

# MONTHLY MOVIES

COPYRIGHT (C) T. Rob Brown

Movie Review column for *Dvino Magazine*, a monthly production of *The Laredo Morning Times*.

June 2021

Copyright © 2021 T. Rob Brown, owner TRB Photography & Writing

## Road trips: 'Ready for another adventure'

*By T. Rob Brown*

**A**s we said goodbye to another graduating class this May, I was reminded of some important cinematic Hero's Journey knowledge by one of my photojournalism students.

Texas A&M International University graduate Jessica Rodriguez, atop her head, wore a decorated graduation cap featuring Bilbo Baggins' Hobbit home along with Bilbo's own words, "I'm quite ready for another adventure."

Now that the Centers for Disease Control lowered pandemic guidelines, some of us might actually hit the road and do a little traveling—safely, of course—this summer. We can't completely let our guard down but—thanks to the vaccines—at least we have an opportunity to "breathe" and explore our world once again.

Jessica, of course, meant she was ready to begin her career in photography rather than to take a physical road trip. These life journeys come in all shapes and sizes from closing one chapter and moving on to the next. Each becomes a link in the chains of our lives.

"You simply have to put one foot in front of the other and keep going," Star Wars creator George Lucas once said. "Put blinders on and plough right ahead."

Those are wise words for today's graduates who head off on their next adventure to face a difficult job market.

“My first six years in the business were hopeless,” Lucas said. “There are a lot of times when you sit and you say, ‘Why am I doing this? I’ll never make it. It’s just not going to happen. I should go out and get a real job, and try to survive.’”

As a student of anthropology, sociology and literature, in addition to cinema studies, Lucas read “The Hero with a Thousand Faces” by Professor Joseph Campbell. In it, Campbell identifies the Hero’s Journey as a series of life events—or a cycle—that we all go through. Some of us pass and some fail but it recurs in our lives. This cycle goes back all the way to ancient mythologies and studies of early humanity.

It’s all about the communication process of storytelling. It’s how we inform a younger generation about morals while keeping the story entertaining enough to keep their attention. In ancient times, by word of mouth, these stories told young tribal hunters and warriors of the task ahead—what must happen in order for them to go off on that adventure, succeed and return back home. Once home, they would need to be reintegrated with their tribe. In a sense, to cleanse themselves from the bloody task required of them.

The Hero’s Journey shows us this cycle, which begins in the Hero’s Ordinary World. From there, a Call to Adventure occurs and the Hero must make a decision. This decision often ends up in a refusal of that call. Around this time, the Hero meets a mentor who helps guide them and teach them the rules of the Special World. Once the Hero accepts the call, he or she enters the Special World where they face tests, enemies and meet new allies.

During the journey, the Hero approaches the figurative or literal inmost cave and, inside, faces a great Ordeal that involves a rebirth of some sort. Often, this is symbolic and involves water—similar to religious baptism.

After that, the Hero is now officially a Hero and fully committed to the quest. He or she presses on toward their goal, called Seizing the Sword. Now, the forces of darkness are upset and chase the Hero toward the final confrontation—the climax of the story.

The last part of the Hero’s Journey is the Resolution, when all of the loose ends—subplots—are completed. It’s when the Hero reintegrates with the tribe back in the Ordinary World. Screenwriters call this the denouement, a French word which literally means “the action of untying.”

So as Lucas began creating the 1977 release of “Star Wars,” he thought back on those anthropology courses and what he learned there. He never set out to be an anthropologist but what he learned and applied forever changed filmmaking. The modern Hollywood epic adventure story was born.

“Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose,” Yoda tells Anakin in “Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith.” Yoda often asked his pupils to stay clear of fear, which he said was “the path to the Dark Side” of the Force.

That’s the same bit of fear that Bilbo Baggins faced in “The Hobbit.” He almost didn’t make it to the start of his grand adventure. But after overcoming that fear, he took a risk. It paid off. Returning back home to the Shire, he was forever changed.

This is what the cycle is all about—learning, growing and changing for the better. Bilbo learned this lesson.

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door,” Bilbo later tells his nephew in “The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring.” “You step into the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no telling where you might be swept off to.”

## Road-Trip Films

In order to prepare for your summer road trips, you might want to take a look at some of the classic films in this sub-genre of adventure films. These are stories about the journey and what we learn from it.

Some road-trip films teach us a lot about relationships. Whether it’s about race relations, like “Green Book” (2018), the growth in father-son relationships, such as “Over the Top” (1987) or “Real Steel” (2011)—or a brotherly relationship in “Rain Man” (1988)—or even a mother-son relationship in “The Guilt Trip” (2012). Some explore interpersonal relationships—buddy films—such as “Thelma & Louise” (1991), “Due Date” (2010) and “Mississippi Grind” (2015). Some feature a group and focus on small group communication and relationships like “Wild Hogs” (2007), “The Hobbit” trilogy (2012-2014) or “The Lord of the Rings” trilogy (2001-2003).

Some are chock full of humor like “The Blues Brothers” (1980), “The Cannonball Run” (1981), “National Lampoon’s Vacation” (1983), “Pee-wee’s Big Adventure” (1985), “Planes, Trains & Automobiles” (1987), “Dumb and Dumber” (1994) and “Tommy Boy” (1995). For some, they focus on action: “Terminator 2: Judgment Day” (1991), “Zombieland” (2009) and “Mad Max: Fury Road” (2015). Some signal the end of an era, such as “Logan” (2017). Lastly, some are great at making us smile and sing along, like “The Muppet Movie” (1979).

My five nominees for the completely made-up award of Best Road-Trip Film, from among the movies I’ve seen, are: “Green Book,” “Rain Man,” “The Blues Brothers,” “Tommy Boy” and “Zombieland.” Each of these explore different aspects of relationships and the Hero’s Journey.

Similar to “42” (2013) and “Hidden Figures” (2016), “Green Book” explores the often-overlooked historical roles of Black Americans and early race relations. Viggo Mortenson plays Tony Lip, a working-class Italian American bouncer, who becomes the driver of African American classical pianist Donald Shirley, expertly portrayed by Mahershala Ali. These two actors displayed great charisma and interaction together on screen during this road trip. This film also falls under the buddy film category. Often in that sub-genre, the buddies begin the story as strangers or enemies and, through their Hero’s Journey, become friends before the end of the story. It received an 8.2/10 on the International Movie Database website, 77% on the Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer and a respectable 91% audience score.

For many of us in the 1980s, “Rain Main” brought public awareness to autism and the newer concept of high-functioning autism. Dustin Hoffman plays Raymond Babbitt along with Tom Cruise as Charlie Babbitt. This film is about a sibling relationship but follows the buddy film premise as well. As they travel cross-country, Charlie gets to know the brother he never knew. At first, it’s all about his father’s will and money. In the end, the two grow a brotherly bond. It received an 8.0/10 on IMDb.com, 89% on the Tomatometer and a 90% audience score.

“We’re on a mission from God,” the Catholic “Joliet” Jake and Elwood Blues tell people throughout the film as they strive to save the orphanage where they were raised. “We’re getting the band back together.” With its origin on Saturday Night Live sketches, “The Blues Brothers” focuses on a brotherly relationship between Jake (John Belushi) and Elwood (Dan Aykroyd) but it’s all about the comedy and blues music during a road trip around the Chicago area where we meet blues legends like Cab Calloway, James Brown, Aretha Franklin and Matt “Guitar” Murphy.

“There are 106 miles to Chicago, we have a full tank of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, it’s dark and we’re wearing sunglasses,” Elwood tells his brother. To which Jake replies, “Hit it!” It received a 7.9/10 on IMDb.com, 73% on the Tomatometer and a 92% audience score.

“Tommy Boy” is another buddy film in the tradition of Laurel and Hardy or “The Odd Couple” (1968) where two opposite personalities conflict until they eventually become friends. This one takes place on the road as Thomas “Tommy” Callahan III, played by Chris Farley, and co-worker Richard Hayden, played by David Spade, work to sell auto parts to save Tommy’s family business. Their crazy antics on the road will split your sides. It received a 7.1/10 on IMDb.com, a lowly 42% Tomatometer yet the audience scored it at 90%. Apparently, the critics didn’t get this movie as well as the fans.

The “Zombieland” films are great mash-ups of the horror, action and comedy genres. The first film starts out as a loner film (Jesse Eisenberg as Columbus), turns into a buddy film (Woody Harrelson as Tallahassee), then turns yet again into an ensemble picture (Emma Stone as Wichita and Abigail Breslin and Little Rock)—which gives us time to get to know each of the characters as they travel across the U.S. in search of Twinkies and a safe haven from the zombie apocalypse. That time spent on character development really pays off and we care about these characters on into the second film—despite all of their idiosyncrasies. The first film received a 7.6/10 on IMDb, 89% Tomatometer and an 86% audience score. The second film, “Zombieland: Double Tap” (2019) was one of the later films I saw prior to the start of the pandemic. I remember seeing this one at least four times in the cinema and I kept seeing new things I missed with each viewing. It received a 6.7/10 on IMDb, 69% Tomatometer and an 88% audience score.

## **Local Cinema**

So, as we each consider where that road might take us this summer, I’m happy to note that some of the local cinemas are reopening. Short trips to the cinema are on my desired summer fun list. Regal Laredo & RPX—also called Hollywood—was scheduled to reopen on May 21. Cinemark at Mall del Norte already reopened back in April.

Meanwhile, Alamo Drafthouse Cinema’s corporate offices were unable to renegotiate \$105 million in debt and filed for bankruptcy on March 3, according to an April 26 article on Variety’s website. It was then expected the business would be sold on May 3 to the stalking horse group led by Altamont and Fortress in Delaware bankruptcy court. According to the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema website, the Laredo location will reopen on Friday, July 23. Despite that rocky road, the reopening of that cinema is a huge relief for its fans.

## **July 2021 cinema releases**

After getting its release date jostled, "Black Widow" is slated for a July 9 release. July 16 brings us a return to the Looney Tunes basketball world with "Space Jam: A New Legacy." A battle between the forces of G.I. Joe and vampires begins on July 23 when "Snake Eyes: G.I. Joe Origins" and "Hotel Transylvania: Transformania" release. Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson leads the cast of Disney's "Jungle Cruise" on July 30.

In closing, how could we forget Yoda's most famous quote ever? "Do or do not," he told Luke on Dagobah. "There is no try." But then I hear the echo in my mind of Obi-Wan "Ben" Kenobi during his climactic battle with young Darth Vader—Anakin Skywalker—on the lava planet of Mustafar, "Only a Sith deals in absolutes." I wonder how Yoda would respond to Obi-Wan?

"The show must go on."