Films in Focus: New and recent releases

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

BEOWULF - You can't beat the source material. "Beowulf," a largely digital sword and sorcery, monster and dragon 3-D (in some theaters) flick, is taken from that very same 3,183-line Old English epic poem we were all 'BEOWULF' - The intrepid Viking hero of 'Beowulf,' voiced by Ray Winstone, prepares to confront Grendel's mother with the full force of animation. CNS Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) force-fed a few lines of in high school. The plot couldn't be much simpler. A great Danish hall presided over by the aging King Hrothgar (Anthony Hopkins) is attacked by the monster Grendel, who slays many of the warriors within. Hrothgar's call for a hero to rid the land of Grendel is answered by the champion Beowulf (Ray Winstone), who in a long, unspeakably bloody battle ... Director Robert Zemeckis moves things along lickety-split; for such a dark, heavy tale, lit by gray, diffuse far-northern skies and golden torchlight, the film is remarkably light on its feet. The few attempts at humor - Beowulf strips for battle, resulting in a series of early day Austin-Powers-like Hide the Privates shots - yank us out of the 6th century, but it's never long before a monster chases us right back. In short, you can almost taste the mead. Even if you don't know what mead tastes like. A Paramount Pictures release. Director: Robert Zemeckis. Writers: Neil Gaiman, Roger Avary. Cast: Ray Winstone, Anthony Hopkins, Robin Wright Penn, Jon Malkovich. Running

time: 1 hour, 53 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA - Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "Love in the Time of Cholera" is a hugely esteemed novel in the line of Latin magical realism that is his specialty. As your imagination curls inside its lush tendrils of prose, sensual pleasure (as in sex) pushes away an urge to think: This is ridiculous. The naughty impulse gets a big, helping hand from Mike Newell's film version. Here is a $50 million movie, shot in the author's native Colombia, that asks us to accept the Spanish potency totem Javier Bardem as timid, mom-led Florentino Ariza, a hunched shy-guy who improbably rises to head a riverboat company while bedding 622 women to slake his "virginal" crush on the woman who rejected him, Fermina (Giovanna Mezzogiorno). What is missing is the novel, its strange time shifts and lusciously compiled details and playful, god-like viewpoint. There is no denying that the book is art. Books so very literary, filling up our mental screens as we read them, don't really need movies. An IFC Films release. Director: Mike Newell. Writer: Ronald Harwood from novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Cast: Javier Bardem, Benjamin Bratt, Giovanna Mezzogiorno, Liev Schreiber, John Leguizamo. Running time: 1 hour, 52 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

BEFORE THE DEVIL KNOWS YOU'RE DEAD - If you had to name the American film director who best used actors in the last 50 or 60 years, you'd start with Elia Kazan. But very soon you would name Sidney Lumet. No currently working director has stacked up more imposing performances (nor more great adaptations). Probably "Before the Devil Knows You're Dead" will be Lumet's last hurrah (he is 83), and again the performances are utterly engrossing. Philip Seymour Hoffman, whose heft is more than filled with matching talent, kicks it off with an eye-peeler. He's New York real estate agent Andy Hanson, on holiday with wife Gina (Marisa Tomei), and they flourish in bed with a candor that must have made Lumet smile and think, "Now, there's something I couldn't film in 1957." After that happy time, it's downhill for Andy. So much ripe and realized work here, so why is the film not great? The time tricks keep us alert, but also make us see that the plot is thin stuff (a heist goes wrong and people pay). The script groans for big drama as all the heartaches ooze up, but this is not "Long Day's Journey Into Night" (a great Lumet movie in 1962). A ThinkFilm release. Director: Sidney Lumet. Writer: Kelly Masterson. Cast: Albert Finney, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Ethan Hawke, Marisa Tomei, Rosemary Harris. Running time: 1 hour, 47 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

AMERICAN GANGSTER - Things were different in the 1970s. For instance, daily life didn't meander along randomly. It flashed by in exciting or poignant sequences of scenes, generally set to righteous music. Ridley Scott is a director who loves montages (French for "frequently overused technique"), and he sprays these musicalized vignettes like shotgun pellets through "American Gangster," which takes place mostly in the late-Vietnam War era. "American Gangster" has a grabber of a story, and a true one to boot. It's about Frank

Lucas, who built a Harlem-based criminal empire in the early 1970s by importing high-grade heroin straight from Southeast Asia. His most notorious technique was to smuggle the drug in coffins accompanying dead soldiers returning from Vietnam. But the movie's flashes of grit and its evocations of the blaxploitation tradition (dig those 1970s superfly fashions) have real appeal, and the actors (including the ageless Ruby Dee as Lucas' mother) are mostly up to the high bar the two leads set. And if Scott's filmmaking style is on the pat side, death by montage still seems merciful compared what happens at the wrong end of the movie's guns and drugs. Director: Ridley Scott. Writers: Steven Zaillian, Mark Jacobson. Cast: Denzel Washington, Russell Crowe, Josh Brolin, Armand Assante, Ruby Dee, Carla Gugino, Cuba Gooding Jr., John Hawkes, Chiwetel Ejiofor, RZA. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

MARTIAN CHILD - When is John Cusack not credible? Never putting forward a foot wrong, even when a script goes squish, Cusack is one of the sure resources modern directors have learned to rely on. In "Martian Child" Cusack has an amiably engaging if not easy role, playing David Gordon. He's a fantasy novelist with a fine modernist house as proof of success, but also a widower who hopes adoption might fill the void. He can tap into young imagination, but his fictions are not quite enough. It's the child within (backed by Cusack's looks, still boyish at 41) that make him open to adopting Dennis, not a menace but a "weirdo" to other kids at the orphanage. Dennis has his own sci-fi slant. Parents gone, he believes he's from Mars. He has space lingo and his spacesuit is a large cardboard box. He looks upon the world through a slit, fearing sunlight and wearing a weighted belt to hold him down on Earth (never mind that Mars has less gravity). A New Line Cinema release. Director: Menno Meyjes. Writers: Seth Bass, Jonathan Tolins. Cast: John Cusack, Bobby Coleman, Amanda Peet, Joan Cusack, Oliver Platt, Anjelica Huston. Running time: 1 hour, 33 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.

BEE MOVIE - Hello, Jerry. That greeting can only be for "Bee Movie" king bee Jerry Seinfeld, yada, yada, yada. Though not in the magical sphere of a "Finding Nemo" or "Ratatouille," "Bee Movie" is fun to watch. Seinfeld's Barry B. Benson (he wears sneakers, his antennae double as a cell phone) is a honeybee yearning to do something more with his life than be just another worker in the hive. So, he ventures out for his first view of the open-air world with a squadron of buff "pollen jockeys." Directors Simon J. Smith and Steve Hickner fashion an entire metropolis inside the hive - factory, suburbs, highways, condos - and New York City outside. Barry's foray into the Big Apple of blooming fall colors and Central Park's bountiful gardens is a roller coaster of stomach-in-the-throat dips and turns. Flying about, he ends up in the apartment of Vanessa, a florist voiced by Renee Zellweger. Right off, he breaks Bee Law No. 1: Don't talk to humans. An inter-species friendship blooms. Humans, he tells her, have plundered the work of bees and profited from honey production. Says one villainous beekeeper, "They make the honey and we make the money." Litigation ensues, bees suing humans for years of exploitation. "When I'm done with the human race," says Barry, "they won't be able to say, 'Honey, I'm home' without paying a royalty." "Bee Movie." Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour, 31 minutes. 3 stars.

DAN IN REAL LIFE - The two good things in "Dan in Real Life" are right at the center: Steve Carell and Juliette Binoche. They are winsome and winning, but the script is taffy custard. Carell is Dan, a "real life" advice columnist seeking syndication. A widower, he devotedly fathers three girls, the cutest a howitzer of

teen attitude. Binoche is Marie, a New Yorker who meets Dan cutely, then keeps meeting him cutely at the grand shoreline home owned by his family. But Marie has just recently taken up with Dan's burly brother Mitch (Dane Cook). So while Dan and Marie are like two pieces of kindling wishing to strike a match, smitten Mitch hovers cluelessly until he hears the backbeat and, of course, gets mad. This is comedy, mainly because Carell is such an inflected comic player, with his darting eyes and bladelike nose. He takes amusing riffs into little corners of pathos and yearning. And it's comedy because Binoche has a swift sense of humor, responds with her native French tact (just a hint of accent) and seeks to cushion her covert suitor's floundering moves. What keeps us watching is that we enjoy Dan and Marie and want them to get together. A Buena Vista Films release. Director: Peter Hedges. Writer: Peter Hedges, Pierce Gardner. Cast: Steve Carell, Juliette Binoche, Dane Cook, John Mahoney, Dianne Wiest, Alison Pil, Brittany Robertson. Running time: 1 hour, 38 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

SLEUTH - There isn't much point in remaking Anthony Shaffer's stage hit "Sleuth," filmed with very busy stagecraft in 1972 by Joseph Mankiewicz. Proof: Kenneth Branagh's remake, the Shaffer play partly gutted, the rehabby Harold Pinter. No talents better sum up modern British theater than Pinter and Branagh. But they've made a movie. As such, "Sleuth" is like being stuck in a cold locker for preserved hams: Michael Caine as rich, snobbish writer Andrew Wyke, and Jude Law as actor Milo Tindle, who seduced Wyke's wife and is invited to the estate for drastic comeuppance. A lot of talent came together to provide us that rare and saddest gift of British theater to Americans: a bore. No gift for Brits, also. A Sony Pictures Classics release. Director: Kenneth Branagh. Writer: Harold Pinter. Cast: Michael Caine, Jude Law. Running time: 1 hour, 28 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

LARS AND THE REAL GIRL - Quirky, odd, impish, fey, weird, daffy - the adjectives arrive with wee squeals, eager to describe "Lars and the Real Girl." Almost suicidally shy, Lars (Ryan Gosling) is a young recluse, alienated somewhat like a cute lollipop that won't stick to anything. He lost his parents a while back and feels that brother Gus (Paul Schneider) briefly let him down. But Gus is lovingly near (Lars lives in the garage), and so is Gus' warm, outreaching wife, Karin (Emily Mortimer). In this film made by Craig Gillespie, Lars sees a sex doll being ogled on a computer by an office mate. He discreetly orders one for himself, life-sized, a brunette with wistful eyes and romance-novel lips. The story premise is that Lars develops a shy crush on her, but never (apparently) has sex with her. He names her Bianca (surely no nod to Jagger), and they bond like wax to honey. This may be spot-on, deadpan comedy. Or it may just be another symptom of the infantilizing of movies. The film is like a spaced therapy project where even the doctors are patients and everyone hopes to graduate from Barbie to Bianca. An MGM release. Director: Craig Gillespie. Writer: Nancy Oliver. Cast: Ryan Gosling, Emily Mortimer, Paul Schneider, R.D. Reid, Patricia Clarkson. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

RENDITION - There's a curious line in the dialogue of "Rendition": "The CIA calls it 'extraordinary rendition.' It started under Clinton." A big, busy cast moves in intriguing locations in an unnamed North African country, maybe Morocco. At the center is CIA analyst Doug Freeman (Jake Gyllenhaal), new to the job and relaxed about it - until the CIA toughie on duty is killed right next to him by a terror blast. The real target is hefty prison chief and CIA go-along Abasi (Igal Naor, a virtual replica of Telly Savalas, yet less

amusing). So vivid is Naor that we even come to feel for his character, a virtuoso of basement torture. Freeman is the CIA witness of this, because the new, screaming object of electric and water torment is an Egyptian-born, American engineer, Anwar (Omar Metwally, fine in a very stressed role). We meet Freeman's local girlfriend, and Abasi's family, and, especially, Anwar's pregnant wife back in Chicago, Isabella (Reese Witherspoon). The movie is a lacing of personal lives, not only plot strings. And yet the basic substance is piercing. The extraordinary, law-subverting nature of "rendition" is rendered viably enough that American citizens should watch and then talk, and not about melodrama. A New Line Cinema release. Director: Gavin Hood. Writer: Kelley Sane. Cast: Jake Gyllenhaal, Reese Witherspoon, Meryl Streep, Peter Sarsgaard, Omar Metwally, Alan Arkin, Igal Naor. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

THINGS WE LOST IN THE FIRE - Benicio del Toro is aging into one of the major, used movie faces, up there near Bogart, Gabin, Von Sydow, Mitchum, O'Toole, Nolte and Tommy Lee Jones. A few times in "Things We Lost in the Fire," he could be James Dean at 40. As an actor, del Toro is imposing but limited. His spaniel eyes and Beat Latin smolder fit Jerry Sunborne, who seems born more for the dark side of the moon. Jerry is a heroin addict in a flophouse, trying to recover with group support, and oddly his best chance comes when his favorite pal, successful Seattle developer Brian (David Duchovny), is killed. The widow, Audrey (Halle Berry), invites Jerry to live and work in the house, partly in guilty charity to a bond she had resented, partly to balm her grief. Allan Loeb's script doesn't go for the most obvious climax, but at the cost of other, obvious payoffs. The story is built to contour and warmly neuter the growing rapport of Audrey and Jerry. The home is a cherished sanctum of family. The kids (Micah Berry and Alexis Llewellyn) are perfectly pert packages. Flashbacks keep reminding us how superb a spouse and dad Brian was, even dying like a saint. Still, it's a soaper about a doper and a classy widow. Keep that in mind, even if you give way to seduction. A Paramount Picture release. Director: Susanne Bier. Writer: Allan Loeb. Cast: Halle Berry, Benicio del Toro, David Duchovny, Alison Lohman. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

RESERVATION ROAD - "Reservation Road" hits its marks, but regrettably the marks are made of sponge. There is the squishy tension of a problem drama gone soft. Mark Ruffalo plays Dwight, a lawyer. Returning home with his son from a game of their beloved Boston Red Sox, he veers away from a coming vehicle and fatally sideswipes a boy near the road. This is Josh Learner, son of Ethan (Joaquin Phoenix) and Grace (Jennifer Connelly), instantly plunged into grief along with their younger daughter (Elle Fanning). Terry George's film is about how Dwight, who drove away in panic, feebly tries to duck (but doesn't get rid of his damaged SUV), while feeling damningly guilty. Feeding his misery, he observes Josh's funeral, frantically bonds with his teen son, and picks the scabs of his failure with ex-wife Ruth (Mira Sorvino). If this were not about well-heeled, suburban, educated people, we might at least have the pulp satisfaction of a revenge killing. But "Road" is bound to its plaintive sense of taste. A Focus Features release. Director: Terry George. Writers: John Burnham Schwartz, Terry George. Cast: Joaquin Phoenix, Mark Ruffalo, Mira Sorvino, Jennifer Connelly, Elle Fanning, Antoni Corone. Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

30 DAYS OF NIGHT - "30 Days of Night" has the two things a horror movie most needs: strong atmosphere and creepy monsters. Unfortunately, it also has the common bane of horror movies: stark implausibility. Inevitably, some plot slack must be cut for a Far North (Barrow, Alaska) movie featuring cannibalistic

vampire dementos. Josh Hartnett is the young sheriff, first alarmed by a charred body in the snow, then by sled dogs with their throats cut. Not just cut, horribly mangled. Fast and strong, the beast people pounce like nightmares on steroids, wasting nearly as much blood as they suck (scariest element: They wear light clothing in the Arctic winter). Sam Raimi produced, and the craftily made "30 Days" is a slash above your standard gore grab. Speaking of that, remarkably poor use is made of the town's impressive waste disposal machine. After some grinding at the start, it returns for only one grisly, gnawing meal. A Columbia Pictures release. Director: David Slade. Writers: Steve Niles, Stuart Beattie. Cast: Melissa George, Josh Hartnett, Danny Huston, Ben Foster. Running time: 1 hour, 37 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

Capsules compiled from movie reviews written by David Elliott, film critic for The San Diego Union-Tribune, other staff writers and contributors.

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