

Movies with young stars both score

By Gerri Pare and Henry Herx
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — The unlikely subject of juvenile chess playing becomes a surprisingly appealing movie in *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (Paramount).

The movie re-creates the fact-based story of 7-year-old chess prodigy Josh Waitzkin (Max Pomeranc), whose sportswriter dad, Fred (Joe Mantegna), wrote a book about his son's emergence as a contender for the national chess title.

Josh's casual interest in chess begins in a New York City park where locals such as Vinnie (Laurence Fishburne) play a lightning-fast version of the game known as blitz chess, and the boy shows an unusual aptitude.

When his dad recognizes he has a real gift, he hires single-minded Bruce Pandolfini (Ben Kingsley) to tutor him in hopes that Josh will qualify to compete in state and national finals. Bruce, and to a lesser degree his father, expect Josh to totally devote himself to chess much as genius Bobby Fischer did two decades prior. Fischer eventually won the world championship of chess.

But, as gentle, sweet-natured Josh emphatically states, "I'm not Bobby Fischer." Therein lies the conflict that is dramatized — will Josh be allowed to remain a normal kid (as mom Joan Allen wants), or will he be relentlessly pushed by his tutor and dad to be the new Bobby Fischer?

Child chess whiz and first-time actor Pomeranc carries the movie's key role with his soulful eyes and telling expressions as he journeys through fear of his father's disapproval and self-doubt. Mantegna's finely understated performance gradually reveals his own path to enlightenment about his son's development. And Kingsley brings a commanding presence to his role, though his Irish accent is perplexing.

What broadens the appeal of director Steve Zaillian's movie is that the situation portrayed can apply to so many families where parents badly want their child to excel — perhaps at too great a cost. Whether it be in Little League, scholastics or ballet, there is



Paramount Pictures

Josh Waitzkin (Max Pomeranc) is a young chess prodigy in *Searching for Bobby Fischer*.

the child at risk of being pushed beyond his or her limits to where nothing, absolutely nothing, matters but winning. This movie's conclusion and message is a very positive one.

Less successful are novice director Zaillian's dark and dreary visuals. The slavish attention to contrasting light and shadows across faces becomes self-conscious and detracts from the story. And a mysterious link between rival tutors is dangled through several scenes and never resolved.

On the other hand, the movie realistically captures the atmosphere of tense parents awaiting the outcome of matches and their varying reactions to how their youngsters performed.

If you can abide the movie's sluggish pace and its extremely solemn tone, it may provide insights about parent-child relationships and juvenile development.

Due to adults in heated conflict over a child's development, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG — parental guidance suggested. (GP)

'The Secret Garden'

Parents taking the family to see *The Secret Garden* (Warner Bros.) are likely to enjoy it even more than the youngsters.

That's because this dramatization of Frances Hodgson Burnett's children's classic uses a lot of creativity in visualizing the story's Victorian setting as seen through eyes of the little orphan girl at its center.

After her parents are killed in India by an earthquake, 10-year-old Mary Lennox (Kate Maberly) comes to live in her uncle's remote manor on the English moors.

Her uncle, Lord Craven (John Lynch), proves as remote as his 100-room manor and Mary is left in the care of Mrs. Medlock (Maggie Smith), his stern, forbidding housekeeper.

Late at night, Mary imagines she hears the cries of someone echoing down the drafty corridors. Although the servants claim it's only the wind, one night Mary discovers its human source.

The manor holds other mysteries for Mary, most notably that of a locked garden, closed since the death 10 years before of her aunt — her mother's twin

sister. The eerie manor and its mysterious secrets get this tale of metamorphosis off to a vividly involving start.

With the cheery encouragement of a sympathetic servant (Laura Crossley) and her young nature-loving brother (Andrew Knott), Mary proceeds to transform the neglected garden into a flowery showcase and change the life of her sickly cousin (Heydon Prowse).

As directed by Agnieszka Holland, the result is an appealing tale of three lonely children discovering life's wonder and joy in the process of tending a long-neglected garden.

Along the way, of course, this refreshes the spirit of the gloomy uncle, the overbearing housekeeper and any cranks who might be in the audience.

Children will love the nature photography and parents will be reminded of how much love children require to grow.

Certainly there's some magic in the story but it comes from the human heart and offers a rich experience for all family members.

The USCC classification is A-I — general patronage. The MPAA rating is G — general audiences. (HH)

Book provides detailed history of Catholicism in the United States

The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present, by Jay P. Dolan; University of Notre Dame Press (South Bend, Ind., 1992); 504 pages; \$15.95 (paperback).

By E. Leo McMannus
Guest contributor

Jay Dolan, who teaches history at the University of Notre Dame, included the year 1926 in the fourth ("The End of an Era, 1920-60") of the five periods — embracing 15 chapters in all — of this fascinating history.

I can remember my father taking me as an 8-year-old boy to the Main Street East overpass of what was formerly known as the New York Central Railroad in Rochester to catch a fleeting glimpse of a special crimson-painted, westbound train. Cardinals from France, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Austria, Hungary and Italy were aboard the train on its way to the first International Eucharistic Congress being held in Chicago.

It was as if the pope himself — impossible thought! — were coming to America.

In Chicago, half a million Catholics took part in several days of spectacular devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. I was not that precocious to realize — for the crimson train alone was enough for me — that this was what Dolan would describe later as Catholic triumphalism. Confidence marked the American Catholic scene. Everything was now go.

The Chicago pageantry's exuberance was obviously a far cry from the earlier periods: from the first, "The Colonial Period, 1500-1780," with its account of the slow, arduous, and painful work of the Spanish and French missions in the New World and with the role of the Catholics — few in number in the English colonies — who would be caught up in the spirit of a new nation.

The second period, "A Republican Interlude, 1780-1820," features a riveting account of the effort to develop an American version of Roman Catholicism: the clergy's election of a bishop (John Carroll), the insistence on the Americanization of imported priests, support for the separation of church

and state, the desire for an English liturgy, and the laity's greater participation in the life of the church.

The third period, "The Immigrant Church, 1820-1920," which offers the most chapters (eight), provides Dolan the opportunity to develop well the adjustment of Catholics from many foreign cultures not alone to America but also to each other. Dolan, who writes "from the bottom up," rather than from the hierarchy "down," records the painful failures and the promising successes.

I have already introduced the fourth period of Chicago's "triumphalism" — what Flannery O'Connor called "Catholic smugness." It was the period when the bishop took firm control, when it almost seemed that he was the church. As Archbishop Joseph P. Hurley (St. Bernard's Seminary, 1920), once leader of the church in Florida, told Monsignor William Barry, of the famous family that has left its name upon a Miami university, "I am running this diocese ... I shall set the policy."

Beneath the popular devotions there

were undercurrents of change, such as the liturgical movement, the concern for social and racial justice, and the laity's emergence that would challenge the clerical dominance.

The final period, which most of us remember well, is called "The Catholic Reformation, 1960-1984," with its 15th and last chapter, "A New Catholicism." This was the period symbolized by the Kennedys, the peace movements, civil rights, women's rights, concern for the environment, and the revolution set in motion by Vatican II (1962-65).

Long forgotten now were those words of Pope Pius X in 1906 that the laity's one duty "is to allow themselves to be led, and like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors."

Everything seemed so well organized and under control in 1926. Today's Catholics, no less assured of the Holy Spirit, face the challenge of old: how to be both Catholic and American.

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