

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

CASSANDRA'S DREAM - Getting out of New York has been rejuvenating for Woody Allen, who turned 72 last month. Mr. New York Movies had been filming too many trite, papery footnotes to his career; then, working in Britain toned him up. There was the crafty "Match Point" (2005), the 'CASSANDRA'S DREAM' - More garnishing than substance in the drama 'Cassandra's Dream,' cute dating couples (from left) Sally Hawkins and Ewan McGregor, Hayley Atwell and Colin Farrell add to the London ambience. CNS Photo courtesy of Keith Hamshere. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) intriguing but iffy "Scoop" (2006), and now the crispest of the English trio, "Cassandra's Dream." Adroitly written by Allen without strumming for laughs, shot with pellucid sharpness in fine locations by Vilmos Zsigmond, pepped by the almost Vivaldian score of Philip Glass, this is tight entertainment. Colin Farrell and Ewan McGregor do some of their finest work to date as lower-middle-class London brothers, Ian (McGregor) and Terry (Farrell). Ian is sick of working in his aging dad's tired restaurant, while garage mechanic Terry has an adorable girlfriend (Sally Hawkins), but is more preoccupied with his gambling habit and pub prowling. Eager to swing free, the boys feel the old English itch for open water. Though financially strapped, they buy a small sailing vessel, the Cassandra's Dream. The film builds expertly

to its key action, which is done almost glancingly. Then, it sags a little, as the siblings suffer ethical hangovers. An IFC Films release. Director, writer: Woody Allen. Cast: Ewan McGregor, Colin Farrell, Tom Wilkinson, Phil Davis, Sally Hawkins, Hayley Atwell. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 stars.

STEEP - Like some surfer movies of recent vintage, "Steep" is buzzy in a jock way but also quaintly solemn, as if saluting the final conquistadors. And, why not? Few of us would have the guts to do as "extreme skiing" wizards do in this documentary. Often they seem a bit nuts, in a happily adrenalized way, but as one of the slope kings says, reflecting on the odds, "If you were not scared, you wouldn't be crazy. You'd be dead." Rick Armstrong, Doug Coombs and wife Emily, Mohawk-haired "rebel" Glen Plake, Canada's Eric Pehota, downhiller and base-jumper Shane McConky, the aerial genius Seth Morrison - the group is, to use this era's favorite superlative, awesome. Even if you would no more climb such places and ski them than you would scale the Washington Monument in greased pajamas, the beauty of the helicopter shots and body-cam views is thrilling. At the end, along with some sad news about one star, there is paradise: the Alaskan crags where powder piles with extraordinary depth and softness, "like velvet." A Sony Pictures Classics release. Director, writer: Mark Obenhaus. Cast: Doug and Emily Coombs, Bill Briggs, Stefano De Benedetti, Seth Morrison, Glen Plake, Rick Armstrong. Running time: 1 hour, 31 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.

PERSEPOLIS - The Islamic Republic of Iran can seem as reductively bad as a living cartoon of a nightmare. But view the best Iranian films, often complex and subversive of the regime, and you discern what life teems behind beards and veils. "Persepolis" is a cartoon movie adapted by graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi from her memoir books, along with Vincent Paronnaud (dialogue and narration are French, not Farsi). Satrapi and Paronnaud maintain the books' style. That means simple, blocky figures densely slotted as shadows and silhouettes. "Persepolis" feels abstract, never deeply personal, because Satrapi offers only surfaces and push-pin thoughts while sharing here sincere but glib sisterhood with Iranian history. When she screams at hair stubble on her legs, this arrives with more socko than the slaughter of innocents in the war. Bizarrely, in this hip, feminized slap at the Islamic Republic, the regime has the best rhetoric: "To die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society." Using her life as a prism, Satrapi injects a limited amount of light. A Sony Pictures release. Directors, writers: Marjane Satrapi, Vincent Paronnaud. Voices: Chiara Mastroianni, Catherine Deneuve, Danielle Darrieux, Simon Abkarian. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

MAD MONEY - What is it with Diane Keaton? She just turned 62, has the facial lines to show it and is even willing to dress badly, but her comic timing hasn't lost a nip of zip and she can still beam one of the great smiles of movie history. The main kick of the fluffy heist movie "Mad Money" is Keaton. She gets mad (her husband lost his executive job and they may lose their swell house), and then decides to get crazy mad. She joins the cleaning staff of the Federal Reserve Bank in Kansas City, sees the bulk loads of old cash being shredded like the last confetti of 1939, and chooses to rob the joint. She needs two partners. So power mama Queen Latifah, deciding to commit a felony for her kids' sake, links up in the crime chain with Katie Holmes as the winky weak link. The family grows to include snow-haired Ted Danson (Keaton's husband), Holmes' cute biker doof, Adam Rothenberg, and big guard Roger R. Cross, who tumbles for the Queen. When those

two hold a closeup, the screen is full. An Overture Films release. Director: Callie Khouri. Writers: Glenn Gers, John Myster. Cast: Diane Keaton, Queen Latifah, Katie Holmes, Ted Danson, Roger R. Cross. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

27 DRESSES - "27 Dresses" only seems like a lobotomy. In fact, this is public surgery to install a new vacuum tube for airheads into the generic chick flick, model 2008. Katherine Heigl, who is herself like a new model (of Ashley Judd, with a petal or two borrowed from media dandelions Britney and Paris), stars as Jane. A New York office workaholic, her real-life mission is to make weddings perfect. She always appears as a bridesmaid, and florid dresses jam her closet. Jane is wry, creative, lovely, adorable, but naturally her caring, sensitive boss never notices her crush on him. No, George (Edward Burns) is too busy being adorable himself. And bypassing Jane for her sister, Tess (Malin Akerman), a grabby blond who is like cellophane with teeth. How can you, without benefit of coma, forgive people who make a movie this bad? How can you understand anyone needing to see it? If this is comedy in 2008, then Sly Stallone can follow his new "Rambo" with a remake of "Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot." A 20th Century Fox release. Director: Anne Fletcher. Writer: Aline Brosh McKenna. Cast: Katherine Heigl, James Marsden, Malin Akerman, Edward Burns, Judy Greer. Running time: 1 hour, 37 minutes. Rated PG-13. 0 stars.

RECENT 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 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. Sparing, 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.

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 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.

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