

Top ten films of '02: Overlooked treasures

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

"Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." In Steven Daldry's film *The Hours*, this opening line from Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* connects three women in three stories. In the first, Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) is writing a novel about Clarissa Dalloway, who makes a decision to buy flowers for a dinner party she is giving that evening. In the second, set in the 1950s, Laura Brown (Julianne Moore) begins reading the book. She identifies so closely with the troubled Mrs. Dalloway that she spends the day reading the story. Finally, 50 years later, Clarissa Vaughan (Meryl Streep) announces that "I will buy the flowers myself" for a dinner party she is giving for a friend dying of AIDs.

The connection between these three women is brought to screen through three superb performances in a script adapted by British playwright David Hare from Michael Cunningham's novel. Among a fine selection of films released in 2002, I place *The Hours* at the top of my ten best list. Although mental illness plagued Virginia Woolf, driving her into periods of deep depression, grace shines through the darkness of this film.

In *Adaptation*, flush with the success he and Spike Jonze had with the movie *Being John Malkovich*, Charlie Kaufman set out to write a script for *The Orchid Thief*, a book by *New Yorker* writer Susan Orlean.

The anguish of the writer, in all of its sleepless nights, feelings of inadequacy and churning angst, has rarely been presented so vividly as in this film. Halfway through the ordeal—which seems to the viewer to be a documentary about Kaufman's failed attempt to produce a script—Kaufman is forced to call in his twin brother (both played by Nicholas Cage) for assistance. The twin, much more confident in a Hollywood sort of manner, wants to make the film end with a commercial bang. As the two proceed, the viewer is left to puzzle over what is real and what is not.

25th Hour is an unpleasant story told exceptionally well by director Spike Lee, who celebrates his love for multiethnic New York in what I believe is his finest work. The film describes drug dealer Monty Brogan's (Edward Norton) final 24 hours of

freedom before starting a seven-year prison term. Brogan has two fears: he is a handsome young man about to be locked up in a New York state prison, and his girlfriend may have betrayed him to the police. The film does not judge Brogan's means of livelihood, but lets his suffering demonstrate what he himself concludes, "I blew it." Brogan spends his final hours with two boyhood friends, one an ethically challenged stockbroker and the other a shy Jewish schoolteacher. As the teacher, Phillip Seymour Hoffman gives another of his superb performances as a man fighting temptation in a battle he is certain to lose. When he does, Spike Lee stuns the viewers with an image of youthful innocence defiled.

The Quiet American remains true to Graham Greene's novel, unlike the first film based on the book. Set in Vietnam in 1952, just as the United States is taking over the French role in transforming South Vietnam into "our" kind of country, the story involves a "quiet" American diplomat who supports terror when it suits American purposes. British journalist Thomas Fowler (Michael Caine) tells the story in flashback after American diplomat Alden Pyle (Brendan Fraser) is found murdered. Director Philip Noyce's picture is far superior to the earlier watered-down version, in which Greene's ending was changed to make the American into the hero. Noyce had planned to release the film in 2001, but after 9/11, he says, there was no taste for an anti-American movie.

About Schmidt isn't only another artistic rendering of life in writer-director Alexander Payne's Omaha, Nebraska, it is also a surprising endorsement of the organizations that make television pleas to solicit sponsorship funds for needy children. I say surprising because Payne treats the program without irony—just the facts. Widower Warren R. Schmidt (Jack Nicholson in a tightly controlled performance) likes the idea of a personal connection to the child who benefits from his monthly check.

Payne and co-writer Jim Taylor craft a narrative from letters that Schmidt writes to the child, Ndugu Umbo, a six-year-old orphan in Tanzania. Schmidt tells Ndugu much more about himself than he has ever told anyone, including the sad realization that he had built an emotional wall around himself, and now that he's retired, there is no one to keep him company inside that wall. Payne treats his characters and their setting with understanding and honesty. His retiree wanders the countryside in an increasingly depressed state until he finds hope in a moment that makes this film sing with grace.

Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* is being overlooked by many critics, but it is one of the year's best films—thrilling entertainment with a vision of the future. Tom Cruise plays John Anderton, chief of a Washington, D.C., special police unit. The time is 2054 and murder has been eliminated because “precrime” has been perfected, a method whereby the police rely on visionaries to predict when and where a murder is about to be committed. Anderton arrests bad guys before they kill. It seems an infallible system—until Anderton is fingered for the murder of a man he has never met. Clearly, precrime is not perfect, but it prevents most murders before they happen. The viewer will have to decide if the occasional mistake of arresting innocent people and the injustice of enslaving the visionaries are worth the benefit of doing away with murder.

Documentaries deal with facts from the point of view of the filmmaker. Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* offers conclusions that resonate with my own bias, so I celebrate his conclusions. But even as I cheer him for attacking the gun lobby's strong hold on Congress, I regret that he came down so hard on National Rifle Association spokesman Charlton Heston, who has said outlandish things but who is also beginning to display some of the frailty of his age.

Signs is another film overlooked by critics. Director M. Night Shyamalan builds this film around the phenomenon of the sudden appearance of circles in cornfields. Their message is that aliens are coming, and the family of Graham Hess is their target. Since a religious sensibility was apparent in Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*, it is no surprise that it is also evident in this picture. Pastor Hess (Mel Gibson) has quit the ministry after the death of his wife in an automobile accident. He has also lost his faith—until a message from his dead wife saves the family's life. The brother-to-brother argument over faith would fit well into sermons.

My final two films are both set in earlier periods. *Road to Perdition* is Sam Mendes's treatment of a graphic comic novel. Tom Hanks is a mob hit man in the depression Midwest who desperately wants to keep his son from knowing of his trade. (“I can't attend your concert tonight, Peter. I am working.”) Of course, the boy finds out and becomes part of the struggle to escape his father's bosses. Mendes (*American Beauty*) has said that he has decided in his older years to focus on redemption. He can't redeem this mob hit man, but he can find hope in the hit man's son.

Far from Heaven honors the Hollywood studio films of the '50s (especially the work of Douglas Sirk). This is the audacious task director Todd Haynes set for himself: Make a film that respectfully stays within the mind-set of the '50s while remaining

sensitive to the era's limited views on marriage, sexuality and race. He makes a '50s film from a 21st-century perspective, one that honors both the past and the present.