

Ballet, battles and bravado



By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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For one evening, the Bolshoi Ballet takes on a new challenge with audacity in an exhilarating encounter with the masters of contemporary choreography in *A Contemporary Evening*. Two 17th-century Portuguese missionaries face the ultimate test of faith at a time when Christianity was outlawed and their presence forbidden in *Silence*. The idyllic existence of an all-American is shattered by social and political turmoil in *American Pastoral*. 900 migratory workers rise up against the landowners in *In Dubious Battle*. An ex-maid of honour decides to hold her head up high and attend her oldest friend's wedding in *Table 19*, and Caesar plans to absorb the villagers into Roman culture by having an estate built next to the village to start a new Roman colony in the animated *Asterix and Obelix: The Mansions of the Gods*.

Silence

Two 17th-century Portuguese missionaries, Father Sebastian Rodrigues (Andrew Garfield) and Father Francisco Garupe (Adam Driver), embark on a perilous journey to Japan to find their missing mentor (Liam Neeson). While there, the two men minister to the Christian villagers who worship in secret. If caught by feudal lords or ruling samurai, they must renounce their faith or face a prolonged and agonising death. They face the ultimate test of faith at a time when Christianity was outlawed and their presence forbidden.

It took celebrated director Martin Scorsese 28 years to bring Shusaku Endo's 1966 acclaimed novel to life.

The first time he read the book, *Silence* made a huge impression on Martin Scorsese – it seemed to speak to him personally.

“The subject matter presented by Endo in his book has been in my life since I was very, very young,” Scorsese says. “I was raised in a strong Catholic family and was very much involved in religion. The bedrock I still have is the spirituality of Roman Catholicism I was immersed in as a child, spirituality that had to do with faith.”

Scorsese says that while reading the book he was astonished to discover it confronted the very deep and profound issues about Christianity that, as he puts it, "I still cope with constantly."

"At this time in my life I continually think about - wonder about-- faith and doubt, weakness, and the human condition, and these are the very themes that Endo's book touches upon in a such a direct way."

"I was raised Catholic, and at one point in my teens, I felt a deep connection to my religion," he says. "As the years passed I found myself questioning the Church's dogmas. I see how a strong faith helps people deal with life. But what exactly does faith mean? And do we need a church hierarchy or organised religion to experience it? Filming *Silence* was a way for me to think about these issues and express them visually through lighting and camera work."

American Pastoral

Based on the Pulitzer-winning Phillip Roth novel, it follows an all-American family across several decades, as their idyllic existence is shattered by social and political turmoil that will change the fabric of American culture forever.

Ewan McGregor (*Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*, *Beginners*) makes his directorial debut and stars as Seymour "Swede" Levov, a once legendary high school athlete who is now a successful businessman married to Dawn, a former beauty queen. But turmoil brews beneath the polished veneer of Swede's life. When his beloved daughter, Merry, disappears after being accused of committing a violent act, Swede dedicates himself to finding her and reuniting his family. What he discovers shakes him to the core, forcing him to look beneath the surface and confront the chaos that is shaping the modern world around him: no American family will ever be the same.

Screenwriter John Romano, who has holds a Ph.D. in Literature and has taught English at Columbia University, was drawn to a story that not only spans one of the most dizzying periods of transition in American life — from the post-WWII positivity and conformity of the late 1940s through the uncorked turmoil and disruption of the 1970s — but also moves between huge historical events and their entwining with the most private family moments. "I knew the book well and thought

it was the best book about the sixties written from the perspective of the Vietnam War revolution on the home front," recalls Romano. "Roth was looking at the family and the psychological roots of youth revolt," stated Romano. "His focus, and thus our focus, is on the human experience."

McGregor was attached to play the central character of the Swede in *American Pastoral* long before signing on to direct the film. Ultimately, it was his love of the material that led to his decision to take a leap into his feature film directorial debut. "I was very moved by the script and I was completely taken by the Swede and the study of father-daughter relationships," he says. "He's a man who believes very much in living his life the right way. He's a product of the post-war era and he absolutely embodies the idea that there was once a seemingly attainable American Dream. In a sense, the Swede is the American Dream and his daughter Merry is the '60s."

In Dubious Battle

In California apple country, 900 migratory workers rise up against the landowners. The group takes on a life of its own, stronger than its individual members and more frightening. Led by the doomed Jim Nolan (Nat Wolff), the strike is founded on his tragic idealism and the philosophy to never submit or yield.

Directed by and starring James Franco. Also starring Vincent D'Onofrio, Selena Gomez.

In Dubious Battle is a novel written by John Steinbeck in 1936. The central figure of the story is an activist for "the Party" (possibly the American Communist Party or the Industrial Workers of the World, although it is never specifically named in the novel) who is organising a major strike by fruit pickers, seeking thus to attract followers to his cause. This marks Steinbeck's supreme interest in what happens to men's minds and hearts when they function, not as responsible, self-governing individuals, but as members of a group.

"It's very topical - the idea of battling 'the man' will always be relevant," says Franco. "Unions, wages, 1%ers vs. the rest, strikes — these are things that will always be relevant as long as there is an exclusive upper class resting on a larger lower class. But what I was really interested in showing was man in conflict with himself."

"With Steinbeck, I was trying to be as faithful to his spirit as possible. Some things changed from the novel, mainly character developments, because Steinbeck was still learning how to create fully dimensional characters when he wrote this early book. We added dimension to all the characters, and wove them together more, sort of like an Altman film."

Table 19

Ex-maid of honour Eloise (Anna Kendrick) - having been relieved of her duties after being unceremoniously dumped by the best man via text - decides to hold her head up high and attend her oldest friend's wedding anyway. She finds herself seated at the 'random' table in the back of the ballroom with a disparate group of strangers, most of who should have known to just send regrets (but not before sending something nice off the registry). As everyone's secrets are revealed, Eloise learns a thing or two from the denizens of Table 19. Friendships - and even a little romance - can happen under the most unlikely circumstances. Directed by Jeffrey Blitz.

"It's basically about the loser table at the wedding," says Blitz. "Where do you put all the single people or the freaks or the losers? It's kind of, if we get it right, it's Breakfast Club as adults at a wedding."

Asterix and Obelix: Mansion of the Gods

French-Belgian 3D computer-animated adventure family comedy film written and directed by Alexandre Astier. In order to wipe out the Gaulish village by any means necessary, Caesar plans to absorb the villagers into Roman culture by having an estate built next to the village to start a new Roman colony. It is based on the comic book Asterix: The Mansions of the Gods, which was the seventeenth book in the comic book series Asterix by Goscinny and Uderzo.

A Contemporary Evening

This innovative production forms part of the current season of seven wonderful ballets from Russia's Bolshoi Ballet company – one of the world's great powerhouses of classical ballet – currently being screened at Ster-Kinekor's Nouveau theatres. Don't miss the encounter between some of the best dancers in the world and the masters of contemporary choreography in the form of Hans Van Manen's Frank Bridge Variations, Sol León and Paul Lightfoot's Short Time Together and Alexei Ratmansky's Russian Seasons. This encounter between some of the best dancers in the world and masters of contemporary choreography results in an outstanding synthesis of bringing Van Manen's formal beauty, León and Lightfoot's intensity, and Ratmansky's witty brilliance to a new level. This exciting once-off production was filmed live from the Bolshoi on 19 March for broadcast into cinemas worldwide, including here in South Africa. With music from Benjamin Britten, Max Richter, Ludwig van Beethoven and Leonid Desyatnikov, the ballet features the Bolshoi principals, soloists and corps de ballet.

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