DVD Select: 'Babel' will speak to you

by Robert J. Hawkins

I sat at a restaurant table recently and listened to a fellow thoroughly trounce the globe-trotting meditation on miscommunication, "Babel" (Paramount, 4 stars). He found it boring. His wife found it boring, too. They both found it confusing. And, needless to say, they didn't "get it."

Making judgments on slivers of evidence, as I have a tendency to do, I would have pegged them as classic "ugly Americans" who demanded American food and familiar comforts every time they got off a boat in a foreign port.

'BABEL' - Cate Blanchette and Brad Pitt star in the action thriller 'Babel.' CNS Photo courtesy of Murray Close.They are exactly the audience that needs to see this movie but, more so, needs to think about it and the tragedies that occur when we fail to communicate and try to understand those who are "different."

It has been weeks and I still can't shake this film from my consciousness. Just as I've carried with me director Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's masterful drama "21 Grams," I carry this one. He makes those kind of films.

Structurally, "Babel" nods toward Inarritu's "21 Grams." There are multiple narratives sliced and diced and shaken in time - and yet by the end, the connections are clear.

In "Babel," an American couple (Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett) are on a bus tour through Morocco. A bullet crashes through the bus window and into the chest of Blanchett, East and West collide in panic, fear, anger, politics and cultural differences.

Up on the hillside, a poor Moroccan man's family is ripped apart by the shot as well.

Back home in California, the couple's desperate housekeeper (Adriana Barraza) and her nephew (Gael Garcia Bernal) take their children with her to Tijuana and her son's wedding - with disastrous results.

Meanwhile in Japan, a young deaf student (Rinko Kikuchi) is struggling with the isolation she feels from her disability and from the tragic loss of her mother.

Sometimes, the barriers to communication are not of their making, but how they choose to overcome them is. That is where I think Inarritu's "Babel" is most brilliant. The choices can be subtle - simple acts of listening, speaking in respectful voices, compassion - these open ways and worlds.

Give "Babel" a chance and it will speak volumes to you.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Shut Up and Sing" (Genius/Weinstein, 3 1/2 stars) The Dixie Chicks recently cleaned up at the Grammys. This week, the story of their persecution by phlegmatic American conservatives is brought home in this superb documentary from Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck. It all started on the eve of the AmBush in Iraq, when lead singer Natalie Maines told a London audience she was ashamed that George Bush came from her beloved Texas. Pretty soon idiots in Congress were shouting treason. Spineless station managers at country radio were ordering the Dixie Chicks off the air. The troglodytes of talk radio - Pat Buchanan, Bill O'Reilly, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity - had found more women to bully and bash, like the impotent little Talibans they are.

And yeah, it hurt them. Mainly the loss of so-called fans. The Dixie Chicks went away for a while and had babies, wrote great music, answered their critics - but they didn't back down. Ironically in a poll today, the majority of Americans would say they are ashamed the George Bush is from the same country. Hey, he lied to

get his war on.

"Shut Up and Sing" is a fantastic answer to the vitriol of the American Talibans. Natalie Maines, Emily Robison and Martie Maguire are still making great music together. The rest of the nation embraced them when country music deserted them, though the Dixie Chicks will always be country girls at heart. This is their story and they're sticking to it.

"Man of the Year" (Universal, 2 1/2 stars) Tom Dobbs (Robin Williams) is a talk-show host who decides that somewhere inside his snarky jabs at politicians, he may really have some answers - and so runs for president of the United States. He doesn't stand a chance. Especially after he tones down the quips to appeal to a broader audience. One thing Dobbs does have going for him is the electronic voting machines being used across the country. There's a glitch in the software which steers a ton of votes into his pocket. Enough to win the presidency. Eleanor Green (Laura Linney - love this woman, bravest actress on screen) knows about the glitch. She works for the company that makes the machines, and they know about it, too. When she tries to blow the whistle she's vilified, drugged and nearly killed for her efforts.

No, I wouldn't call this a comedy, although it has funny parts. Political thriller? Maybe. I think writer-director Barry Levinson was just trying to warn us that technology is not to be trusted, talk-show hosts aren't to be taken too seriously and not everyone likes an honest whistle-blower.

Well, we know the voting machines are susceptible to fraud - Ohio and Florida will someday bear that out. "Man of the Year" gets a bit too preachy - forgets it's a movie - at times, especially when Lewis Black (as Dobbs' speechwriter Eddie) is allowed to run at the mouth. This is mostly entertaining stuff, though. And as a treat, you'll see Christopher Walken play a normal human being. Really.

"Keeping Mum" (ThinkFilm, 2 1/2 stars) The vicar (Rowen Atkinson) has his head buried in the hereafter, so much so that he doesn't notice that his wife (Kristin Scott Thomas) is shagging the golf pro (Patrick Swayze), that his daughter (Tamsin Egerton) is a nymph and that his son (Toby Parkes) is the target of a half-dozen bullies. Into this messy, rural English household drops the new housekeeper Grace Hawkins (Maggie Smith). Grace, she of the beatific smile and comforting "Yes, dearie," immediately begins to set the household right. Problems, and problem-people just seem to disappear. Wait. They do disappear. In the spirit of Alfred Hitchcock, you the audience are in on it from the start. Not so, the vicar's family. Good, quirky fun. And Tamsin Egerton is a leggy, pouty vision to watch for in the next few years.

"The Prestige" (Buena Vista, 3 1/2 stars) Hugh Jackman and Christian Bale are magicians in Victorian London who start out as friends and collaborators but end up locked in a powerful rivalry. There are twists and revelations aplenty along the way in this stylishly designed piece, nominated for Oscars in art direction and cinematography. The director is Christopher Nolan and fans of his time-skewing "Memento" and edgy atmospheric "Batman Returns" can expect more of the same high-quality cinematic experience. Other cast members include Michael Caine, Andy Serkis, Piper Perabo, Rebecca Hall and Scarlett Johansson. And here's a casting quirk: David Bowie as the genius of electricity Nikola Tesla.

"For Your Consideration" (Warner, 2 1/2 stars) Is Christopher Guest becoming an acquired taste, like Woody Allen? By now, his ensemble cast is a comfortable old friend or an annoying intrusion. It's not that you either love him or hate him - but you either get him or you don't. Lots of people "got" "Best of Show" and "A Mighty Wind" which used the world of dog shows and folk music, respectively, as launching pads for wry humor and satirical jabs. (OK, everybody got his "Spinal Tap.") Gone this time is Guest's patented "mocumentary" style, replaced by actual narrative. The story is about the effect Oscar buzz has on movie people. Catherine O'Hara is a fading actress in a clunker of an indie film, "Home for Purim," along with Harry Shearer and Parker Posey. When a mere suggestion that they are doing Oscar-worthy work filters onto the set it is as if somebody spiked the water bottles. People simply change, and not for the better. You'll recognize plenty of other Guest stalwarts in the lineup, including Eugene Levy, Fred Willard, John Michael Higgins, Michael McKean, Bob Balaban and Jennifer Coolidge among them.

Other worthy films: Coming-of-age in the 1980s drama "A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints"; Asian action-thriller "Bloody Tie"; documentary on the punk rock scene "American Hardcore"; French father-son drama "C.R.A.Z.Y."; taking basketball to the streets in "Crossover"; mainstream family animated feature "Flushed Away"; and animated sci-fi sequel "Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children."

IT CAME FROM TV

Straight from the tube: the premiere season of "Family Ties"; the ninth season of "South Park"; the fourth season of "Penn and Teller: Bulls-t!"; and season two, volume two of "Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea."

FROM THE VAULTS

"The Alice Faye Collection" (Fox) She sang, she acted, she glided across the floor as if on a cloud. Gershwin, Berlin, Porter - they all wrote songs for her. Here are four of Faye's gems: "The Gang's All Here," "Lillian Russell," "On the Avenue" and "That Night in Rio."

"The Cuban Masterworks Collection" (First Run Features) Five carefully restored films from highly regarded Cuban film directors, spanning "The Twelve Chairs" of Tomas Gutierrez Alea (1962) to "A Successful Man" from Humberto Solas (1986).

"Apartment Zero" (Union Station Media, 1988) This is the original uncut theatrical version that fans have craved for so long. A psycho-sexual thriller launched the careers of Colin Firth and screenwriter David Koepp.

"A Man for All Seasons" (Sony, 1966) The Best Picture Oscar winner stars Paul Scofield as Sir Thomas More. He won Best Actor. The picture also won for cinematography, costume design, writing (Robert Bolt)and director (Fred Zinnemann). It as also nominated for supporting actor (Robert Shaw) and supporting actress (Wendy Hiller). Whew.

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

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