

TOM LAVAGNINO'S LIST OF "THE TOP TEN FILMS OF 2009"

10.) **NINE.** This tragically under-rated musical mirrors, in a strange sense, its pedigree -- the wildly over-rated **EIGHT AND A HALF** (which is the most visually dazzling, but most utterly incoherent, of master Fellini's films). Rob Marshall and his team have taken the Maestro's core elements and concocted a sumptuous cinematic celebration of the human female -- in all her alluring, heartbreaking, punishingly desirable, fantastically kaleidoscopic guises (Penelope Cruz and Marion Cotillard primary among them).

9.) **A PERFECT GETAWAY.** Never heard of it? You will. Like other under-the-radar, barely-released instant classics (see **ONE FALSE MOVE** a decade or two ago), this flawlessly structured, impeccably produced exercise in neo-Hitchcockian tension builds to a pull-the-rug-out-from-under-you climax that will blow your mind with its sheer inventiveness. Destined to become a NetFlix favorite / cult classic forever after.

8.) **MANAGEMENT.** The brilliant dramatist Stephen Belber (best known for the Richard Linklater adaptation of his play **TAPE**) makes his feature-film directing debut with this oddball love story pairing traveling saleswoman Jennifer Aniston (who's superb) with destined-to-inherit-his-family's-ramshackle-Route-66 motel Steve Zahn (in the performance of his career). The film also features Woody Harrelson's most outré appearance of 2009; his dinner-table monologue is truly one for the books.

7.) **(500) DAYS OF SUMMER.** Brilliant concept, beautifully executed, with two absolutely perfect actors (not to mention a paen to the 21st-century downtown Los Angeles, the likes of which haven't ever been previously glimpsed). Highlight : The stylized "split screen" sequence, showcasing the associative rift between the "expectations about what will happen at a party" versus "the harsh reality."

6.) **UP IN THE AIR.** "Would you like the cancer?" is the query posed, by a stewardess, to George Clooney's character in one of the initial sequences in this magnificently-crafted movie. The eventual fallout from his answer, both spiritually and emotionally, is entertainingly engineered by the bright-eyed Jason Reitman and his terrific troika of Clooney, Vera Farmiga, and Anna Kendrick .

5.) **THE HURT LOCKER.** Everything's already been said about this stunning film; suffice to say that, for me, it completely redefines Kathryn Bigelow's career (which, in my opinion, had been undistinguished in the extreme -- **NEAR DARK** notwithstanding -- until now).

4.) **TWO LOVERS.** The best love story of the year, hands down -- and, in Joaquin Phoenix, one of the greatest acting performances in cinema history. Two sequences stand out : His "preparing himself to accidentally encounter Gwyneth Paltrow on the subway platform," and his "arriving early at the restaurant and trying to behave as if he's not completely uncomfortable waiting for Gwyneth and her boyfriend to arrive." Both sequences are subtly powerful, emotionally devastating, and incisively-drawn in a manner rarely seen in contemporary movies (indie or otherwise).

3.) **PARANORMAL ACTIVITY.** For what it is, this film is perfect -- a flawless exercise in both dramaturgy and slowly-escalating-to-the-point-of-explosion horror. It helps matters enormously, of course, that the two actors are brilliant, and that their motivations (especially the guy's whole "testosterone-induced unwillingness to vacate the premises" mindset) are grounded so completely and solidly in believability.

2.) **SIN NOMBRE.** A knockout in every respect. Brilliant script, dynamite direction, stunning photography, great acting -- it all works like gangbusters in a narrative concerning Central American workers pushed to the brink as they journey north through Mexico. This criminally under-seen Sundance Award-Winner is the single best narrative film released in 2009.

1.) **ANVIL : THE STORY OF ANVIL.** "Thumb hang." Need I say more? ANVIL is impossible not to love, hilariously devoted to rock n' roll at its most celebratory. This is a film guaranteed to place a giddy smile on your face (especially if you happen to be over the age of 50); it's cinematic Prozac -- and for that we should all be thankful.

UNDERRATED: BROKEN EMBRACES, OBSERVE & REPORT, I LOVE YOU MAN, BIG FAN, FRIDAY THE 13TH, ICE AGE 3-D, BRUNO, I HOPE THEY SERVE BEER IN HELL, THE INFORMANT, ORPHAN, IT MIGHT GET LOUD, THE WORLD'S GREATEST DAD, THE INFORMERS

OVERRATED: THE MESSENGER, ADVENTURELAND, AN EDUCATION

SLIGHTLY OVERRATED: UP (which I loved up until the moment when "the dogs took flight in their little airplanes" -- and thusly ruptured the accord-with-reality that the story had taken such pains, up to that point, to inculcate).

Worst Of The Year: THE SOLOIST (I walked out on this one), THE UNBORN, THE ANSWER MAN, JULIE & JULIA, DRAG ME TO HELL (I walked out on this one, too), THE ROAD, ANTICHRIST (truly sad, because Von Trier is a genius), THE BLIND SIDE, STATE OF PLAY

Underappreciated Performances: Clive Owen in DUPLICITY, Jess Weixler in ALEXANDER THE LAST, Steve Zahn in MANAGEMENT, Ben Affleck in EXTRACT, Vera Farmiga in ORPHAN, Joshua Leonard in HUMPDAY, Christian McKay in ME & ORSON WELLES, Peter Capaldi in IN THE LOOP, Evan Rachel Wood in WHATEVER WORKS, Matt Damon in THE INFORMER, Everybody in STAR TREK, Everybody in THE WHITE RIBBON

Didn't See These, But Wanted To: THIS IS IT, PUBLIC ENEMIES, CAPITALISM A LOVE STORY, BRIGHT STAR, FUNNY PEOPLE, SHERLOCK HOLMES, COLD SOULS, SUGAR, BANDSLAM, JENNIFER'S BODY, TAKING WOODSTOCK, FANTASTIC MR. FOX, THE INVENTION OF LYING, PAPER HEART

Obligatory AVATAR Reference : I enjoyed it thoroughly.