

Film Feature: Best & Worst of 2017 So Far by HollywoodChicago.com

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on July 12, 2017 - 8:45pm

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CHICAGO – The 4th of July holiday is over and the second half of the year looms before us, so what better time than to assess 2017 so far, with the best and worst films of the first half of the year. The film critic contributors of HollywoodChicago.com – Patrick McDonald, Jon Espino and Spike Walters – offer up their choices for BEST and WORST.

The first half of 2017 was fairly strong, as the increasingly crowded film marketplace is not necessarily holding the best films until the fall “Oscar season.” Each film critic will offer three films, as Patrick and Jon will assess their personal “Best,” and the virtuous Spike Walters will take on the “Worst.”



BEST OF 2017 SO FAR by Jon Lennon Espino



Baby Driver

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Entertainment

BABY DRIVER: In the past, Edgar Wright has proven his versatility as a filmmaker by creating distinct genre films while making sure that his artistic flair was always present. “Baby Driver” is just his latest entry into a growing catalog establishing his auteurism. He creates a jukebox action film with nostalgic romance at its core. Every character may be a caricature, and the story may be completely familiar, but Wright proves that it’s all about the execution. The film keeps its foot firmly planted on the gas pedal, only slowing down to either deliver a punchline or develop romantic tension. Full of great performances and fun music, this film kickstarted this lackluster summer and showed up it may still have some gas left in its tank.

IT COMES AT NIGHT: There are few horror films that can scare you without even trying, but “It Comes At Night” does a great job at it. The best horror film of the year, it is subtle and insidious with how it penetrates your mind and keeps you on the edge of your seat. Writer/Director Trey Edward Shults build on the elements he showed us in his debut film “Krisha” and raises the stakes. He uses natural elements, like character interactions and our human fears of the forest and the dark, in combination with excellent sound design to establish the menacing tone and crippling tension.

THE BIG SICK: The rom-com genre gets such a bad rap, and rightly so, but Emily V. Gordon and Kumail Nanjiani changed that by developing an endearing and hilarious story that is mostly autobiographical. This love story is completely unconventional in more than just its approach. Each character is beautifully fleshed out, turned into genuine people with flaws and all. Instead of the comedy just being used as a form of momentary relief, it is expertly crafted throughout the story and essentially becomes a character all its own. Kumail Nanjiani delivers a breakout film performance that proves just how versatile of an actor he truly is.

BEST MOMENT OF THE BEST: In “Baby Driver,” every single scene where the surrounding action was perfectly synced to the percussive beats in the music, especially during the shootout scenes.



BEST OF 2017 SO FAR by Patrick McDonald



Beauty and The Beast

Photo credit: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: I took a lot of pipe for my love of this film, and I think most of the negative criticism came from the generation who wore the VHS tape out watching the animated version. But this live action re-imagining was in the great tradition of Broadway musical transition from stage to film. The archetypes of this version were impeccable, as the Beast (Dan Stevens) and the Beauty (Emma Watson) each lushly performed their roles. The musical numbers were the highlights, as the “Gaston” number was reminiscent of the “Bottle Dance” in “Fiddler on the Roof,” with the stops and starts of a great Broadway number (directed by Bill Condon of “Chicago”)... and even the most familiar songs (“Belle”) took on a new resonance as live action. Walt Disney Studios still knows how to deliver, as this may be the most enjoyable 139 minutes of film experience you’ll have all year.

THE HERO: The smaller and more independent features continue to shine, as new film creators emerge every year. One such director is Brett Haley, who in his third feature film has perfected his style of sly humor, deep emotion and character resonance. The legendary cowboy actor/voiceover artist Sam Elliott is in the title role, as an aging cowboy actor/voiceover artist. In portraying another realization of himself, he captures all the moments of true feeling, as the character finds out he has a terminal disease. In an attempt to make amends for all his perceived sins, he accidentally begins a new relationship (with an excellent Laura Prepon from “That ‘70s Show”) and becomes a YouTube sensation (this is done in a particularly realistic sense). This is one of the great performances, and films, of 2017 so far.

THE BEGUILLED: “Birds do it, bees do it...” as I said in my recent review. That is the essential core of a more complex story, about a Union soldier (Colin Farrell) during the American Civil War, who ends up injured and taken in by a Southern girls boarding school in Confederate Virginia. The woman and girls holed up in the school – portrayed by Nicole Kidman, Kirsten Dunst, Elle Fanning and other young actresses – are at first scared, then intrigued, and then attracted, to the handsome Irish warrior. The soldier, feeling his true oats for the first time in his life, makes both hay and bad decisions regarding his circumstance. Director Sofia Coppola, remaking a Clint Eastwood film and novel adaptation from 1971, creates an atmosphere that slowly builds like a tense thriller, and delivers the goods all the way to the tragic end. This is one of those films that everyone can relate to, as long as if you’ve even had that itch that needs to be scratched.

BEST MOMENT OF THE BEST: The “Be My Guest” number from “Beauty and the Beast” is a marvel of combined digital art and Broadway baby delivery (by Ewan McGregor, of all people). I could watch it ten times in a row and never get tired of the marvelous scenic invention by Bill Condon and the production team.

Now that we've listed the BEST, it's time for the BLECH! Spike Walters takes on three of the WORST of 2017 so far on PAGE TWO...



WORST OF 2017 SO FAR by Spike Walters



Fist Fight

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

THE SPACE BETWEEN US: This is a weebegone young adult romance about (literally) star-crossed lovers that had me slapping my forehead in incredulity, starting with the opening sequence in which a scientist (Gary Oldman) explains his mission to Mars using some of the most tiresome third hand clichés picked up from old sci fi movies. And it's all downhill from there as Asa Butterfield (playing a wide-eyed wonder for like the 12th time) is a boy raised on Mars who falls in love – via instant message – with a surly foster kid (Britt Robertson) on earth. So he makes the journey back, but as the film so heavy handedly exclaims “his heart can’t handle our gravity.” This film takes the diseased “Youth Adult” lovers cliches to gobsmackingly awful extremes, with precious few stars to brighten the mood.

DESPICABLE ME 3: This film was one of the most painful experiences I've had at a children's movie yet this year (but then again I haven't seen “The Emoji Movie” yet so there's a chance this may get bumped off the worst list by the time the end of the year rolls around). I have never been a huge fan of Gru and his Minions in this series, but I found them at least tolerable before. “Despicable Me 3” was my tipping point, with its long lost twin brother conceit and Minions reenacting prison movie clichés for absolutely no reason. It wastes a talented voice cast with Steve Carell, Kristin Wiig, and Trey Parker with jokes that fall in that weird no-mans-land... too lame and overworked to appeal to parents, yet full of references that'll fly right over the heads of the target kiddie audience. I'm also over Illumination Entertainment's style of elongated limbs and grotesque sized bodies and heads as well. Unsophisticated younger children will still probably stay still for its seemingly interminable 90 minutes, but I happily would have taken a trip to the dentist over another trip with Gru and company.

FIST FIGHT: Here's something of a modern miracle – a major studio movie without a single redeeming asset. Everything that can go wrong does in this alleged “comedy” about teachers at a failing high school (let's laugh at the state of poor kids in public school ha ha!) settling their differences like children with a fight on the playground. This is the kind of movie that sticks to everyone involved and makes you think a little lesser of them. It's a tone deaf descent into hack comedy hell with a premise that can't even sustain the film's own two minute trailer... much less an entire movie. But getting something this wrong is exceedingly hard to do, and I haven't seen a movie yet that comes close to this film's ability to find rock bottom and then smash right through it.

WORST MOMENT OF THE WORST: “Fist Fight” is full of them, but the moment when Charlie Day (who portrays a teacher) and his 8 year-old daughter litter the stage with F-bombs – while performing a rap at a children’s talent show – was a particularly cringe inducing example of a gag that even Adam Sandler has abandoned for being done to death.

“Baby Driver,” “It Comes at Night,” “The Big Sick,” “The Hero,” “The Beguiled” and “Despicable Me 3” are still in theatrical release. See local listings for theaters and show times. “Beauty and the Beast,” “The Space Between Us” and “Fist Fight” are available on DVD or digital download.



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