



Sleeping Beauty). But more than that, she has told them that s\_h\_e is Briar Rose. Now that Gemma has died, Rebecca is driven to find out who her grandmother really was and why she told this story. Even from the beginning, Rebecca discovers that much of what she believed about her family history isn't true. Eventually her

THE MT VOID

Page 2

search takes her to Poland and the truth about the dark time of the Holocaust.

Yolen has done a very good job in describing a Jewish family and its history, but what is worth noting is that she has not ignored the other aspects of the Nazi regime during that period. One of the primary sources of information for Rebecca when she travels to Poland is a man who was imprisoned for his homosexuality. And the history involves other groups persecuted as well. Yolen manages this without minimizing anyone's suffering--it is not a contest of what group suffered more, but a look at the people who suffered and how they often worked together against the horror.

Marge Piercy's H\_e, S\_h\_e, a\_n\_d I\_t told a 16th Century legend, both in its own time and then as a re-telling in a near-future time, so that we could see that what seemed like just an old story was still very relevant to the issues that face us today. In B\_r\_i\_a\_r\_R\_o\_s\_e, Yolen takes a fairy tale rather than a legend, but then does the same thing: shows us that it would be a mistake to write it off as just another story--shows us that even a fairy tale may have much underlying truth in what it says. [-ecl]

---

2. Well as of this writing, we are back from India for less than one week (though it will probably be delayed several weeks in publication). India, of course, has a culture that is really very unlike just about anything you can see in this country. You can get little tastes of what India is like, but a small taste is very often misleading. When I was about three years old my father had a bottle of saccharine on the kitchen table. He would put a tablet in his coffee and it would make it sweet, I was told. My mother would occasionally put sugar cubes in coffee for the same purpose

and I had eaten those from time to time and liked them so I bided my time and when nobody was around I got the bottle of saccharine . I tasted the dust around the rim and found it tasted sweet. So I took two or three saccharine tablets and prepared to pop them in my mouth. It was nice that I could fit more saccharine tablets in my mouth than sugar cubes. In the next second the three tablets went into my mouth. Blech! Ptooy! Out they came. Concentrated saccharine tastes terrible. It's bitter. It tastes just about the opposite of what a small taste is like. The taste of a foreign county may act the same way. Going to an Indian restaurant may not, in fact does not, give the feel of India but closer to the exact opposite feel.

But when people ask why I want to go to such weird places I usually tell them it comes from my reading of H\_u\_c\_k\_l\_e\_b\_e\_r\_r\_y\_F\_i\_n\_n. There is an incident in it in which Jim finds out that somebody speaks French. Jim has never heard of there being different languages.

"If he's human, why don't he talk like a human?" he asks. Well, gang, you and I know that you don't have to talk English to be human. But what else is there that we assume is true of everybody that may not be? What about kissing? That is something I guess you sort of think is an instinctive behavior. It is not so intrinsic of humans as you might think. For example the Japanese never heard of the practice of kissing until they came in contact with the West. So it isn't so intrinsic to humans as you might think. Another example was our first night in China our National Guide, a very nice man who had never come in contact with many non-Chinese people before wanted to say something nice to his new American guests. He looked at our tour group, which except for about five people were all retirees, and told us "We served you a vegetarian meal because vegetables are very good for old people." The way his mind worked was to assume all people, or at least most people, are proud to have attained a great age. I am sure eleven years later that the National Guides in China know better that Westerners don't like to think of themselves as old, and it is probably a less interesting trip because of it. One of the things we tell ourselves to give ourselves a warm, fuzzy, friendly feeling is that people are all really alike. Don't you believe it. It would be a much less interesting world if they were. The hardware

may have similarities, but the software is really, really different. And that is why I travel.

---

### 3. THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: Tim Burton proves himself a creative genius with a film deserving of instant holiday classic status. Just about everything comes together and genuinely works in the best holiday film since Alistair Sim starred in A\_C\_h\_r\_i\_s\_t\_m\_a\_s\_C\_a\_r\_ol. Rating: +3 (-4 to +4)

From the on-again off-again career of Tim Burton comes a film so original and incredibly creative that it genuinely is unlikely to be surpassed as a holiday film for decades. While Burton did not actually direct in this outing (Henry Selick did), Burton produced and wrote the story, creating the characters. And T\_h\_e\_N\_i\_g\_h\_t\_m\_a\_r\_e\_B\_e\_f\_o\_r\_e\_C\_h\_r\_i\_s\_t\_m\_a\_s shows an unmistakable Burton style. The entire film is done in beautiful 3-D animation and is the culmination of the poetic fairy tale style we saw some of (but not enough) in E\_d\_w\_a\_r\_d\_S\_c\_i\_s\_s\_o\_r\_h\_a\_n\_d\_s crossed with the tongue-in-cheek horror-spoof style of "Frankenweenie" and "Vincent." This film dazzles the viewer with so many beautiful images that I found just taking my eyes off the screen to make notes meant I was missing something I wanted to see. The style the film kept reminding me of some

exceptionally creative Czech films--particularly those of Jiri Trnka--and wishing more films like that could be done elsewhere. Now a visual style every bit as compelling, perhaps more, has found its way into an American film. The fairy tale style that I liked so much in E\_d\_w\_a\_r\_d\_S\_c\_i\_s\_s\_o\_r\_h\_a\_n\_d\_s I attributed to Caroline Thompson, a then first-time screenwriter whose talents I claimed were just what Burton needed. I am very pleased that Burton seems to have had the same insight. Thompson wrote N\_i\_g\_h\_t\_m\_a\_r\_e's screenplay also and this time she and Burton have completely fulfilled the promise their pairing showed in that film. The ten musical pieces here are

written and scored with the clever style and quality of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta.

The story takes place in a land where holidays are born. One town makes Halloween each year, another makes Christmas. The artistic genius of Halloweentown is one Jack Skellington, a sort of skeleton with a globular head. But then everyone in Halloweentown is a horror, that is the spirit of Halloween. The town is full of werewolves, vampires, bats, spiders, mad scientists, and things for which there are no names. Jack is dissatisfied with Halloween and stumbles on Christmastown. He is enchanted and puzzled by the idea of Christmas and decides he and his town of horrors can do it all better. Halloweentown starts working on putting on a horror-tinged Christmas. If that seems a silly plot, well you don't expect a holiday film is going to have a Dostoyevsky-level story. Just accept the story and watch how well it is told. Regardless of the plot this is a film that you w\_i\_l\_l find rewarding. Take it from me you may possibly have seen a film like this before but only rarely, and you have never seen it done so well for 75 minutes. If you thought T\_h\_e\_W\_i\_z\_a\_r\_d\_o\_f\_O\_z was an impressive children's film, go see T\_h\_e\_N\_i\_g\_h\_t\_m\_a\_r\_e\_B\_e\_f\_o\_r\_e\_C\_h\_r\_i\_s\_t\_m\_a\_s. Amazingly to me I give a Christmas film a rating of +3 on the -4 to +4 scale.

---

#### 4. GETTYSBURG (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: This film of military history contains more authentic military history than any other film I have ever seen. The film itself is more than four hours and very little seems to be fiction. Perhaps a little is speculation, but the highest proportion of time is reenactment of the most important battle in United States history.  
Rating: +3 (-4 to +4)

As usual when I see an historical film, I will go home afterward and pick up many historical accounts of the event and pick holes in what I have seen on the screen. I have not yet read Shelby Foote's account of the battle of Gettysburg (which is about 120 pages), but

I have read several shorter accounts. What I have discovered is that the film contradicts no account any more than the accounts contradict each other. And that is not surprising since by all accounts writer/director Ronald F. Maxwell, after basing his script on a Pulitzer Prize winning novel, T\_h\_e\_K\_i\_l\_l\_e\_r\_A\_n\_g\_e\_l\_s by Michael Shaara, allowed his small army of historical experts to be tyrants over the production of the film. What made it to the screen is what the experts agreed happened. What S\_t\_a\_r\_W\_a\_r\_s was to the special effects film, G\_e\_t\_t\_y\_s\_b\_u\_r\_g is to the historical film. Nobody who sees the film and later reads account of the battle can come away without the feeling of having witnessed the battle already and without remembering a flood of images from the film. As far as how well the actors look and dress like people of the Civil War the film gets an A+. For the degree to which each major actor looks like the actual person he is portraying the grade is a not-too-shabby B+. (The opening credits show the original and the actor and invite comparison.) Why not higher? Well for example at the time of his most familiar photographs, Lee had a fuller beard than Martin Sheen sports. That is the sort of variation you get. Of course nobody mentions how full Lee's beard was at the time of Gettysburg so perhaps I am underrating the film. But if I can find no less picayune quibble than the length of a beard in a 254-minute historical film, I am not just impressed, I am floored.

The actors are often familiar, if you can make them out under the heavy beards typical of the Civil War period. (The presence of women, incidentally, is limited to a count of two and a screentime of about six seconds.) But actors seem to be chosen more for proven acting ability than for marquee value. The players include Tom Berenger as Gen. Longstreet, Martin Sheen as Gen. Lee, Stephen Lang as Maj. Gen. Pickett, the late Richard Jordan as Brig. Gen. Armistead, Jeff Daniels as Col. Chamberlain, Sam Elliot as Brig. Gen. Buford, and Kevin Conway (whom I thought had been dead for at least a couple years) as the what I would guess was an interpolated character, Sgt. Buster Kilrain.

Gettysburg was the climax of the Civil War as Midway was the climax of the war in the Pacific. And I found myself comparing this film to the film M\_i\_d\_w\_a\_y as I watched it. M\_i\_d\_w\_a\_y is only five minutes longer than half of GETTYSBURG's length, yet for that film a whole fictional plot of "human interest" was added about an American commander's son in love with a Japanese-American woman. Apparently the filmmakers thought that so much history was too much for the viewer. In G\_e\_t\_t\_y\_s\_b\_u\_r\_g with the exception of a few conversations to broaden the characters, and a rhetorical speech added here and there, what we see is all documented history and ironically the film is more and not less compelling as a result.

From the point of view of the film five men were responsible for the South going from a winning war to a losing war with this one battle. For the North, Buford created the strategy and Chamberlain

defended the weak flank. For the South, Jeb Stuart chose to raid rather than reconnoiter, Ewell failed to attack at a strategic moment, and Lee's ego told him to fight the battle even on the enemy's terms because winning would almost certainly bring the end of the war. Of these the most screen time is devoted to Chamberlain who, torn with self-doubt, shows himself to nonetheless represent both heroism and decency.

G\_e\_t\_t\_y\_s\_b\_u\_r\_g was reportedly made as a television mini-series and at some point was redirected to the big screen. It will certainly lose much of the impact of its huge cast when translated to the small screen. In incredible list of historical reenactment societies apparently volunteered to act as extras and to reenact the battle. The men participating in Pickett's charge form a very long wall that will not be nearly as impressive when the flanks are cut for television's aspect ratio. On the other hand, getting the film on video will allow the stopping of the film and reading from historical sources about the various actions being depicted. My initial reaction to the film was that it must have cut out a lot of what was really happening to concentrate only on Buford's defense of the high ground the first day, Chamberlain's defense of the flank the second day, and Pickett's charge the third day. The first source I saw that described the battle in any detail listed three important actions and they were exactly the ones chosen by the filmmakers. This engaging film is almost a textbook about the battle and because at the same time it is so enthralling, this is one of best and perhaps in some respects is the best historical feature film ever made. Nothing quite like this has ever been done at this length and done this elaborately, so it is all the more impressive. My rating is +3 on the -4 to +4 scale.

---

##### 5. FAREWELL MY CONCUBINE (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule review: Suffering for one's art is the theme of this film from three cooperating Chinese countries. The story follows two Beijing Opera singers over a half century. They suffer to learn

their art and then each political change in China brings new suffering. This is a film that is well made but which has limited capacity to be enjoyed.  
Rating: 0 (-4 to +4).

How much misery can anyone give to their art is the question asked by F a r e w e l l M y C o n c u b i n e. It is the story of a poor boy, the son of a prostitute, who becomes a popular opera star and what is required of him. Douzi is groomed for only one role, the loyal concubine of a defeated king who kills herself rather than desert her lover and master. Learning any role requires an incredible

THE MT VOID

Page 7

regimen of punishing physical training and potentially lethal beatings from the sadistic perfectionist schoolmaster. Douzi's training entails an even worse aspect--to better play a woman he has to offstage and on renounce his gender entirely and think of himself as a woman for the rest of his life. He is paired to go through life with Shitou, the actor groomed for the role of the king. Once they achieve greatness Douzi's problems are still only beginning. Shitou decides to take a wife of his own, an act of chivalry toward a prostitute. But the pairing now turns into a triangle. Douzi is forced to take lovers, but only male ones.

Just when this lifestyle looks like it cannot get worse, the Japanese invade China. This brings a new set of hardships, and yet another set of hardships come along when the Nationalists regain China, the Communists bring yet another bad turn that only gets worse with the Cultural Revolution. The film reminds one of a Dickens story except that things do not get better with time. The overall theme seems to be that when you are a man slotted for the Beijing Opera to play a woman in a single role for your whole life, that life is really a bitch and then you die.

It is hard to imagine a much more nihilist film. Every good deed that one of our two characters performs results in all the more misery for them or others. If you are Chinese it is quite possible that there is a perceivable nobility in all the pain, but--and I say this as someone who has seen or heard several Beijing operas-- it is very hard for a Westerner to appreciate the aesthetics of



this art form. Even without that there will be some aspects of story that a Westerner will find hard to understand.

At 170 minutes \_ F \_ a \_ r \_ e \_ w \_ e \_ l \_ l \_ M \_ y \_ C \_ o \_ n \_ c \_ u \_ b \_ i \_ n \_ e is a difficult film to watch

particularly with its relentlessly downbeat theme. There have been several films this year with Chinese themes and this one is harder to recommend than most. With my limited understanding of Chinese culture I would rate this film a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

---

6. To those of you who saw the recent announcement that various Bell Labs locations in New Jersey would start charging for conference rooms, rest assured that (for now, anyway) Bell Labs club activities are exempt, so our meetings will continue. [-ecl]

Mark Leeper  
MT 3D-441 908-957-5619  
leeper@mtgzfs3.att.com

An idea that is not dangerous is unworthy to be called an idea at all.

-- Elbert Hubbard

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT ALMOST BLANK