



Greta Gerwig in *Frances Ha*.

*Shadow Dancer* (Dir: James Marsh). Starring: Andrea Riseborough, Clive Owen, Aidan Gillen, Domhnall Gleeson, Brid Brennan, David Wilmot, Gillian Anderson. Established documentarian Marsh (*Man on Wire*, *Project Nim*) nimbly directed this character-driven spy tale set in 1993, when tensions in Northern Ireland are starting to fade. After a failed bomb attempt in London, reluctant IRA participant and Belfast single mother Collette (Riseborough) is captured by MI5 and promised protection in return for information on her IRA headliner brothers (Gillen, Gleeson). Collette agrees, but the influence of her government contact (Owen) gradually erodes, placing her and her family at risk while he scrambles for answers. The twists and turns don't hold our attention as much as the characters' inability to go beyond their assigned roles. The movie's color scheme is defined by dreary, optimism-draining browns and grays; Owen and Riseborough (who are excellent) look tired and withered. Subtle and introspective, *Shadow Dancer* shows the working-class grind behind the cloak and dagger excitement. The burden of real life affects everyone. Tom Bradby adapted the script from his novel. [R] ★★★

*Triumph of the Wall* (Dir: Bill Stone). Usually when someone tells you a movie, or anything for that matter, doubles as a "metaphor for life," it's a cue to roll your eyes. Here's an exception, a low-key film with emotional heft. Filmmaker Stone meets Chris Overing, a laconic handyman who resembles Josh Duhamel, in a coffee shop. Overing is building a 1,000 ft.

dry-stone wall in rural Quebec for a client's property. The project, he estimates, will take eight weeks; Stone agrees to film it. Years later, Overing and a rotating door of assistants are still working on the damned wall, which has Stone approaching his film from a more philosophical perspective. One of the assistants, Paul, notes how you take a few days off from the wall only to return confused. But as Overing observes, even though the project is taking forever, he's making something with inherent value. That's why he keeps coming back, and why Stone keeps the camera rolling. Both men want to build something that lasts. We all do. [NR] ★★★1/2

*Frances Ha* (Dir: Noah Baumbach). Starring: Greta Gerwig, Mickey Sumner, Michael Zegen, Adam Driver, Patrick Heusinger. "I'm not a real person yet," says the film's title character (Gerwig), a young New Yorker whose life is in perpetual almost. She's not quite in a relationship with a burgeoning alcoholic before they (kind of) break up. She's an apprentice at a modern dance company. Her friendship with Sophie (Sumner) would qualify as a marriage if they weren't interested in men. When life starts changing—Sophie moves on, money dries up—Frances finds herself slipping into the twentysomething mire: she's too old to be an artsy ingénue but too young to settle for what isn't her ideal. Baumbach, shrewdly avoiding an indictment on entitled Generation Yers, illuminates the awkwardness of transitioning from young adult to adult. It's Gerwig who breathes heart and soul into that concept, delivering an effervescent, guileless perform-

ance as a young woman finding her place at the adult table. (Literally. When she asks a dinner guest what he does for a living, it sounds like she's play-acting.) Gerwig and Baumbach, who both wrote the acridly funny script, create a character we love—for better or for worse. [R] ★★★★

*The English Teacher* (Dir: Craig Zisk). Starring: Julianne Moore, Michael Angarano, Greg Kinnear, Nathan Lane, Lily Collins, Jessica Hecht, narrated by Fiona Shaw. High school teacher Linda Sinclair (Moore) has loved books from an early age, contributing to a reader's passiveness where she's content to let others create the excitement. When a former student (Angarano) reluctantly returns home with a brilliant play, Linda campaigns to have the school premiere it. Her passion for the work, and the playwright, causes her prudent judgment to unravel. Soon, she's in hot soup with the school and the writer's father (Kinnear). Solid cast makes the movie work for about 40 minutes until the major plot twist is revealed. At that point, screenwriters Dan and Stacy Charlton abandon internal struggle for a strained lunacy that prevents us from knowing the characters beyond selfish irritants that cement Sinclair's undeserved martyr status. There's no logic anywhere, especially from the lead character. It's hard to root for a 45-year-old woman who doesn't know the difference between self-sacrifice and manipulation, never mind one whose behavior cannot be reasonably explained outside of a psychiatrist's office. [R] ★1/2 ■