



The physician at the movies

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Spellbound

Directed by Jeff Blitz, Rating G. Running time 97 minutes.

Playing off the title of the classic Hitchcock thriller, *Spellbound* shows how ideas for good movies can originate in subtle ways in contrast to the sessions where Hollywood's self-important "pitch" their concepts, so well parodied in Robert Altman's *The Player*. Director Jeff Blitz watched the finals of the 1997 National Spelling Bee on ESPN while doing graduate work in film studies at USC, and was "spellbound." The filmmakers financed the movie on credit cards. The result is an absorbing focus on eight contestants and their families starting in their hometowns and ending in their participation in the finals. Because the filmmakers capture the tension as the contestants battle the dictionary and fall by the wayside, it is not, as my wife Colette said, a relaxing or entertaining film. Still, it is very much worth a rental for its many wonderful moments, its human insights, and its demonstration that, despite the many changes in society, the immigrants of today have much in common with those who came before them.

In the engaging intro, we learn that of the 9 million American children who compete in spelling bees, only 249 will make it to the finals, and only one winner will be crowned. It's amazing that no interest group has yet challenged the legality or constitutionality of subjecting children to such stress, not giving handicap points, and then declaring only one winner. Indeed, the biographical sketch of the first contestant (and that of a few others) is a heartwarming affirmation about what can be accomplished in America if one sets a goal and works to achieve it.

We are first taken to Perryton, Texas, which the kids describe as "boring," to meet Angela Arenivar. Her father Ubaldo illegally crossed the border with his wife 20 years before. Neither Ubaldo nor his wife speaks English but, as he says, neither do the cows he works with as a main ranch hand on a big Texas spread. Yet here is his daughter winning the right to go to the finals after a local contest of 54 rounds; a son who is pursuing a master's degree and who provides articulate commentary; and another son who also succeeds in the local spelling bees. Angela was one of my two favorite contestants even before I learned in the "Where are they now" segment that she was studying Spanish and pre-med at Texas Tech.

Then it's off to Tampa, Florida, to meet Nupur Lala, who was eliminated in the third round of the previous year's finals. Her teacher remarks that she is very happy when she sees another Indian student in her class, because academics in India

Some of the National Spelling Bee contestants in *Spellbound*.



are taken very seriously and Indian students "have a great work ethic." The father comments, "You don't get any second chances in India the way you do in America," when reflecting on his daughter's second bite at the apple.

Next we are in Rolla, Missouri, where Ted Bingham and his family work a farm. Ted has "never been to the East coast or the West coast." Good at math, he is in a class of 40 children that he describes as "not many are smart; one guy likes trucks." He says, "It's hard to make friends when "no one can understand what all you can do." Studying medicine (in Iowa) is also in his plans.

Off to New Haven, where Emily Stagg plays polo and has an *au pair*. She rides horses "with people who are better than me," and sings in an *a capella* group "with people who sing better than me." So, she says, she competes in the Spelling Bee as a sort of a "hey, look at me." She laughingly calls the stress "a different form of child abuse."

In marked contrast is Ashley White of the District of Columbia, whose single mother is on welfare and whose two

imprisoned uncles plan to watch the finals on TV. Ashley's teacher describes her as a "little angel—the full package." Ashley says that she doesn't go outside much, spending much of her time studying and reading the Bible. She says that she doesn't have peers, "because the boys are always on the basketball court and the girls just stand around and watch them." While Ashley's mother constantly bemoans her lot, Ashley talks about how she prayed the night of the contest and says that "as I go higher, my goals go higher." It was not surprising to learn that she had been "baptized in her community church, had moved into her own apartment and planned to attend Howard."

Off to San Clemente, California, to meet another Indian student, Neil Kadakia, whose sister placed fifth in the nationals. He studies 7000 to 8000 words a day. Four nights a week, he is drilled by a spelling coach on words derived from Greek, Turkish, Spanish, and German, and he has "a great Latin teacher." Neil manages to mingle some meditation and sports with his academics. His immigrant father and brother built the family house themselves. Neil's father says that in America, "if you work hard you can make it; that's nonexistent in other parts of the world." The father admits to driving his son hard, but says, "What in life that's worth it, is easy to achieve?" Later we find that he is paying 10,000 people in India to pray for his son and has promised to feed 5,000 if Neil wins.

From affluent California, we travel cross-country to the blue collar town of Ambler, Pennsylvania, to meet April Degideo. Her father runs the Easy Street Pub across the street from the factory where he worked before he got laid off. "That's as far as I've gotten in my life," he says. April, who says her parents remind her of Edith and Archie Bunker, works with her spelling cards 8 to 9 hours a day during the summer, and 5 to 6 hours a day during the school year. Despite this, she is the least confident of all the featured entrants, always dreaming she will go down on an easy word.

The last student is the one pictured on the DVD and in the intro, Harry Altman of Glen Rock, New Jersey. He is the most immature and full of himself, and hence the least likeable, which is probably the reason for his getting the shortest screen time during the initial introductions.

The film takes you through the contestants' arrival in D.C. and the rounds with words like "tergiversate." You meet the pronouncer, who is surprised that his ESPN appearance makes him a quasi-celebrity. We see disappointment, tears, relief, and joy among the contestants and their parents. In an era when "reality" has been applied to the most

contrived and tawdry behavior on television, it is refreshing to see how close one can get to recording true reality, even given the observer effect and film editing.

The bonus material on the DVD updates the whereabouts of the contestants and introduces you to past National Spelling Bee winners, including the first in 1925. Director Blitz tells us that his own childhood stuttering problem led to an early fascination with speech and storytelling. He became president of his high school debate team, which went on to win New York state championships. I was amused to learn that the filmmakers are often told that the Bees are a waste of time in an age of computer spellcheckers. As a former editor, I can say that spellcheckers often do not pick up egregious mistakes. Furthermore, as Blitz notes, "Top spellers master incredible memorization skills, learn word origins, root languages, and the history of English. But they also learn the value of determination: these kids are usually self-starters whose energy and devotion are rewarded with participation in the Bee, with meeting like-minded kids, and with being treated like champions, win or lose."¹

Reference

1. ThinkFilm. Spellbound Production Notes.

The other Spellbound

Starring Ingrid Bergman, Gregory Peck, and Leo G. Carroll.
Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Running time 111 minutes.

Hitchcock collaborated with screenwriter Ben Hecht, Artist Salvador Dali (who designed the colorized dream



Ingrid Bergman and Gregory Peck in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound*.

Courtesy of Photofest.

The physician at the movies

sequence), and Miklos Rosza, who composed the haunting Oscar-winning musical score.¹ Bergman plays Dr. Constance Peterson, a psychiatrist who gets involved personally and professionally with the Psychoanalytic Institute's new director, J.B. Ballantine, played by Gregory Peck. Ballantine turns out to be an amnesiac and a possible murderer of the Institute's former director. The film introduces us to Dr. Peterson as she smokes a cigarette before greeting a troubled patient. Her colleagues all try to hit on her and accuse her of being frigid when she resists their advances, but she warms up when Ballantine comes upon the scene. The movie serves up some memorable scenes including the Dali dream sequence, an escape through Grand Central Station, and chilling scenes involving Ballantine and Dr. Peterson. The one ludicrous moment occurs when the amnesiac Ballantine who, as far as I can tell is an internist, scrubs in on a neurosurgical procedure with some staff psychiatrists. And, yes, Hitchcock makes an appearance.

Reference

1. Dans PE. *Doctors in the Movies: Boil the Water and Just Say Aah!* Bloomington (IL): Medi-Ed Press; 2000.

Radio

Starring Cuba Gooding Jr., Ed Harris, Debra Winger, and Alfre Woodard.

Directed by Mike Tollin. Rated PG. Running time 109 minutes.

Radio is based on the true story of a white football coach, Harold Jones, at Hanna High School in Anderson, South Carolina, who reached out to a retarded black youngster, James Robert Kennedy (known as Radio), and over time helped him become a revered member of the school community. In short, the film, which is reality turned into fairy tale, stands above the mass of garbage Hollywood increasingly serves up. The excellent acting by Cuba Gooding, Jr., and Ed Harris made it well worth the rental for my wife and me. On the other hand, our literal-minded lawyer daughter was put off from the get-go for legitimate reasons I will soon explain.

In the movie version, Radio (Gooding) is a moderately retarded boy who regularly steers his shopping cart full of treasures from his home past the football field. One

day, he keeps a ball that went over the fence. Later, when he returns it, he is tied up in a shed by a racially-mixed group of football players. When Coach Jones (Harris) discovers this, he is furious and puts the players through merciless wind sprints and practices. He also returns the football to the boy and takes him back home where his mother Maggie (S. Epatha Merkerson), a hospital worker, looks at him skeptically as she tends her garden. This begins a pattern where the coach enlists Radio's help with the practices and slowly gets him to talk by feeding him hamburgers and Cokes. The boy is fascinated by radios, including the coach's, which he receives as a gift, hence the nickname. The script takes us through one year during which Radio is hazed by the players, and becomes an assistant for the football and basketball teams, despite parental complaints about the boy's behavior that had resulted in technical fouls being assessed, as well as the coach's failure to give his full attention to the team. The coach takes the boy to his history class against the advice of the principal (Alfre Woodard), and the board of education representative who questions his spending so much effort in incorporating the boy into the classroom. The football team suffers and the coach's wife Linda (Winger) and teenage daughter Mary Helen (Sarah Drew) are neglected. Radio's saintly mother dies, with devastating effects on the boy, leading the coach to devote even more time to him. But it's all in a good cause and at the feel-good ending, we learn why the boy's plight so affected the coach.

The movie was filmed in Walterboro, South Carolina,



Cuba Gooding, Jr. and Ed Harris star in *Radio*.

because Anderson had become too modernized over the years. By contrast Waterboro, with its empty jail, empty bank, and empty gym next to a high school that is now part of the state's university, turned out to be ideal, giving the movie a genuine feel.¹ Also noteworthy was the way this story came to Tollin's attention. An avid sports fan who had produced a number of sports-themed films, Tollin saw an article about the pair, "Someone to Lean On," by Gary Smith in a 1996 Sports Illustrated. The story had particular resonance because Tollin had led a group of 12 Special Olympians up Mount Kilimanjaro in 1990 and had been impressed by their courage and fortitude. He bought the story straightaway.¹

The DVD bonus materials provide the answer to why this laudable film put off our daughter and turned out to be less than it could have been. Tollin praises screenwriter Mike Rich for taking this relationship, which began in the early 1960s, and compressing it into one year by arbitrarily setting it in the late 1970s. To my mind, that's the film's Achilles heel. When we meet the real Coach and Radio, we learn that both are indeed still revered at the high school, but that their relationship took years to develop, as did the acceptance by the community. Furthermore, Alfre Woodard, who was so good in such films as *Passion Fish*, is wasted in a role that doesn't ring true. There was no black principal in the 1970s, let alone a black woman principal. Woodard was reduced to asking locals what would have happened had there been one. After seeing the real characters and watching what Jeff Blitz accomplished with his documentary, *Spellbound*, I believe that this might have been better done as a documentary showing the real difficulties and incremental gains that finally produced such a remarkable outcome. Or, if it had to be made into a feature film, then the technique used in making the fictitious story, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, which unfolds over 20 years as dated newsreels provide the timeline, might have worked much better. Spend a few bucks on a rental and decide for yourself.

Reference

1. Revolution Studios. Radio Production Notes.

Lost in Translation

Starring Bill Murray, Scarlett Johansson, and Tokyo.

Written and directed by Sofia Coppola. Rated R. Running time 102 minutes.

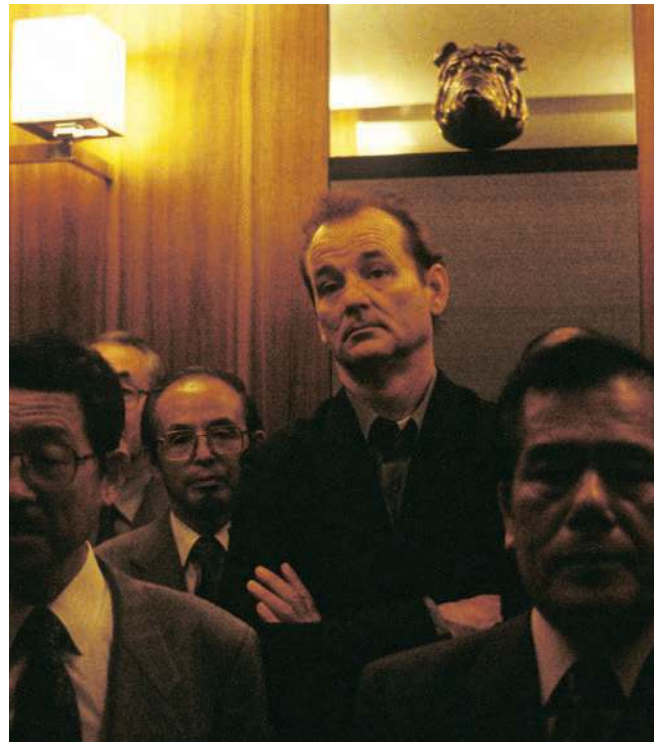
The last time I had a Sofia Coppola sighting was in *The Godfather III*, the lame finale in the Godfather trilogy that, up to then, had defied the theory that sequels never are as good as the original.¹ The scene in which she makes gnoc-chi with Andy Garcia's character when they "go to the mattresses" is an unforgettable piece of bad acting. I wish I could say that she's a better screenwriter and director than she is an actress but I can't, despite her being honored at the Golden

Globes for Best Picture and Best Screenplay, and the startling four Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Actor for star Bill Murray. Murray plays an actor having a mid-life crisis. His better days behind him, he is relegated to filming commercials, albeit at an extravagant price. There he meets a beautiful young woman who is, as Coppola describes it, in a "what is my life?" crisis.¹ This otherwise plot-less film appears to derive from Coppola's having spent time in Tokyo while she was trying to find herself after her acting disaster. The movie is a cross between an infomercial for Suntory whiskey, the Park Hyatt Hotel, and Porsche, as well as a travelogue of Tokyo, especially its Ginza district. There's also the de rigueur bullet train trip to lovely Kyoto and its famous shrine. I traveled that same path in 1963 on the way to Calcutta when Tokyo was not half so garish and saw a wedding party in Kyoto similar to pictured in the movie.

This is a classic case of a movie with so few good scenes that they are all in the previews. The best is the one where the Japanese director of the commercial speaks for about 30 to 60 seconds and the interpretation is one short sentence leading Murray to deadpan, "Is that all he said?" The opening credits focus on Scarlett Johansson's (Charlotte's) bottom and then shift to Murray (Bob Harris) being driven through Tokyo. Every Japanese cultural and business cliché is included: deep bows, giving gifts, and exchanging business cards on meeting, high-tech amenities, computer games, sending a woman to his room, an outlandish talk show host, etc.

The story line, such as it is, involves Harris spending days in the hotel, mostly at the bar, and engaging in desultory bored conversations with his wife who is running their family home, but keeps faxing him questions about swatches of fabric and making him feel guilty about missing one child's birthday and another's ballet recital. Charlotte is in Tokyo with her husband of one year while he is making a video of a rock group. The set-up is that her husband John (Giovanni Ribisi) is gone all day and Charlotte is alone in the hotel. When he returns, he's too tired to do anything but grouse about his day and to fall asleep, resisting her advances. John, who thinks Evelyn Waugh is a woman, is clearly a jerk. Yet we are supposed to believe that Charlotte, a recent Yale graduate with a degree in philosophy, fell for this guy.

Harris meets Charlotte at the bar and in the pool and they start to see a lot of one another. In one scene they are jabbering about the philosophy of life on his bed without his physically succumbing to her pouty and soulful looks. The dialogue goes something like: *Young thing to wise old codger*: "I don't know what I'm supposed to be. Does life get any easier?" *Old codger*: "No." *Young thing*: "Does marriage get any easier?" *Old codger*: "That's hard. It gets a whole lot more complicated when you have kids. When your first child is born it is the most terrifying time. Life as you know it is gone, never to return."



Scarlett Johansson and Bill Murray star in Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*.

Much of the film's dialogue is in Japanese, which certainly lessened screenwriter Coppola's job. My physician daughter who was an East Asian Studies major, spent four years in Japan, and is fluent in the language says that much of the dialogue is meaningless or redundant. When Coppola doesn't know what to do next, she breaks away for car rides in Tokyo or golfing with Mount Fuji in the background. There are scenes of the fleshpots of Tokyo, where a gyrating nude woman (a favorite Hollywood staple) sings about "sucking on my titties." There is another reprise of the *La Dolce Vita* fountain scene, mad chases through computer game emporiums, a karaoke turn by a madcap Japanese friend of Coppola's, Fumihiko Hayashi, who calls himself "Charley Brown." There's even a visit to a sterile looking medical clinic when Charlotte stubs her toe. Bob and Charlotte only speak English and are answered in Japanese and, yes, there's lots of paperwork. I found it hard to believe that a premier Tokyo medical facility would not have someone on staff who speaks English. Interspersed in this mess are heavy meetings between these age-mismatched lost souls. Poor Charlotte is devastated when Bob won't "make love" to her or run away with her, especially when he does shack up with the aging hotel chanteuse, Kelly (Anna Faris), who belts out a repertoire of old standards nightly in the lounge.

It was not surprising to find that Francis Ford Coppola is the executive producer. In the final credits, Sofia thanks "Mom and Dad" and thousands of others. If I had been one of

them, I would have been glad not to have been further identified. Okay, I need to tell you that the film's publicity site says that "Over 245 critics called it one of the best pictures of the year, more than any other movie of 2003." You can see that as my being out of step, or as an indictment of the movies of 2003 and the flacks who critique them.

As for Bill Murray, like many actors who never won anything but honorary Oscars such as Cary Grant and Fred Astaire, his body of work deserves recognition. Individual films in which his talents were better showcased and for which the nomination would have been more justified include: *What About Bob* and *Groundhog Day*. If he receives an Oscar for this film, it will be like an equally popular Elizabeth Taylor getting the Oscar for *Butterfield 8*, a terrible film in which she plays that Hollywood perennial, the prostitute with a heart of gold.

Reference

1. Dans PE The physician at the movies: The Godfather Part III. *Pharos Spring* 1991: 38-41.

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