Films in Focus: New and recent releases

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

THERE WILL BE BLOOD - If the genius actor Daniel Day-Lewis didn't actually dig up John Huston (1906-87) for his stunningly dominating role in "There Will Be Blood," he must have tapped some psychic channel. As Daniel Plainview, whose pastoral name cannot hide a gnarly interior, the actor is often quite close to Huston's vocal timbre, mannerisms and slightly sinister courtliness. And yet, with fresh force, Day-Lewis is drilling in depth. Daniel 'THERE WILL BE BLOOD' - As Daniel Plainview, Daniel Day-Lewis rises from lowly prospector to lofty king of California greed in the drama 'There Will Be Blood.' CNS Photo courtesy of Francois Duhamel/Paramount Vantage. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) drills for oil, after raw years as a metal prospector. He is very alone, except for adopted baby H.W. Part of the movie's creepy power is that we can't tell if Daniel loves the boy, finds him a burden, or just uses the kid to soften dim or suspicious farmers out of their land and oil rights. The plot is fairly simple, and creaks. We hear that happening as Daniel gets into a poisonous rivalry with a smug, boyish preacher, Eli Sunday (Paul Dano). Both are fanatical hucksters. Eli, a dinky prophet, has conned himself into some belief, and Daniel despises him. The movie has a startling sense of work, the beauty and danger of tools, the way hard land can be both heaven and hell. Under starchy facades of dignity, people crawl with need and envy. A

Miramax Films release. Director, writer: Paul Thomas Anderson. Cast: Daniel Day-Lewis, Paul Dano, Ciaran Hinds, Russell Harvard. Running time: 2 hours, 32 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

THE BUCKET LIST - A two-character event, "The Bucket List" has two reasons to be seen: Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson. Freeman is Carter, a married garage mechanic who once had academic hopes and can get all the answers right on his fave show, "Jeopardy!" Nicholson is Ed, rich from the hospital biz, unmarried and with the fabled Jacko style that is like a bazooka sucking caviar. They are parked in beds at the hospital Ed owns, with Carter grumpy about the pea soup and Ed simply grumpy all the time. And why not? Both have cancer and dim prospects. Savingly, for the film, the old men revert to being boys. They draw up a list of things to do before they kick the bucket. Since Ed is rich, this means the big pig-out: sky diving, racing hot cars down a privately leased speedway, luxury food on the Riviera, visits to the Nile, the Taj Mahal and Hong Kong. A Warner Bros. release. Director: Rob Reiner. Writer: Justin Zackham. Cast: Jack Nicholson, Morgan Freeman, Sean Hayes, Beverly Todd. Running time: 1 hour, 44 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 stars.

FIRST SUNDAY - As star of "First Sunday," Ice Cube earns his name. He has an almost hibernating hum, glowering in his take on the old Brando and Mitchum routines, his aura of boredom radiating cool. The comedy is a quaint contraption (writer and director, David E. Talbert) about a former felon, Durell (Ice Cube), who can't seem to hold down a job. But he's desperate to grab fast money to prevent his ex from moving away with his beloved son (cute C.J. Sanders). That pillow mint of family value is it for substance. It doesn't quite justify Durell's joining a pal (Tracy Morgan) who is both a wise-off and moron to rob a church whose fat pastor (Chi McBride) is almost as glacially chilled as Durell. A Screen Gems release. Director, writer: David E. Talbert. Cast: Ice Cube, Katt Williams, Chi McBride, Tracy Morgan, Loretta Devine, Regina Hall, Keith David. Running time: 1 hour, 28 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

THE ORPHANAGE - You need to be devout about generic chills to really go for "The Orphanage." Spanish director J.A. Bayona, up from shorts and videos, has devotion - but what is the Spanish phrase for "everything but the kitchen sink?" It starts with a childhood game and ends with one from the dark side. Darkness made quite visible is the grand old orphanage near the sea, from which Laura was adopted at 7. She returns at 37 to its abandoned vastness as the new owner. Belen Rueda plays adult Laura, seemingly not hexed by memories of the place, which might be called Xanadu, Manderley or the Castle of Otranto. Her doctor husband keeps smiling blandly for the longest time, even after their dreamy, adopted son, Simon (Roger Princep), slips off with imaginary friends to a huge sea cave under a lighthouse cliff. And weird Montserrat Carulla shows up as a "social worker" with haunted eyes, to reveal that the boy has a serious illness. The truly disturbing element is the heavy reliance on childhood loneliness, fear and sickness. This mood-swamped contraption presses along almost interminably, until - but why spoil it? Suffer if you must. A Picturehouse release in Spanish (subtitled).

Director: J.A. Bayona. Writer: Sergio C. Sanchez. Cast: Belen Rueda, Roger Princep, Fernando Cayo, Geraldine Chaplin, Montserrat Carulla. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

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 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 atmospherics 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.

NATIONAL TREASURE: BOOK OF SECRETS - Nicolas Cage looks good in a seersucker suit. That is about the only clear and certain fact to ward off suspicion in "National Treasure: Book of Secrets." Who owns the book? The president of the United States, who tells nobody about it but lets it be kept on the rear of an open shelf at the Library of Congress, where just about any nosey bookworm could find it. The current prez, not George W. Bush but actor Bruce Greenwood, knows of the book and tells treasure hunter and history buff Ben Gates (Cage). But only after Gates invokes the president's Huck Finn impulse to help Gates open up the forgotten cellars of George Washington's mansion at Mount Vernon, leaving the Secret Service behind as they enter spaces no curator or site maintainer had ever thought to visit. Even winners of the Bancroft Prize in history would have to admit there's a crazy, pinballing urge to entertain. And that most of the actors give off the special shine of people on a paid holiday. Less a film than a theme park for conspiracy addicts who seriously debate "Ripley's Believe It or Not," this is not about history. It is about gold. Box-office gold. A

Walt Disney release. Director: Jon Turteltaub. Writers: Cormac and Marianne Wibberley. Cast: Nicolas Cage, Helen Mirren, Diane Kruger, Jon Voight, Ed Harris, Bruce Greenwood. Running time: 1 hour, 37 minutes. Rated PG. 2 1/2 stars.

WALK HARD: THE DEWEY COX STORY - Johnny Cash once got the stuffing knocked out of him by an enraged ostrich named Waldo, breaking five ribs. Now a counterfeit Cash comes along to throttle the singer a bit more. Not so nice to kick a fella while he's down (or, actually, dead), but in all fairness "Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story" isn't meant as a slap at the Man in Black. It's intended as a sendup of all those smarmy, formula-addicted flicks about tortured artists who find success, then calamity, then redemption through the graces of a good woman/higher power/agent. There's no ostrich in "Walk Hard," but there is a pet giraffe, and the movie itself is like a zoo tour of primal, rock 'n' roll wildlife, with Dewey (John C. Reilly) the guitar-strumming schlub who becomes king of the jungle. The laughs hit like a case of the hiccups - erratic and occasionally a little uncomfortable. Reilly does have a way with a mike. And in the area of tearing plumbing fixtures out of walls, he way outpaces Joaquin Phoenix's work in "Walk the Line." It's that kind of comedy. Everything plus the bathroom sink. Or a dozen of them. A Columbia Pictures release. Director: Jake Kasdan. Writers: Jake Kasdan, Judd Apatow. Cast: John C. Reilly, Jenna Fischer, Kristen Wiig, Tim Meadows, Chris Parnell. Running time: 1 hour, 36 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

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.

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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