

The physician at the movies

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Diane Lane and Raoul Bova in *Under The Tuscan Sun*.

Under the Tuscan Sun

Starring Diane Lane, Sandra Oh, Lindsay Duncan, and Raoul Bova.

Directed by Audrey Wells. PG-13. Running time 111 minutes.

Under the Tuscan Sun begs the question, “Why bother to buy the movie rights to the book if you are going to completely gut it?” I guess the title was worth it. A runaway bestseller, Frances Mayes’s memoir recounted how she and her second husband decided to buy a “fixer-upper” villa after having spent a few summers in Tuscany.¹ The book was suffused with local color and the pair’s persistence in the face of the inevitable snafus and travails of adapting to how things work in a very different culture. It appealed to all those who had spent time in that lovely region, as well as the armchair travelers who dreamt of owning a villa in Tuscany, even those of us who can’t hammer a nail straight.

So what happened on the way to the movie? Well, one good thing, namely Diane Lane, whose luminous performance, as well as the cinematography of the beautiful Tuscan countryside around Cortona and Montepulciano, make the movie bearable. Mayes is portrayed as a successful author who, in the midst of a triumphal book party, learns that her husband is cheating on her. She also meets an author whose book she trashed, which occasions one of the film’s best lines. The young man will reprise the line about two hours later, Hollywood-time. Despite having supported her husband

through his Ph.D. studies, Mayes is left without a house and almost destitute after a messy divorce. She moves into a grim apartment house filled with others going through a divorce, including a lawyer who has daily crying fits. He’s kind enough to cool it when Mayes, who hears him through the paper-thin walls, asks him to stop.

Her best friends, a lesbian couple who planned to take a tour of Italy but decided to have a baby, convince her that she needs to get away. They trade in their tickets to pay for her passage, and Mayes joins the “Gay Away Tours” where she is toasted with champagne as the only straight passenger on the bus. We are now in the *Rome Adventure* or *If It’s Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium* phase of the movie, as the scene shifts from the wedding-cake architecture of the Vittorio Emmanuelle monument in Rome, to Orvieto and into Tuscany. Lo and behold, she gets a premonition about a name, “Bramasole,” and then sees it on a for-sale sign as the bus approaches a decrepit villa. She shouts to the driver to let her off, and, after sending the bus on its way, she impulsively proceeds to buy the property.

So far, the only thing that this script has in common with the book is that Mayes is a writer who lived in San Francisco and had been divorced.

Mayes is clearly out of her depth as she tries to cope alone in a house with bad plumbing, hazardous electrical wiring, bats, and other assorted inconveniences. She is aided by a very *simpatico* realty agent, Signor Martini Vincent Riotta, who turns out to be, wonder of wonders, a married Italian who is faithful to his wife. He does admit at one point that his desire to cheer her up, as her solitude plunges her into depression, does try his fidelity. He tells her about a rail line that was built in the Alps between Italy and Austria before there was a train that could negotiate the curves. In other words, be patient, build it and love will come. He helps her get a group of Polish workers to transform the villa. This sets the scene for her facilitating a love affair between a young handyman, Pavel (Pawel Szadja), and the neighbors’ daughter, Chiara (Giulia Steigerwalt), much to the parents’ dismay. Mayes becomes pals with Katherine (Lindsay Duncan), a British “expat” realtor, who oversees the sale’s paperwork. Once beautiful, she has aged into a garish hedonist who tries to recapture her youth by having affairs with younger men. Katherine seems more at home in *Fellini’s Roma* than in this small town, and, indeed, constantly refers to “Federico” and fancies herself to be Ursula Andress in *La Dolce Vita*. Naturally, the screenwriter couldn’t resist using the fountain in the town square to replicate that famous scene in the Trevi Fountain.

Meanwhile, Mayes heeds Katherine's advice to look for some action in Rome. While trying to escape a pair of Italian wolves, she hooks on to a hunk, Marcello (Raoul Bova), who takes her to lovely Positano for some wild lovemaking. She keeps fantasizing about him as the "one," but later, when she returns to Positano, she learns that he is spoken for (the scenery is nice, though). The writer-director begins to bring closure by harking back to the beginning of the picture, when Patti (Sandra Oh), Mayes' very pregnant friend, arrives on her doorstep, very distraught. It turns out that her partner left her because she "didn't want to be a mother." The arrival, on his bike, of the author Mayes trashed completes the circle. When the Pole, his Italian bride, the Asian-American woman, her baby, the biker/author, the crazy friend, and Mayes sit down to a great feast, Signor Martini's prediction that she will find a new family in Bramasole is fulfilled. The only thing missing was Sister Sledge's 1979 hit, "We Are Family," playing in the background. Had this contrived mess been the original story, I doubt that anyone would have bought the rights, assuming it could have gotten published.

Reference

1. Mayes F. *Under the Tuscan Sun*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books; 1996.

Doctor movies

My charge is preferentially to review movies that have some connection with medicine or doctors. So here are my thoughts about two films that meet the criteria, but for which my wife and I had limited tolerance.

Beyond Borders

Starring Angelina Jolie and Clive Owen.
Directed by Martin Campbell. Rated R.
Running time Too Long.

Beyond Borders would have been better titled *Beyond Belief*. It stars Angelina Jolie as Sarah Jordan, a spoiled American seemingly happily married to Henry Bauford (Linus Roache), a stockbroker and son of a wealthy London industrialist. The movie opens with her playing a Schumann sonata and then flashes back to a night shortly after her marriage, at a fundraiser for a charity run by her father-in-law to aid refugees, presumably Doctors Without Borders. There, she meets Nick Callahan (Clive Owen), a boorish, self-righteous doctor who crashes the party and chastises her father-in-law on his stinginess in helping the refugees in Ethiopia. He brings a

starved child along as an exhibit. Sarah becomes love struck and filled with the desire to leave her affluent life to travel to Ethiopia. The filmmakers missed a soundtrack opportunity; I was hoping to hear, "Just One Look, That's All It Took." The doc is taken to jail and separated from the young boy, who escapes from the airport van taking him for deportation, only to freeze to death. This was the first of many "I'm outta here" scenes, but I persevered because that's my mission. Sarah then tells her husband, "I know this sounds like little Miss Bleeding Heart," but will he please cadge £100,000 from his father for supplies she can transport to Ethiopia. Throughout all her appearances at such places, whether in Cambodia, Africa, or Chechnya, Sarah is immaculately coifed and dressed in white chiffon. In contrast to the terrible conditions around them, she and Doctor Arrogant Savior are in pretty nice digs. The Ethiopian camp where they are struggling to find water even has a well-tuned spinet so she can play her favorite Schumann piece, "Themes from Childhood," which soothes "the savage breast" of Callahan, who had been ridiculing her unmercifully up to then.

The scariest thing was to watch Jolie emote with her numerous soulful close-ups and to see her pouty lips filling up about two feet on the screen. To give Jolie her due, the movie apparently was life transforming, and she is now the goodwill ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner. I guess she thought the movie was doing the cause a favor. I can't speak for Doctors without Borders, but Doctor Callahan is an



Angelina Jolie in *Beyond Borders*.

affront to all doctors who have worked overseas in primitive settings. Callahan says that, given the death rate, he doesn't bother to learn the patients' names, because if he did, he "would have to remember them." Ironically, the movie makes a good case for the "compassion fatigue" of which Callahan accuses his patrons, in that in each country, the governments are run by corrupt indigenous leaders who for decades have taken their large cuts from the aid earmarked for the needy. The countries are ravaged by civil (or rather not so civil) wars, e.g., between Communist Khmer Rouge and another corrupt indigenous group of Communists. Each governing authority is oblivious to meeting their countrymen's basic needs and brutally repressive to people whom they should regard as their brothers and sisters. As I found in Calcutta, our efforts against cholera would have been rendered relatively moot if there had been adequate sewage and a proper water supply, but year after year, like Groundhog Day, the toll of sickness and death recurred in their absence.

The film becomes tedious as it tries to merge these issues with a bogus romance between Sarah, now Lady Bauford, and Callahan. Lady Bauford joins the United Nations staff in London, and is very cold to her burgeoning family, always thinking of joining Callahan wherever he is. As her husband loses his job during a stock market slump and starts an affair with his father's secretary, Jolie's character becomes increasingly hard to take. She thinks nothing of leaving her own children to go save the world's children, and becomes increasingly self-righteous. She loses her cool at a Cambodian checkpoint, when she learns that Callahan, her Beau Ideal, has accepted money from the rebels for running guns along with the medicines. The film's director must have realized that Jolie was coming across too soft, so he has her reprise her Lara Croft kick-butt image in decking Callahan, which wins over the officer in charge of the checkpoint.

In the next scene, she lectures another warlord about letting her through because she works for the United Nations, because if anything happened to her, the United Nations would come down on him. Just the thing to get him quaking in his boots, I thought, especially because that was the day when the first of two panels reported that the United Nations had refused many attempts to secure its mission in Baghdad and ignored explicit warnings of a terrorist attack, thus resulting in five times the number of casualties. Did the United Nations confront the attackers? No, they blamed the United States and then pulled out.¹ My wife and I took that as our cue to leave as well. The film's promoters say the movie has an interesting twist at the end, but we decided we could live without knowing what it was.

Reference

1. Bravin J. Panel Criticizes U.N.'s Actions in Fatal Blast of Building in Iraq. Wall Street J 2003 Oct 23: A4.

The Secret Lives of Dentists

Starring Campbell Scott and Hope Davis.

Directed by Alan Rudolph. Rated R. Running time 104 minutes.

Once, while fielding questions on a radio show about my book on doctors in the movies, a Knoxville dentist gently noted that dentists are doctors, too. He then went on to say that physicians hadn't had it half as bad with their movie image as dentists, and asked me if I could name a film where they came off well. I couldn't. All I could think of were images of *Marathon Man*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, and W.C. Fields's *The Dentist*. In preparing a set of film clips for the recent San Luis Obispo Medical Society Champions in Health Care dinner, I found it quite easy to find sympathetic portrayals of nurses and physicians, but less so for pharmacists and dentists, the other groups being honored. I did come up with a lesser-known Preston Sturges film, *The Great Moment*, about William Morton, the dentist who used ether as an anesthetic for performing painless dentistry at the suggestion of chemist Charles Jackson. The picture ends with the surgery performed in the dome of the Bulfinch building of the Massachusetts General Hospital by one of its founders, John Collins Warren, on October 16, 1846. At the surgery's conclusion, Warren is reported to have said, "Gentlemen, this is no humbug." His support catalyzed ether's widespread use. The surgical amphitheater became known as the "Ether Dome" and is now a registered national historic landmark.¹

Morton died penniless at age 49 after 22 years of bitter litigation defending pending patents for "letheon," his name for ether, which was already in the public domain, and the delivery mechanism, a glass retort with an enclosed sponge. The credit for the advent of anesthesia has been accorded to Long, who first used ether in surgery in 1842, even though it wasn't until 1848 that he publicly announced its use, and a year later that he wrote it up, having failed to realize the significance of his milestone at the time.¹

I resolved to augment my dentist movie database by seeing *The Secret Lives of Dentists*. Big mistake! The film begins in the office of a husband and wife dentist team, the Hursts, as both tend to their patients, among other matters. The wife, Dana Hurst, presumably the better dentist, lives for the opera chorus she sings in. She is played by the mousy Hope Davis, about whom the critics rave, but who leaves me cold. She is inattentive to her children, one of whom is in the "I love Daddy more than Mommy" phase. The other daughter, trying to reach out to her mother, gives her a rabbit's foot on the way to her one-night performance of Verdi's *Nabucco*. When she promptly leaves it in the car, her nebbish of a husband, David (Campbell Scott), a caring father, runs backstage to give it to her and seeing her in the arms of the tenor, immediately retreats.

On returning to his seat, he is accosted by a crazy patient,



Hope Davis and Campbell Scott in *The Secret Lives of Dentists*.

Slater (Dennis Leary), a nasty trumpeter with bad teeth. Slater yells out that his filling has fallen out and that he wants his money back. It's just what he needs on an evening out with his kids. The next day, Dana is inconsolable because the opera is over. She gets all dressed up to go to the store and David thinks she's meeting the tenor. After a long time, she returns with groceries and suggests that they go to their country house, which is covered with decayed leaves. Opening the refrigerator full of rotten food prompts David to tell the children that living things rot, reflecting the filmmakers' very deep theme, "Teeth outlast everything. Death is nothing to a tooth. Life is what destroys teeth."²

The next day, David asks Dana to see Slater, who has been dumped by his wife and will later be David's Iago, making one wonder if staging Verdi's *Otello* might have been more apt. Dana calls David to ask him to fix dinner for the children because she will be late. This conjures up a vision of her having a bout of sexual frenzy with her male dental assistant and a male patient. There being only so much inanity we could stand, my wife and I checked out at that point; so there were many secrets we must have missed. It wasn't until I read the production notes that I realized that this is another *American Beauty* knockoff. The screenwriter said he was thrilled to find a story "about middle class Americans where the husband fought for the marriage, and I found it very moving that this woman was in a place in which prototypically men get caught." He goes on to say that the husband is in "denial" and "That's postwar American men as I've experienced them: no one has ever told them what to do with their feelings. They are lost."¹ He describes the wife as being passionate and wanting to experience life, and presumably get a little rotten in the process.

One thing my wife and I could agree on was that it was hard to believe that any of this trash was applicable to the wonderful dentists we have had in New York, Colorado, Virginia, and Maryland. Here's to Doctors Caruso, Schoenbaum, Spence, Smith, Scott, and Weiss, champions all.

References

1. Chandler CA. Crawford Williamson Long Entry. World Book Volume 12: 396; and Rosen G. William Thomas Green Morton Entry. Volume 13: 676; and Rosen G, John Collins Warren entry, Volume 21: 35, Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation; 1974. Also see discussions of the Ether Dome on Massachusetts General Hospital website.
2. Production Notes, *The Secret Lives of Dentists*. Manhattan Pictures; 2002.

Bend It Like Beckham

Starring Parminder Nagra, Keira Knightley, Jonathan R. Meyers, and Anupam Kher.

Directed by Gurinder Chadha. Rating PG-13.

This delightful, unpretentious film might best be characterized as *Gregory's Girl* meets *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. The first, Bill Forsyth's 1981 film set in a Glasgow suburb, also revolves around a superb teenage female soccer player or footballer, as they are known outside of the United States, and explores the angst of adolescent crushes and growing pains. In *Bend it Like Beckham*, Jess (Parminder Nagra), the adolescent daughter of Punjabi immigrants to Britain via East Africa, idolizes David Beckham, the mega-star who played for Manchester United before being sold to Real Madrid. Half the movie focuses on football and how it challenges the cultural conceptions of a woman's role generally and specifically in traditional families, whether Indian or British. Adolescent crushes and romance are also integral to this part of the film.

The other half shows Jess's sister, Pinky (Archie Panjabi), going down a more traditional path and making her parents, especially her mother, happy by marrying a nice Indian boy. The girl's mother says about the groom's family, "We'll show them we're not poor. We'll give a wedding they'll never forget." Think *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* plus, but without the cultural divide between the bride and groom. Thus we see the rituals involved in the ramp up to the big Punjabi extravaganza, full of merriment and bonhomie. Having spent months working in India, I got to see the sweetly innocent side of the Indian nature, so much in evidence in this film.

Jess lives for football. Her room is dominated by a poster of Beckham scoring. Her mother can't understand why a daughter of hers wants to play football and can't make chapattis,

Indian bread resembling a tortilla. The mother, Mrs. Bhamra (Shaheen Khan), keeps turning to the enshrined picture of the family guru and asking what she did to deserve two deceiving daughters: one who sneaks off to play football and the other who says she's at work when she's making out with her boyfriend. Both girls navigate rocky roads to their dreams. Jess is recruited to play on a traveling football team by an older English girl, Jules (Keira Knightley). They become fast friends and great teammates. Their friendship is tested when Joe (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), the young Irish coach whom Jules has a crush on, begins to fall for Jess. Ironically, both girls are suspected of being lesbians by their mothers who can't abide football. When the groom's parents see the two girls being affectionate at a bus stop, they immediately jump to conclusions and go to the girl's house to break up the sister's arranged marriage. Later, there will be an ironic twist. Jules' mother, Paula Paxton (Juliet Stevenson), is worried because her daughter doesn't date and is into sports, although her father, Mike (Frank Harper), is just as happy that she isn't boy-crazy. There's a very funny scene in which Mike tries to teach his wife the intricacies of football at lunch, using jars of French mustard and teriyaki sauce, and a shaker of sea salt.

There is an interesting sidebar involving Jess's father (Anupam Kher), who is supportive of her playing football when he realizes that she is good. He recounts how he was the best forward when they won the East African cricket championship, but when he came to England, the All-England cricket club members made fun of his turban and wouldn't let him play. After learning that Jess surreptitiously flew to Germany for a match, he rescinds his support. He sees no future in it for her and wants her to go to university. The parents forbid her to play in order to concentrate on her university entrance exams. There's a great scene involving their opening the thin admissions letter after praying before their guru. "Now you can be a fine doctor," the father exclaims. The conflicted father will later weaken again in a wonderful scene in which

he realizes that his daughter must get a chance to follow her dream. He says, "Bloody English threw me out of their club and I vowed I never would play again. Who was hurt? Me!" See the film. You'll like it. I also enjoyed seeing the director's dedication of the film to her "Dear Dad." She also thanks David and Victoria Beckham, who appear fleetingly in the film, and Mia Hamm, the American soccer star. As for the title, here's the director's explanation: "As an athlete you simply have to admire Beckham's ability to defy gravity and bend the ball, in the way that he does. . . . We came up with the title because it also works as an excellent metaphor for the film as the girls 'bend' the rules rather than 'break' them so they can get what they want."¹

Reference

1. Production notes, *Bend It Like Beckham*. Fox Searchlight; 2003.

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Parminder Nagra and Keira Knightley star in *Bend It Like Beckham*.