Quick takes

reviewed by Mark Oppenheimer

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Based on John Bayley's two memoirs about his marriage to novelist Iris Murdoch, *Iris* is in almost all respects expertly done. But the movie, directed by Richard Eyre, from a screenplay by Eyre and Bayley, is so saturated with details from Bayley's books that the story can't breathe. It's more collage than narrative. The film moves back and forth without much logic between the years of the couple's courtship, when Bayley was desperately trying to hold on to Murdoch, and the final years of their marriage, when Bayley's love is tested not by her uncompromising individuality but by her struggle with Alzheimer's.

Judi Dench is excellent as the mature Iris, conveying her (pre-Alzheimer's) intelligence and forceful character with sharpness--sharpness of eye, face and diction. Kate Winslet is appealing as the young Iris, soft where Dench is hard, but equally charismatic. Hugh Bonneville and Jim Broadbent as the young and old John Bayley, respectively, look so uncannily similar, and their performances blend so naturally, that they seem to be one actor, and a good one.

Unfortunately, the characters don't exist in interesting relation to one another. Bayley is presented as a bumbling fool who never understands why Murdoch is willing to spend any time with him, much less marry him. The movie makes that point all too well. Though we can understand why the real Bayley wants to elegize his beloved as a goddess-figure, the imbalance of personalities undermines the love story. It seems that Murdoch needs Bayley only when, because of Alzheimer's, she isn't really Murdoch anymore.

Since the love story flags, the movie is left to sustain itself as a commentary on Alzheimer's. In dramatizing the disease, it offers a good deal of insight and emotion. We feel the tragedy, for instance, in Murdoch's descent from mastery of language into inarticulateness. Someone who early on lectures eloquently on the value of education and literature becomes in the end unable even to autograph a novel for

an old friend. Affecting too is the simple decline in her charisma, caught well in a scene in which she must abandon a TV interview because she cannot keep track of the interviewer's question from beginning to end. She begins as someone whom others can't keep their eyes--or hands--away from and ends as an echo of that person, loved mostly for what she used to be.

Given all that Eyre had to work with--Bayley's insights, and the success of his memoirs, along with the skill of the assembled actors--it's not surprising that Iris is intelligent, insightful, well-acted, and respectful of Murdoch. Perhaps because of all that material, Eyre fashioned more of a respectable movie than a good one.

--Daniel Oppenheimer

Amélie: Films that delight some viewers can render others choleric. The French film *Amélie* is a case in point: its heroine is likely to make half the audience feel better about the human race while the other half gropes for a sick bag.

Amélie is 20-something, a waitress in a Paris cafe. She had a solitary childhood because her doctor father (doctors usually come off badly in films these days) was convinced that she had a weak heart and was unfit to attend school. Loneliness promoted the growth of her vigorous imagination. Initially exercised in the usual introverted ways, her imagination is put to public use when an accident reveals to her a man who has also lost out on much that life has to offer. In ways which combine wide-eyed mischievousness with a notion that she has been given an unexpected chance to do good, she sets about manipulating him by stealth, leading him toward happiness.

This proves habit-forming and soon she is busily solving the problems of every unfortunate she happens to encounter. It's all very freewheeling. One good deed spins off an unlikely tangent to another, characters float in and out of the action, and much of what happens is frankly implausible. Many would find Audrey Tatou's gangling Amélie utterly infuriating in real life, and they are probably not willing to give her the benefit of the doubt in fiction. For me the saving grace of the film is that most of the characters are as crazy as she is, offering a helpful squirt of lemon juice to cut the sucrose.

--Tom Aitken

The Son's Room: Italian director-writer-actor Nanni Moretti plays Giovanni, a psychiatrist--perhaps not a very good one, since much of the advice he offers is conventional, complacent stuff. The same adjectives apply to his private life. When his son, Andrea, gets into trouble at school he is rescued not by Giovanni, who does some professional hand-wringing, but by the more instinctual reaction of Andrea's mother, Paola. But then Andrea dies.

What happens next makes for interesting comparisons with the recent American film *In the Bedroom*, in which bereaved parents cope with the fact that their son has been killed, and the father eventually exacts revenge. Giovanni and Paola have no one to blame for their son's death, but this of course makes it seem no less a waste of his and their hopes. Both go into emotional spasm and Giovanni dismisses all his patients.

The healing factor is the coming to light of Andrea's previously unsuspected girlfriend. When, after much agitated debate, Giovanni and Paola meet her, she is disconcertingly less distressed than they are. But even as she exploits, in no very reprehensible way, their anxiety to be nice to someone their lost son was fond of, her amiable presence restores their ability to continue with life.

--Tom Aitken

Storytelling: Todd Solondz is demonstrating an increasingly limited palette with regard to tone and content. His first two films are regarded as dark satires. *Welcome to the Dollhouse* explores the loneliness of life in junior high, and *Happiness* creates an unrelentingly bleak portrait of the depravity and isolation of sexual selves. *Storytelling* was expected to be a challenging break in form, exploring in two separate halves how telling a story can blur or erase the line between fact and fiction. Unfortunately, *Storytelling*, which is split into two sections, "Fiction" and "Nonfiction," fails to spark any such constructive conversation. It relies on Solondz's old bag of tricks, shock and irony--both of which lose their potency when overused, as they are here.

"Fiction" takes place in a writing class, which gives Solondz an opportunity to demonstrate his self-reflexivity and wit by pushing buttons on sex, race and disability through the experiences and short stories of a couple of hapless students, Vi (played by Selma Blair in a solid, understated performance) and Marcus (Leo Fitzpatrick), who has cerebral palsy. Through the class's short-story critiques,

Solondz gives voice to and ultimately diffuses every critique of his supposedly shocking statements.

"Nonfiction" follows wannabe documentary filmmaker Toby Oxman (Paul Giamatti), who is shadowing an aimless high school student named Scooby (Mark Webber) and his dysfunctional family. Solondz's extended riff on *American Beauty* (he names the documentary "American Scooby" and mimics some of the dialogue and imagery from *Beauty*) is mildly entertaining, yet remains a sidebar to his main thrust, which is to shame documentary filmmakers who deride their subjects. Interestingly, Solondz himself has often been accused of holding his characters, and even his audiences and critics, in contempt. Cinematic penance, if that's what this is, does not make for a very good film.

--Daniel C. Richardson