



MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

We hope that you have learned a little from our latest film, *An Unfinished Film* from China. We received some good reports and a few less than enthusiastic ones from our members... but it is all an edifying experience and these films expand our horizons and knowledge.

Our next film is purported to be (remember we don't have the opportunity to preview them) a "gentle comedy", chosen by us to be light-hearted before the holiday season.

We wish every one of our members a very Happy Christmas, and a wonderful New Year.

Best wishes to all from your FISH committee,

Roz Garwen



FILMS IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS INC

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FILMS IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS INC

10.00 am Sunday 14th December 2025

8.15 pm Tuesday 16th December 2025

The Movie Teller

***You may prefer to read this review after seeing the film**

Synopsis:

Despite its harsh setting – 1960s Atacama Desert in northern Chile where the main industry is saltpetre mining – this film is a tender comedy in the spirit and style of *Cinema Paradiso* & *The Last Film Show*.

Review: Steve Pond

In 2022, as movies conceived and shot during the COVID-19 pandemic began to be released, we saw a sudden influx of films rejoicing in the act of moviemaking and movie-watching. From Steven Spielberg's *The Fabelmans* to Damien Chazelle's *Babylon*, from Sam Mendes' *Empire of Light* to the Indian Oscar entry *Last Film Show*, a surprising number of films bred during pandemic isolation were movies about movies.

Another movie that belongs in that company is *The Movie Teller*. This Spanish-language film set in Chile and made by a Danish director with a cast whose biggest names are known for French and German movies, puts an international spin on the love of movies and embraces the art of storytelling in a way that is at times profoundly moving.

The film is a mixture of genres, celebrating cinema in one scene and delving into the politics of Chile in the 1960s and '70s in the next. It's a portrait of hardscrabble lives in the Atacama Desert, "the driest place on earth," but also a rapturous celebration of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *The 10 Commandments*, *Pierrot Le Fou*, *Spartacus*, *The Apartment*, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, *From Here to Eternity*, *Paths of Glory* and dozens of other movies. And it's a "Last Picture Show"-style lament for the vanishing days in which strangers came together to sit in the dark and watch images on a big screen. It takes place 50 years ago, but feels appropriate for today — at least for anybody who still loves movies.

Lone Scherfig, best known for her Oscar nominated 2009 drama *An Education*, ended up directing the project that Brazilian director Walter Salles (*The Motorcycle Diaries*, *On the Road*) had been nurturing for years. Based on the bestselling novel by Hernán Rivera Letelier, it was written by Salles, Rafa Russo and Isabel Coixet and filmed in a small mining town in the Atacama Desert, now deserted and empty, where the action is set.

Bérénice Bejo (*The Artist*) and Daniel Brühl (*Inglorious Basterds*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*) get top billing, but the actors who really own the movie are Alondra Valenzuela and Sara Becker. Together, they play María Margarita, a young girl who lives for her family's trips to the local movie theatre every Sunday.

The father, Medardo (Antonio de la Torre), works in the local saltpetre mine, as do almost all the men in the town. The mother, María Magnolia (Bejo), cares for her four children, but still yearns for a life on stage or on screen.

Sunday at the movies is a grand ritual for the family, but that changes when an explosion puts Medardo in a wheelchair and takes away his livelihood. No longer able to afford movie tickets for the entire family, the family sends one child and has them describe the movie to everyone else – and after a couple of her brothers flub the assignment, María Margarita turns out to have a knack for remembering what she saw and capturing it in words.

“That crazy girl narrates black-and-white films like they were in Technicolor and CinemaScope,” says an amazed villager who urges Medardo to charge for his daughter’s weekly appearances as “Rita Valentina, the Movie Teller.”

This part of the story is rendered with delicacy and lyricism, aided by graceful music from Fernando Velazquez. At one point, María Margarita quotes the Shakespeare line, “We are such stuff as dreams are made on,” then adds, “I think we’re made of the same stuff as movies.” In these scenes, *The Movie Teller* finds the rhythms of those dreams and puts them on screen.

But there’s lots more going on than just the movie-telling. María Magnolia leaves her family without notice, forcing María Margarita to turn for help to a boss, Hauser (Brühl), who has always seemed unduly attracted to her mother. The workers try to unionize, hoping to ride the wave of progressivism they see sweeping the country. A local loan shark hires María Margarita to tell him a movie, but has darker plans for her. Plus, the rise of the Pinochet regime threatens to return the country to authoritarianism.

That’s a lot to juggle alongside the story of a young woman’s coming of age, but the haunting performances by Valenzuela as the young María Margarita and especially Becker as the older one, keep the focus on her story. And even when the narrative veers into politics and despair, the movie never loses its faith in the power of cinema and of storytelling itself.

In its happiest moments, *The Movie Teller* is glorious and, yes, a little corny; in its darkest ones, it’s still lovely and sad. And with narration by María Margarita guiding us through the film, we eventually realize that we’re one more audience for Rita Valentina, listening to one more movie.

Source: www.thewrap.com ~ Steve Pond 17/9/2023 Edited extracts accessed 24/6/25

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COMING UP:

Full information on the February to June 2026 screenings will be available on the FISH web site in January.



Some thoughts on: *An Unfinished Film*

I must admit that I came to this film with quite low expectations. The synopsis and review in our newsletter, both sounded fairly underwhelming to me, and perhaps there were some cultural prejudices at play in my mind as well, after my disappointment in our last Chinese outing, *Black Dog*.

However, my initial imagined fears and concerns were totally swept away by an extraordinary piece of cinema that proved to be a powerfully engaging and moving work that evoked feelings of compassion for the infected, gratitude for our own relative avoidance and fear, as the intensity and speed of the epidemic revealed its scale and tragic physical consequences.

The first part of the film/doco turned out to be so much more interesting than anticipated. Real life struggles and stresses of getting the 'gang' back together again, raising enthusiasm levels for completion of a film begun a decade before, dealing with government censors which had led to the original decision to cease production in the first place, dealing with several doubtful and warily reluctant cast members, and the joy of reviewing old footage and reviving antiquated technology, all proved to be fascinating real-life drama. It was a similar situation to that in a previous FISH outing years ago when we screened a doco called *Lost In La Mancha* about a doomed film of Don Quixote by Terry Gilliam, the ex Monty Python member turned director. It was lack of money and atrocious weather in Spain that finally killed the film's completion. This one was a pandemic.

When the Covid Crisis hits, the film launches into overdrive as the disabling reality of it becomes obvious. Previous problems and issues fade into insignificance as the virus is now a matter of life and death. Things that were taken for granted before, like love of family, immediately resume their rightful importance.

The most beautiful shots occur now in the isolating dark, lonely silence of the hotel rooms, while the world outside thrashes in chaos. The following footage of interrupted, desperate phone calls to wives and children at home, are just heartbreaking. I remember one wonderful shot of Jiang's face in the centre of a blackened screen, capturing the loneliness and isolation perfectly. Baby Paopao and wife Sang Qui on the telephone seeking resolution, direction, company and love was just amazing drama, so incredibly moving.

I'd forgotten how devastating the Covid disaster was overseas, particularly in China and even New York. Despite shutdowns, (especially in Victoria), we got by relatively lightly compared to so many other countries. This film was a timely reminder of how thankful we should be, and help us keep our national habit of bemoaning our 'cost of living crisis', in perspective.

This is the wonderful benefit of being a FISH member. If this film had come to our notice on a television ad or a newspaper program, we probably wouldn't have given it a second thought. FISH has given it to us on a plate. We are one very lucky set of cinema patrons.

Ross Armfield
Reviewer in Chief