

DVD Select: A leader for troubled times; a lesson of virtue so needed now

by Robert_J_Hawkins

It is amazing what you can accomplish in a world without the distraction of television. Consider the 19th century social crusader William Wilberforce (Ioan Gruffudd) in the moving bio-picture "Amazing Grace" (Fox, 3 1/2 stars). In his lifetime, we learn in the DVD's extras, Wilberforce spearheaded no less than 65 distinct social initiatives.

'AMAZING GRACE' - Ioan Gruffudd portrays social activist William Wilberforce and Romola Garai his wife, Barbara, in the period drama 'Amazing Grace.' CNS Photo courtesy of Samuel Goldwyn Films. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin Among his better-known efforts: the first animal-welfare society, the first free-education movement, the first bible society, prison reform, child-labor protection and the founding of the first national art gallery.

But Wilberforce is best known for his tireless campaigning over four decades for the abolition of slavery and slave trading by England, something that was accomplished only days before he died.

Wilberforce was a man of comfortable means, a man of God and a member of Parliament and, thus, a member of privileged society. All of which makes his selfless devotion to the greater good all the more extraordinary.

Director Michael Apted, best known for his lifelong "7-Up" documentary series, says Wilberforce's story shows "how heroic politics can be." And isn't that a curious notion these days? We don't in the least think of politics as remotely "heroic." Combative, poll-driven, opportunistic, manipulative, polemical - these are concepts that come to mind. Not heroic.

Wilberforce had many friends outside of Parliament, but very few inside. His college classmate and friend William Pitt (Benedict Cumberbatch) was England's youngest prime minister at age 24 and a secret ally. But inside Parliament, Wilberforce faced 300 members deep in the pockets of the slave-trade industry.

Nonetheless, he confronted, antagonized, prodded, berated and shamed his fellow MPs in the name of a righteous cause. "Having heard all this, you may choose to look the other way ...," he wrote, "but you can never say again that you did not know."

Wilberforce did have an exceptional support system in his firebrand wife Barbara (Romola Garai), the wild-eyed activist Thomas Clarkson (Rufus Sewell), the onetime slave and author Olouadaq Equiano (Youssou N'Dour), eventually the powerful Lord Fox (Michael Gambon) and the former slave-ship-captain-turned-humble-priest John Newton (Albert Finney).

It is the tortured Newton who scripted the words to "Amazing Grace," which, given music, took flight and brought comfort and hope to millions over these centuries.

Wilberforce's heroic stand took place 200 years ago, but as the features on the DVD take pains to point out, slavery was not abolished from the planet - only the English empire. Slavery, especially in the forms of child labor and prostitution, flourishes today around the world.

"Amazing Grace" is one of those films you want to insist that every politician watch today in order that they might develop a moral spine.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Ocean's Thirteen" (Warner, 3 stars) You know the one I want to see? "Oceans 26" where Clooney and Pitt and Damon and the boys start looking like Bobby "Bacala" Baccalieri, Carmine Lupertazzi and Johnny "Sack" Sacramoni. You know what I mean? I'm tired of sucking in my gut every time I watch their movies. All that ageless man talent. Unfair. This time, Danny Ocean (George Clooney) and the crew are out to break the Bank. That's Willie Bank (Al Pacino), a nasty piece of work who financially guts Reuben Tishkoff (Elliott Gould) out of his holdings while the poor guy is in a coma. Fortunately, Willy Banks is a major player in casino ownership, so payback is second nature to Ocean's boys. The DVD comes with additional scenes, a Jerry Weintraub tour of the casino and a documentary on Las Vegas. You can also get the three "Ocean's" films in a gift set.

Let there be music: "The McCartney Years" (MPL/Rhino) Which years would those be? Well, this set spans four decades in three discs, starting after the Beatles thing imploded, with McCartney's first solo, "Maybe I'm Amazed." The first two discs travel right through to 2005 and "Fine Line" - so you can watch the creases of time fold across McCartney's face. (I love what time has done with his eyes.) Disc three contains video from three definitive concerts: a 1976 Wings show, the 1991 "MTV Unplugged" show and the headline performance at 2004's Glastonbury Festival. McCartney has recorded some commentary tracks. The booklet has a timeline that includes these back-to-back landmarks: "1960: Formation of the Beatles who play Hamburg and the Cavern in Liverpool" and "1966: The Beatles perform their last public concert..." I dunno, there was something else in between, I'm pretty sure.

"Shrek the Third" (DreamWorks, 2 stars) Are we tired of the big green guy yet? Not a chance. Nor it seems are the stars who make up the voice cast, including such returnees as Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy, Cameron Diaz, Antonio Banderas, Rupert Everett, Justin Timberlake, Julie Andrews, John Cleese and Eric Idle. The animated feature sequel's mountain of extras include "Shrek's Guide to Parenthood" on which Donkey, Puss in Boots and others offer parenting tips for Shrek and Fiona.

"La Vie En Rose" (Warner, 2 1/2 stars) The life, voice and death of French singer Edith Piaf is given a stunningly candid treatment here. Her life wasn't pretty, but her voice was extraordinary. Marion Cotillard inhabits the very being of Piaf. This is an extended edition with footage not shown in theaters. Extras include the making-of feature "Stepping Into Character."

"Paris, Je T'aime" (First Look, 2 1/2 stars) Eighteen short little stories by 21 directors take different - and uneven - looks at the City of Love. Cast includes Fanny Ardant, Julie Bataille, Juliette Binoche, Steve Buscemi, Willem Dafoe, Gerard Depardieu, Julie Depardieu, Marianne Faithfull, Ben Gazzara, Hippolyte Girardot, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Bob Hoskins, Emily Mortimer, Nick Nolte, Alexander Payne, Natalie Portman, Miranda Richardson, Gena Rowlands, Catalina Sandino Moreno, Ludivine Sagnier, Barbet Schroeder, Rufus Sewell, Gaspard Ulliel, Leonor Watling and Elijah Wood.

"Jerome Bixby's The Man From Earth" (Anchor Bay, 2 stars) How would you feel if you had lived on Earth all these past 14,000 years? Would you be more patient or less patient with the phone company? Well, weightier questions are at hand as sci-fi writer Bixby makes his 14,000-year-old man a college professor who has suddenly retired and is moving on. A conveniently diverse gaggle of scholarly friends drops by to see him off, and when he reveals the truth of his nature to them, the Mother of All Academic Smackdowns is launched. Great debate ensues.

"3000 Miles" (Revolver Entertainment, 1 star) The 8th Gumball Rally starts in London heading east, and ends, naturally, at the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles, where Hugh Hefner is injected with a Viagra speedball - no, just kidding. I'm not even sure: Is Hefner still alive? Anyhow, jerks with money like Bam Margera and Ryan Dunn and X sport names like Tony Hawk and Mike Escamilla race the 3,000 miles, with so much partying and dude-style craziness thrown in.

Also this week: Tasteless and misogynistic "Cougar Club"; hunters become the hunted in New Guinea in "Welcome to the Jungle"; a used-car salesman repents in the Christian-themed "Flywheel: Director's Cut"; Alex Jones has bad news for you in the documentary "Endgame: Blueprint for Global Enslavement."

IT CAME FROM TV

Mega box set of the week: "The Addams Family Complete Series" (MGM) Nine-disc set with all 64 episodes are carried across nine discs. Extras include some commentary tracks; several featurettes - "You Rang, Mr. Addams," "Snap, Snap," "The Addams Family Portrait," "Tombstone Trivia," "Mad About the Addams" and more.

FROM THE VAULTS

"Close Encounters of the Third Kind: 30th Anniversary Ultimate Edition" Thirty years. Incredible, huh? This set includes all three versions of the Steven Spielberg classic - 1977 original theatrical release; re-edited 1980 theatrical film; and the definitive 1998 director's cut. Tons of great bonus material, including fresh interviews with Spielberg.

"The Princess Bride" (MGM) What, again? Yes, it seems like every week a special edition of this fine and funny tale is being released. At least this time - being the 20th anniversary edition - it has some legitimacy. The DVD contains three new features and the "official" Princess Bride DVD game.

"Golden Boy" (Sony, 1939) A then-unknown William Holden is Joe Bonaparte, a violinist who moonlights as a boxer. His boxing career begins to take off, jeopardizing his musical one, and his fight manager Joe Moody (Adolphe Menjou) doesn't want the gravy train to stop. He employs his girlfriend Lorna Moon (Barbara Stanwyck) to use her feminine wiles to keep Joe in the ring. But even a fur-and-diamonds-loving dame like Lorna has second thoughts.

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