

Film picks: Recommended movies from 2006

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [January 23, 2007](#) issue

When director John Ford asked a young Henry Fonda to play Abraham Lincoln in the film *Young Mr. Lincoln*, Fonda protested that he could not possibly take on the role of such a major figure. Ford responded: "You are not playing the Great Emancipator. You are playing a young jackleg lawyer from Springfield."

Director Catherine Hardwicke may have thought of Ford when she gave Keisha Castle-Hughes and Oscar Isaac their roles as teenage Mary and Joseph in the restrained and reverent *The Nativity Story*. This retelling of the classic Christmas story stands out as the best film of the year.

The Nativity Story covers the familiar: Mary's unexpected pregnancy, Joseph's frustrated response, the couple's journey to Bethlehem, Herod's anger, the Magi, sleeping shepherds and finally the birth in a cave. But in Hardwicke's hands the familiar becomes fresh again.

The Christmas card tableau evokes every nativity performance we have ever seen. But there is no triteness, sentimentality or forced piety in it because we have met this couple in the grimy reality of their village, in the crowded streets of Jerusalem and on the rocky paths to Bethlehem. We know that they are carrying out a difficult assignment, and that their hardest work is still ahead: they have to raise this infant to adulthood.

The Nativity Story delivers unexpected moments that inform and inspire. The three wise men, for example, provide the film with bits of gentle humor. In a sly moment as they leave Bethlehem, they pause to look toward Jerusalem lying across the valley and recall that Herod is waiting for their report. They look at one another and agree to go home another way. You can almost hear them chuckle as they turn their camels eastward.

Earlier, before he has heard from an angel why Mary is with child, an angry and humiliated Joseph refuses to denounce Mary and grant the villagers the right to stone her. We see the measure of the man in his loyalty to this young girl.

In another moving moment, the first shepherd to reach the manger cave is the old man the young couple met earlier on their journey into Bethlehem. A few days earlier, he had offered them the hospitality of his fire when Mary was cold and tired. When he is awakened with the message of “good tidings,” he stumbles, half asleep, to the place where the brightest of the stars illuminates the cave. There, in utter awe, he reaches out to touch the child.

Babel also has a biblical theme. The film’s title comes from that unwise decision by an ancient people who wanted to build a tower tall enough to reach the heavens. Yahweh disapproves and, by giving humankind many different languages, drives them into isolation from one another. Must the isolation be permanent?

Director Alejandro González Iñárritu doesn’t think so. He brings together people speaking different languages with stories that interconnect, beginning with an accidental shooting in a rural area of Morocco. The film moves to the story of a Tokyo teenager, then to another story in Southern California and Mexico.

The connections between the people in *Babel* are neither strained nor contrived. They are, from Iñárritu’s perspective, a series of events that reveal that we must be our brother’s and sister’s keeper: a bullet fired from a hill in Morocco impacts both a mother on the road below and a mother who is babysitting in Southern California.

In *A Prairie Home Companion*, based on Garrison Keillor’s radio program, Keillor and director Robert Altman take the familiar radio format and use it to reflect on death. Altman died at age 81 a few months after the film’s release, which heightens its poignancy. He had recently revealed that he had a heart transplant in the mid-1990s. He was also suffering from cancer—which was not known by his film production company. But because of concerns about his health, the company hired experienced director Paul Thomas Anderson to stand by, just in case.

Also standing by is the character called the “dangerous woman” (Virginia Madsen), dressed in white and “waiting for someone” during the radio broadcast. Is she waiting for the cast member who dies backstage? Or for the young cast member obsessed with suicide? Whatever her motive, this mysterious angel has a good attitude toward death, saying at one point: “There is no tragedy in the death of an

old man. Forgive him his shortcomings, and thank him for all his love and care.”

That line may have come from Keillor, who wrote the script. But I would like to think that it came from Altman. It’s unlikely that he saw his own impending death as a tragedy. He was still working, surrounded by old and new friends who were relishing their time with him. Not a bad way to close a satisfying career.

Little Miss Sunshine, in contrast to *PHC*, is the work of newcomers, the husband-and-wife team of Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris; it’s also the first feature-length script by Michael Arndt. *Little Miss Sunshine* takes risks with its story of six members of the Hoover family who say and do such outlandish things that you, and certainly your Aunt Maude, would be shocked if you were not already laughing at the film’s brilliant insights.

Grandpa (Alan Arkin), as the oldest member of the family, loudly gives himself permission to say whatever he likes. (Besides, he has a bullet in his bottom, courtesy of the Nazis.) With all his faults—and they are many—Grandpa keeps the family on course even when it means shoving everyone into a broken-down Volkswagen bus to take young Olive (Abigail Breslin) to the finals of the Little Miss Sunshine beauty contest.

Why travel from New Mexico to Southern California for a contest that should not mean much to anyone? Because it means a lot to Olive. These family members care about each other, although this becomes apparent only when the family confronts a larger opponent, an ugly and superficial modern culture so shallow that only Grandpa’s wisdom can pull the family through. It is Grandpa who trains Olive for her big competition number.

How should a film tell the story of Iwo Jima and the familiar World War II photograph that was snapped at the top of the island’s highest peak? Clint Eastwood, in his film *Flags of Our Fathers*, has a simple answer: Tell it honestly, because getting to the top of the mountain was dangerous, hard work and deserves respect. But honesty also demands that Eastwood tell the dark side of glory as well.

After the photo became famous, three survivors of the attack were sent home to sell war bonds—an exploitive experience that reflects badly on the government as it drove one of the men, a Pima Native American, into a life of alcoholism that ended in his early death.

The death of Princess Diana in September 1997 stunned a British public that had made a pop icon out of the young woman. Director Stephen Frears examines Diana's death through the reactions of Queen Elizabeth II and the young prime minister, Tony Blair, in *The Queen*. Isolated at Balmoral Castle in Scotland, Elizabeth (Helen Mirren in a superb performance) can see no reason for any public display of grief over the young woman who had disgraced the royal family. Certainly, she assumes, there will be no royal funeral. But Blair (Michael Sheen), who is more politically savvy, knows better. Frustrated over the queen's icy refusal to give in to the public's demand that she return to London to show respect for Diana, Blair conducts a quiet campaign to persuade Elizabeth to change her mind.

The queen follows Blair's script for the funeral and performs her role as chief mourner, but her resentment is deep. She's accustomed to performing any duty that her position demands, but in this case she feels the hatred of the people, something she has not known until now. She anticipates the day that the public will turn against Blair; it is the fate of leaders.

We Are Marshall is based on the aftermath of a 1970 plane crash that took the lives of most of the members of the football team and coaching staff from Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia.

Director McG (yes, that's his public name) builds his film on the theme of grief. The father of one player who died in the crash wants the school to cancel football, but another player stages a student protest to force the school's board of trustees to start the next football season. Under a new coach the school wins only two games that season. But the coach points out to his players that winning is not nearly as important as not giving in to grief.

My favorite character in the film is the school's president, played by David Strathairn (who starred in *Goodnight, and Good Luck*)—a man who doesn't have much interest in football but knows its importance to his school and the community. As a wise leader, he respects the enthusiasms of others.

Finally, Al Gore's timely and important *An Inconvenient Truth* is the year's most significant political film statement, even though by Gore's own admission it is less of a documentary than a PowerPoint production. Even the Bush administration now admits that the polar bear is an endangered species and finally blames global warming—the inconvenient truth Gore wants us to hear. To paraphrase a line from John Ford's *The Searchers*, "Next time you'll listen to your Uncle Al."