

The year of the biopic

MORTONsdARCUS - Sentinel correspondent
Article Launched: 12/31/2004 12:00:00 AM PST

What do "Finding Neverland," "Ray," "Kinsey," "Beyond The Sea" and "The Aviator" have in common?

They are major studio biopics and make one wonder if that venerable Hollywood genre is making a comeback.

In the 1930s, the biography film told the stories of great figures in science, politics, warfare, even sports. They were tales of heroes, ordinary human beings (almost all males) who defeated self-doubt and society's small-minded prejudices to bring the world medical cures, scientific breakthroughs, political and civil rights and other great feats of human endeavor.

True, the films were fictionalized and tailored the lives they portrayed to fit a Hollywood formula in which the individual followed his beliefs no matter what, his moments of self-doubt assuaged and reversed by a good wife who stood behind him and whatever project he undertook. But they were stories that inspired a generation of Americans.

Interestingly, the best biopics starred actors originally known for their roles as gangsters. When the Hollywood censorship office virtually outlawed gangster films in 1934, these actors proved their mettle in biopics, winning appreciative audiences, critical acclaim and, in several cases, Academy Awards. Paul Muni went from "Scarface" to "Juarez," "The Story of Louis Pasteur" and "The Life of Emile Zola"; Edward G. Robinson went from "Little Caesar" to "The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse," "Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet" and "Dispatch from Reuters;" and Jimmy Cagney went from "Public Enemy" to "Yankee Doodle Dandy," the story of song-and-dance man patriot, George M. Cohan. Other actors, like Gary Cooper, were World War I hero Sergeant York and baseball icon Lou Gehrig, and Don Ameche invented the telephone in "The Story of Alexander Graham Bell."

Recently, the biopic has made brief reappearances, but as anti-heroic, small films celebrating grunge and self-destructive losers—which shows what our society has come to. Last year's "American Splendor" is a prime example, as are "Monster," the story of serial killer Aileen Wuornos, and "Man on the Moon," the life of ill-fated comedian Andy Kaufman.

Then, several months ago, five major Hollywood biopics suddenly appeared on screens across the nation. How do they stack up against their predecessors? Does the formula survive? Is the acting the same high caliber as Muni, Robinson and company? More important, do the films inspire the viewer to achieve great things? And if not, what does that say about us as a people?

As for Johnny Depp's rendering of Barrie, it is so low-keyed as to be almost non-existent, and as with most of his performances there is an emptiness at the core of his portrayal which adversely affects the entire film.

On the other hand Jamie Foxx as Ray Charles in "Ray" is inspired but, alas, not inspiring because the film is too simplistic. Blaming Ray's womanizing and drug addiction on his guilt feelings over his brother's death, it pays too little attention to Ray's overcoming his blindness and his stance on racial prejudice, and it conveniently ends 20 years before Ray's death, so it doesn't have to deal with the psychological demons that continued to plague him.



Not so with "Kinsey," the uncompromising picture of pioneer sexologist Alfred Kinsey who is portrayed as a repressed, socially awkward, single-minded academic who lives life as if it is a scientific experiment. Bits of the old biopic formula are present, however, as Kinsey butts heads with the small minds around him and his wife's confidence propels him onward. However, his character is flawed by his insensitivity, and his wife is portrayed as increasingly suffering because of it. Liam Neeson gives the grittiest, heartfelt performance of his career as the complex Kinsey.

The same cannot be said of Kevin Spacey's portrayal of crooner Bobby Darin in "Beyond The Sea." Spacey impresses as an actor because of his voice control and elocution, but the viewer is always aware that Spacey is acting. The characters he creates are hollow, like witty acting exercises from which Spacey is not only detached but aloof.

His portrayal of the talented but self-destructive Darin is not only superficial but self-serving. As in his other roles, there is a smugness in it, as if, as star and director, Spacey was saying, "Look what I can do." And "Beyond The Sea's" purpose? None beyond Spacey's admiration for the crooner and his love affair with himself.

If "Beyond The Sea" is the most self-serving of the five films, "The Aviator" is a close second, since it presents Howard Hughes, in real life a power-hungry millionaire weirdo who used people like handkerchiefs, as a hero. Although Leonardo DiCaprio gives the best performance of his career, the film is essentially a mood piece from director Martin Scorsese, who seems more concerned with its looks than with the complex mental makeup of its protagonist whose story, like Ray Charles's in "Ray," is cut short long before its end.

All in all, the five films portray less-than-heroic figures. Other than Ray's stance against racism and Kinsey's insistence on continuing his examination of what makes us tick no matter what the consequences, there is little to inspire the viewer to accomplish great things. Except for Kinsey and possibly Barrie, the films are not about great men but pop culture figures, and one comes away from them with a disturbing sense that they reflect a significantly diminished view of who we are as a people and what we can become in 2005 and the years to come.

Morton Marcus is the co-host of the TV program Cinema Scene which airs Thursdays and Sundays on Channel 27 at 8:30 p.m. He will lead the second annual "Meet The Critics" forum at the Nickelodeon Theater on Jan. 8.

Featured Links

Marketplace

- Find a Rental
- Find a Business
- Find Stuff
- Get Grocery Coupons

Special Sections

- Newspaper in Education
- SantaCruz PHOTOGALLERY
- Sentinel Triathlon
- Santa Cruz Live
- TV Schedule

Sponsored Links

- Alternative Cancer Treatment Clinic
- Attorney Finder Lawyer Search
- Aupairs & nannies available
- Bridesmaid Dresses
- Cellit Mobile Marketing
- Chrysler
- corporate awards
- Debt Management
- Diamond Rings
- Internet Auctions
- Magic Love Spells
- Moving Companies, Movers
- Personal Loan
- Reverse Osmosis Water Softener
- Vacation Home Rentals
- yellow pages
- Stem Cell Medicine
- Alternative Cancer Treatment
- Sea Logix Pharmaceutical Grade Fish Oil
- Support our Troops
- Credit Help Resource
- Santa Cruz Real Estate
- Free on-line dating: Deception services
- Moving Companies
- Online Degrees
- Isagenix
- 2009 Calendars
- Property South France
- Apartment Amsterdam
- Property Provence
- Property Provence