

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

PENELOPE - One could have hoped that "Shrek," with its moralizing switcheroo ending, imposed at least a generation-long hold on the ugly-princess-with-a-curse template. But that would have been a squandering of hope, which, come to think of it, doesn't do you any good when you're born, as the poor little rich girl Penelope (Christina Ricci) was, with the snout of a pig. Because it seems the snout-curse will be lifted only when she is accepted by one of her own - i.e., a blue blood. Penelope has spent her life hidden away by 'PENELOPE' - Christina Ricci stars in the modern-day romantic tale 'Penelope.' CNS Photo courtesy of Nick Wall. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) her parents in their sprawling mansion. But now she's 25, and Mom (Catherine Harris, way, way over the top) has arranged for interviews with a long string of blue-blooded suitors. The very sight of Penelope, however, invariably causes them to flee in horror. Because those suitors signed a non-disclosure form, of course, the pig-girl remains a secret. Until, that is, sleazy photojournalist Lemon (Peter Dinklage) hooks up with one of those ex-suitors (Simon Woods, a great, great sniveler), who has his own reasons for wanting to out Penelope. "Penelope" is an odd concoction - a witch's gentle brew of modern-day fairy tale, feather-light romance and slapstick comedy. It's not a knockout potion, but it goes down smoothly and is harmless enough to serve to the kids. "Penelope." Running time: 1 hour, 29 minutes. Rated: PG. 2 1/2 stars.

THE BAND'S VISIT - The men in the Alexandria Police Band are way, way out of their element. Having arrived in Israel to play at the opening of an Arab cultural center, they've taken a bus in exactly the wrong direction and now find themselves stranded outside a small desert town. In the middle distance stand the town's bland apartment buildings, looking similarly stranded. Striding purposefully up to an outdoor cafe,

Tewfiq (Sasson Gabai), their sad, tightly strung leader, asks Dina (Ronit Elkabetz), the cafe's owner, for directions to the Arab cultural center. "No Arab culture here," she tells him, bemused. "No Israeli culture. No culture." Dina what-the-hells and takes them in, bringing Tewfiq and Khaled (Saleh Bakri), a young, Chet-Baker-crooning Lothario, to her apartment, assigning a co-worker to take the rest of the band to his. They will spend the long evening and night together, these disappointed, end-of-the-road Israelis and out-of-their-depth Egyptians. Wryly written and slyly directed by Eran Kolirin, "The Band's Visit" is grounded by impeccable performances from the Israeli/Palestinian cast, particularly those of Gabai and Elkabetz. "The Band's Visit." Running time: 1 hour, 29 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 3 1/2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

4 MONTHS, 3 WEEKS, AND 2 DAYS - A film of brutal, breathtaking intelligence, a work of pellucid, shimmering art without a scintilla of compromise, "4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days" is surely one of the very best films of the year. And you can pick the year. Romania, 1987. The communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu will collapse in two years, but of course no one knows that. Gabita (Laura Vasiliu) and Otilia (Anamaria Marinca) are roommates, university students in a bleak, rundown dorm. Gabita seems nervous and distracted as she ineffectually - ditsily, even - packs for a trip. Otilia scurries around getting things done for her. But Gabita, as it happens, isn't going on a trip. She has arranged to have an abortion, illegal at that time in Romania. Or rather, the can-do Otilia ends up arranging it for her, even stepping in to meet Bebe (Vlad Ivanov), the abortionist, to work out the awkward details. What follows is a scale-model horror show of existence under a totalitarian regime. "4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days" grows darker, visually and viscerally. Near the end, as Otilia staggers through the night, we can barely make her out, yet we couldn't be more with her, locked into her shattering journey through this brilliant, shattering film. "4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days." Running time: 1 hour, 53 minutes. Rated: Unrated (with subtitles). 4 stars.

THE SPIDERWICK CHRONICLES - Goblins and ogres and sylphs, oh no! When the recently split-up Grace family - dad has flown - arrives at the creepy, isolated old mansion that belonged to Aunt Lucinda before she was taken to the asylum. ... (See first sentence.) And why are goblins, et al., about? Eighty years ago, Lucinda's (Joan Plowright) slightly unhinged father, Arthur Spiderwick (David Straithairn), discovered a secret world of invisible creatures, and inscribed his "knowledge of the fantastical world" in a book, or rather, Book. Should the No. 1 ogre Mulgarath ever get hold of it, why. ... So Spiderwick surrounded the mansion with a sort of Goblins-B-Gone protective circle, and hid the Book away. The pace is so swift and the creatures so icky that there's no time to examine the workmanship on the shaky contraption of a plot, which, even allowing for Faerie cosmology, seems a mite far-fetched. "The Spiderwick Chronicles." Running time: 1 hour, 37 minutes. Rated PG. 2 1/2 stars.

TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE - "Taxi to the Dark Side" was nominated for an Academy Award for Best

Documentary Feature. It is a methodically constructed, step-by-step detailing of how the Bush administration's policy of condoning torture trickled down the chain of command to the largely untrained troops in the field, or, more to the point, in the detention centers. The film includes photos and grainy film clips from Abu Ghraib - where some of the Bagram guards were sent after the U.S. invasion - that are one step beyond horrifying. Writer, director and narrator Alex Gibney includes interviews with troops and excerpts from administration officials. And where has this taxi taken us? The fare, Gibney's film suggests, will be steep. Rated R. 4 stars.

VINCE VAUGHN'S WILD WEST COMEDY SHOW - 30 DAYS AND 30 NIGHTS, HOLLYWOOD TO THE HEARTLAND - 'Vince Vaughn's Wild West Comedy Show - 30 Days and 30 Nights, Hollywood to the Heartland' is a surprisingly moving, often hilarious account of five men on the road - four talented comedians and a movie star. Onstage and off, they weave stories and life insights night-after-night to audiences from San Diego to Lubbock to Louisville. It's an intimate look into the heart of ambition and struggle and the prodigious challenge of making people laugh. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

OVER HER DEAD BODY - Filmed on the aesthetic principle that viewers want lots of sunlight (which won't hurt it later on TV), "Over Her Dead Body" is about a control freak (superbly tanned Eva Longoria Parker) who is killed by an ice statue on her wedding day. As a ghost, she haunts and pesters the cute psychic (Lake Bell) who heals and woos her ex (Paul Rudd). Writer and director Jeff Lowell can twinkle it along, and the cast, especially "Boston Legal" fixture Bell, is engaging. Beyond that, let's note a funny talking parrot, a Catholic exorcism as visual gag, the longest flatulence joke surely ever put into a chick comedy, and a weirdly dismissive plug for an esteemed writer (David Foster Wallace). The movie is vapid, but it's boring only if you really mind clocking TV vegetation time while sitting in a movie theater. Or hate sunlight. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

UNTRACEABLE - It opens with the torture and slow death of a kitten, which neatly captures the spirit and tone of the execrable, excruciating "Untraceable." Yet another serial killer is on the loose. The worst kind, at that: A fiendish computer wunderkind whose machinations send police and FBI agents scurrying to their terminals, where we endure scene after scene of fingers tapping on keys. I ask you, what kind of society produces monsters like these? Or, more to the point, movies like this? Jennifer Marsh (Diane Lane, trying to look drab and not coming close) is just another single-mom FBI agent in Portland, Ore., assigned to nab Internet crooks with her whiz-kid pal Griffin (Colin Hanks). "Untraceable," (slickly shot, unfortunately - Portland is a gorgeous gray) is hateful, brutalizing, inexcusable. The contempt with which the film regards the audience should by all rights be returned, with well-earned outrage flung back in its face as bonus. Free of charge. No, really - it's on us. A Screen Gems/Lakeshore Entertainment release. Director: Gregory Hoblit. Writers: Robert Fyvolent, Mark R. Brinker, Allison Burnett. Cast: Diane Lane, Billy Burke, Colin Hanks, Joseph Cross. Running time: 1 hour, 41 minutes. Rated R. 1 star.

U2 3D - Almost? Almost. Almost! No other rock concert film, past or present, will inspire viewers to repeatedly think "almost" as much as "U2 3D," which opened recently and is billed as the first live action, real-time, digital 3-D film ever. Watching U2 perform in 3-D on an IMAX screen, in 5.2 Surround Sound, is an eye- and ear-popping experience. By any description, no previous rock film has come so close to making you feel like you're "almost" there, in the middle of the action, on stage with the band. That's "almost" as in you almost feel like the tip of Adam Clayton's Fender bass is about to hit you in the face at one point, and you "almost" feel like you can reach out and snatch one of The Edge's guitar picks from his microphone stand during "Beautiful Day." At other points, you almost feel as if the hands of the ecstatic audience members are an inch away, waiting for your high-five. National Geographic Presentation of a 3ality Digital production. Directors: Catherine Owens, Mark Pellington. Cast: U2. Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes. Rated G. 3 stars.

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 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, downhill 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 Parronau (dialogue and narration are French, not Farsi). Satrapi and Parronau 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 Mister. 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.

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.

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