

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET - Sweeney Todd is no sweetie pie. The meat pies made from his victims create a mental pungency you can almost smell in theaters showing "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street." It's an ugly story given a slick and sickly 'SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET' - Johnny Depp stars in the musical thriller 'Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street.' CNS Photo courtesy of Leah Gallo. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) beautiful form of intensity by Tim Burton's version of the 1979 Stephen Sondheim musical. Burton preens his vision like a goth peacock, in a terminal London so dark and dirty even Dickens would have turned queasy. Top feather of the peacock is Johnny Depp as Todd, who returns from distant penal service, believing his lovely wife a suicide, his daughter now the kept morsel of vile Judge Turpin (Alan Rickman). What's a sad fella to do? Well, lacking therapy, set up a barber shop where he can vent some spleen by slashing the necks of customers. No other musical stars a man who croons warmly to his razors. As the defining alternative to a feel-good show, "Sweeney Todd" can make you swear off meat pies forever. Popcorn could suffer, too. A Paramount Pictures / DreamWorks SKG release. Director: Tim Burton. Writer: Josh Logan. Cast: Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter, Alan Rickman, Timothy Spall, Ed Sanders, Sacha Baron

Cohen. Running time: 1 hour, 48 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR - With "Charlie Wilson's War" Tom Hanks is a long, fine way from the famous bucket of caramel corn, "Forrest Gump." No Gump or Gumby is this. The movie's energizing strength is intelligence. It is so entertainingly adult. Of the many smart people in it, the main brain is Congressman Charlie Wilson. Up from rural Texas with more than a hint of Lyndon B. Johnson in speech and connivance, Wilson gives Hanks a juice fest of political Americana. Wilson, by passion and skullduggery, roped together covert deals and some congressional black-op budgets to feed modern arms to the Afghan guerrillas fighting the Soviet invasion of the 1970s. Wilson is a crafty, impish, mostly liberal politician, able to satisfy his mostly rural, Christian constituents without being a hypocrite or moralizer. He can fight a good fight, and for good reasons, while also slurping drinks, sharing a jacuzzi with strippers or ogling the sexy girls who secretary for him (one he calls "Jailbait"). But Charlie Wilson fought, won and had his own fun doing it. A Universal Pictures release. Director: Mike Nichols. Writer: Aaron Sorkin. Cast: Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, Ned Beatty, Shaun Toub, Om Puri. Running time: 1 hour, 37 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

YOUTH WITHOUT YOUTH - It's rare for an old master to be young again. Orson Welles did with "F for Fake," and now, with a similar dance of invention, Francis Ford Coppola in "Youth Without Youth." Coppola is 68, and his last directed feature ("The Rainmaker") was a decade ago and tired. A leap like "Youth" is only possible for a veteran who found true rejuvenation, and Coppola goes for broke as he hasn't since the 1980s. Tim Roth stars as Dominic Matei, who in 1938 is 70 and reaching the end without completing his big book on the roots of language. Instead of lightning in a bottle, he is hit by lightning on the street. Though cooked almost to death, he slowly awakens in a Bucharest hospital. Coppola has conviction even with the airiest elements. The churn and sweep of time, memory, karma, the whole enchilada of fate, give the story a weirdly compulsive charm. Some won't like the film, which is their sad loss. Coppola experiments with storytelling in a succulent, commanding way. He seems so youthfully mature, creative with a ripe and laughing nod to art, dreams and even (the bonus) classy kitsch. A Sony Pictures Classics release. Director, writer: Francis Ford Coppola. Cast: Tim Roth, Alexandra Maria Lara, Bruno Ganz, Marcel Iures, Andre Hennicke. Running time: 2 hours. Rated R. 4 stars.

THE KITE RUNNER - Afghanistan is a nation tortured by history, but the core feeling in "The Kite Runner" is heartburning love of the place, its proud people and dusty, rugged beauty. The "star" kite belongs to Amir, son of a rich, very moral but Western-minded (that is, not very Islamic) man, Baba. Amir's "runner" for the kiting contests is the top servant's son, Hassan. The story, which often feels like a book breathing, centers on the bond between the upscale lad and the one from a poorly regarded minority. Devoted to each other, they are tested by bullies, and Amir does something that shames him, then resentfully compounds that with something just as shaming. In its atmospheric and rich acting (including the boys, so tossed by fate), "The Kite Runner" is a very traditional grabber with modern fidelity to all the right, living details. It takes us far away, yet inside lives, so that the distant seems utterly present and personal. A Paramount Classics release. Director: Marc Forster. Writer: David Benioff. Cast: Halid Abdalla, Homayon Ershadi, Shaun Toub, Abdu Qadir Farookh, Atossa Leoni. Running time: 2 hours. Rated PG-13. 3 stars.

THE SAVAGES - Most of us get old. We all die. And some, before the end, draw the extra penalty card: senility requiring round-the-clock care. Those facts pretty fully define the sensitive soaper "The Savages," from director and writer Tamara Jenkins. Old (77) Philip Bosco, in a very fine sunset performance, plays perfectly named Lenny Savage. Sick and fading, he has a grim temper and was probably never very likable. Clues indicate that his wife left long ago because he took up with another woman, and there's a hint of past rages inflicted on the kids. Now, they're middle-aged and flogging their ambitions. Wendy (Laura Linney) is a temp worker and aspiring playwright, overweight brother Jon (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is a minor prof and Brecht specialist. They have lives more than lifestyles, and those lives wobble even more when they bring dad from Sun City in Arizona and park him in a Buffalo nursing home. People who have dealt with the seriously sick and aged will find many points of contact. But the movie virtually checks off those points, like a sophisticated version of a care brochure. Thank heaven for good actors. A Fox Searchlight release. Director, writer: Tamara Jenkins. Cast: Philip Seymour Hoffman, Laura Linney, Philip Bosco, Gbenga Akinnagbe, Peter Friedman. Running time: 1 hour, 53 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

RECENT 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 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.

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.

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

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