

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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Critic David Denby Propounds Power of Film as Shared Spectacle

By LAUREN MARTIN

Lamenting in short order “that three and a half hour shambles on Sunday night,” the Academy Awards; the “very stupid piece in the New York Times this morning which implies that the popular movies should have won the awards;” and the news that show-business trade magazine Variety had fired its veteran critic — “that’s really an outrage” — David Denby sounds every bit the articulate, authoratative film critic he is every other week in the New Yorker magazine.



Mr. Denby speaks on Sunday.

Speaking from the city in rapid, vivid and casually complete thoughts, Mr. Denby also laments the bizarre financial calculus of movie studios these days, which is one of the reasons he thinks grownups are not going to the movies so much, which is one of the reasons film festivals are proliferating. Which brings us to why Mr. Denby will be on the Vineyard on Sunday: he’ll be taking questions from grownups at the Martha’s Vineyard Film Festival.

Mr. Denby is fluent in all aspects of the movies, not to mention books (he’s written three, including one on Great Books and the latest, called Snark).

Ask him about financing films (studios and even hedge funds are shying away, but wealthy individuals financed Oscar winner *The Hurt Locker*). Ask about film stars (they don’t make a movie successful any more). Ask about film distribution (they’ll all come by direct download on the Web or video on demand). About criticising films (all the sacked critics should band together and produce a credible online film magazine to counter the “industry suck-up” blogs).

But he waxes warmest if you ask simply about the experience of watching movies — and not on an iPod or an airplane or a 40-inch television screen. In a theatre.

“That was what struck everyone from the beginning,” he says. “That a group of strangers — they may not be strangers on Martha’s Vineyard but in a city they certainly are — gathered in the dark and were awestruck by these enormous images, lit up on the screen, larger than life faces and bodies. And the experience was at the same time both religious almost, in the sense of being overawed, and erotic, in the sense of it being beautiful people.



New Yorker film critic glad Hurt locker won top award.

“People when they come out of a theatre, they are often silent. When they stream out, they’re still playing the movie in their head, they’re still within the movie, in that world, totally surrounded by darkness. And that experience is irreplaceable.

“And obviously Avatar just steroids it,” he says, pausing before trying out a new verb. He was one of the many critics who thought the three-dimensional blockbuster was “swell.” But he also thinks The Hurt Locker was worthy of its best picture Oscar. “It’s good for women, good for independent film and good for taking war as an experience seriously.”

He thinks it’s a shame that films are “going the way of fiction, where you have James Patterson and Danielle Steele, and then you have small novels of sensibility.

“That’s not what Hitchcock and John Ford and Renoir, Chaplin, Keaton thought. They wanted to make movies for everyone.

“The breathing at once with 500 or 200 other people, and the sense of communion of fantasies interlocking among strangers, and that mix of religious and erotic absorption, you can only get that in a theatre,” he says.

Still, the problem of grownups remains. “That’s what the commercial failure of The Hurt Locker suggests. Obviously it was not for kids. It was done realistically.

“But grownups are not going to the movies particularly designated for them,” he says, citing several reasons, including the improvements of home screens. A lot of blame, though, lies like crummy gum with the atmosphere at malls, where most movies play. “It seems to be for kids. It’s noisy, it’s jangly, it’s garishly colored, there’s no decent food.”

But this could change, he said, citing new upscale cinemas. “You could have a real restaurant, a bookstore and a bar... you’d have to charge a few dollars more, maybe, if you had stadium seating and comfy chairs and, oh, for God’s sake, not 40 minutes of ads for the local pizzeria, and then, right?, eight ads for coming attractions which all seem to be the same movie, over and over again, the same car crashing through windows ... that’s turned a lot of people off.”