

As Hollywood gallops to the 2007 finish line, a broad lineup promises a photo-op finish

by David_Elliott

Holiday kitsch got a jump-start from "Fred Claus," and holiday mayhem fires off an early round with "P2." But there remains, abundantly, the delightfully premature ripping into packages for the coming season.

THE STRETCH RUN - As Hollywood gallops to the 2007 finish line, a broad lineup (Alvin and the Chipmunks! Francis Ford Coppola!) promises a photo-op finish. A strong contender is the drama 'Darfur Now,' a documentary by Ted Braun. CNS Photo courtesy of Lynsey Addario. WAR PROFITS - Tom Hanks and Julia Roberts star in 'Charlie Wilson's War,' a film about secretive politics. CNS Photo courtesy of Francois Duhamel. Like certain parental friends of Santa, we may promise more than we deliver. But here, ribboned, is the coming film bounty as presently known (what is the season without surprises?).

As usual, the year's closing phase is ruled by three types of film: movies scared away from the summer stampede; holiday fun pix "for the whole family" (does a return of Alvin and the Chipmunks do it for you?); and the crucial cannonade of Oscar wannabes.

Despite the Chipmunks, family comedies, a Loch Ness fantasy and even Dustin Hoffman as Mr. Magoo (oops, Mr. Magorium), it looks like a remarkably adult spread. Refreshingly different from, oh, January to October.

Directors of repute on tap include Francis Ford Coppola, Mike Nichols, the Coen Bros., Mike Newell, Paul Thomas Anderson, Rob Reiner, Tim Burton, Woody Allen, Brian De Palma, Frank Darabont, Guy Ritchie, Julian Schnabel and Noah Baumbach. The frisky Coens dipping into Cormac McCarthy's world ignites interest. The notion of Johnny Depp as Sweeney Todd is grimly fetching. As is Nicole Kidman in an adult wedding comedy. And Bob Dylan lobs his bardic whine again.

It won't be a cheery grog party, not with the Alien (plus Predator) loose again, and a paralyzed French editor, and hell in China, Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa. There could be breathy critical quibbling about Gabriel Garcia Marquez being siphoned for erotic screen fantasy.

Here's how we stack it. You rip it.

NOVEMBER NIGHTS (AND MATINEES)

Since you have probably forgotten most of your school cram, relax. "Beowulf" is not textually bound to the classic, but is the Robert Zemeckis action take using the "motion-capture" technology of the hit "300," with Ray Winstone as the hero, Angelina Jolie sometimes nude (but PG-13), Anthony Hopkins as the king, and Old English cuss words like "fuck."

Sudanese men face a future clouded by bleakness in the documentary of modern African strife, "Darfur Now." The latest bad-news documentary surely merits attention. Ted Braun's "Darfur Now" looks at six people in the Sudanese civil war hell and in its far-flung diaspora, including actor-activist Don Cheadle.

With "Love in the Time of Cholera," director Mike Newell, having slapped a Harry Potter book into film shape, dresses an even more prestigious book. Javier Bardem anchors the Gabriel Garcia Marquez story that Ronald Harwood scripted, as a lovesick man trying to balm his youthful love failure by way of 622 affairs. It was shot big-scale in Colombia.

Your chance to cherish Dustin Hoffman using funny hair and odd speech arrives with "Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium," which sat on the shelf for months awaiting a pre-Xmas slot. Hoffman is the ancient but deathless toy-store head, grooming Natalie Portman as successor, their romp of whimsy "helmed" by Zach Helm.

Tommy Lee Jones has another payoff performance as a sheriff in the new Coen Bros. crime story, "No Country For Old Men," a modern Western thriller extracted by the bros from the dark Cormac McCarthy novel. Its chamber is loaded with quite a cast: Jones, Javier Bardem, Josh Brolin, Woody Harrelson, Kelly

MacDonald, Tess Harper.

The season period doesn't get any less holiday than in famed provoker Brian De Palma's "Redacted." It's a hi-def digital lacing of episodes about our troops in brutal form south of Baghdad, with rape and killing drawn from true events. Starring Ty Jones, Patrick Carroll, Kel O'Neill.

A concert cellist and a rock hunk breed a prodigy named "August Rush," a Brit tale high on music from director Kirsten Sheridan, daughter of Jim Sheridan. Actual music was gotten from Keri Russell, Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, Freddie Highmore.

Disney made a musical, and perhaps it really is "Enchanted." The Snow White-based story transfers mostly to mod Manhattan, with Amy Adams the damsel, Patrick Dempsey the stud, Susan Sarandon the evil queen and James Marsden the prince as realms collide. Plus, the great Tim Spall.

For "Hitman," Timothy Olyphant rips around Eastern Europe as Agent 47, in this Slavicized thriller from Xavier Gens.

Six actors get to play Bob Dylan at different stages of "I'm Not There," which is fewer personas than The Man himself. Will the music bard really be present in Todd Haynes' tribute and reverie that includes Cate Blanchett, Richard Gere, Heath Ledger, Christian Bale, Julianne Moore?

Do you need a description of "Stephen King's The Mist?" OK, it is King's update on another King story about another town in awful peril. Director Frank "Shawshank Redemption" Darabont lavishes spooky harm on Thomas Jane, Andre Braugher, Toby Jones, Marcia Gay Harden.

While "This Christmas" may seem a month early, it could hit home as a Yuletide family drama about siblings working things out 'round the tree. Regina King, Delroy Lindo, Mekhi Phifer, Loretta Devine drink the nog.

"Romance and Cigarettes" (Nov. 30) is a labor of twisted love and curling smoke, from actor, sometimes director and writer John Turturro. It's his romantic fantasy about infidelity and family strife, with lots of classic and some new songs. Also starring Susan Sarandon, James Gandolfini, Kate Winslet, Christopher Walken, Steve Buscemi and Eddie Izzard.

Joby Harold's "Awake" (Nov. 30) is a thriller about a man whose special, spectral awareness during heart surgery involves his wife in a more than mental plot. The cast is topped by Hayden Christensen, Jessica Alba, Lena Olin, Terrence Howard.

Back to the creepily mesmerizing land of Rick (Harrison Ford), Roy (Rutger Hauer) and Rachael (Sean Young) in "Blade Runner: The Final Cut" (Nov. 30), Ridley Scott's big-cult vision of a future gone rather fabulously wrong. This is the 25th anniversary visitation.

DECEMBER DELIGHTS (OR NOT)

Joe Wright again directs Keira Knightley of his "Pride and Prejudice" in "Atonement" (Dec. 7), an upscale Brit family drama spanning decades, from the novel by Ian McEwan. James McAvoy, Vanessa Redgrave and Romola Garai enter into what would once have been Merchant & Ivory territory.

The fantastic world of Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" trilogy finds screen traction in a likely franchise starter, "The Golden Compass" (Dec. 7). Human souls become animals, even odder things happen in Chris Weitz's lavish treatment starring Sam Elliott, Tom Courtenay, Nicole Kidman, Dakota Blue Richards.

"Grace Is Gone" (Dec. 7) is back, after an earlier release was canceled. John Cusack plays a man denied military service, facing sudden tragedy on the homefront. With Alessandro Nivola, Gracie Bednarczyk.

From Germany's Doris Dorrie, maker of the wry "Enlightenment Guaranteed," comes "How to Cook Your Life" (Dec. 7). Now, she looks at a cheery Zen priest who cooks in San Francisco.

In George Clooney's film "Leatherheads" (Dec. 7), romantic comedy tackles football fever in the rah-rah 1920s, with John Krasinski as the gridiron star. More attention may go to Clooney and Renee Zellweger.

"Revolver" (Dec. 7) is unrelated to the Beatles album. It's an action spree of revenge, mobs and drugs, with director Guy ("Snatch") Ritchie pumping the firepower with actors Jason Statham, Ray Liotta, Vincent Pastore.

"The Walker" (Dec. 7) has Woody Harrelson as an insider and ladies man in D.C., then a mess of "capitol" crimes makes his urbanity difficult. It comes from an old pro with dark, manly themes, Paul Schrader, and has a rather Altmanesque bunch: Lily Tomlin, Lauren Bacall, Kristin Scott Thomas, Ned Beatty, Willem Dafoe.

Noah Baumbach had a critical hit with "The Squid and the Whale." He follows it with "Margot at the Wedding" (Dec. 7). Nicole Kidman is the writer who finds great material in the conniptions of her sister's nuptials, while Jack Black, Jennifer Jason Leigh and John Turturro also toss rice.

The team behind "Twin Towers" offers more pain in "Nanking" (Dec. 12), a probe via drama of the hideous Japanese rape and murder assault on Nanking, China. Occidental contingent includes Jurgen Prochnow, Woody Harrelson and (zounds!) Mariel Hemingway.

If you don't know these are Simon, Alvin and Theodore, you are probably not ready and willing for Dec. 14's "Alvin and the Chipmunks." Practice your squeaky, 78 rpm voice for "Alvin and the Chipmunks" (Dec. 14), as Alvin, Simon and Theodore get a cartoony feature film after lots of TV and recording gigs.

Richard Matheson's sci-fi story "I Am Legend" (Dec. 14) arrives big-time after so-so earlier versions ("The Last Man on Earth" and "The Omega Man"). Will Smith thinks he is the last survivor of a world plague, finds otherwise, is joined by many effects, a dog and Alice Braga in Francis Lawrence's movie.

Ellen Page plays "Juno" (Dec. 14), all about teen pregnancy, life lessons and intimate acting options for her, Allison Janney, Jennifer Garner, Jason Bateman, Michael Cera.

Whatever "This Christmas" didn't do for merry black Christmas, "The Perfect Holiday" (Dec. 14) may provide. Santa comes to the family relief of a big cast led by Morris Chestnut, Queen Latifah, Gabrielle Union, Terrence Howard, Faizon Love.

"Starting Out in the Evening" (Dec. 14) is Andrew Wagner's film from the Brian Morton novel, about a declining writer (Frank Langella) and brainy grad student (Lauren Ambrose) hatching a scheme, with work also for Lili Taylor.

Marc Forster and writer David Benioff adapted Khaled Hosseini's ongoing hit book "The Kite Runner" (Dec. 21). All about an Afghani man who made it to American success, but must return for deeply personal reasons during the harsh Taliban years.

Even Helen Mirren went gamely commercial for "National Treasure: Book of Secrets" (Dec. 21), John Turteltaub's wild history fantasy that pivots on John Wilkes Booth's diary. Secrets burgeon open for her, Nicolas Cage, Jon Voight, Ed Harris, Harvey Keitel.

"P.S. I Love You" (Dec. 21) is reportedly a comical tearjerker, with Hilary Swank the young widow pulled ahead by her late husband's letters, in Richard LaGravenese's heart hustle.

The most grisly of hit musicals, "Sweeney Todd" (Dec. 21) hits screens with a wallop given the style gymnastics of Tim Burton. His favorite actor, Johnny Depp, is the grim and grinning butcher in a big, British show featuring Helena Bonham Carter, Alan Rickman and non-Borat Sacha Baron Cohen.

Rock gets another satire twist in Jake Kasdan's "Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story" (Dec. 21). It's about a lusting, ludicrous music star, and John C. Reilly prepped for these moves long ago, in "Boogie Nights."

Francis Ford Coppola (truly Ford again?) returns after a decade's absence with his "Youth Without Youth" (Dec. 21). Tim Roth is an old prof become young again, with Bruno Ganz on hand to muscle the drama that Coppola, never demure, has even compared in emotive layering to "Vertigo."

Siblings who must care for an elderly parent find that life can be very rude about that, in "The Savages" (Dec. 21). Tamara Jenkin's drama of love and tested loyalty employs an A-list triangle: Laura Linney, Philip Bosco, Philip Seymour Hoffman.

Do we need the titanic face-off that is "Alien Vs. Predator: Requiem" (Dec. 25)? Damn straight, for are we not men? Even women can be men for this.

Tom Hanks and Julia Roberts like what they see in Mike Nichols' Christmas Day gift about secretive politics, "Charlie Wilson's War." "Charlie Wilson's War" (Dec. 25) is not about Charlie Wilson, the GM head and Ike's notorious secretary of defense, but about the Texas politician who armed anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan. Talk about consequences! And maybe Oscar bids for director Mike Nichols, Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts, Philip

Seymour Hoffman.

Painter and filmer Julian Schnabel's new labor of artful love is "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly" (Dec. 25), dramatizing the French fashion editor whose paralysis left him communicating by blinks. It is from a hit book, and won Schnabel the auteur prize at Cannes this summer.

"The Great Debaters" (Dec. 25) is thankfully not about the 2004 Bush-Kerry, uh, debates. Denzel Washington directed himself as an English teacher coaching debaters at a black college in 1930s Texas. Some of the verbal wind comes from Forest Whitaker.

"The Water Horse: Legend of the Deep" (Dec. 25) is about how the Loch Ness monster grew from a magical egg and also a horse, with help from a Scottish laddie. Emily Watson and Ben Chaplin back up Alex Etel and many effects.

Top the year, maybe, with the new work of risk-loving Paul Thomas Anderson ("Boogie Nights"). For "There Will Be Blood" (Dec. 26), he transformed part of an old Upton Sinclair novel to tell of oil wildcatter mania in 1920s California (the oil used was chocolate). Daniel Day-Lewis rigged up for it.

"Cassandra's Dream" (Dec. 28) should come to us this year, though Woody Allen is a slippery fella for, as Variety puts it, "upscale arthouse auds." He wrote and directed, but doesn't star in, this London tale of brothers (Ewan McGregor, Colin Farrell), a murder and dark laughs abetted by Tom Wilkinson.

"The Red Balloon" and "White Mane" (Dec. 28) is the happy return of Albert Lamorisse's 1950s classics about a Parisian boy and his beloved balloon, and about gorgeous wild horses.

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