

## film roundup

KEITH UHLICH



A Hidden Life

**Clemency** (Dir. Chinonye Chukwu). Starring: Alfre Woodard, Aldis Hodge, Wendell Pierce. Alfre Woodard brings a multifaceted authority to the smallest role (see her defiant Mistress Shaw in *12 Years a Slave* for one stellar example), so it's wonderful to see this terrific and often underutilized performer take a plum leading role in writer-director Chinonye Chukwu's death-row drama. As Bernadine Williams, an uber-professional prison warden nearing an emotional breaking point, Woodard is as initially chilly and stern as the movie that houses her. Cracks are beginning to show in her rigorously maintained facade now that she's overseeing the execution of an inmate (Aldis Hodge) whose appeals for clemency are likely to fall on deaf ears. Chukwu's direction is steady and confident, her screenwriting slightly less so (the film wears its indie-with-a-conscience bona fides a bit too boastfully at times). Regardless, Woodard never steps wrong, infusing each

word, look and gesture with a foundation-shaking power. It's a shame that a spotlight vehicle such as this is the exception for the actress rather than the rule. [R] ★★★1/2

**A Hidden Life** (Dir. Terrence Malick). Starring: August Diehl, Valerie Pachner, Bruno Ganz. How many filmmakers could claim a run as fertile as Terrence Malick with his four autobiographically-tinged, narratively improvisatory features of the last decade—*The Tree of Life* (2011), *To the Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015) and *Song to Song* (2017)? His latest, *A Hidden Life*, is by comparison merely excellent. The writer-director treats the true-life story of Franz Jägerstätter (August Diehl), an Austrian conscientious objector during WWII, as a straightforward, if still highly mystical moral tale. As Adolf Hitler comes to power, Jägerstätter's lush mountain village is overrun by the Führer's supporters and his irreligious ideology. With the ex-

ception of his loving wife Franziska (Valerie Pachner), most of Jägerstätter's friends and neighbors fall prey to their worst instincts. Jägerstätter, however, remains steadfast in his pacifism, even though his defiance will assuredly result in his execution. Gorgeously photographed by Malick's long-time camera operator Jörg Widmer, this 172-minute epic proves as wearisome as it does enrapturing, though its transcendent moments (see in particular Jägerstätter's discussion with a church muralist about the possibility of painting "the true Christ") are like nothing else. [PG-13] ★★★1/2

**Little Women** (Dir. Greta Gerwig). Starring: Saoirse Ronan, Emma Watson, Timothée Chalamet. Every generation gets the *Little Women* it deserves. That may come off harsher than Greta Gerwig's clear labor of love warrants: The *Lady Bird* writer-director tailors Louisa May Alcott's tale of the four March sis-

ters to her own quirky perspective, most notably in her achronological restructuring of the narrative. She also weaves in certain biographical details of Alcott's own life so that author/spinster in training Jo March (Saoirse Ronan) gets a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too character arc that's very 2019 in its meta-feminism. The cleverness of Gerwig's adaptational choices tend to overwhelm storytelling basics. Familiarity with the source material is presumed to a detrimental degree, while emotional beats are plowed through rather than permitted to linger. This is still a great yarn, even skeletally. And the cast—which includes Emma Watson as Meg, Timothée Chalamet as Laurie, Laura Dern as Marmee, and Meryl Streep as Aunt March—is so effusively committed that the film often works in spite of itself. [PG] ★★★

**Uncut Gems** (Drs. Benny Safdie and Josh Safdie). Starring: Adam Sandler, Julia Fox, Kevin Garnett. Incessantly unpleasant, the latest film from Benny and Josh Safdie (*Good Time*) barrels through several feverish days in the life of NYC jeweler Howard Ratner (Adam Sandler) as he attempts to score big with an illegally procured opal. Everything and everyone seems to stand in the way of his personal gain, be it his nag of a wife (Idina Menzel), his dunderhead of a mistress (Julia Fox), his thug of a brother-in-law (Eric Bogosian), or—via the cheeky decision to set the action in 2012—the fiscal recklessness of America itself. Even NBA superstar Kevin Garnett and R&B artist The Weeknd, playing themselves, get in on obstructing Howard's windfall; they're both examples, in addition to the coveted opal's African origins, of the Safdies' queasy relationship to race. Sandler is as off-putting and aggressive as in any of his quickie comedies, while Darius Khondji's seasick camera-work augments this monotonously frenetic project's shallow sense of moral and ethical nausea. *Gems* is an anti-capitalist parable gone glibly dudebro. [R] ★1/2 ■