

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

I AM LEGEND - In the near future, a viral plague not only will exterminate humanity and spawn a race of flesh-eating mutants, but - the horror - drive gas prices to \$6.63 a gallon. Fortunately, that's of zero concern to Robert Neville (Will Smith), who as the last man on Earth enjoys certain perks, free fill-ups among them. Director Francis Lawrence and writers Mark Protosevich and Akiva Goldsman have taken Richard Matheson's 1954 novel, with its subversive twist on subjects of social justice, and made what's mostly a straight-up monster mash. Smith plays Neville as a tortured warrior, an Army scientist still insisting "I can fix this" to no one in particular, three years after his efforts as chief virus-fighter failed to stop the killer epidemic. The climax, surprising or not, proceeds to wrap up so fast you might wonder if the zombies scarfed a few pages of script. A Warner Bros. release. Director: Francis Lawrence. Writers: Mark Protosevich, Akiva Goldsman. Cast: Will Smith, Alice Braga, Charlie Tihan, Salli Richardson, Willow Smith, Dash Mihok. Running time: 1 hr., 40 min. Rating: PG-13. 2 1/2 stars

ALVIN AND THE CHIPMUNKS - Not even at Hugh Hefner's mansion has a **'ALVIN AND THE CHIPMUNKS'** - Simon, Alvin and Theodore (from left) star in the family comedy 'Alvin and the Chipmunks.' CNS Photo courtesy of 20th Century Fox. **RATINGS**

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) grown man been awakened in bed and told by a chipmunk, "I had a nightmare. Can I sleep with you?" It's a high point of "Alvin and the Chipmunks," starring digitally animated Alvin the scamp, smart Simon and adorable Theodore. They're back, out of long TV service for a zippy holiday comedy that goes flat after establishing just how winning the chipsters can still be. The chipmunk trio, moving among more or less live actors, are still enjoyable. Kids get a laugh from their mischief, such as the poop gag and the toy mania and the way Theodore keeps angling for a cuddle. An adult mind soon wonders about all the product plugs. And the nearly complete waste of ace comic actor Jane Lynch, as the camera keeps ogling a smiling, generic blond (Cameron Richardson). And the plot, which plops into mediocrity. It's a free-fall into total plastic. Kids deserve better. Alvin, Simon and Theodore deserve better. But 'tis the season to take what you get. A 20th Century Fox release. Director: Tim Hill. Writers: Jon Vitti, Will McRobb, Chris Viscardi. Cast: Jason Lee, David Cross, Justin Long, Jane Lynch, Cameron Richardson. Running time: 1 hour, 24 minutes. Rated PG. 2 stars.

JUNO -The term "Junoesque" doesn't apply to short, pin-pert Ellen Page in "Juno." But already the name of the Roman goddess is jointly owned by the Canadian, age 20. We first see teen Juno losing her virginity to the sounds of Astrud Gilberto, so we guess the movie will be fun. Since her squeeze is Paul (Michael Cera), who is charming like a stressed, hormonal puppy, we wonder if the fun can last. It can, yet with sobering twists. "Juno" is about a girl who gets pregnant and is backed by her shaken but smart, decent parents (Allison Janney and J.K. Simmons are funny without turning sitcom). She likes the boy who proved less his manhood than her new womanhood and determines to face matters her way. Prenatally, Juno chooses to give away the baby, and the prospective parents, Mark (Jason Bateman) and Vanessa (Jennifer Garner), seem so very right. Well, Vanessa does, with Garner's lovably eager yearning. There is something about how suave yupster Mark looks at Juno, the way he plays verbal tag with her, that make us worry. A Fox Searchlight Pictures release. Director: Jason Reitman. Writer: Diablo Cody. Cast: Ellen Page, Michael Cera, Allison Janney, Jason Bateman, J.K. Simmons, Jennifer Garner. Running time: 1 hour, 32 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 1/2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

THE GOLDEN COMPASS - There may be box-office gold from "The Golden Compass," but panning for it while viewing is a real day at the mine. It stars beautifully named Dakota Blue Richards as beautifully named Lyra Belacqua, niece (maybe more) to lofty Lord Asriel, one of the big men at Oxford U. Daniel Craig plays him, but is seldom seen. Fantabulous forces infiltrate this world and a parallel universe. Lyra, like almost everyone, has her "daemon," a cute companion pet that can speak and even morph into other species (like ferret to bird). A menacing power has abducted kids to a polar lab where they are separated from their daemons, a borderline Nazi operation that Lyra will invade with various stalwart companions. The most mysterious is Miss Coulter, played by Nicole Kidman. She's icy when not vaguely maternal, and wears outfits

worthy of the Golden Compass Globes. A New Line Cinema release. Director, writer: Chris Weitz. Cast: Dakota Blue Richards, Nicole Kidman, Eva Green, Daniel Craig, Jim Carter, Sam Elliott, Ben Walker. Running time: 1 hour, 53 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

MARGOT AT THE WEDDING - Written and directed by a man, Noah Baumbach, "Margot at the Wedding" might rank as the "chick flick" of the year if it had more good scenes for Nicole Kidman and Jennifer Jason Leigh. Kidman is Margot, the tall sister with a mildly lofty reputation as a New York fiction writer. We get a full draft of her source material in the film, much of it from Leigh as sister Pauline, a been-around teacher sliding into foolish nuptials with a self-pitying artist, Malcolm (Jack Black). Black restrains nearly all his comic impulses, even when standing mostly nude in front of a mirror. Malcolm is the kind of guy who strikes taunting poses and then, challenged, tends to blubber, whine and ask for pity. He's like a blob of cheese caught between the serrated knives that are Pauline and Margot, who reunite for the wedding and to settle old scores. It's a movie in which everyone wants answers without being able to formulate the questions. The cast is so good that the story doesn't quite dissolve into soapy wall stains, but we can see some bubbles. A Paramount Classics release. Director, writer: Noah Baumbach. Cast: Nicole Kidman, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Jack Black, Zane Pais, Ciaran Hinds, John Turturro. Running time: 1 hour, 31 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

ATONEMENT - "Atonement" has the glow of a film doing major literary beautification, the Serious Quality patina of movies that come at year's end to woo Oscar. They make you fret: Is it really that good, and will it last? "Atonement" is that good, and it should last. Joe Wright, again using the faceted gem of his 2005 "Pride & Prejudice," Keira Knightley, has with adapter Christopher Hampton fashioned a teeming but never merely cake-piled film of Ian McEwan's novel. To brand it "Masterpiece Theatre" or "Merchant and Ivory" is, despite some vapors of Jane Austen, Evelyn Waugh and Henry James, to be a glutton for glibness. The plot pivots on an act of barely adult foolishness, compounded by juvenile spite. The young man becoming adult is Robbie Turner (James McAvoy), bright son of the housekeeper (Brenda Blethyn) at a succulent English estate. He is the virtual, adoptive son of the wealthy family and, despite the class barrier, has a crush on the gorgeous heiress Cecilia (Knightley). "Atonement," a triumph of adulthood, atones for a lot of shoddy stuff at the movies in 2007. A Universal Pictures release. Director: Joe Wright. Writer: Christopher Hampton, Ian McEwan. Cast: Keira Knightley, James McAvoy, Saoirse Ronan, Romola Garai, Brenda Blethyn, Juno Temple. Running time: 2 hours. Rated R. 4 stars.

ROMANCE & CIGARETTES - Part of the fun of "Romance & Cigarettes" - and only the right mood will let you inhale this one - is the thought of John Turturro grinning, lighting up, puffing his film through the air. Wildly versatile as an actor, Turturro as moviemaker fondles his roots with generous pleasure. James Gandolfini stars as Nick Murder, who, despite the name, is not a hood but a New York bridge worker. Of course, Gandolfini hauls some heft of menace from "The Sopranos," and when his angry wife, Kitty (Susan Sarandon), tears into him, she can easily match Edie Falco as Tony Soprano's Carmela. Kitty firehoses Nick ("I hate you with all the hate you can hate with!") for being a "whoremaster" fixated on a lurid British tart. That would be Kate Winslet as Tula, a redhead with mouth to match. If you try to recall dear Rose from "Titanic," forget it. Any director who can get Gandolfini to endure middle-aged circumcision, who has lovely

Winslet profaning profusely, who lets Steve Buscemi snark a quip about Randolph Scott, who makes Christopher Walken strut like Elvis while confiding "Some people fear the Lord, I fear women" - well, such a director can also pull off a Bach organ scene in salute to "La Dolce Vita." A Boroturro release. Director, writer: John Turturro. Cast: James Gandolfini, Kate Winslet, Susan Sarandon, Steve Buscemi, Christopher Walken, Aida Turturro, Mandy Moore, Bobby Cannavale. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

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 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.

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.

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