

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

I'M NOT THERE - How do you even go about making a movie that has six actors (one a woman, one a child) playing approximations of Bob Dylan, none of whom is named Bob Dylan and all of whose stories careen through one another like the tracks of some demented railroad, and which further 'I'M NOT THERE' - Cate Blanchett as Jude in Todd Haynes' 'I'm Not There.' CNS Photo courtesy of Jonathan Wenk.
RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) depicts a boy named Woody Guthrie being swallowed by a large, cartoon whale? "Everybody must get stoned" ... a lyric from Dylan's "Rainy Day Women No. 12 and 35," a song whose improved, intoxicated feel happens to match pretty well the defiantly unconventional ethos of Todd Haynes' Bob-centric fantasia "I'm Not There." Actually, the director's fit of Dyl-irium might be thought of more in terms of snooze than booze (or other mind-altering matter). Not that the film's a yawner. Aside from anything else, Haynes puts together a righteous soundtrack, with strong cover versions by John Doe ("Pushing On") and ex-Pavement chief Stephen Malkmus ("Ballad of a Thin Man"), among many others. But as inventively as Haynes attempts to get at the ever-elusive Dylan, the man's own words from the song "I'm Not There" might be prophetic here: "I don't belong to anybody." Director: Todd Haynes. Writers: Todd Haynes, Oren

Moverman. Cast: Cate Blanchett, Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Richard Gere, Julianne Moore, Bruce Greenwood. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

THE MIST - Stephen King's "The Mist" poses no threat to John Carpenter's "The Fog." Conceptually, it nuzzles "Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster," though it's a lot less fun. Back in 1994, a King story was the basis of "The Shawshank Redemption," a fine prison film that made director Frank Darabont's reputation and is an enduring cult hit (notably on video). But soon Darabont became even more long-winded with another, more inane King adaptation, "The Green Mile." You might say he's gone from a solid to a liquid to a gas: "The Mist." Never explained, though maybe due to a grotesquely misguided government experiment, it suddenly blankets much of the East Coast. Residents of a Maine town hide out at the Food House market, where plate glass and firewood lighters provide their main defense. As panic builds, vile tentacles appear from the mist, and giant insects and spiders who fly cast poisonous filaments on screaming people. That isn't primal drama; it's primeval ugliness, made worse by modern effects long on gore. King clearly hates the tide of religious fundamentalism in America, but his brazen caricature of it and everything else shows his fundamentalism as a huckster of horrors (laugh, cringe, scream). After enough time to make this spooker seem like a bug-crazed "Titanic," there is a sub-"Twilight Zone" finish so sunken in nihilism that you might crawl from the theater. The bugs, wisely, have already left. A Dimension Films release. Director: Frank Darabont. Writers: Frank Darabont, Stephen King. Cast: Thomas Jane, Marcia Gay Harden, Laurie Holden, Andre Braugher, Toby Jones, Frances Sternhagen. Running time: 2 hours. Rated R. 0 stars.

RECENT 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 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.

MR. MAGORIUM'S WONDER EMPORIUM - "Quirk's not a sparkle." Weigh that dialogue line and you've got the floaty heft of "Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium." The quirky movie often sparkles, and as Mr. Magorium, maybe this era's Mr. Magoo, there is Dustin Hoffman. Nobody his age (and few younger) brings more crafty zeal to show-biz. And here is Hoffman with a stack of Quentin Crisp hair, bunny teeth and a voice somewhere between Elmer Fudd and Steven Spielberg. He owns and empowers the magical shop, an old cutie set between Manhattan high-rises. Toys, games and stuffed critters are way beyond interactive. Playing is much more important than selling, and the bottom line is so far down that a stuffy accountant (Jason Bateman), whose humorless suited-ness gets him named "Mutant," can barely account the wonders. Get into the right and light holiday spirit, and you should be pleased. As always, the call is yours. A 20th Century Fox release. Director, writer: Zach Helm. Cast: Dustin Hoffman, Natalie Portman, Zach Mills, Jason Bateman. Running time: 1 hour, 32 minutes. Rated G. 3 stars.

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN - "No Country for Old Men," the new startler from Joel and Ethan Coen, deals an odd hand confidently. The Texas crime story leads with aces high, but dips for some low and wild cards. Adapting Cormac McCarthy's harsh novel, the Coens put a skull right on the card table. That is Javier Bardem as Anton Chigurh, whose brown crown of hair, above a coldly staring face, signals a brutal weirdness. He's a psychopath who likes to taunt victims, and he smiles about going to hell. Packing off his sweetly scattered wife (Kelly Macdonald) to her dying but chirpy mom (more Coen humor), Moss plays catch-me with Chigurh. It's macho amateur vs. nihilistic pro, cocky improviser vs. Lecter loon. Soberly forlorn Sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones), who has seen far too much for way too long, dovetails among them, often a bit late. The Coens can lasso any sort of wildness, can romp with it, yet like "Blood Simple," this is a ropery stretch for the dark heart of Texas. Also one hell of a trip. A Miramax Films release. Directors, writers: Joel and Ethan Coen. Cast: Tommy Lee Jones, Javier Bardem, Josh Brolin, Woody Harrelson, Kelly Macdonald, Tess Harper, Barry Corbin. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

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 bladelikey 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.

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

Films in Focus: New and recent releases by David Elliott and others