

FREE FORUM with TERENCE McNALLY - A WORLD THAT JUST MIGHT WORK

ROGER EBERT - Film Critic, Pulitzer Prize winner, multi-Emmy-winner, and Author of his latest bestselling book, "Great Movies II".

Conversation recorded 03-07-06

SOUND UP

TERRENCE: Hello, I'm Terry McNally and welcome to Free Forum. Less than an hour after the final Oscar was awarded Sunday night, I received this e-mail (or an e-mail, at least, that included the following) - I'm reading, I'm quoting, now, from this e-mail - "Blue state values were the big winners at this year's Academy Awards, rewarding blatant anti-family themes of homosexuality, prostitution, pimping, drugs, crime and the overall demonization of America as a bunch of bigots and oil-mongers. Virtually absent from the podium was anything supportive of hard work, self-responsibility, charity, faith or family. The two exceptions were the Supporting Actress Oscar to Reese Witherspoon, who actually deserved the honor, but probably won the extra votes necessary due to her blatant real-life Bush-bashing, and the Best Documentary going to a bunch of penguins who were neither blue nor red. They were values neutral black and white, but the fact that it was a pro-environmental film probably didn't hurt. Selecting Jon Stewart as its host only offers more proof the Academy's taken a turn to the far left. Stewart uses his show to attack President Bush nightly and he freely admits he voted for Democrat John Kerry in 2004.

ROGER: Freely admits.

TERRENCE: "Freely admits. It's time for us -

ROGER: He's open - He's openly Democratic.

TERRENCE: Openly votes in this - for, for one of the major candidates. "It's time for us to stand up against this filth." That was what I received. It got my attention. I decided that I'd better deal with this assault on the sense and sensibility of American moviegoers and who better to talk about films, culture, Hollywood history, than America's top film critic, Roger Ebert.

ROGER: Terrence, how are you?

TERRENCE: I'm great. Let me give 'em a little bio on you, Roger, though you are a guest who needs no introduction. But Roger has been a film critic at the Chicago Sun Times since 1967. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 1975, the same year of the T.V. debut of the multi-Emmy-winning Siskel & Ebert until Gene Siskel's untimely death at 53 in 1999, but the program has continued with Richard Roeper as Ebert and Roeper and is now syndicated in more than 200 markets. Ebert is the author of bestselling books and his latest, h is "Great Movies II," just out in paperback, and he will be appearing tonight at the Barnes and Noble on the Santa Monica Promenade to do a book signing and a talk at 7:30 pm for those lucky enough to get there. Third

Street Promenade, Barnes & Noble, at the corner of Wilshire and the Promenade to meet Roger Ebert, but listeners meet him right now.

ROGER: But Terry, your correspondent, didn't they see the family values in "Hustle and Flow?"

TERRENCE: I think they had an agenda, Roger.

ROGER: Here is a movie about a man who is a pimp. That's his job. He's also a sexist pig, but he's a good a pimp as he can be and that's the best job that he can find and he decides he wants to be a rap artist and the process by which he tries to make a demo (and he incorporates musicians from his local church) and he builds that little soundstage and he starts doing his, uh - Terry is adjusting my microphone. I bet I sound a lot better now.

TERRENCE: You do.

ROGER: Okay. He is redeemed by work and art and by the end of the film, he has a different view of himself. He no longer has any desire to be a pimp and he has a better attitude toward women. So, "Hustle and Flow" is an extremely positive film in terms of upholding these traditional conservative values.

TERRENCE: I know.

ROGER: I will also say that they are liberal values, as well.

TERRENCE: Yes, yes. And I would say, "Tsotsi," which starts out as dark as it possibly could and then, by the -

ROGER: A criminal who has no conscience at all is transformed by coming, accidentally, into possession of a baby. Yes.

TERRENCE: I think that one, by the way, has mythic - I can see, like, Greek myths with the same storyline, you know.

ROGER: And as for "Crash," I mean, your conservative correspondent should have realized that what it does is pull the rug out from under liberal complacency and say, look, racism is very complicated. It's not just top down. It's also sideways. One day you're a victim. One day you're a victimizer. You have to look at yourself. You're not the good guy and the other people are not the bad people over there. Everybody, on a given day, can let themselves down, or let the race down.

TERRENCE: And what is also clearly -

ROGER: The human race.

TERRENCE: What "Crash" clearly shows is how even thinking blue/red, black/white, any of those things, the day is gone for that. I mean, in "Crash" I didn't count it, but there must be eight, ten different ethnic groups.

ROGER: You know, I don't know when blue and red started, but I think it's funny that the Republicans got to be red. Isn't that strange?

TERRENCE: (LAUGHTER) Right. And one thinks they probably came up with it.

ROGER: I don't know. It was probably some map on Fox News or something.

TERRENCE: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

TERRENCE: We jumped right in that because, as I said, that is something I got. There is this agenda, this Hollywood baiting. Let's deal with that just a little more. What is your sense of what is going on with this politicization of films and culture. I mean, I remember the Nixon culture wars, as you do, but this seems to me to be more virulent, more purposeful.

ROGER: You mean the war against these films. Well, there's also the war within these films. Since I thought that "Crash" was the best film of the year, I've gotten a lot of e-mails. Now, when "Crash" won as Best Picture, I've gotten a lot of e-mails accusing me of being a homophobe.

TERRENCE: (LAUGHS)

ROGER: Even though "Brokeback Mountain" was also in my Top Five films of the year and I've never said one word against that movie, which I love and admire. I just happen to feel the other film was better and some of the supporters of "Brokeback" really, I think, don't want to hear any reason why it shouldn't have won because they are so supportive of its agenda, which is kind of, I guess, that anyone can be gay, even a cowboy in 1972 in Wyoming, but I don't really think the movie is about that. I think it's about - I really think it's about two men who are destroyed by their unwillingness to accept their homosexuality, especially one of them.

TERRENCE: Yeah, although I - You mean the one who's murdered, or the one who is destroyed.

ROGER: Now, that's a question I want to ask you.

TERRENCE: Okay.

ROGER: Is he murdered? The interesting thing is, the movie only has one flashback in it, if it is a flashback. It's not a flashback. It's a flash-vision.

TERRENCE: It's almost a hallucination.

ROGER: In which he pictures -

TERRENCE: And very quick. I mean, I can imagine it's very few frames even.

ROGER: Now, is that what really happened. Or is that what he imagines happened because of his childhood experience when his father took him to see those guys that were beaten up. Or did he, you know, was Jack really - Jack's the guy, yeah -

TERRENCE: Yeah.

ROGER: Was he really maybe killed by an exploding tire.

TERRENCE: Now what's interesting is, I hadn't analyzed it after the fact, but in the moment, in the dark room -

ROGER: You assume that's what happened to him.

TERRENCE: It hit me that he was murdered.

ROGER: But the movie has not established any rules for flashbacks.

TERRENCE: That's right.

ROGER: Usually in a film you have certain rules that you're given as to whose flashback it is, what they're imagining, whether it's real or not.

TERRENCE: Is it reliable?

ROGER: So it was quite possible that Innis could imagine his friend being beaten up because of his own childhood experiences and that, in fact, he wasn't beaten up.

TERRENCE: You're right. That's right.

ROGER: You don't know. You know he's dead.

TERRENCE: By the way, the thing that I thought that film was about, even more than two men's inability was that it seemed to me the core of that film was Delmar, Delmar's character as someone who was just so broken, so abandoned that when he reaches out somehow to Jack, -

ROGER: Yeah.

TERRENCE: That that's the first and only time, except for his daughters, that he ever really does. As we see with that beautiful young woman who is willing to befriend him, you know, in the last third and he can't quite come up for that either.

ROGER: Yeah, yeah.

TERRENCE: And it seemed to me that it's about someone who never thought he would experience love and once he did, he didn't matter what it was.

ROGER: Yeah. You know, one thing interesting about Innes Del Mar is that in the short story, he's a Mexican American.

TERRENCE: I know that.

ROGER: And he was cast as an Anglo in this film. Why did they do that? Did they decide you could only have so many issues in one film? I don't want to have an inter-racial gay love story. Was that what they were thinking?

TERRENCE: I don't know. That was something - I hadn't read the short story and when I found that out, I thought it was very curious, which makes Annie Proulx's short story even more textured.

ROGER: She's so wonderful.

TERRENCE: [Station ID] I'm Terry McNally and I'm speaking with Roger Ebert, Pulitzer Prize-winning film critic, co-host "Ebert & Roeper," bestselling author. His latest is "Great Movies II." So that's the sequel, huh?

ROGER: Sort of, yeah, -

TERRENCE: - which is just out in paperback and he'll be appearing tonight for a book signing and a talk at the Barnes and Noble on the Third Street Promenade at the corner of Wilshire and Santa Monica. That's 7:30 tonight. You can meet Roger and hear him talk a little bit because, obviously, the Academy Awards, this time around, got some controversy going. Have we - I remember when "Shakespeare in Love" beat "Saving Private Ryan," there was some talk, but there was nothing like this. This, to me, has been the most - I sort of call it the "Crash" flash, right?

ROGER: Hmm mmm. Geez, that's what we used on our website this morning.

TERRENCE: Oh, was it? Okay?

ROGER: A lot of people were surprised that it won, although it was predicted it in various places. I predicted it. "Time" magazine, "Entertainment Weekly."

TERRENCE: Really? I didn't realize.

ROGER: Now, there are various reasons for it to have won, in addition to the fact - You know, there's a widespread theory now that it won because of homophobia.

TERRENCE: Well, it's widespread by -

ROGER: By some people, yeah, that the Academy didn't want to embrace a film like this. On the other hand, they gave it Best Pic - First, they nominated it, then they gave it Best Picture. Then, they gave it Best Screenplay and they gave Best Actor to Truman Capote, essentially. So maybe it won not because the Academy is homophobic. Maybe it won, maybe, because a lot of people thought it was the best film or because, in the real politic of the Academy, here's a movie that had twenty-four major actors in it, each one of those actors has agents, partners, managers, friends, families, and it was shot in the valley.

TERRENCE: Rather than in Canada where "Brokeback" was and where so many films go these days.

ROGER: And so there were a lot of people who were Academy voters who actually had a personal connection with someone on that film. And then you have people, who like Don Cheadle, who really should have been onstage as one of the producers and, of course, they had that big fight over who was going on stage. I thought they should have had the whole cast onstage. That would have been great for the last shot. It's kind of that climactic -

TERRENCE: And it would have shown an ensemble still works and all of that.

ROGER: But people knew that Don Cheadle essentially was the person who rounded up that cast and Terrence Howard, for example, was paid \$7,500.00 to make that movie.

TERRENCE: I know.

ROGER: As opposed to the \$12,000.00 he made for "Hustle and Flow." So it might have won because it just had a lot of backing from people who had a personal connection with the film.

TERRENCE: That's right. Once you're not - once there isn't a dominant, big budget blockbuster, then the fact that that film was such a - they also sent out DVD's to everyone in the Screen Actors Guild.

ROGER: Yeah, but of course, everyone gets DVD's of everything.

TERRENCE: No, no, no, as a Screen Actors Guild member, not a member of the Academy, the only one I got was "Crash."

ROGER: Wow.

TERRENCE: And what I think it is is that - I mean, what the thought was in the L.A. Times today is that there you've got this loyal body. This is an actor's movie. This is driven by the acting.

ROGER: Well, that's represented by 40% of the votes in the Academy.

TERRENCE: Yes, exactly, exactly. So, but let's -

ROGER: And with that cast, by the way, you've got your Kevin Bacon factor going because you've got so many different kinds of actors, from different kinds of backgrounds. I mean, you've got Sandra Bullock. You've got Tony Danza. I mean, look who's in that movie. Chris Ludacris, they, you know, they reach out - It's, like, between - Somebody in that cast knows everybody in town.

TERRENCE: Absolutely, yeah. There was a lot of talk prior to - and I quoted the right-wingers first because I think this is such a, it is a phenomenon. You know, Tom Frank talks about it in "What's Wrong With Kansas?" If you talk about tax cuts for the rich and stiffing the working poor, you're doing class warfare, but if you talk about the Hollywood elite, and the University's elite, that's okay. And so I think that's why -

ROGER: But this movie - none of these movies were made by the Hollywood elite. These five movies were made by the Hollywood outsiders and they were all made on shoe strings of one size or another.

TERRENCE: These five movies all seem to have a message. To your mind, is this a good time for film? Is this a good -

ROGER: I think it's very interesting that the Academy nominated such a good group of pictures and performances this year and they're not necessarily just left-wing, knee jerk pictures. "Syriana," - What is the message of "Syriana?" I mean, "Syriana's" message, I think, is nobody understands the world of oil and money. Nobody. For example, the George Clooney character is in the CIA and doesn't realize the role he's playing within the CIA and how the agency is treating him and you can go right through that movie and it doesn't matter if a Republican is in the White House or a Democrat is in the White House. According to this movie, they're gonna have to deal with Saudi Arabia because we have to have the oil.

TERRENCE: Right.

ROGER: And so we have to do whatever it takes to get oil. And so the movie is more like a realistic film. It's not a left-wing film.

TERRENCE: Exactly. I agree. I mean, it actually - and the fact that it doesn't have easy answers is, in fact, what makes it more realistic.

ROGER: (OVERLAPPING) It doesn't have any answers. In fact, you were telling me right before the show, Stephen Gagan, who wrote it, deliberately put in three story elements that didn't relate to anything just to show that you're in a universe of events.

TERRENCE: Yeah, in speaking - after a screening once, he said there were three incidents - because someone asked about the child's death - and he said that was one of the three things we just decided we have to put in, sort of like wild cards.

ROGER: Yeah.

TERRENCE: You know, there's all this global context, oil, politics -

ROGER: Hmm mm. Now, is "Capote" a left-wing film? No, "Capote" is about an author from New York who goes to Kansas to cover a murder and that man happens to be gay and, uh, there's maybe one brief shot in the film where he walks across the street and goes into a bar. That's it and it's an exterior.

TERRENCE: You're saying the one moment when he actually does anything that's gay besides being Truman Capote.

ROGER: Yeah. Apparently, he's going into that bar - we never go into the bar with him - looking for some kind of companionship.

TERRENCE: He's looking for Dennis Quaid from -

ROGER: Not after the Golden Globes he isn't.

TERRENCE: You know what I -

ROGER: Yeah, yeah. But, uh, that's not - I mean, is that a pro-gay film? No, it's a film about a homosexual writer and the book that he wrote.

TERRENCE: Yeah, it's about creativity. It's about manipulation. It's about all that sort of thing.

ROGER: But the right wing would say, "Oh, you can't have these movies about these homosexuals," no matter what they're doing. And that's the kind of e-mail that you're reading because, basically, that's the values that they have.

TERRENCE: Oh yeah, and, as you said, couldn't they see the family values in this film or that film? No, no because it's all driven by an agenda and it's really not about the films and it's not about the characters. It's about the agenda, yeah. Um, so you think, um, - I think in your answer to "Is this a good time for film?" your -

ROGER: It's a good - Well, you know, I was on a different kind of talk show last night. I was on the Jay Leno show.

TERRENCE: Oh, very different.

ROGER: And Jay said, "Has Hollywood -

TERRENCE: Me and Jay do this all the time, you know, trade guests.

ROGER: Has Hollywood lost touch with the movie going public? And I said, "No, the movie-going public has lost touch with good films." It's not Hollywood. It's the fact that, you know, I actually believe that, at some point, since we were in school, American education has failed this country and we now have a group of young people - I'm not talking about all of them, but large numbers of them - who are denied an adequate education and denied the kind of reading and writing that you need in order to be a literate person. For example, the first six weekends of the year were won by horror movies that were not screened for the critics by studios because they were ashamed of them. Um, good movies are made. Good movies are seen, but the box office hits are increasingly not even, you know, what we think of as clichéd studio blockbusters. They're low-budget, slasher and horror movies. Now, I like a good horror movie, but what I'm saying is these movies essentially are pitching to the lowest common denominator and connecting.

TERRENCE: I'll tell you I got a ride yesterday from a rental car pick-up, a young Latino, probably twenty. I said, "Did you see 'Crash' and what did you think of it?" And he said, "Yeah, I saw it and I liked it." I said, "What was your favorite film last year?" And he said, "Saw II."

ROGER: Yeah, uh huh.

TERRENCE: Although he said it wasn't as good as "Saw I."

ROGER: But let me tell you something. The "Saw" pictures are not the worst of those. Wait until you see "Chaos." Wait til you see "Chaos" or - I want to say "Mean Creek," I think it may be a different kind of - Well, anyway, I see movies that are absolutely - well, "The Hills Have Eyes," which is coming out this week is pretty disgusting.

TERRENCE: One of the crazy, big questions that I ask people sometimes is, "Is this the first society that's ever pitched its largest, most important cultural artifacts at teenage boys?"

ROGER: That's what's happening. I mean, and that's one reason - talk about the fall off at the box office - frankly, some older viewers and by that I mean people from around 23 years old up, don't necessarily want to go to the multiplex on Friday night because they're gonna be in a room of rude, loud, ill behaved - I mean, I'm sounding like Jon Voight. After the Oscars, they quoted Jon Voight at the Vanity Fair party. "What did you think of the show?" He said, "Well, I liked the show. The young people were well behaved." And I thought, "Who - this is 'Midnight Cowboy.' The young people were well behaved?! I mean, who are we talking to, Fred McMurray? I mean, who is this?"

TERRENCE: Well, it's Jolie's dad. That's who we're talking to.

ROGER: And another reason that the box office is falling off, and this is something that nobody seems to be picking up on, is the multiplex shuffle. This is a phenomenon that you have to go and observe for yourself. You go to a movie theater on Saturday afternoon. At a given time, you will notice, not necessarily that people are talking on their cell phones. They're texting. You can see the light screens light up. They are going to the movie times on the web and they are in touch with each other by messaging. They've sent messages and they are saying to each other - let's say there are six or seven people in this theater, you know - um, "Saw II" opens in five minutes in theater, Screen 7.

TERRENCE: Let's get out of here.

ROGER: And then they'll all stand up and leave at once. And then they'll - they buy one ticket and they go to two or three, or parts of -

TERRENCE: So, what you're saying -

ROGER: Let me get to the point of this which is interesting. If they had bar codes on the tickets, you could only go into the theater you bought a ticket for, but they won't put bar codes on the tickets and why not? It's not the studios. It's the theaters. Sometimes when you buy a ticket at a theater, it is not to the movie that you think you're going to see because a brand new movie in its first week of release, 90% of the ticket goes to the studio. The longer the movie is held over, the larger percentage the theater gets to keep. So the theater - you go into the first run of 'King Kong' and they give you a ticket to their ninth week of "March of the Penguins," and therefore they get to keep more of the money.

TERRENCE: Right.

ROGER: But you don't know that because your ticket doesn't necessarily have a name of a movie on it.

TERRENCE: It probably has a little number. So, yeah, so the studios aim all their promotion at the big opening and that's another reason why they've shifted to these big openings, films that weren't even viewed for critics and so on because they're making the biggest money first weekend and second weekend and the distributor does other things because they're money.

ROGER: So the long run is also, of course, being phased out because DVD's come along so quickly.

TERRENCE: And that- and only help - and that's another thing, if you subtract from the gate, but you add to the DVD, they haven't lost a thing. [Station I.D.] I'm Terry McNally and I'm speaking with Roger Ebert, film critic, co-host "Ebert & Roeper," and Roger will be appearing tonight at the Barnes and Noble in Santa Monica, at the corner of Wilshire and the 3rd Street Promenade at 7:30 tonight for a talk and book signing with his newest book, "Great Movies II, Essays About a Hundred Great Movies." Let me also tell people that upcoming on "Free Forum" next week, live, Louis Lapham, editor of Harpers Magazine and it - Do your homework. Before the show, go pick up, either the Harpers Magazine or go to the web of Harpers Magazine because his lead essay, the cover story by Louis Lapham this month, is the "Case for Impeachment" and that's what we will be talking about next week. So, do your homework and meet you here again next week. Also, some upcoming interviews will be with Hubert Sauper, the director of the Oscar-nominated "Darwin's Nightmare," uh, Joe Conneson (??), Robert Thurman, and some others.

TERRENCE: This DVD thing - I notice that in your new book, you've learned something from DVD's. You like the DVD experience.

ROGER: Well, of course, although I like the big screen experience, too. There are two movies in the book, "Rules of the Game," and "Children of Paradise," which are on anybody's list of the - well, "Children of Paradise" was voted Best French Film ever made.

TERRENCE: And "Rules of the Game" are usually in the top five or ten.

ROGER: "Rules of the Game" was number 2 in the "Sight and Sound" poll of the greatest films of all time. I felt, until I saw them, on the Criterion collection disks, I had never really seen them because I saw them on beat up 16 mm film prints in film class. I saw them at repertory theaters. I saw them at crummy VHS tapes that were faded and made from bad prints. Now, Renoire, for example, in "Rules of the Game," which I did out of Boulder. You know, I do that shout at a time in Boulder where we both go every year to that conference.

TERRENCE: That's how we know each other, yeah.

ROGER: On the DVD, there's a scene in an upstairs corridor of the country house and people are entering and leaving all along the corridor from the back to the front. Until I saw the DVD, I couldn't clearly see what was happening in that corridor and couldn't appreciate Renoire's deep focus. So, DVDs, uh, can be restored to allow us to see a film in a way that we never really got to see it before.

TERRENCE: Now, what I notice is, of course, because of the way you see films, you probably have seen them in a darkened room first and then see them on DVD.

ROGER: Well, I had taught "Rules of the Game" in film class and still had never really been able to see it like this. But, on the other hand, the problem with the DVD coming out right away is that it shortens the run and there are certain kinds of film that - a teenage action picture can open, play three weeks and close - but there are kinds of films that need to build an audience through word of mouth -

TERRENCE: Well, "Crash" -

ROGER: Like "Crash."

TERRENCE: "Crash" built over nine or ten weeks.

ROGER: I know. It opened in May and it was still playing in August. But, on the other hand, can you guess - you know, the Internet Movie Data Base -

TERRENCE: Yeah.

ROGER: Which is the largest source of movies on the planet -

TERRENCE: IMDB - where you can see how many times I died on television.

ROGER: They have the list of the top 250 films as voted by their worldwide audience. Okay, I'm gonna give you a clue. Number One is "The Godfather." What is number two?

TERRENCE: E.T.

ROGER: No. "The Shawshank Redemption." And that movie has been in the top 5 of IMDB for ten years.

TERRENCE: Amazing.

ROGER: And when it opened, it did more business every week than the week before and then it had to close because of a video deadline.

TERRENCE: I got it. Tell you what, we have one minute left.

ROGER: Okay.

TERRENCE: What I want to ask you is, I didn't know you wrote Op Eds. I was gonna say, you know, you've been at this a long time. Movies may be good or bad, but the

country and the society looks like it's in a pickle. Have you - I was gonna ask, have you thought about moving your attention to the broader context, but obviously when you write Ob Eds you do. Tell me a little bit about that.

ROGER: Okay, well I just wrote a bit about George Bush especially during the debates because I thought he was just hammered to pieces. The rabbit - the "deer in the headlights" syndrome. He was at a loss for words. He's not intelligent enough. He's not well spoken enough. When you look at him, you just don't believe that he understands or cares about what he's saying. And maybe I'm prejudiced, okay. You know, I guess everybody is. I don't know what objectivity is because to be human is to be subjective, but I uh, I was really disappointed in - how many things does he have to do wrong? I mean, maybe you can ask Louis Lapham that, but now, things are piling up so quickly.

TERRENCE: Oh, yes, but when you have 34% approval ratings. I mean, obviously people have caught on. The one thing I say, Roger, is that the Rove Right Bush Republicans are electoral savants.

ROGER: They know how to get elected.

TERRENCE: Only good at demonizing and winning elections - demonizing opponents, winning elections. They have no inclination or talent for governing, not even interested in it. Everything is a political calculation and right now it's losing.

TERRENCE: Okay, I've got to tell people that you've been listening to Terry McNally speaking to Roger Ebert. Join me next week. My guest will be Louis Lapham and we're gonna talk about impeachment. E-mail me at temcnally@atg.net and I'll put you on a list of what's coming up or if you want CD's of all shows. Thank you to my engineer, Stan Misraje in production and Matt Perez in traffic and to you, my listeners. Thank you, Roger Ebert. Keep up the good work.

ROGER: Keep up the good work, Terry.

END OF TAPE