

DVD Select: 'Atonement' a powerful tale of wartime romance

by Robert_J_Hawkins

There are two kinds of people. There are those who obsess over every detail in a relationship, who analyze each behavior and meditate on the significance of every word and action that transpires.

'ATONEMENT' - Keira Knightley and James McAvoy star in the wartime drama 'Atonement.' CNS Photo courtesy of Alex Bailey. 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 Then there is the other kind. They are called guys.

Guys have their own set of questions in a relationship. Like, "What's up?" "Now what's wrong?" and "What just happened?"

That last question is the one I kept asking myself all through the epic romantic drama "Atonement" (Universal, 2 1/2 stars).

The time is 1935, on a fabulous English estate that requires dozens of loyal, undereducated and underpaid countrymen to maintain it in all its splendor. Robbie (James McAvoy) is a gardener but none of the above. In fact, the master of the manse took Robbie under his wing and paid for his education at Oxford or some such place.

It is the same place the master sent his sultry daughter Cecilia (Keira Knightley). Both are back at the estate, where an unspoken upstairs-downstairs attraction percolates.

Observing from a distance is the knowing - and perhaps a touch covetous - gaze of Cecilia's little sister, Briony (Saoirse Ronan). She of the fertile, literary imagination, Briony sees from a distance and interprets through her own unformed emotional filters with all the certainty of a 13-year-old. (Much like most Internet bloggers.)

Briony's dangerous brew of imagination, pubescent longings, immaturity and youthful pragmatism results in a tragic set of misperceived circumstances which end up with poor Robbie, the cook's son, hauled off to prison. As Briony points the assertive accusatory finger.

Flash forward and World War II is in full bloody bloom and Robbie is somewhere in France, avoiding Nazis and desperately seeking the Dunkirk beach where the greatest retreat in modern history is about to unfold. Perhaps not as surreal as it unfolds here in the vision of director Joe Wright.

In London, Cecilia is toiling as a nurse, awaiting the return of Robbie, her true love. Elsewhere in London, Briony (Romola Garai) is older, wiser and horribly ashamed of the tragedy she has set in motion. She is a nurse in training and an aspiring writer at night.

Flash even further forward and Briony is an aging literary giant (the marvelous Vanessa Redgrave) discussing her last novel - one based on her own life and that of her sister and Robbie. Suffice to say that in her novel, Briony gives Cecilia and Robbie the joy she denied them in real life.

Small compensation if you are Cecilia or Robbie, perhaps. But a moving and heartbreaking revelation none

the less.

"Atonement" is a powerful story, with some clever turns that pull viewers through the story. It has stunning scenery and a charming and engaging cast. What it lacks is a fluidity that would enable the audience to get completely lost in the story. There is a pieced-together feel to so many scenes. Leading to the question "What just happened?"

ALSO THIS WEEK

"I Am Legend" (Warner Bros., 3 stars) A genetic breakthrough in the treatment of cancer turns renegade and within three years has devastated the population of Earth. Those who survive are mindlessly violent and cannibalistic "dark seekers." The few who weren't affected are being hunted down and killed by the dark seekers. Except for Dr. Robert Neville (Will Smith) who manages to survive in the rapidly decaying city while seeking a cure for the genetic monstrosity.

Neville periodically captures a live dark seeker on which to perform his experimental cures. All prove unsuccessful - fatal actually. Meanwhile, the seekers are showing signs of rapid evolution - organizing into packs, laying traps for Neville.

The arrival of a pair of survivors - Anna (Alice Braga) and a boy Ethan (Charlie Tahan) - raises the prospect that there are more survivors. They are en route to safe colonies in Vermont, which Anna knows exist because, "God told me," she explains. Here, "I Am Legend" deteriorates from an engrossing tale of one man's battle to survive in an incredibly hostile atmosphere into a video game shooter, as the dark seekers zero in on Neville's brownstone fortress.

Anna and Neville must engage in the fight of their lives and Neville, a solitary figure for over three years, makes the ultimate sacrifice.

Not the happiest of endings, but ultimately a hopeful one.

Meanwhile, an alternate ending on the DVD is downright disturbing. In it, the most-recently captured dark seeker on which Neville is experimenting proves to be the mate of the "alpha male." Savage as they are, the dark seekers have re-evolved back to that point. The alpha only wants his mate returned, which Neville finally realizes.

I think he also realizes, in a moment of clarity as he stares at the dozens of photos of dark seekers on which he has unsuccessfully experimented, that he's become something of a Joseph Mengele, the Nazi "Angel of Death." Bummer.

"Enchanted" (Disney, 3 stars) This is just a flat-out love fest for every great movie that Disney has created over the years. The references to classic animated films come so quickly they tumble over each other. The story itself is a classic retelling of the prince and princess fables. It begins in 1930s and '40s Disney-animated style with the lovely Giselle (Amy Adams) pining for her prince in a woodland cottage with only the forest animals as friends.

When Prince Charming, um, make the Prince Edward (James Marsden) rescues Giselle from an ogre, they set the wedding for the next day. (Stuff happens fast in animation.) The wicked queen/stepmother Queen Narissa (Susan Sarandon) pushes Giselle down a bottomless well into a land where "there is no happily ever after" - New York City. Specifically, Times Square, which Disney will probably own in its entirety by the year 2020.

Giselle emerges as a flesh-and-blood human, albeit more naive and trusting than most hicks who land in the big city. She is befriended by divorce attorney Robert Philip (Patrick Dempsey) and his daughter Morgan (Rachel Covey). Prince Edward and a talking squirrel plunge down the well to rescue Giselle and they're followed by the queen's underhanded second Nathaniel (Timothy Spall) who is out to kill Giselle with poisoned apples.

Giselle sings and dances her way across New York, extolling the joys of love and melting the hearts of crusty and cynical New Yorkers - and the audience, too. Amy Adams is a real doll.

AND THE REST: A languid take on Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "Love in the Time of Cholera" stars Javier Bardem; Guy Ritchie stays safely within familiar turf - guns, violence and gangsters - in "Revolver"; good versus evil in the fantasy film "The Seeker"; confirmation that L.A. is one big sprawling mess in "Southland Tales"; and skiers drop down breathtaking verticals in the documentary "Steep."

IT CAME FROM TV

College life as only Disney can conceive it in season one, chapter one of the sitcom "Greek"; sci-fi meets cowboys in season four of "The Wild Wild West"; cowboys meet gangsters (sort of) in season two, volume two of "The Untouchables"; family ties bind in season eight of "Married ... with Children"; a ship of fools keeps us laughing in season three of "McHale's Navy"; space out with season three of "Battlestar Galactica."

FROM THE VAULTS

"Don't Drink the Water" (Lionsgate, 1969) This is the Jackie Gleason version of the Woody Allen play. Allen reportedly hated this version. It all comes down to how you feel about Jackie Gleason - but admit it, he could play the blustery Ugly American like nobody else.

"Bull Durham: Collector's Edition" (MGM, 1988) I once asked Susan Sarandon how it felt to make love to Kevin Costner in a bowl of Wheaties. She turned those huge eyes on me and said, coolly, "Every woman should try it." My favorite scene in the movie, still.

"Eight Men Out: Collector's Edition" (MGM, 1988) John Sayles gave us this memorable take on the Black Sox scandal - and today we long for the simple days when all a player fixed was the World Series.

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