



1987 Academy Films: Invitations to Hope

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Bits and pieces of flickering forms dancing on a screen. They shape moments of suffering, struggle, and joy into a play of images that, when they are at their best, tug and pull on the sleeves of our souls. For some, good films are like great novels of old, exploring and mirroring the stories of our human dilemma. Often in urban anonymity, they grasp us like dark shadows of shared experiences that momentarily tempt us with new ways of discerning what can speak to our troubles. For me, they are also a rich rehearsal of the mystery of God's Spirit at work in all of creation; they can trigger shame, sadness, and celebration, inviting us to be touched by moments of grace born in broken people and in the most painful and joyous events of our lives. They are invitations to hope.

EMPIRE OF THE SUN

English school boy
transplanted into an English Tudor house in Shanghai, China
protected by an upper class invincibility
distanced from harsh street poverty by an elegant British enclave

Silly boy!
don't you know Japan, the Empire of the Sun, is coming?
You love their planes diving from the sky
But we want somehow to warn you that they are more than toys.

It is the late 1930s in Shanghai, China. You are Jamie, 11-year-old irrepressible English schoolboy in the back seat of a limousine on your way to a party on Boxing Day at the home of the British Ambassador. The cushy upholstered car is pushing through the market streets of a city swelled by tattered refugees who are fleeing the countryside, driven by the fear of invasion by the soldiers of Japan. Your face presses against the window to catch the contrasting sights. Watch out! There is a bunch of slaughtered chickens swaying on

the end of a pole over that man's shoulder. They smash against your window leaving streaks of blood that grotesquely frame pictures of cooking rice and police sticks.

A few days later, your well-manicured, upper-class parents are trying to avoid the anxious crush of thousands traveling to a few ships docked in harbor. In the panic you become separated

from your mother. Terrified, you find your way back to the British Tudor mansion ghetto, only to find your house abandoned to scavengers. Scraping tins to feed yourself and riding your bicycle through the jumble doesn't last long. Back on the streets you run, chased by a young bully, until you stumble straight into the path of an old truck which screeches to a halt. That is the way you meet Basie and his friend, a ne'er-do-well merchant ship American sailor, who later, in your Japanese concentration camp, is Dickens' Fagin incarnate.

How does Jamie survive the world of long forced marches, concentration camps, and gruel for food? The adult world around him is suffering, too exhausted to provide this young lad with the emotional nourishment he needs. But now we see Jamie transformed into *Jim*, scurrying around the prison compound trading one scarce good for another, finding for each person that needle or cabbage—always just what the person is looking for. And still there is no one person that we meet in young Jim's life who is close to being selfless enough to give him the love and care that he longs for.

Spielberg is telling us something important in this film. He tells it to us through Jamie's people—people who despite their obvious flaws and self-centeredness at critical moments miraculously provide Jamie with enough so that he survives.

Basie turns out to be Fagin, the king of the American compound, committing clever trading and bribery until he amasses a gluttony of prized goods. He even risks Jim's life by sending him through the barbed wire of the camp to lay traps for Thanksgiving pheasants, and then takes bets on Jim's survival from fellow Americans whose eager eyes are pressed against the window in their hut. Still, Jim worships him, waiting for Basie's promise to come true to take him on a long planned escape. Basie of course leaves without him. A thoroughly despicable character? Yes. But in spite of himself, he provided Jim the skills to survive this alien turmoil of war. Basie unknowingly shared a gift of hope.

Then there was Mrs. Victoria, the elegant and delicate young woman, who views her impoverished situation as an undeserved fall from grace. Early, in their barracks, we see her tension and irritation with a hyper Jim kept just below the surface, like a pot on a hot stove ready to erupt into a full boil. She is too preoccupied and withdrawn to have anything left for this lonely boy. Nevertheless, it is Mrs. Victoria who blows on a faint spark of caring at just the right moment, bringing Jim, booted out of the American compound, in from the cold. In the midst of her self-absorption, from some forgotten place in her center, she becomes a vehicle of a moment of grace.

We see an English doctor, who never leaves the sick at the camp's makeshift hospital, using Jim as a heart pump for a dying woman. And yet he too, in a few minutes retrieved here and there, fashions some semblance of schooling for Jim, tutoring him in the structure of language. These are fragments of care as if they were tiny gifts wrapped in fragile tissue paper.

I believe Spielberg is saying to us that Jim's world is a reflection of our own. Most of us live in a world of unfulfilled promises, a world of only partial availability to others, and a world of fragments of care. Sometimes we too experience life as Jim does, scurrying around to squash our fears of abandonment and being alone. There are times when we too yearn for care and nurturing as he did.

In our most wide awake hours we live with the unsettling insight that no one else can give

us what we want. And yet some deep abiding force and Spirit, in the form of small acts from others, is available for us to use, providing us with just enough of what we need to survive. We find that what we need comes from no single person in our lives. But the small acts of grace that we glean from others, when they are taken as a composite, make up what we need. Although they may come in the most unexpected of places and in the most unlikely of vehicles, the acts of grace that God provides us are enough. *Empire of the Sun* reminds us that we can experience an incredible sense of hope when we open our eyes and discern those gifts of love.

NUTS

Claudia is an angry, defiant woman in a black dress sitting in a courtroom. She is impatiently tinkling with a pencil on a glass of water when her court-appointed attorney tries his best to defend her sanity. Her hands draw quick bold strokes of faces of people with mouths of fangs, while the testimony of others goes on. Her mother takes the stand and we see the flashbacks of Claudia's mind begin: a child sitting on her bed crying and holding a stuffed animal while her mother, holding a drink in her hand, passes in the hallway and shuts the door on her daughter's imploring face. Claudia's face now tightens, holding back tears of pain, of the loss of love and protection never found.

Sometimes we are overtaken by surprise when we expect one thing but get another. That was my experience in watching the powerful film, *Nuts*. I thought I was going to view a story about a woman ground up within the legal and mental health system who was trying to prove her sanity to stand trial. I ended up seeing a profound and wrenching portrayal of child abuse.

Two apparently desperate parents are trying to protect their daughter from a manslaughter charge. How compassionate and harmless they appear until little by little in the sanity hearing the truth comes out: a stepfather who sexually abused her—in one flashback we see a twenty dollar bill being slipped under the bathroom door while an 11-year-old Claudia watches in horror as the door handle turns—and a mother who didn't want to know the truth and turned away because of her own emotional needs.

Claudia's mother cries while trying to describe her love for Claudia. I listened as a faint secret of recognition whispered from somewhere in my own distant past. Her mother's words spoke of love, but reflected something else: her own inability to fathom why her daughter could not love her. She was not speaking of her own love but of her emptiness and her desperate need to be loved and nurtured herself. Something suddenly grabbed a vulnerable place deep within and shook it until my throat tightened and blood throbbed, strain-

ing to get through. My eyes moistened as tears of empathy turned into a knot of anger in my stomach.

At some point in the madness of that portrayal of a real life courtroom drama, Claudia crosses a powerful threshold of emancipation. The shame that she has so carefully hidden, even from herself, comes into the open. And when it does, when it is spoken out loud, her freedom begins. *Nuts* is for us too. It invites us to cross our thresholds of fear, and to hear spoken aloud the dark secrets of our souls; it invites us to trust that there are other human beings who will hear, who will care, and who, when knowing, do not see us as shameful, crazy, evil, or whatever else those God-awful beliefs are that have imprisoned us. It took Levinsky, a tenacious and patient

attorney, to discover bit by bit Claudia's secrets, and to form an alliance with her which led to her first steps of inward freedom. It was as if he was for a few hours an invisible vehicle of the Holy Spirit.

There are Levinskys in our own lives, those who, if we allow them, are vessels of grace who gently help us break off some of our chains by speaking our fearful truths. When we allow them to come in, like Claudia, we too experience the hope of freedom.

HOPE AND GLORY

Far from the rarefied heights of British upper class and the shores of Shanghai, another young boy weathered the same Second World War. Only this time the setting is in a suburb of London during the time of incessant Nazi bombing.

Director John Boorman has given us a splendid story of growing up during the war from the eyes of Billy, a young schoolboy from an English middle class family. Billy watches his father, in a fit of patriotism, go off to join the army, while his mother changes her mind at the last minute, keeping him and his younger sister at home rather than see them join the thousands of children who were sent to spend the war in the countryside. He learns of his mother's sorrow of a lost love and watches houses being bombed and children grieving the deaths of parents. He is forced to join a gang that scavenges through hulks of bombed-out houses and destroys whatever is still standing. And finally, he watches as his own house is burning to the ground and feels the anger in witnessing the pity of others who are spectators to his family's own misery.

But *Hope and Glory* is not only a story of these physical threats and changes. More importantly, it is a tale of Billy's emotional journey, his search for someone with whom he really can connect, someone who can stop and focus on him and appreciate life as he is experiencing it. Everyone, it seems, is out of touch. His mother can barely keep her sanity as she vainly tries to keep a family together. His father is off in the military. Billy's school is run by a tyrant of a schoolmaster who whips him for not paying attention in class. He has no understanding adult to turn to. There is no one until after his house is bombed and he trundles off with sisters and mother to his grandparents' house in the country.

It is there at a house alongside a small river that his curmudgeon, sometimes staggering, grandfather grouses and swears his way into Billy's

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I heart. One small scene reflects his tenor. All four of his daughters have come for a visit and instantly engage in a boisterous conversation, completely ignoring their father. Overhearing the complaining of one of his daughters, Billy's grandfather yells above the hubbub,

“You frustrated baby. That husband of yours still can't rise to the occasion?”

To which one of his daughters angrily replies, gesturing toward her father, “He's a menace—he ought to be locked up.”

Then, turning to Billy during a game of cricket, grandfather adds,

“I won't have their husbands here. All four gals married duds, including your mother. They tame you if they can, cage you, and feed you little tidbits.”

The summer is over, and Billy is to be sent back to his dreaded home school. His

grandfather is getting ready to drive him, and Billy is complaining and saying he has had it with school.

Grandfather: “Oh, you miserable little scamp. I’m the one who should be fed up, sacrificing my last sup of black market petrol to take you to school.”

Billy responds by reminding him that he won’t be able to stay with him.

Grandfather: “Only until you can get into the local school.”

Billy: “With Miss Evans; I hate her.”

Grandfather: (now heating up and grousing): “You’ll be home on the weekends; now shut up. We’re going.”

They drive off with grandfather continuing to grump, but one of his ruminations lets Billy know that he understands. Grandfather is thinking of the overbearing schoolmaster, who forces students to comply with military discipline, when he exclaims, “Great strapping fellow playing silly buggers with a war on—Outrageous!”

He stops the car just outside the school yard wall. Billy gets out and disappears around the gate. Grandfather now privately vents his own frustration with what his grandson will have to put up with and mutters a curse as if it was delivered to the headmaster: “All you do is knock the *sense* out of them and...and...” Then a great shout goes up from the children. Billy runs back to the car, jumps in, and excitedly tells grandfather that the school has been bombed early that morning and that it is closed. Both of them seize the humor of the instant and break out into uncontrollable laughter. The voice of an older Billy observes over the celebration, “All my life never quite matched the perfect joy of that moment. My school lay in ruins, the war giving back the promise of stolen days.”

For Billy, this outrageous grandfather became the one person, in the midst of the literal turmoil of his life, that really connected with Billy, identified with him, and celebrated how he experienced the world. With the magic of celluloid, writer and director John Boorman is showing us that, like Billy, the joy of life happens when unexpected persons enter our world, the Zorbas who can dance and laugh and join us in celebrating those moments that redeem life and make it all worthwhile. God is in the dance of life. It is a joyous hope that erupts from those people with whom we really connect.

IRONWEED

Gospel missions, soup kitchens, cheap wine, flop houses, railroad yards, and shoes tied with string and twine. Images of the depression. Out of the early morning shadows, bulging forms begin to stir, as if slumbering balloons slowly start to inflate. These are forgotten wisps of stubble called bums, tattered and swaying, their empty faces hiding the memories and passions that lie within.

We meet two of these bums in *Ironweed*. Their buried lives emerge in front of our eyes like baggy forms crawling out of newspapers on park benches in early morning hours.

Helen’s feistiness and sharp tongue could not eclipse a certain delicateness and vulnerability that she wore just below her tailored felt hat, coat, and soiled gloves. And then there is Francis, barrel chested, wearing a dirty shirt frayed at the edges and a moth-eaten cardigan

sweater covered by a third-hand, tightly fitted suit jacket. But it's his eyes that arrest our attention—eyes that are vacant and glassy, hauntingly reminiscent of the distant staring of a wounded animal now dying.

Helen and Francis. We feel the rough fabric of their stories brilliantly portrayed by Meryl Streep and Jack Nicholson. Both are on journeys to make peace with their painful memories. We watch as they struggle to come to terms, to touch once more and heal their unclosed wounds.

For Helen, the journey towards a remnant of peace ends in death. For Francis, it ends with the first visit to his family in 22 years.

On the road for a long time, Francis has just returned to Albany, New York. He wants to see Helen, but another destination draws him like a giant magnet. He passes the house a couple of times, acknowledging to a street buddy that he lived there a long time ago. Then one day he hires on as a day laborer for a junk man, breaking his back for just enough money to buy a turkey. Time to come to terms before moving on.

With the turkey under his arm, he rings the doorbell and first meets a surprised Annie, his former wife. They talk. Then he meets Billy, his son, Danny, his grandson, and finally his daughter, Peg.

Long ago he had abandoned any hope of forgiveness. That was buried with his child, Gerald, in St. Agnes Cemetery. Gerald was a small boy who, 22 years ago, had slipped out of the hands of a slightly juiced up Francis and fallen on the kitchen floor, breaking his neck.

It is his daughter's wrath that explodes in that same kitchen.

Billy says to Peg: "Give him a break, he just got here, for Crissake."

Peg: "What break did he ever give me? Or you? or any of us?"... "I'm not going to be a hypocrite and welcome him back with open arms after what he did.

You don't just pop up one day with a turkey and all is forgiven."

Francis: "I ain't expectin' to be forgiven. I'm way past that."

But later, after slamming the door and stomping out, it is Peg who returns to the kitchen. Francis pulls a rumpled letter out of his pocket with a note on it saying, "First letter from Margaret," and begins to read it. "Dear Poppa. I suppose you never think that you have a daughter that is waiting for a letter since you went away...." When he finishes, he softly murmurs, "It's a good old let-

ter, I'd say." Then he tells a funny story about a ball game he pitched in Toronto.

With tears in her eyes, Peg sits down at the kitchen table, reaches across, and places her fingers over Francis' hand. It is her hand fashioning an act of reconciliation.

Ironweed invites us to see that all of us are flawed, that there are acts of our own which have led to suffering. But it is also an invitation to come to terms with the wounds of our lives. We see Francis and Peg as ourselves, vainly looking for some little gesture of grace even when we believe, in Francis' words, "I'm way past that." Sometimes if we open ourselves and share our vulnerabilities, we are startled to be given a gift, a small but transforming act of forgiveness, of reconciliation, gently waiting for us, occasionally even one we shape within. Because of that miraculous Spirit, there are times that we, like Francis, experience hope that enables us to come

to terms with ourselves and fashion a measure of peace for our lives.

So here's to the Basies and Mrs. Victorias who break through the walls of self absorption to give us just enough, the Francises and Pegs who teach of reconciliation, the grandfathers whose connectedness unleashes laughter from our souls, and the Levinskys and Claudias who free us by speaking our fearful truths, and the Phillips and Jons who gently comfort us from the storms of our lives. Their powerful images touch a spark of God within, embracing us with invitations of hope.