



FOR JULY 4TH, A DOZEN MOVIES THAT SCREAM "AMERICA!"

As we head into the Independence Day weekend, I wanted to suggest some classic titles scattered over the decades that each in their way evoke our country's unique character.

Some of these movies are overtly patriotic, portraying seminal moments and figures in our colorful history, while others delve into more complex, troubling periods and events which have also helped shape our national identity.

The common denominator is that they are all- unmistakably and unforgettably- American.

Mr. Smith Goes To Washington (1939)- Powerful Senator Joseph Paine (Claude Rains) ensures the appointment of young Jefferson Smith (James Stewart) as interim junior Senator of his state on the basis that he will be too green to ruffle the cozy Washington establishment. Paine then assigns female D.C. operative Clarissa Saunders to be Smith's handler. Initially stunned by her charge's sheer idealism and "can-do" attitude, she finds it harder than expected to control the freshman Senator. When one of Smith's first initiatives threatens a lucrative project championed by Paine, the embattled young man gets a first, bitter taste of cutthroat politics. Still, he won't back down. Frank Capra's potent morality tale remains one of actor Stewart's finest moments. (Indeed, when he won the Oscar the following year for "The Philadelphia Story", Stewart considered the award delayed compensation for "Smith".) Stellar support comes from Arthur as the conflicted Clarissa, Rains (superb as the ruthless Paine), not to mention recurring Capra players Edward Arnold and Thomas Mitchell. (Trivia note: Mitchell actually appeared in five Oscar nominated pictures that year!) Over seventy years after its release, "Mr. Smith" remains one of our finest political dramas. Don't miss that classic filibuster scene!

The Pride Of The Yankees (1942)- Biopic of famed New York Yankee Lou Gehrig (Gary Cooper) traces his storied athletic career, as the legendary southpaw ascends to the best team in baseball, while also portraying his romance and eventual marriage to devoted wife Eleanor

FOR JULY 4TH, A DOZEN MOVIES THAT SCREAM "AMERICA!"

(Teresa Wright). The movie culminates in his final gallant battle with a rare and fatal disease, soon to bear his name. We watch as Gehrig bears this ultimate challenge with the same grace and finesse he displayed as a ballplayer. Potent inspiration for a country newly at war, this sentimental tearjerker still holds up beautifully, with lots of patriotic flavoring and the inspiring atmosphere of a simpler, nobler time. The magnetic Cooper was never better, Wright is radiant as his spouse, and we even get a glimpse of Babe Ruth playing himself. Don't miss this affecting ode to a long-ago era when our nation's role models really were heroic.

Yankee Doodle Dandy (1942)- A meeting with F.D.R on the eve of our country's entry into World War II prompts an aging George M. Cohan (James Cagney), America's most revered showman, to look back on his colorful life, from the lean early days touring the country with his parents and sister in vaudeville (Walter Huston, Rosemary de Camp, and Jeanne Cagney-Jimmy's real-life sibling), to later heady, happy times as our country's most prominent songwriter/performer, who stirred love of country through the first several decades of the twentieth century. Director Michael Curtiz's idealized homage to Cohan's life and legacy was perfectly timed to stir our spirits as we entered World War II. This exuberant slice of Americana is Cagney's show entirely, netting him his only Oscar (after all those gangster roles!). The actor actually began his career as a song-and-dance man, and here he gets to prove it, in a series of rousing, nostalgic numbers that keep the rich Cohan legacy alive. Walter Huston stands out in a sterling supporting cast playing George's loving Dad. Good enough to watch any old time, but a must for Independence Day. Go ahead- wave that flag!

Picnic (1955)- Hal Carter (William Holden), a down-and-out former college football jock, hops a freight to Kansas to ask his wealthy former roommate Alan Benson (Cliff Robertson) for a job. Alan's thrilled to see him (at first), but others distrust the rugged stranger, including Flo Owens (Betty Field), the socially ambitious mother of the girl Alan's been dating, town beauty Madge (the sultry Novak, in her film debut). She senses the potential chemistry between Hal and Madge, an attraction that might hurt Hal's job search, and ruin Flo's carefully laid plans for her daughter's future. These simmering issues eventually come to a head at the town picnic. Joshua Logan's adaptation of the hit William Inge play captures the feeling of mid-twentieth century small town America as few other pictures have. Location shooting (in Technicolor) helps, with the crowd shots of real

FOR JULY 4TH, A DOZEN MOVIES THAT SCREAM "AMERICA!"

Kansans enjoying themselves during the picnic sequence particularly evocative. The two romantic leads do indeed heat up the screen, particularly during their memorable dance to the fifties standard, "Moonglow". Robertson, Field, Rosalind Russell and Arthur O'Connell round out a first-rate cast. This is one "Picnic" well worth attending.

The Searchers (1956)- Three years after the Civil War, missing veteran Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) returns to his frontier home, where he's greeted by his jubilant family, including Martin (Jeffrey Hunter), a part-Cherokee adoptee-now grown-who owes his life to Ethan. Tragedy strikes when a local tribe attacks the farm, brutally murders Ethan's brother and sister-in-law, and carts off their young daughter Debbie. Ethan and Martin immediately saddle up and set out to search for her, with no idea that the journey will take them as far as Canada--and last seven years. Monument Valley never looked as breathtakingly beautiful as it does in this exquisite, richly faceted Western, perhaps the most accomplished film in John Ford's oeuvre. Wayne gives the performance of a lifetime as the obsessed, enigmatic Ethan, while young Natalie Wood is indelible in a brief role as Debbie, the kidnapped girl caught between two worlds. Ford described his ambitious masterwork as a "psychological epic," and this gut-twisting, high-lonesome tale certainly grows more nuanced with each viewing.

The Music Man (1962)- Traveling charlatan "Professor" Harold Hill (Robert Preston) convinces the citizens of River City, Iowa, that they should have a marching band to help guard youth against moral corruption. Charming the socks off everyone with his plan to teach the town's kids how to play instruments using his deliciously absurd "Think System", Hill's a homey kind of huckster. His only obstacle is to win over local librarian Marian Paroo (Shirley Jones), who believes he's a fraud. This exuberant, energetic adaptation of Meredith Wilson's hit Broadway musical is a bona fide marvel, thanks to Preston's virtuosic turn as the ultra-charming swindler. Homing in on small-town America in 1912, "Music Man" mixes nostalgic sentiment with real-world woes, memorably in the person of Ron Howard, who plays Marian's sullen younger brother Winthrop. Comedian Buddy Hackett adds levity as Hill's goofy sidekick, while Jones is a perfectly prim counterweight to Preston's engaging rogue. And let's not forget the songs: "Till There Was You" (later recorded by the Beatles) and the rollicking "76 Trombones" will leave you humming long after the lights go up.

Bonnie and Clyde (1967)- Loosely based on the real-life exploits of the infamous 1930's-era bank-robbing couple, this film follows cocky

FOR JULY 4TH, A DOZEN MOVIES THAT SCREAM "AMERICA!"

outlaw Clyde Barrow (Warren Beatty) and renegade moll Bonnie Parker (Faye Dunaway, in her breakout role), from love at first heist to their legendary demise in a blaze of gunfire. Embarking on a cross-country crime spree with Clyde's brother, Buck (Gene Hackman), and his wife, Blanche (Estelle Parsons, who snagged an Oscar for this), Clyde is hailed as a Depression-era hero, but the gang's days are numbered as they try to outrun and outgun the coppers. With its gritty outlook and unapologetic celebration of anti-authoritarianism, "Bonnie and Clyde" helped usher in the New Cinema of the 70s. Skittish about the film's violence, Warner Bros. almost soft-pedaled the movie's release into an early, anonymous grave, but producer/star Beatty fought to make sure audiences got their say--and of course, they loved it. In just her third film role, Dunaway captivated men and women alike, holding her own scene by scene with veteran star Beatty. Her costumes also set off a brief retro-twenties fashion craze.

American Graffiti (1973)- One hot night in the summer of 1962, a group of California teenagers get together after a school dance for one last cruise out in the valley. In a series of vignettes, we track momentous happenings in the young lives of thoughtful, strait-laced Steve (Ron Howard) and his brainy pal Curt (Richard Dreyfuss), both of whom have misgivings about leaving home for college, and Curt's sister Laurie (Cindy Williams), who doesn't quite want the same things out of life as Steve, her long-time boyfriend. Cut to a sock-hoppin' soundtrack by Wolfman Jack and photographed in cruise-strip neon by the great Haskell Wexler, "Graffiti" is not just one of George Lucas's best films, it may be the best American movie ever about being young, uncertain, and on the cusp of maturity in the early '60s. Lucas based his seminal film on his own experiences as a hot-rodding youth in Modesto, and the result is a crisp, wonderfully nostalgic evocation of teen restlessness, with a stellar, soon-to-be-famous cast including Mackenzie Phillips, Harrison Ford, and Paul LeMat. Cars, girls, and rock-n-roll on a hot summer night: "Graffiti" gets the formula right.

All the President's Men (1976)-A true-life detective tale about a pair of intrepid reporters, this film follows Washington Post journalists Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) as they uncover a possible connection between the 1972 Watergate burglary and a White House staffer. With the blessing of executive editor Ben Bradlee (Jason Robards) and inside dope from Woodward's ultra-secret source, "Deep Throat" (Hal Holbrook), they "follow the money" all the way to the top. Although you never glimpse anyone playing Nixon, this Oscar-nominated film directed by the late Alan J.

Pakula documents how the power of the press and determination of two young journalists brought down this president, who two years prior had won re-election by the widest margin in history. Faithfully adapted from the Pulitzer Prize-winning book authored by these reporters, the movie is more exciting than fiction, and the starring triumvirate of Redford, Hoffman, and Robards merge seamlessly with their real-life counterparts. Here's a superlative thriller always worth revisiting.

Breaking Away (1979)- This strikingly buoyant coming-of-age picture set in Indiana tells of four local boys (and recent high-school grads) who must face their futures, but not before enjoying one last carefree summer. Protagonist Dave (Dennis Christopher) is obsessed with cycling, and on learning how many cycling champions come from Italy, cultivates an appreciation for all things Italian, much to the consternation of his conventional parents (Paul Dooley and Barbara Barrie). Dave's cycling skills will eventually be tested against the snobby college guys in Bloomington's annual bike race. Director Peter Yates's heartfelt, life-affirming movie will prove a winner for older kids and adults. Christopher is appealingly quirky in the central role and the film also showcases the budding talents of future stars Dennis Quaid and Daniel Stern as two of Dave's buddies. Dooley is outstanding as Dave's bewildered father, a solid Middle American you might actually buy a used car from. Don't miss this one.

Born On The Fourth Of July (1989)- This riveting biopic of Vietnam protester Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise) opens with his all-American upbringing in Massapequa, NY, and entry into the war as a deeply patriotic enlisted man. Later, Kovic returns home disillusioned and psychologically scarred from a bullet wound that's left him paralyzed from the waist down. Alienated and adrift in Mexico, the hard-drinking vet eventually begins to pull his life together, devoting his energies to anti-war activism. Helmed by "Platoon" director and Vietnam vet Oliver Stone, "Born" is a profoundly moving portrait of a macho athlete whose horrific battle experience causes him to reassess his politics and reorient his give-'em-hell attitude. Cruise, in an ambitious turn away from heartthrob roles, plays Kovic with precision and conviction, especially at his darkest moments, delivering the finest work of his career. Co-written by Stone and Kovic, "Born" reflects the pain and anger felt by an entire generation of returning US soldiers, and will leave a lasting impression.

FOR JULY 4TH, A DOZEN MOVIES THAT SCREAM "AMERICA!"

Glory (1989)- True story of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw (Matthew Broderick), son of Massachusetts abolitionists, who's appointed to lead the first black regiment for the Union in the Civil War. Before this group is able to prove their mettle in battle, Shaw must fight injustice within the Union hierarchy, as superior officers doubt the regiment's ability to fight and seem unwilling (at first) to even equip them properly. Ultimately, Shaw's faith in his men is borne out heroically. Edward Zwick's vivid Civil War epic boasts authentic atmosphere and terrific battle sequences, but aside from the story's inherent fascination, what sets this movie apart are the incredible performances glimpsed in between the gunfire. Broderick brings to Shaw a nuanced mix of determination and vulnerability, but Denzel Washington virtually steals the picture as a defiant enlisted man, winning an Oscar for his efforts. Morgan Freeman also shines as a wise, seasoned regimental sergeant. Rousing entertainment and revealing history lesson, all in one.

For over 2,100 outstanding titles on DVD, visit www.bestmoviesbyfarr.com

To see John's videos for WNET-Channel 13, go to www.reel13.org