



February is generally a throwaway month. The happy holidays are long gone – but not your holiday weight – and flirtatious spring refuses to commit (thank God, since you still need to lose that holiday weight). If you're black, you can celebrate your history; if you're newly enamored, you can rock Valentine's Day. For the rest of us, there's little to mitigate the midwinter blahs.

Unless you're a movie maniac living in Beaufort.

Thanks to the seven-year-old Beaufort International Film Festival – BIFF to those who know and love it – February in Beaufort has become increasingly fabulous . . . a rejuvenating celebration of vision, gumption, creativity and that wondrous magic we call The Movies.

I love it that BIFF unfolds in February, not just because the month is otherwise so lame, but because it's also Oscar month. The weekend after BIFF gives out its prestigious Jean Ribaut awards, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences will distribute its own coveted statues . . . for the 85th year!

Are you caught up on your Best Picture contenders? I'm not. Ever since they upped the number of nominees (from 5 to 9), it's almost impossible for even the most dedicated cinephile to see them all before the big night rolls around. It doesn't help that most of the serious competitors flood the theaters around the same time, near the end of the year. (String 'em out, y'all. Give a girl a chance!)

As it stands, I've seen six of the nine nominated films. Not bad for a middle-aged dance mom with a job, eh? My husband has seen one I haven't seen, but I've seen two he hasn't seen. So, in terms of a family score, we're still down three films.

It's Raining Movies. Hallelujah!

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Most of my friends don't make it to the movies as often as I do. I used to feel guilty about that – like maybe I was being too frivolous? – but I reminded myself that my friends do lots of things I *don't* do. Like take vacations. And buy shoes.

Movies are way cheaper than shoes.

I can't explain what it is about the movies, exactly, but on any given day – at any given time – there's virtually nowhere I'd rather be than in a darkened cinema. From the minute the lights go down until the final credits roll, a good movie is almost a religious experience for me.

I think it's like that for a lot of folks. In fact, I might even go so far as to suggest that in this age of increasing secularism, movie theaters, for many people, serve the same purpose churches once did. (That's right. Theaters are the new churches. Be sure to tell my pastor I said that. Heh.)

Seriously, though. I think I'm onto something. Hear me out, o' ye of little faith in film. When was the last time you found yourself with a large group of people, sitting quietly for a long period of time, in rapt attention, watching and listening and feeling your heart grow inside you? Perhaps you were moved to tears, and heard others around you sniffing, too? Maybe, at the end of the experience, the crowd burst into spontaneous applause, and you found yourself clapping, too, and crying again, and you knew that something inside you had changed forever. And you couldn't wait to go out and spread the word.

Where were you the last time that happened? At church?

If you answered "at the movies," you're not alone. If you answered "at the movies, while seeing *Les Misérables*," I was sitting two rows in front of you, to the left.

A great movie is so much more than mere entertainment. (Not that there's anything wrong with

mere entertainment!) And it's more than an emotional catharsis, too. (Though, who doesn't love those?!) A great movie can be a sermon . . . without the preaching. It can be a prayer of confession. Or a song of praise. Or both. A great movie holds a mirror to our collective soul, showing us the worst of who we are – and the best. It both convicts and forgives.

And it doesn't have to be a "religious" movie to be a religious experience, either. Look at some of this year's Oscar nominees, for example. Both *Les Misérables* and *Life of Pi* wear their religiosity on their sleeve – and both are deeply powerful – but the soul-stirring majesty of *Lincoln*

and the soul-wrenching ambiguity of

Zero Dark Thirty

are equally effective. It's impossible to leave any of these films unchallenged . . . or unchanged. They have different "preaching styles," for sure, but they all speak to the very heart of our humanity, where darkness and light still wrangle for control. They ask the big questions about life and what it means – the same questions religion seeks to answer.

And then there's the little Oscar contender I caught last week – *Silver Linings Playbook*. My expectations were probably too high going into this film – all the nominations, the rave reviews, etc. Had there not been so much hype, the movie would have been a delightful surprise, I'm sure. As it is, I'm a little bumfuzzled. A salty-sweet romantic comedy, "Silver Linings" doesn't rise to the sublime stature of the movies I mentioned in the last paragraph. Until the end, that is. Sometimes, a great ending is enough to make you love a whole movie. And this one did for me. In keeping with our religious theme, "Silver Linings" introduces us to a cast of extremely screwed-up characters – "fallen" people, we Jesus freaks call them – who flat-out save each other through grace. It's textbook, I tell you. Gospel 101. And it's beautiful to behold. I was touched that even this humble movie – a trifle, in many ways – earned applause from the audience one recent rainy afternoon. I walked out of the theater, right into that rain – and it felt like baptism. I was light as air; free as a bird. No longer weary or heavy burdened. That's some good religion right there.

The last Oscar nominee I'm qualified to comment on is *Argo*. It's been a few months since I saw it, so I'm a little hazy. But I remember thinking something along the lines of:

Wow! This movie has it all!

For two hours plus, I was clutching my chair, completely caught up in the gripping story, and with a movie like this one – a political thriller – that would have been more than enough to satisfy. What I didn't expect was the humor, humanity, and huge emotional payoff that

Argo

delivered. (

Seriously?

You're going to tell a story this exciting

and

make me weep at the end? And

laugh

all the way through?

Really?!

) Unlike with "Silver Linings," I approached

Argo

expecting very little – "mere entertainment" – but what I got was an uplifting paeon to the human spirit in all its quirky, courageous, ingenious glory. Sometimes, a movie is like a psalm – beginning in dark turmoil, resolving in joyful celebration, renewing our faith in all things good and true. So it is with

Argo.

And now these three remain: *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, *Django Unchained*, and *Amour*. I haven't seen them yet, but here's my guess: The greatest of these is *Amour*.

[The Beaufort International Film Festival](#) runs February 13 – 16 at the USCB Center for the Arts. The 85th annual Academy Awards air on Febuary 24 on ABC.

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