



**THE AUSTRALIAN** ★  
**In Arts on Friday, David Stratton on the best and worst films of 2014**

**Best of Boxing Day**

BOXING Day is the biggest cinema-going day of the year and, once again, Australians have diverse choices, even if much of the better-quality offerings await later in January. **The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies** brings Peter Jackson's interminable Tolkien adaptations to a close with fitting sound and fury. For scale and a little more subtlety and serenity, Russell Crowe's **The Water Diviner** is a Gallipoli tale with emotion, shot handsomely by *Lord of the Rings* Oscar winner Andrew Lesnie. The art houses will be full with audiences revelling in another grumpy and endearing performance from Bill Murray, this time in the thin but fun adult comedy **St Vincent**. There's less humour in Timothy Spall's interpretation of the grand British painter in Mike Leigh's **Mr Turner**, although he will win an Academy award nomination. For the kids, the Disney and Marvel hybrid **Big Hero 6** is the pick of the season along with the holdover **Paddington**, ahead of another **Night at the Museum** (3) starring Ben Stiller and **Dr Proctor's Fart Powder**, which is self-explanatory.

**Michael Bodey**

Left and below left, Spall as JMW Turner in Leigh's *Mr Turner*; the actor spent two years learning to paint in preparation for the role, which won him a best actor award at Cannes

great art critic John Ruskin (Joshua McGuire) as an effete mummy's boy who can't pronounce his Rs has raised a few hackles.

"Apparently some guy wants to sue me for defamation of Ruskin!" Leigh says, barking a laugh. "It's not an arbitrary caricature, Ruskin was a cosseted prig with precocious opinions. Of course he is to be taken seriously in the grander span of his life achievements, but if one were ever to have met him I don't think he'd be a million miles from our expression of the essence of something."

"But that is not a statement about critics," he adds in response to a question. "It never occurred to me. A good critic is a good critic and a bad critic is a bad critic, and there are plenty of them." He folds his hands over his paunch. "Next question," he says.

LEIGH isn't the easiest of interviewees. Long used to spending weeks or months in one-to-one improvisations with actors before pulling various strands together for filming, his mind is as focused as his appearance first seemed when I walked in. If he veers off the track at any point during his long, thoughtful answers, he comes back to it eventually ("Let me finish," he says when I glance at my notes). Any vagueness on my part, any stating of the bleeding obvious, is pounced on, read as an invitation to be benignly mocked.

I wonder about the film's final scene, why he chose to finish on this emotion instead of another, reassuring him that I won't be giving the ending away. "Not when you can read about it in books," he quips.

His earthy, no-nonsense demeanour probably has much to do with his northern English roots. Born in industrial Manchester, the son of a doctor from a Jewish immigrant family



**[LEIGH ELEVATES] EVERYDAY NOTHINGNESS INTO GREAT DRAMA**

TIMOTHY SPALL

(whose surname was originally Lieberman), he attended an all-boys grammar school with a strong tradition of drama, and spent free time watching movies in his local fleapit: "I'd sit there thinking wouldn't it be great if you could have a film in which the characters were like real people instead of being like actors."

It wasn't until Leigh moved to London to take up a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art ("to my utter astonishment") that he discovered such films: the so-called British new wave spearheaded by the likes of Tony Richardson; *Shadows*, an improvised film by US director John Cassavetes; and the street-smart

French films of Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and the nouvelle vague school, which proved the biggest influence: "The real, fundamental, anarchic, status quo-challenging, breathing-real-air aspect of it," he has said.

Leigh honed his directing skills at East 15 Acting School in Essex, where he met actress Alison Steadman, to whom he was married from 1973 until 2001; their sons Toby, 36, and Leo, 32, are an illustrator and filmmaker respectively. (The latter's documentary about the making of *Mr Turner* is out in the new year.) He would go on to direct plays at the Royal Shakespeare Company and devise projects at Manchester Youth Theatre; in the 1970s he made nine TV plays including *Abigail's Party*, featuring a pregnant Steadman.

Before any of this, there was art: "By the time I was 14 I could tell you about Picasso and the impressionists and Dali and the surrealists and all sorts." Not Turner? "I thought his stuff was for chocolate boxes or biscuit tin lids. I wasn't interested in landscapes, although I was an avid camper and hiker. I used to be sent to stay with my grandparents in the Hertfordshire countryside — that rural unsullied world that Turner painted before all the hedges got pulled up."

He pauses, smiles. "It wasn't until I went to the Camberwell School of Arts in 1963 [a year-long foundation course before a stint at the London Film School] that I started thinking about figurative painting. You couldn't be a London art student without starting to twig Turner and the way he anticipated the impressionists and 20th-century art, even artists like Rothko. Slowly, he just sort of grew on me."

Leigh was as inspired by Camberwell as he was disappointed by RADA ("which was very superficial and old-fashioned back then"), largely thanks to the life drawing classes he at-

tended. He calls them a revelation: "They made me think about the creative process, of the possibilities of what actors could do, only because everyone was standing around a [life] model, looking at something real and trying to find a way of expressing it. My thoughts were, 'We have not found a way of expressing this at RADA, ever.'"

Looking at something real, trying to find a way of expressing it — isn't this a sort of manifesto for his films? Leigh eyes me beadily. "Manifesto? If you say so," he grumbles.

"I was just formulating notions of what I went on to do, really."

He says that his biggest influence is people, since he finds people endlessly fascinating. Everybody matters. Everybody is the potential central character in a story. Not everybody has to be British, either; while Leigh has famously refused to move to Hollywood ("I'd rather poke steel pins in my eyes"), in 1989 he devised the acclaimed play *Greek Tragedy* with an ensemble cast of Greek-Australian actors including Zoe Carides and Nicholas Papademetriou at Company B, now Belvoir, in Sydney.

We talk about Australia, about the people and the space and the outback. About the time he took the Ghan from Adelaide to Alice, then drove on up to Darwin by himself. "My friends in Melbourne and Sydney said, 'Whatever you do, don't leave the road and go for a walk.' A bit different to driving around England."

Interview over, Leigh pulls the strands together.

"I think Turner would have been more than inspired by the Australian landscape," he says with a smile. "And the light."

"He really would have loved that light."

**Mr Turner opens nationally on December 26.**



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