leads to a confrontation with the Dean. This scene between the duo is like a one act play in the middle of the film, and bookends the beginning and the end like a flash flood in the middle of a drought. This highly authentic look at an alien social climate in America is passionately pro-women, in a very subtle and exquisite way.

HIGHLIGHT: A short but powerful scene between Marcus and his mother (Linda Emond) that is perfection between the two performers.

[Click here](#) [28] for the full review of “Indignation.”

“Indignation” is available for download and was released on DVD in November of 2016.

★ Moonlight



Moonlight

Photo credit: A24

Identity is something we all struggle with, and it is thrown into the blender of our lot in life – socially, economically and status-wise. “Moonlight” is an extraordinary examination of those determinants, told through a story about a poor African American male, portrayed by three actors in boyhood, high school and young adulthood. The boy happens to be gay, and that situation in his environment is not exactly conducive in “coming out.” What is expressed is as much a cycle of his life lottery – crack addict mother, drug dealer role model and law-of-the-jungle friendships – as who he eventually becomes. There are sensitive portrayals all around, especially by Mahershala Ali (as the role model), plus Trevante Rhodes and André Holland as the adult best friends. Their highly charged reunion in the third act is a fulfillment of quid pro quo intervention.

HIGHLIGHT: The subtleties of that third act, which is expressed as much through the subtext of looks and gestures, as it is in words.

[Click here](#) [29] for the full review of “Moonlight.”

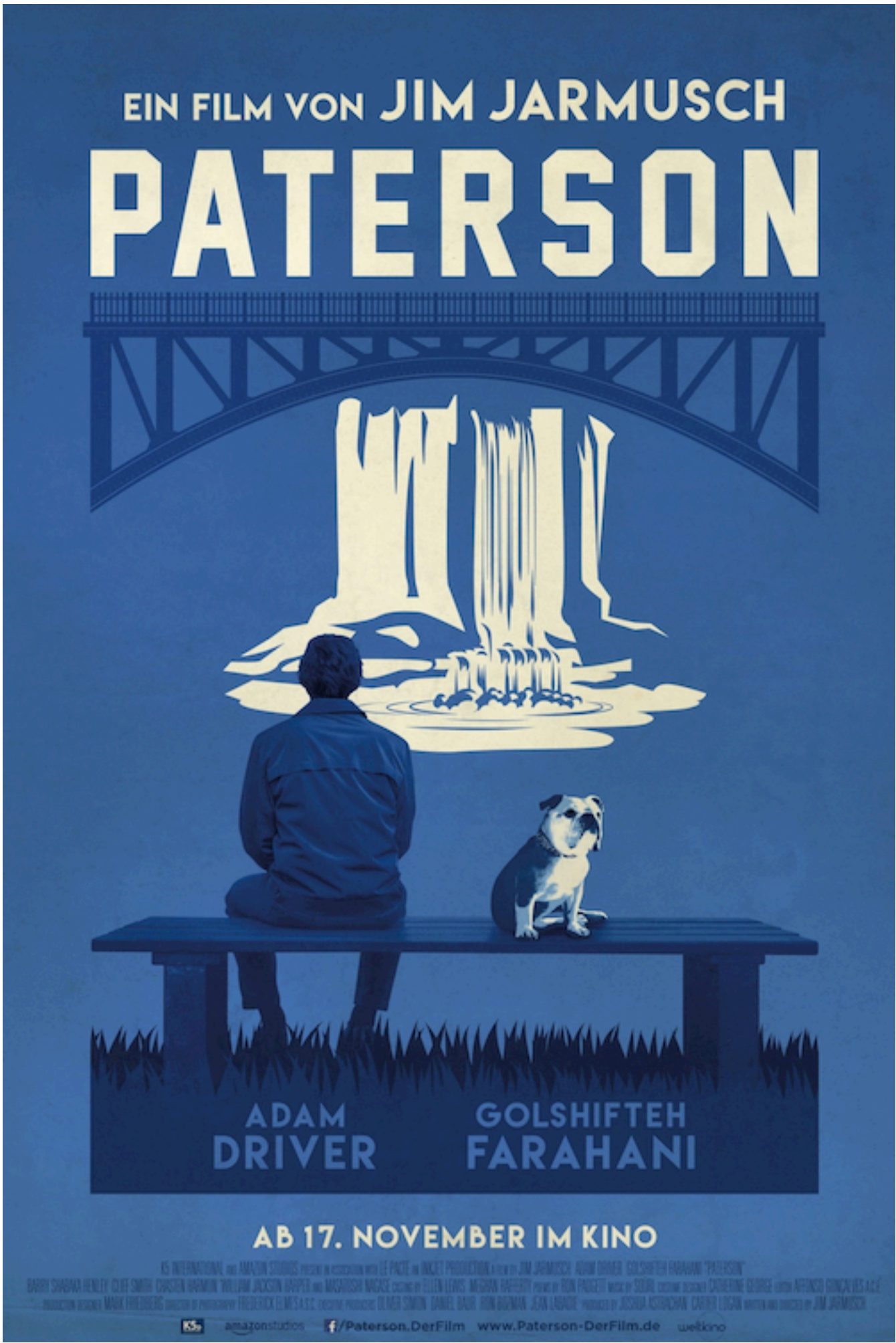
[Click here](#) [30] for an interview with director Barry Jenkins and writer Tarell McCraney of “Moonlight.”

[Click here](#) [31] for an interview with actor Naomie Harris of “Moonlight.”

[Click here](#) [32] for an interview with actor André Holland of “Moonlight.”



Paterson



Paterson

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

From politician/poet Pablo Neruda to bus driver/poet Paterson is not much of a stretch, in the universe of creativity. Sizzling hot actor Adam Driver portrays the low-key driver/poet, who naturally (of course) drives his vehicle in Paterson, New Jersey. Written and directed by the terrifically low-key Jim Jarmusch (“Broken Flowers,” “Dead Man”), this exploration is about dreamers, as the aspirations of Paterson and his young wife (Golshifteh Farahani) stay on the front burner of their middle class lives. Poetry is everywhere, as the film expresses, and Paterson lives through those “everywheres” and delivers his heart. There are triumphs, tragedies and everyday people, in a rhythm that inspires the verse.

HIGHLIGHT: The confrontation of Paterson and a Japanese tourist towards the end, that motivates a new beginning.

Paterson is currently in limited release (January 20th, 2017, in Chicago), see local listings for theaters and show times.

★ Toni Erdmann



Toni Erdmann

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Did you know that Romania is the hotbed for foreign language films this year? “Toni Erdmann” is the fifth film of writer/director Maren Ade, and is a combined German/Austrian/Romanian production that hilariously indulges the meaning of life. Ines (Sandra Hüller) is a hard-charging business woman, who rarely sees her wacky and widowed father Winfried (Peter Simonischek). When Winfried’s beloved dog passes away, he decides to shadow his daughter and increase her appetite for living, in the guise of his alter ego Toni Erdmann. There are so many highlights in the film there are too many to list, needless to say it’s a poignant reminder of the short porch we all stand on, in life’s rich pageant.

HIGHLIGHT: The first five “Plot Keywords” on the Internet Movie Data Base are father/daughter conflict, father/daughter relationship, deadpan humor, male full frontal nudity and pubic hair. Interpret that as you please.

“Toni Erdmann” – nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the Golden Globes – is in limited release (January 20th, 2017, in Chicago). See local listings for theaters and show times.

**Hell or High Water**



Hell or High Water
Photo credit: CBS Films

To get a sense of “Hell or High Water,” it’s best to reference the anti-hero films of the 1970s (“Five Easy Pieces” comes to mind). A truly American film, from its Texas settings to its economic intricacies, the plot is a simple circumstance of two brothers (Chris Pine and Ben Foster) robbing banks, and a two-weeks-before-retirement Texas Ranger (Jeff Bridges) out to capture them. What is not simple is the complexities of the reasons behind the robberies and the characters that are encountered along the way, in addition to the culture of Texas and post-millennial America. The pursuit is strong, as the Bridges character represents an older version of justice, and the brothers represent a newer version – one where other criminals rob as well, just not with guns and masks. The film is expressive and dramatically pleasurable from the first frame to the last, with performances that fit perfectly within the story – this is simply a great roller coaster ride of a film.

HIGHLIGHT: Give credit where credit is due – the writer is Taylor Sheridan (“Sicario”) and the Scottish/UK director is David Mackenzie, who makes his American film debut.

“Hell or High Water” is available for download and was released on DVD in November of 2016.

 Jackie



Jackie

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

This may be a generational thing, but I thought “Jackie” perfectly encompassed the tragedy of the United States, through the mourning of a president’s widow after he was killed – by a bullet to the brain on a American street. Jacqueline Kennedy (Natalie Portman) was only 34 years old when John F. Kennedy was assassinated right next to her, and the film follows her planning of an elaborate funeral for her husband, while the feelings whirl around this horrific event. This is director Pablo Larrain’s second 2016 biography film – from a script by Noah Oppenheim – and like “Neruda” he doesn’t do a straight line narrative, opting to create a rich palette of symbolism and a representative portrait of the First Widow. Natalie Portman provides one of the best performances of the year, and the camera never blinks through a killing field of lost hope.

HIGHLIGHT: In recreating the assassination, director Larrain moves the presidential limousine through a series of underpasses, a reference that Jackie Kennedy made in the interviews she did right after the tragedy.

[Click here](#) [33] for the full review of “Jackie.”

[Click here](#) [34] for a one question overview of how director Pablo Larrain of “Jackie” captured the JFK assassination (scroll down, it’s in the slideshow article).

To directly access the reviews, interviews and writings of Patrick McDonald, Writer and Editorial Coordinator of HollywoodChicago.com, [click here](#). [17]

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