

## Movie Reviews

by Tony Medley, MSPE



### *Dead of Winter*

8/10

Prime Video

97 minutes

R



(Photo credit: Vertical)

Sexagenarian Barb (played by Emma Thompson) travels to an isolated lake in Northern Minnesota (filmed in Finland and Germany) to bury her husband's ashes there. She gets stranded in the middle of a blizzard but discovers a young girl (Laurel Marsden) kidnapped by a couple (Judy Greer and Marc Menchaca) for nefarious reasons that would be a spoiler to reveal.

Barb goes through hell to try to rescue the girl, even though she herself is stranded in the brutal

cold wilderness with nothing to help. Her location is about as remote as it gets, and Barb has no cell phone service. She is also completely unarmed as she proceeds to try to help the captured girl. Thompson occasionally borrows Frances McDormand's Oscar-winning accent from *Fargo* (1996) and does it well. As usual, Thompson gives a sterling performance. (When has she not?) This is a welcome movie for older women, showing how a 60-year-old widow can take on some bad people all by herself. There are plot holes, but they are often present in movies like this, so they really don't detract. Barb seems to know many survival techniques and how to do many things that a normal person like her would probably not know how to do, but there would be no movie if she couldn't do them.

Directed by Brian Kirk and written by Nicolas Jacobson-Larson and Dalton Leeb, the film has chilling locations and cinematography (by Christopher Ross), and that's in a good sense. Among the many positives of this film is the frozen environment in which it takes place. The acting by Menchaca as his character is freezing cold makes one feel his pain. I'd give him an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor.

I found this film filled with high tension throughout, exhausting but captivating and believable.

## *Now You See Me: Now You Don't*

5/10

Netflix, Prime Video

113 minutes

PG-13



(Photo Credit: Katalin Vermes/Lionsgate)

This is the third film in the *Now You See Me* series. I liked the first one (2013), didn't see the second (2016), and this one fell flat for me. I wasn't impressed with the "magic," which seemed mostly like special effects. Critics were asked to not reveal the spoilers. To me, though, that request was not necessary, because I didn't see anything that could remotely be a spoiler—except perhaps explaining some of the tricks, most of which would be impossible to perform in real life without prior access to the venue, especially the theft of the diamond.

Directed by Ruben Fleischer, this film has script credits to Seth Grahame-Smith, Michael Lesslie, Paul Wernick, and Rhett Reese and a story by Eric Warren Singer and Michael Lesslie. Whenever you see a script credited to that many writers, you know two things: first, that there were probably more and, second, that they had trouble with the script from the get-go. Sure enough, this story really *reaches for it*, so to speak.

A new group of magicians follow in the footsteps of the "Horsemen," the original four magicians (Jesse Eisenberg, Woody Harrelson, Dave Franco, and Isla Fisher) who would steal from the rich to give to the poor but who apparently disbanded 10 years ago, after the last movie in 2016. (They should have stayed disbanded.) However, the Horsemen have returned and have enlisted a new group of eleemosynary-minded magicians (Justice Smith, Dominic Sessa, and Ariana Greenblatt) to go after an evil diamond merchant played by Rosamund Pike.

Frankly, Pike is the best part of the movie. She is a beautiful, smiling personification of evil. The movie sings when she's onscreen. Alas, she is not onscreen enough, and the other characters just don't compare.

With an estimated budget of \$110 million, the locations—New York, France, Antwerp, South Africa, the Arabian Desert, and Abu Dhabi—are beautiful and lovingly filmed; but even Pike and the locations and cinematography aren't enough to overcome the weak script and story, which are overflowing with plot holes, the magic notwithstanding.

As an aside, the film's staff included several magic consultants from the world-famous Magic Castle in Los Angeles, and several of the actors practiced magic there. My friend Everett Fields (grandson of W. C. Fields) used to take me there. I met Milt Larson, the one who converted a 1909 mansion into The Magic Castle. When Larson learned where I lived, he told me that when the house across the street from mine was torn down in the 1960s, he purchased many of its interior elements and used them in The Magic Castle, such as the staircase and other structural features.

This *Now You See Me* film concludes with a teaser about a potential fourth installment. As expensive as this film was to make, they should save their money.

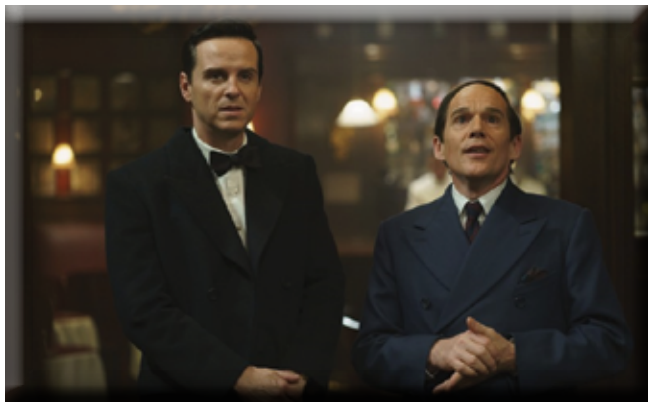
## *Blue Moon*

5/10

Prime Video

100 minutes

R



(Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classic)

Inspired by the letters of Broadway lyricist Lorenz Hart (Ethan Hawke) and Elizabeth Weiland (Margaret Qualley), this movie tells of one fabricated night in Hart's life. Hart, a lifelong drunk, is sitting in the bar at Sardi's on the night of the opening of the Rodgers and Hammerstein hit, *Oklahoma!*, waiting for the after-party to start. He is bemoaning his life to the bartender, Eddie (Bobby Cannavale), who reminds me of the robot bartender (Michael Sheen) in the 2016 film *Passengers* (a movie I really liked but which came and went without much effect). In reality, although Hart did attend the opening of *Oklahoma!*, he did not attend the after-party.

This film pictures the apparently bisexual Hart as not only an unsympathetic drunk (although, at this point, he is apparently sort of on the wagon) but a hypocrite as well. He demeans both Richard Rodgers (Andrew Scott) and Oscar Hammerstein (Simon Delaney) and insults the play itself to the bartender; but when Rodgers and Hammerstein arrive, he is a sniveling sycophant to them both while singing high praises for the play.

*Blue Moon* is written by Robert Kaplow; it is directed by Richard Linklater, whose trilogy films—*Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset*

(2004), and *Before Midnight* (2013)—were all disappointing to me, although they received rave reviews from others. Linklater did, however, make one of the best movies I've seen this century: *Me and Orson Welles* (2008). So, I approached this movie with wariness.

Rodgers and Hart wrote some memorable musicals with good songs, in addition to "Blue Moon," such as "My Funny Valentine," "The Lady Is a Tramp," "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered," "Lover," "There's a Small Hotel," "With a Song in My Heart"... the list is long. But the only music in this film consists of Morty (Jonah Lees) playing snippets of some Rodgers and Hart songs on the Sardi's piano as background music while conversing with Hart and Eddie. However, these are melodies written only by Rodgers. This movie is about Hart, who was a lyricist, but the film never mentions any of the notable lyrics Hart wrote, such as "Blue Moon... you saw me standing alone... without a dream in my heart... without a love of my own." It's shameful that Linklater couldn't find it in his heart to celebrate some of his main character's brilliant accomplishments.

Something this film doesn't tell is that Rodgers had originally asked Hart if he wanted to participate in turning the 1930 stage play *Green Grow the Lilacs* (upon which *Oklahoma!* is based) into a musical. Hart declined. So Hammerstein, who had recently ended his relationship with Jerome Kern, was enthusiastic when Rodgers approached him with the idea. Hart dismissed the attraction of the story and had become dysfunctional due to his alcoholism and unreliability. So, for more than an hour and a half, we have to sit and watch Hart bemoan his life.

There have been other films consisting mostly of conversation, the two best being *My Dinner with Andre* (1981) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966). But both of those had spellbinding dialogue—not so here. Rather than spellbinding, this film is tedious, despite a good performance by Hawke, who, at 5' 10", portrays the barely five-footer Hart by looking up at everyone. To

exacerbate the tedium, the last 15 minutes are taken up by his 20-year-old girlfriend, Elizabeth—with whom he apparently has an unconsummated relationship—telling him a long, sad story about one of her romances. What does this have to do with the talented lyricist Lorenz Hart? Zzzzzz.

Rodgers and Hart wrote some great songs. It's a shame that someone would make a movie about the lyricist without highlighting some of the songs he wrote instead of concentrating on making him look like an obnoxious, unappreciative, unsympathetic, self-pitying nudnik. Maybe that's what he was, but he did coordinate with Rodgers to write some lovable music that should live forever.

### *Nuremberg*

5/10

In Theaters

158 minutes

PG-13



(Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classic)

I was really looking forward to this film, and that is often the kiss of death for a movie—and so it was here.

Written and directed by James Vanderbilt, the first 75 minutes of this film are about army psychiatrist Dr. Douglas Kelley (Rami Malek) and his *boy crush* on Nazi Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring (Russell Crowe). This part of the movie not only

sets the stage for the confrontation between Chief United States Prosecutor Robert Jackson (Michael Shannon) and Göring much later in the film but also establishes Göring's charm. All that could have been easily done in less than 30 minutes. As I watched the film, I continually wondered why these 75 minutes were so uninvolved, and I actually had to fight nodding off several times. I kept saying to myself, "Get on with it!"

So, why did this biopic of the Nuremberg trials turn into a maudlin story of a little-known psychiatrist? I asked the film's PR firm if the producers had any backup or authentication for this part of the story, and I received no response. So, I looked in the production notes, which are provided to film critics and will generally contain a short synopsis of the story with possibly even some details about how the film was produced. These notes are usually short, maybe 5–15 pages at the most, including bios of the main cast and crew. The production notes for this film, on the contrary, are almost as long as a novella, 45 pages! But they do explain how this story developed. Decades ago, Vanderbilt came across an arcane book, *The Nazi and the Psychiatrist*, by Jack El-Hai.<sup>1</sup> Although the production notes refer to this book as "bestselling," an internet search reveals that there are no available sales figures for this book, that it is referred to as *not* being a bestseller, and that overall US sales were relatively low. Misrepresenting this book's sales is not a good way to establish credibility and verisimilitude.

Vanderbilt bought into El-Hai's narrative, *hook, line, and sinker*; but who knows how accurate it is? The story is that Kelley concluded that Göring and his fellow Nazi leaders "were not clinical psychopaths or monsters," but were "disturbingly ordinary men ... capable of orchestrating remarkable crimes under the right conditions."<sup>2</sup> According to the book's thesis, that wasn't what *the powers that be* wanted to hear, so Kelley was relatively quickly replaced by psychologist Gustave Gilbert (Colin Hanks), whose opinion was that "the Nazi leaders exhibited profound moral and emotional deficits—qualities he regarded as

pathological and emblematic of an innate capacity for evil,” which was apparently what the bosses wanted to hear.<sup>3</sup>

The more entertaining part of this film is the sort of *revisionist* history about Robert Jackson, who has heretofore been lauded as a self-effacing hero who took on the task of bringing justice to war criminals, thus sacrificing his chance of becoming Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. This film, however, portrays Jackson completely messing up his two-and-a-half-day examination of Göring, who out-charms and dominates Jackson. Jackson is shown as being inexperienced in criminal trial work, thus British barrister Sir David Maxwell Fyfe (Richard E. Grant) must jump in to save Jackson and revitalize the examination.

That said, the term “revisionist history” has generally had a pejorative connotation. However, just because the history is “revisionist” does not mean that it is inaccurate. This telling of Jackson’s lack of competence sheds a bright, shining light on something that has, thus far, been buried or ignored. Out of all the trials in which the outcome was known at the outset, this one takes the cake. So, whether or not Fyfe did save Jackson, the resulting death penalties would undoubtedly have still been imposed. There is no record that I can find of Kelley’s having had any kind of relationship with Jackson as is shown in this movie; and since this relationship forms the basis of the film, it detracts from the true story. In fact, since Kelley was replaced after six weeks, much of the historic relationship with Göring rested with Gilbert, whose role is minimized and fictionalized in this movie.

Russell Crowe steals the film with an Oscar-quality performance of Hermann Göring, and Michael Shannon expertly captures Jackson’s ineptitude; but this film needed a much better script and a good editor. When a film’s director has written the script and is part of the producing team, the result is usually a film that is too long and in need of cutting by an unbiased editor and producer.

### *Dead Man’s Wire*

8/10

Netflix, Prime Video

105 minutes

R



(Photo Credit: Stefania Rosini/Row K Entertainment)

This film tells the story of Tony Kiritsis (Bill Skarsgård) of Indianapolis, Indiana, who goes to Meridian Mortgage Company on February 8, 1977, and takes its president, Richard Hall (Dacre Montgomery), hostage. Kiritsis wires his sawed-off shotgun to Hall’s neck and keeps this in place throughout the ordeal.

Kiritsis then takes the hostage to his apartment, where he makes demands that Meridian Mortgage provide him with immunity, an apology for the way they treated him, and money. Kiritsis had wanted to turn 17 acres into a shopping center, but he claims that Meridian treated him unfairly.

Filled with mounting tension and well-directed by Gus Van Sant from a script by Austin Kolodney, this movie is said to be “based on” actual events. That’s probably because the dialogue has been invented—but the story is true. This actually happened.

***Sisu: Road to Revenge***

**5/10**

**Prime Video, Apple TV**

**89 minutes**

**R**



(Photo Credit: Kristjan Moru)

*Sisu: Road to Revenge* is little more than a silly Bugs Bunny–type chase film overloaded with over-the-top violence. It’s a sequel to the 2022 film, *Sisu*, in which a man, Atami (Jorma Tommila), took revenge on Russians who killed his family in WWII. That movie apparently validated him as an indestructible force of nature.

“Sisu” in Finnish refers to a unique concept encompassing extraordinary determination, grit, bravery, resilience, and inner strength, especially in the face of adversity. It combines the ideas of stoic endurance, persistent resolve, and the will to push forward when most would give up. That certainly describes Atami in this movie.

In this film, Atami is now 66 years old and wants to tear down his old house in Russia and take it back to Finland. I can’t imagine why anyone would want to do that, but that’s the plot. The Russians find out about it and want Atami to be killed, so they enlist Igor Draganov (Stephen Lang)—the malevolent, evil guy who murdered Atami’s family—to finish the job.

Written and directed by Jalmari Helander, this film is one of the more absurd presentations you will ever see. For example, Atami, who never speaks a word, drives an old truck filled with the lumber of his old house. Coming after him are many Russians with modern equipment. The car chase has scenes that come straight out of Roadrunner cartoons, completely impossible in the real world—and diametrically opposed to, let’s say, the iconic car chase in *Bullit* (1968).

*Sisu: Road to Revenge* is loaded with brutality and action. On the downside: this movie is not, in the least, plausible. On the upside: its runtime is reasonable, and it won’t put you to sleep.

***Anniversary***

**8/10**

**In Theaters**

**117 minutes**

**R**



(Photo credit: Owen Behan, Courtesy of Lionsgate)

*Anniversary* is a disturbing film about the disintegration of what starts out to be a close-knit, loving family. Ellen (Diane Lane), a college professor, and Paul (Kyle Chandler), a restaurant owner, are the parents of a family consisting of four children. Their three daughters are Anna

(Madeline Brewer), a successful, rebellious, queer, stand-up comedienne; Cynthia (Zoey Deutch), an environmental attorney; and Birdie (Mckenna Grace), a sensitive teenager. Their second oldest child is Josh (Dylan O’Brien), a mediocre writer who has a close relationship with his mother, Ellen.

The film begins as the family gathers to celebrate Ellen and Paul’s 25th wedding anniversary, and Josh brings along Liz (Phoebe Dynevor) as his date. It turns out that Liz had been one of Ellen’s students at Georgetown University. Liz had written an inflammatory, indeed traitorous, paper that Ellen didn’t like, and Ellen basically forced Liz out of Georgetown.

Two years later, Josh and Liz are married, and Liz has published a book, *The Change*, that ignited a movement around the country, advocating for one-party rule. Ellen, a patriot who cherishes the Constitution, hates the book and doesn’t like Liz too much, either. Josh is a staunch supporter of his wife.

Directed by Jan Komasa from a script by Lori Rosene-Gambino, this movie contains prolific casual smoking, so I can only assume that tobacco companies had something to do with the financing—unless the filmmakers just want to encourage people to smoke, as they did for so many decades in the 20th century, during which virtually every movie showed people lighting up. But for the over-abundance of smoking, I would have given this film close to a 10 because the directing and acting are outstanding and the tense story inexorably grows more dystopian as it slowly dissolves into its climax.

When I watch a film on a link in my office, as I did this one, I often pause the film to do other things and come back to it—but I couldn’t tear myself away from this one, as it had me captivated.

## *Hamnet*

5/10

In Theaters

130 minutes

PG-13



(Photo Credit: Agata Grzybowska/2025 Focus Features LLC)

*Hamnet* is a film based on Maggie O’Farrell’s 2020 novel, *Hamnet*, though it’s not about William Shakespeare (Paul Mescal), and it’s not about his son, Hamnet (Jacobi Jupe). No, it is about Shakespeare’s wife, Anne Hathaway, even though she is called Agnes (Jessie Buckley) in both the novel and the movie. Why? Because O’Farrell discovered that “Agnes” is the way Anne Hathaway’s father’s will refers to her.

Does Jessie Buckley look like Anne Hathaway?  
There are no contemporaneous descriptions of

Anne Hathaway. A couple of paintings of people alleged to be Shakespeare do exist, but they have not been validated. Paul Mescal resembles those pictures.

Even though we don't really know what he looked like, one thing you can be sure of when you see a film about Shakespeare, the man, is that the story is completely fiction. There are only around 20–25 independent contemporary references to Shakespeare during his lifetime, the first being a 1592 Robert Greene pamphlet in which Greene refers to Shakespeare as an “upstart crow.” And even though Shakespeare was a writer, he apparently was not a writer of letters. As a result, little is known of him except that he wrote some plays, he married Hathaway, and they lived together in Stratford; but Shakespeare lived most of his professional life in London. Shakespeare is said to have commuted often between London and Stratford (a three-day journey in the 1600s), but that's merely speculation. We do know that Shakespeare and Hathaway had three children, one of whom, Hamnet, died in 1596.

This film surmises a twenty-first-century type of love match between Shakespeare and Hathaway, but it speculates that the play, *Hamlet*, was based on Shakespeare's losing his son. While that idea is possible, it's debatable, since Shakespeare wrote six plays between his son's death in 1596 and

his authorship of *Hamlet* around 1600. It's not impossible that his loss did influence the play, but it is dubious.

*Hamlet*, the play, is almost identical to the Scandinavian legend which tells the story of Amleth, written by the twelfth-century Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus in his *Historia Danica*. In that legend, Amleth is a prince whose father is murdered by his uncle, who then marries Amleth's widowed mother—which is exactly the story told by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*. O'Farrell proposes an interesting view that Shakespeare chose that fable for the play as an homage to his son.

The best part of this film is the *tour de force* performance by Jessie Buckley as Agnes. Her birthing scenes are unforgettable and hard to watch. What women go through today to give birth is brutal, but the ordeal was much worse back then, with no doctors or hospitals; and Buckley's performance captures that with a rawness rarely seen in movies.

I'd like to give this film a higher rating because of Buckley's performance, but it is just too long for such a thin story. I could cut 40 minutes out of it with a snap of my fingers, and the film wouldn't lose a thing. Even so, I think Buckley deserves an Oscar.

## NOTES.....

1. Jack El-Hai, *The Nazi and the Psychiatrist: Hermann Göring, Dr. Douglas M. Kelley, and a Fatal Meeting of Minds at the End of WWII* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs Books, 2013).

2. “Nuremberg Production Notes,” *Madman Entertainment*, <https://www.madman.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Nuremberg-Production-Notes.pdf>.

3. Ibid. Ω