

The physician at the movies

Peter E. Dans, MD



Jeremy Irvine and Joey (horse) in *War Horse*, 2011. © Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

War Horse

Starring Jeremy Irvine, Peter Mullan, Emily Watson and David Thewlis.

Directed by Steven Spielberg. Rated PG-13. Running time 146 minutes.

Based on a children's book and later a play of the same name by Michael Morpurgo,¹ this is an old-fashioned film with an almost unheard-of 5800 extras. It opens in the rolling hills of England with the dawn of a beautiful sunrise. Filmed on location in and around Dartmoor in Devon, it has an authentic rustic feel. A flute solo ushers in a very well-crafted soundtrack. The camera then focuses on teenager Albert Narracott (Jeremy Irvine) hiding behind a tree and watching a mare give birth. After much straining, the mare delivers a colt who is soon on his feet and gamboling with his mother in the field (an incredible sight when one considers how long it takes newborn humans to accomplish that). When the horse becomes a yearling, he is auctioned off in the town square. The boy's father, Ted Narracott (Peter Mullan), a hardscrabble farmer who needs a workhorse to plow his rocky fields, falls in love with the horse and decides to bid on him, even though his bloodlines are those of a thoroughbred,

When his landlord Lyons (David Thewlis) bids against him, his pride is challenged and he gets the horse at the exorbitant price of thirty guineas. The farmer, who was crippled in the Boer war, can hardly afford to pay the rent, let alone the cost of the horse. The landlord is pleased because if the farmer doesn't make the rent by October the farm and the horse will be his. As the landlord climbs in his fancy car full of himself, he is

chased by the family goose in a scene that is reminiscent of the goose Samantha in the film *Friendly Persuasion*.

As predicted by their neighbors, the farmer's wife, Rose Narracott (Emily Watson), a hard-working practical sort, sees this as yet another disastrous judgment by her husband, who is rarely seen without his flask of whiskey to help him cope with the pain in his leg. When it's time to plow, the farmer tries to harness the horse to the plow. When the horse resists, the farmer is so angry that he gets his shotgun and levels it at the horse, vowing to kill him. The boy stands between his father and the horse and the farmer relents and stomps away; the boy tells him that he can get the horse to do the plowing. His mother backs him up in a poignant scene in which she sits down with the boy and shows him a box with medals and ribbons that his father earned during the war for saving his mates. When he returned home, he was so angry at what the war had done to him and his comrades that he threw the box away. His wife retrieved it and hid it, and now opens the box to show the boy what a hero his dad was. She gives the boy a ribbon that will appear as a talisman throughout the film.

The boy names the horse Joey and begins to train him and break him. As they bond, the boy is able to get him to submit to the harness. After many false starts during which the boy collapses as a crowd watches, Joey responds to the boy's



urgings and plows the rocky fields, dragging the boy through the mud. Despite this success, the turnip crop that the farmer had planned to use to pay off his debts fails. Shortly thereafter war is declared with Germany. A rider cries out, "We will ring the bells and will not ring them again until the war is over." Young men sign up for what they think will be a very quick victory, promising that they will be home by Christmas. In the background, we hear strains of "The Roses Are Blooming in Picardy." The town's horses are commandeered and Joey is bought for thirty guineas by Captain James Nicholls (Tom Hiddleston), who promises the boy that he will take good care of the horse and to keep in touch. The performances of the actors, especially the young boys, are excellent, but the star of the show is Joey. We see him buddying up with a fellow equine as they train to execute a cavalry charge before embarking for France in 1914.

There is a Pickett's type charge in which the British emerge from the tall grass into the open to try to surprise the Germans; unfortunately the Germans are ready for them and mow them down. As the camera pans over the dead men and horses, a German officer expresses amazement to a British officer for believing that his men would be left undefended. Most horses are shot, but Joey and his buddy survive. They are cared for by two German brothers who desert but are caught at a French farm and shot by their compatriots. The farmer and his daughter are the new owners; their brief story provides a pleasant interlude before the film turns grim and the cinematography gray, as the war deteriorates to trench warfare of attrition with episodic charges and retreats. A harsh German orders all horses including Joey and his buddy to pull artillery, and predicts that they all will be dead in a month. Joey's buddy dies and Joey tries to escape. There is a very striking scene in which the Germans and the Brits with no man's land between them call a cease fire while they work to free Joey from barbed wire.

The film brings home the futility of World War I, so starkly shown in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Grand Illusion*. It reminds us of the consequences of both World Wars I and II, with the loss of two generations of the best young men profoundly altering the demographics of post-war Britain, France, and Germany, as well as, to a lesser extent, North America. The demographic effects go a long way to explaining what we see today in terms of the transformation of European countries. The film also shows the hardscrabble existence of farmers who remain loyal to one another and to the land. It's a generation back from the life pictured in *All Creatures Great and Small*. Those who liked that particular TV series should enjoy this film. It was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture. While not a great film, it tells an interesting story about people one can care about. If you decide to watch it and, like me, have lost some hearing and have difficulty with foreign accents and dropped words, I suggest you turn on the English subtitles option on your DVD.

Addendum: Joey was played by fourteen horses. The main

one, named Finder, also played Secretariat in the recent movie. Spielberg used almost no digital effects so what you see filmed was live action. The barbed wire was rubber so as not to injure the horses.²

References

1. Morpurgo M. *War Horse*. New York: Scholastic Press; 2011.
2. IMDb.com. *War Horse*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1568911/>.

To Rome with Love

Starring Woody Allen, Penelope Cruz, Jesse Eisenberg, Alec Baldwin, and Ellen Page.

Directed by Woody Allen. Rated R. Running time 102 minutes.

Recently I reviewed *Midnight in Paris* and found it to be so enchanting that I rashly said that Woody Allen was back. The movie was an imaginative, funny, and beautifully filmed paean to Paris, opening with a stunning kaleidoscopic tour that evoked many happy memories of the City of Lights. To say that his follow-up film is terrible is an understatement. How could such a talented director and cast make such a bad film with the eternal city as a backdrop? Think of all those wonderful scenes in *Roman Holiday* and you will know what I mean. This film is clichéd, unfunny, pretentious, and populated with people you wouldn't want to spend ten minutes with, let alone 102 minutes. I almost bailed on the film, but I kept hoping it would get better and didn't want to disturb the guy next to me.

Okay, let's start with "unimaginative." In contrast to the beautiful opening of *Midnight in Paris*, this film opens in front of the monstrosity popularly called "the wedding cake," a tribute to King Victor Emmanuel. The next image is of the balcony where Mussolini pompously held forth. I did like seeing the policeman (Pierluigi Marchionne) who stands on that pedestal and directs traffic through the circle with élan, but soon I was overwhelmed by the first vignette, a clichéd tale of a dippy American girl, Hayley (Allison Pill), stopping a handsome Italian Michelangelo (Flavio Parenti) to ask for directions to La Fontana di Trevi. He offers to take her there and before you know it, they are planning marriage. Cue up the Four Aces singing "Three Coins in the Fountain."

How about "unfunny?" Allen's obsessions are sex and death (see *Everything You Wanted to Know about Sex: But Were Afraid to Ask* and *Love and Death*). The death part comes with his stressing over the turbulence during the flight to Rome to meet his future son's family, as well as his reaction to the fact that the young man's father, Giancarlo (Fabio Armiliato), is a mortician and he's not sure whether to shake his hand or eat anything in his house. It turns out that the father's hobby is



Left to Right: Alessandro Tiberi as Antonio, Roberto Della Casa as Uncle Paolo and Penélope Cruz as Anna in *To Rome with Love*.

Photo by Philippe Antonello (c) Gravier Productions, Inc., Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

singing in the shower, where he sounds like Pavarotti. Allen's character Jerry is an impresario who specializes in producing avant-garde operas that nobody wants to see. He immediately concocts a plan to get the mortician to translate his singing ability from the shower to the stage. I'll leave it there.

The second vignette involves a southern Italian couple who have come to Rome for their honeymoon, thinking that they may stay in the big city—even though the bride clearly prefers to go back home. Allen uses a weak contrivance to separate them, during which time they manage to have sex with others before they consummate their own marriage. In the groom's case it's with Anna, a bombshell prostitute played by Penelope Cruz in a dress that leaves little to the imagination. In the bride's case it is ostensibly with a fat Italian movie star for whom she has always had a crush. The entry of a burglar and the film star's jealous wife pushes the vignette beyond farce. Indeed, I found this to be the most far-fetched and offensive of the film's vignettes.

The third vignette features the omnipresent Woody Allen alter ego. Now that he can't play the role himself, the presumably "lovable" schnook Jack is Jesse Eisenberg, whom I found to be obnoxious. An architectural student, he is in a live-in relationship that seems strong until his significant other, Sally (Greta Gerwig), while studying for an exam, throws him together with her visiting friend Monica (Ellen Page), a failed actress. Despite his protestations that he is not attracted to this man-eater, they have a steamy affair, all the while lamenting that they are doing this behind the friend's back.

The fourth vignette focuses on how reality television makes ordinary people celebrities who become famous for being famous. When the famous one is used up, he or she is replaced by another loser. Roberto Benigni, whose only claim to fame is his Academy Award performance in *Life Is Beautiful*, is insufferable as the nebbish Leopoldo who is married with two children. As his every waking minute is chronicled, his fame

results in women lining up to go to bed with him while his family is ignored. He enjoys the ride until the bitter and pathetic end.

Topping off this mess is Alec Baldwin at his most pretentious and obnoxious best as John, an architect who, like the schnook, lived as a student in Rome decades before. He pops up periodically and tries to tell Jack not to get involved with the man-eater, while predicting what's going to happen—as if we need him to tell us. My favorite scene was shot from the balcony of one of those hotels where one can enjoy a morning *colazione* while soaking up a spectacular view of Rome. If you have time to kill (and I do mean kill) see this movie; otherwise resist the temptation to view it at all costs.

The Lost Weekend (1945)

Starring Ray Milland, Jane Wyman, Phillip Terry, and Howard da Silva.

Directed by Billy Wilder. Rated TV/PG. Running time 101 minutes.

In the 1930s, following the repeal of Prohibition, drinking alcohol was portrayed in movies as relatively harmless and ubiquitous. Just think of the *Thin Man* films, where Nick Charles is rarely seen without a martini in his hand. After World War II, films turned dark (so-called *film noir*) and became grittier and more realistic. Based on Charles Jackson's semi-autobiographical novel of the same name,¹ this film was the first to deal seriously with alcoholism. It also has the distinction of being one the many films of the time that were filmed on location in New York City—*Naked City*, *A Double Life*, *Kiss of Death*, *On the Town*, and *Pickup on South Street* among others—which added to the air of realism. Many scenes were filmed on Third Avenue, which was perpetually dark because of the Third Avenue EL or Elevated Line, which last ran on May 12, 1955, and was later dismantled.² The EL's shadow, especially in the southern section of the Avenue called the Bowery, was the home of many homeless. This film shows that alcoholism wasn't restricted to the lower social economic classes; it includes a scene in which the narrator points out a rich person, now a hopeless alcoholic.

In the opening scene, the camera focuses on a bottle of whiskey hanging from a cord outside the apartment window of an alcoholic writer, Don Birnam (Ray Milland). He is being ushered off for a weekend in the country to cure his writer's block by his solicitous brother, Wick Birnam (Phillip Terry), and girlfriend Helen St. John (Jane Wyman), but he wants no part of it. He has been dry for ten days and desperately wants

to stay in the city and drink that bottle and have a weekend bender. He succeeds in getting rid of them by promising to meet his brother at the station. He then heads for his favorite watering hole, Harry and Joe's, "where good liquor flows." The exterior bar scene was filmed at P. J. Clarke's on 55th Street and Third, and the interior in an exact replica on a Hollywood stage set. It was one of New York's many saloons like McSorley's alehouse where writers, journalists, and others went to wind down after work.^{3,4} Don shows the many sides of the alcoholic: by turns manipulative, charming, gregarious, witty (quoting Shakespeare), self-absorbed, inconsiderate of others, and finally nasty when unable to get alcohol.

After many rounds, Nat (Howard da Silva) tells him that he has missed the train and Birnam goes home to sleep it off. When he wakes up, he finds that the bars, liquor stores, and pawn shops are closed by mutual agreement because it's Yom Kippur.² He desperately searches his apartment to locate another carefully hidden bottle. The scene in which he finds it is a classic. Another disappointment occurs on Sundays when liquor stores are closed and bars don't open until one. The bartender stops giving him credit and he begins a downward spiral.

As narrator, he then tells viewers how he got together with such a loving woman as Helen. At a matinee of *La Traviata* while watching the "Drinking Song" ("Libbiamo" or "let's drink"), he gets excited as they lift the champagne glasses and begins to crave a drink. He starts to perspire and goes to get his coat, where he has hidden a bottle. He finds out that his ticket is for the wrong coat and is told that he must wait for the person who has his check. He gets angrier and angrier as he realizes that he has to wait until the opera is over for the woman to reclaim her coat. When she does appear, he strikes up a conversation with her and they plan to see one another again, but as he turns to go, the bottle drops out of his pocket and breaks. He accepts her invitation to join her at a party in an apartment on Washington Square.

They develop a very good relationship during which he is sober, but when her parents come to meet the boyfriend he is scared off and goes back to drinking. Helen goes to his apartment to find out where he is. His brother, a classic enabler, lies, saying he is in Philadelphia. As she turns to leave, Don comes out of the room where he had been lying in a drunken stupor and says, "I'm not a drinker; I'm a drunk. I had to be hospitalized once for the cure but it didn't take." He traces his problem back to dropping out of Cornell to go to New York after first getting published, only to find that he wasn't such a hotshot. He took refuge in alcohol. There's a powerful scene of the DTs filmed at Bellevue. To get ready for that scene, Ray Milland spent a night at Bellevue and cut down on his food as alcoholics are wont to do.² The only disappointing part of the film is the resolution; it seems facile, but a more realistic ending was probably believed to be unacceptable to the audience. As it was, the preview audiences were not enthusiastic, but the



Ray Milland as Don Birnam and Doris Dowling as Gloria in *The Lost Weekend* (1945). Paramount Pictures/Photofest.

critics were.¹ The film won Oscars for Best Actor, Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay. It was nominated in four other categories including for Best Score by Miklos Rozsa, who went on to write over a hundred film scores, including those for *Ben Hur*, *El Cid*, *Quo Vadis*, and *Double Indemnity*, as well as the *Dagnet* theme. The soundtrack has a spooky resonance. Apparently, it was the first film to feature a theremin, a musical instrument that produces a strange wailing sound, later used extensively in sci-fi films.²

For another picture dealing with addiction and showing a very harrowing scene of going cold turkey you might want to rent the 1955 film *The Man with the Golden Arm*, starring Frank Sinatra as a heroin addict.

Addendum: Wilder claimed that the liquor industry offered Paramount \$5 million to not release the film. They refused, but he said he would have taken the money.²

References

1. Jackson C. *The Lost Weekend*. New York: Syracuse University Press; 1996.
2. IMDb.com. *The Lost Weekend*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0037884/>.
3. Hamill P. *A Drinking Life: A Memoir*. Boston: Back Bay Books; 1995.
4. Mitchell J. *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*. New York: Pantheon; 2001.

Dr. Dans (AΩA, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, 1960) is a member of *The Pharos's* editorial board and has been its film critic since 1990. His address is:

11 Hickory Hill Road
Cockeysville, Maryland 21030
E-mail: pdans@verizon.net