

DVD Select: Behind every great man stands a great rat, or a mouse

by Robert_J_Hawkins

It takes a lot of something to make a movie - even an animated one - about a rat that becomes a five-star chef. Don't get me wrong. A lot of chefs are rats.

'RATATOUILLE' - Remy the rat gives Linguini some gourmet cooking advice in the animated family movie 'Ratatouille.' CNS Photo courtesy of Pixar Animation Studios. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin But in Pixar's delightful "Ratatouille" (Disney, 3 stars), the chef really is a rat, named Remy (voiced by Patton Oswalt, who voices Professor Dementor on "Kim Possible"). Of course, he's a closet chef, fronted by a clumsy, gangling, cooking-disabled lad named Linguini (Lou Romano).

Remy sits atop Linguini's thick plume of red hair and guides the young fellow through extraordinary concoctions for a five-star bistro in decline called Gusteau's.

And who gets the adulation, the press clippings, the gastronomic fanfare? Well, Linguini, of course. Would

you want a rat whipping up your dinner?

But it has always been so.

Do you remember the 1953 expose/autobiography "Ben and Me: An Astonishing Life of Benjamin Franklin by His Good Mouse Amos"? Tenderly recalled, but a shocking expose, nonetheless. It seems certain inventions - the Franklin stove and the lightning rod, to name a few - had less to do with the Philadelphia gentleman than with the little church mouse tucked up in his bushy hat.

Oh, the great mice (and rats) behind great men - the stories that can be told. And the ones about why great mice never counsel women or elephants. Hint: high-stress, phobia-based relationships. But Remy seems to get on well, after an awkward start with Linguini's romantic interest, a fierce line chef named Colette (voiced by Janeane Garofalo).

But "Ratatouille" is about a country rat named Remy who, among other things, walks upright, has a finely developed sense of smell and faithfully watches reruns of the cooking show that stars Parisian chef Gusteau (a cross between gusto and the French explorer Cousteau, no?), who professes that anyone can cook.

Through a series of highly animated misfortunes, Remy takes the A sewer to Paris and ends up on the doorstep of the great Gusteau's restaurant. Momentarily stymied by the fact that Gusteau (voiced by Brad Garrett) is dead - the victim, some say, of a venal food critic's poisoned prose - Remy hitches his star to the unlikely tails of the lovable dope Linguini.

The scourge of both Remy and Linguini is Gusteau's heir apparent, the sawed-off brute Chef Skinner (Ian Holm) - he who would trade on Gusteau's good name in marketing a line of frozen dinners. Good heavens, he's turned Gusteau into a cartoon.

But an even greater nemesis looms, the terminally dour food critic Anton Ego (Peter O'Toole), who casts a wide and dark shadow (for such a tall and skinny fellow) over Parisian restaurants through his trenchant prose. A stroke of his pen has brought many a chef - yes, yes! It is he who quite likely gave Gusteau his fatal stroke when he took away a star.

Nasty man, that Ego. But highly principled. If he liked your soup, he'd say as much, no matter how much he loathed you personally. Although, he seems to loath all of humanity quite equally.

The movie hits an emotional peak when Ego strides into Gusteau's, notebook open, and demands that Linguini serve him the greatest meal he's ever tasted. Linguini's problems are compounded by the mass exodus of his staff, which has just discovered that a rat is behind his great dishes.

The solution is something out of "Willard" - Ben to the rescue, without all the carnage. Remy calls upon his sizeable clan of sewer rats to ... well, describing it would never do justice. Let's just agree that Gusteau was correct - anyone can cook.

The chef behind this animated concoction is the talented Brad Bird, also the writer-director of the blockbuster "The Incredibles." Bird's blooming trademark is his skill at telling mature stories in his animation. His films are not all frenetic chase scenes and exploding heads, although these things are not beneath him.

Although, if I may don my Anton Ego cap for a moment: I long for the day when American animators have the confidence to draw subtle characters, as their more-sophisticated Japanese counterparts do. "Ratatouille" is a terrific film for all ages - in part because its characters are really caricatures. Everything and everybody is overpronounced from every conceivable aspect.

As I watched, I wondered how the same animated feature would play out with calm, subtle characters - and I realized this would be worthy of the master animation storyteller Hayao Miyazaki. But we're not there yet.

So let us enjoy the animation we have at hand and not the animation that we'd like to see in theaters.

"Ratatouille" comes with some most-entertaining extras, including the traditional Pixar short subject, in this case titled "Lifted." It is best described as "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" meets a student driver. There is about 15 minutes worth of deleted scenes and an amusing history of rats as told by Remy and his brother Emile (voiced by Peter Sohn) - clearly from the rats' perspective. For adult consumption, Bird and real-life chef Thomas Keller (The French Laundry in Napa Valley) are interviewed, and we learn that great food and great animation take great stamina and inflexibly high standards.

In a related release from Pixar/Disney, 13 of Pixar's beloved animation shorts are collected on a single-disc "Pixar Short Films Collection Vol. 1," including the trademark "Luxo Jr." and the happy jackalope and sheep of "Boundin'."

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Sicko" (Weinstein/Genius Products, 3 1/2 stars) God bless Michael Moore. Bullying creeps like Sean Hannity can wail all they like from their Fox podium, but Moore will not be quieted and we'll be a better place for that. Moore has tackled gun proliferation, 9/11, General Motors and a host of lesser evils, and more often than not he's been exactly right, if not factually exact. While the rest of us are cowered and bludgeoned into submission, Moore screams his indignations from atop the heap. "Sicko" is his take on the American health care system and his summation is: We're getting screwed by the privatized health care system. He lays out his case anecdotally, with story after story of people who lost their homes, their families and even their lives because they couldn't pay the extortion-esque medical fees. He also visits countries with universal health care - Canada, England, France and Cuba - and shows that they are doing so much better for their people. On the DVD, he adds another country, Norway, to the mix. There are also extended interviews with several medical authorities, a Washington, D.C., hearing (circus is more like it), and more. May a thousand Michael Moores take up their cameras against injustice. That's all I'm saying.

"Election" (Tartan Video, 1 star) There was a time when a blurb from Quentin Tarantino touting "the best film of the year" was worth a try. Now he seems to be the Roger Ebert of the hipster movement - any shoddy B-movie or Asian actioner, like this one, gets a cool "best film" accolade from QT. No thanks.

"I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry" (Universal, 2 stars) Straight guys Adam Sandler and Kevin James pretend to be gay newlyweds so they can collect medical benefits. Funny premise just kind of goes limp and sits there like a block of cheese on a hot summer sidewalk. One star is for working Jessica Biel in lingerie into the plot.

Music on DVD: The Who is a band so big and aged that it takes two documentaries to tell their story - "The Story of the Who" and "Six Quick Ones" on two discs in one box. Campy '70s duo Captain & Tennille get a three-DVD box set of TV specials, "The Specials." Popular jam band Barenaked Ladies releases its first DVD of a live concert performance, "Talk to the Hand: Live in Michigan."

IT CAME FROM TV

"Danny Roane: First Time Director" (Lionsgate, 1 star) In this Comedy Central mocumentary, Andy Dick is the title character, an actor whose career is destroyed by drinking. Oh, the naked irony. Why spoil it by adding more?

Big honkin' box set of the week: "Seinfeld: The Complete Series Collector's Edition." Honestly, it includes all 180 episodes of Jerry, Elaine, George and Kramer doing ... stuff. It takes 32 discs to include all nine seasons of ... stuff. There's a 226-page "Official Coffeetable Book" filled with ... stuff. And it is all yours for under \$280.

More mega-sets: "The X-Files - The Complete Collector's Edition" Sixty-one-disc set loaded with extras, priced under \$330; "Full House: The Complete Series Collection" A 32-disc set with all 192 episodes, under \$170.

Also: The third season of the newly reconstituted BBC hit "Doctor Who"; fifth season of "Wings"; third season of Heidi Klum's reality series "Project Runway"; "Sesame Street Old School, Volume 2" is culled from 1974-79; "The Chuck Jones Collection" is a compilation of the great animator's work; "The Best of 'The Colbert Report'" from Comedy Central is just that.

FROM THE VAULTS

"Help!" (EMI Music, 1965) The seminal Beatles movie can be yours in a fully restored box set that includes a reproduction of Richard Lester's annotated script, a 60-page booklet and eight lobby cards.

"James Bond Ultimate Collector's Set" (MGM) All 21 James Bond movies are in this box, spread across 42 discs with loads of bonus material and priced under \$240.

"The Coen Brothers Gift Set" (MGM) Cult-favorite directors offer their top films in a single box: "Blood Simple," "Raising Arizona," "Millers Crossing," "Barton Fink" and "Fargo" for under \$50.

"Chinatown Special Collector's Edition" (1974) and "The Two Jakes Special Collector's Edition" (1990) Jack Nicholson as Los Angeles gumshoe Jake Gittes is the common bond here. Roman Polanski directed the first, Nicholson directed the latter.

"Leading Ladies Collection Volume 2" (Warner, five discs) "I'll Cry Tomorrow" (1955) starring Susan Hayward, Jo Van Fleet, Richard Conte, Eddie Albert; "A Big Hand for the Little Lady" (1966) starring Joanne Woodward, Henry Fonda, Jason Robards, Burgess Meredith, Paul Ford, Charles Bickford, Kevin McCarthy; "Up The Down Staircase" (1967), directed by Robert Mulligan and starring Sandy Dennis, Eileen Heckart and Jean Stapleton; "Rich and Famous" (1981) directed by George Cukor starring Jacqueline Bisset, Candice

Bergen and Meg Ryan; "Shoot the Moon" (1982), directed by Alan Parker and starring Diane Keaton, Albert Finney, Karen Allen and Peter Weller. Price for all this Hollywood magic: just under \$50.

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