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The Pulitzers: The View at 100

Sylvie Drake · Wednesday, July 19th, 2017

First Run Features' video celebrating the first 100 years of the Pulitzer Prize launches in New York tomorrow (July 21). It is a smooth and mostly enjoyable trip through some of the highlights of those annual accolades, focusing on the distinguished writers, journalists, musicians, playwrights and photographers with the most recognizable names, faces, works and reputations, without neglecting a few that are less well known.

Smartly directed by Kirk Simon, *The Pulitzer at 100* delivers 90 minutes in the company of intelligent and admired overachievers. With the help of Natalie Portman, Helen Mirren and John Lithgow who, now and then, read excerpts from highlighted writings, it upholds the best of the best, offers a glimpse of the benefits of having earned eminent recognition and should be of interest to that segment of the public that cares about such things.



Actor John Lithgow reading from four-time Pulitzer winner Robert Frost.

With a Pulitzer Prize comes validation — a stamp of approval — then the monetary gift (whipped topping on the dessert, modest in size and therefore not obscene) and the sheer prestige of it all. But the biggest reward of such a win, especially in the arts, is that a Pulitzer opens doors, and

opening doors is better than gold. Ayad Akhtar, 2013 Pulitzer winner for his play *Disgraced*, says the best thing of all was being “treated as a better writer.”

The Pulitzer at 100 also provides some welcome history about Joseph Pulitzer, the enlightened immigrant editor who came young to America, speaking no English, reinvented himself and created the prize in 1917. Parts of his story are seamlessly interspersed in the video within the context of other events and avoid self-congratulation. The video even touches lightly on the flaws of the Pulitzer Prizes, which are the most vexing things about all prizes, all the way up to and including the Nobels. (How red-faced, I wonder, are the people who showered Nobel Peace Prizes on the likes of Henry Kissinger in 1973 and Yasser Arafat in 1994?)

Being purely human inventions, prizes are unreliable, more so when it comes to those whose selection requires sensitive critical thinking as in the case of Arts and Letters. (The video tells us the Arts and Letters categories were added to the Journalism prizes to provide a touch of glamor.) Evaluating the arts injects a subjectivity that complicates the process. Some years the prizes in those categories are as notable for their omissions (e.g.: no drama award was given in 1944, even though Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* was an obvious candidate — or 1997 when Donald Margulies’ *Collected Stories* was on the table yet no award was given). Some of the prizes are merely quizzical, while others have missed the mark altogether. At least in some minds.

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Everyone knows the role that chance plays in selecting recipients. As novelist and 1999 Pulitzer winner Michael Cunningham (*The Hours*), who also served as a juror in 2012, tells us about that experience: “A list of American books that did not get the Pulitzer Prize would be hard to separate from what we [jurors] agreed were the greatest American books written.”

More troublesome has been the method of implementation and backroom micromanagement of awards, the Pulitzers included. Each year, five jurors are chosen nationwide from among men and women of the critical press who form a committee that meets just once to select a winner from a list of books, plays, poems etc. That list is predetermined by the Pulitzer board. But with the board also serving as final arbiter, results have been mixed and sometimes troubling. Mostly, the board endorses the committee’s choice, but on occasion it also has ignored it, much to the irritation of jurors who take their task very seriously.

To video director Simon’s credit, no one interviewed on camera denies the arbitrariness or difficulty of making that final, fateful decision. Writer Junot Diaz, whose 2008 *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* won the Pulitzer for Fiction, reminds everyone, with kindness and no malice, that jurors are no more than “a bunch of slightly evolved monkeys trying to put it all together. *Mistakes will be made.*”



Pulitzer 2008 winner for fiction, *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

Playwright and teacher Paula Vogel, whose play *How I Learned to Drive* won in 1998, drives home the same point. “There are five individuals reaching a consensus every year,” she states. “Change the constituency of that panel and you might have another [i.e. different] Pulitzer.” Her own win underwent an unexpected moment when she was confronted by the startling headline *Lesbian Wins Pulitzer*, “in the same size font,” says she on camera, “as *Martians Land* or *Child Born With Three Heads*.” When Edward Albee called to congratulate her, she asked, “Edward, what do I do now?”

Albee to Vogel: “Roll up your sleeves and write the next play.”



Winner for Drama 1998, for her play *How I Learned to Drive*.

I served on a Pulitzer committee in 1994 when there was some confusion about whether *Perestroika*, part two of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, was eligible for a vote, since the first part had won the Pulitzer the year before. We were told no, until we were told yes — *after* we had voted and disbanded and days before the winner was to be announced. Since there was no way to meet again and find consensus, we stuck to our chosen winner, which was Albee's *Three Tall Women*. And a good thing too, since, in the video, Kushner talks about how he is still tinkering with *Perestroika* all these many years later. Clearly, it's not finished!

But a centennial is above all a time for celebrating the *good* that prizes can do, pitfalls and all, especially when the majority of them have gone to people who clearly deserved them. With the recent appointment of a new administrator — Dana Canedy, a former senior editor at *The New York Times* and herself a 2001 Pulitzer winner (as part of a team that won for a series about race in America), the first woman and first African-American to hold the position — things will no doubt evolve.

John Adams and Wynton Marsalis lament the fact that the likes of Miles Davis, Duke Ellington and John Cage never won a Pulitzer, but the reality is that you can't include everyone when opportunities for recognition come just once a year. As it is, the video includes many people whose achievements are stellar. Among them, Nicholas Kristof and Thomas Friedman, those dedicated columnists for *The New York Times*; the eminent Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, Fiction, 1988); Tracy K. Smith (*Life On Mars*, poetry, 2012); Nick Ut (Breaking News Photography, 1973) for his indelible photo of Kim Phuc, the Vietnamese girl running naked in tears after napalm has burned all the clothes off her body. It is a once-in-a-lifetime photo matched only by John Filo's iconic photograph of the Kent State shooting that earned him a Pulitzer in 1970.

There is a lot more. Simon's effort to be inclusive sometimes feels as if he's packing all he can into those 90 minutes, especially towards the end when the video begins to feel a bit crowded and breathless. But it does offer an engaging if somewhat varnished look at the utterly imperfect and consequential business of giving out prizes.



Nonfiction winner, 1994.

David Remnick, *The New Yorker*'s editor in chief (a nonfiction winner in 1994), is there to remind us of how difficult it is to play God and decide who wins a Pulitzer and who doesn't. "[It's] not the NBA championship, it's not an objective scoreboard that's in front of you," says Remnick. "These are human beings in the room. They have interests and they have blind spots, maybe even stupidities, brilliances and all the rest and they come up with their answers..."

"I'm not surprised by the number of times jurors get it wrong," says Diaz in what may be the definitive comment, "but by the number times they get it right."

Photos courtesy of First Run Features

The Pulitzer at 100 opens on July 21 at the Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, 1886 Broadway in New York City (212.757.2280) and on August 11 at Laemmle's Music Hall, 9036 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills (310.478.3836).

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