

Morton Marcus: 'Breach' an Oscar-worthy consideration for '07

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by morton marcus

Sentinel correspondent

Now that the 2006 Oscars have departed sorry about that, it's time to find nominees for 2007. My first candidate for the new year is "Breach" As critics continue to howl against the crash-and-burn, explosion-ridden mainstream American film, "Breach," presents a possible new direction for American cinema, or at least a reminder of one that seems to have been forgotten.

Instead of mindless action and, alas, storylines that make no sense, writer/director Billy Ray has shown the way with two character-driven films. First was 2003's "Shattered Glass," the true tale of a reporter's fabricating articles for the New Republic magazine. "Breach," Ray's second feature, tells the story of Robert Hanssen, the FBI agent who sold immensely damaging state secrets to the Russians from 1985 to 2001. Although the viewer knows this fact from the start, what holds him in thrall is Hanssen's character, and the character of Eric O'Neill, the FBI agent who is sent undercover to flush Hanssen into the open.

Yes, it's a cat-and-mouse game — how will the inexperienced O'Neill outsmart the brilliant, suspicious old pro who has fooled everyone in the FBI for 15 years? But it is also a study of moral conundrums each man must face: Why did Hanssen betray his country? Can O'Neill lead a life of deception and lies, keeping secrets from his loved ones as he goes about his job?

The film's excitement lies in its probing of these questions and takes the viewer into that area that fascinates us all — what makes our fellow humans tick, and why do they do what they do? Like the similar query into the character of Charles Foster Kane, the central character of the Orson Welles's classic, "Citizen Kane," the answer is not pat, and in the end remains ambiguous. But the questions and speculations into human motivations speak to the very nature of what makes us human and throws the viewer back on his conceptions concerning how the world works.

Of course, the power of a film is more than its subject matter and script. In "Shattered Glass," Ray proved he was a major new director: his pacing was superb and the performances he elicited from his actors was exceptional. The same is true of "Breach"

The suspense Ray builds, despite our knowing the outcome of the film from the start, is mesmerizing, and all the actors are excellent, particularly Ryan Phillippe as the young O'Neill and Laura Linney as his case officer. And Chris Cooper as Hanssen, turns in a tour de force performance that is certainly worthy of an Oscar nomination. He injects Hanssen's arrogant, paranoid personality with a haunted quality that in its depth recalls the heroes of Greek tragedy. The viewer cannot dismiss Hanssen as just another bad guy. He disturbs our easy assumptions about people and how they function. As all good art does, he makes us reevaluate our notions about people and life.

Cooper has been turning in performances like this for years. He was the relentless labor organizer in "Matewan," the homophobic Marine colonel in "American Beauty," the young sheriff seeking answers to a decades' old murder in "Lone Star," and the toothless orchid thief in "Adaptation" for which he won a supporting actor Oscar in 2003.



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Billy Ray couldn't have chosen a better cast. But it is Ray's script and direction that cause them to shine and make in "Breach" 2007's first possible Oscar nominations for best actor, screenwriter, director and film.

Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program, 'Cinema Scene,' on channels 27 and 72, at 8:30 p.m. every Thursday and Sunday. He leads film discussions at the Nickelodeon theater the first and third Saturday of the month. Contact him through wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com.

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