

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

SON OF RAMBOW - The first thing to know about "Son of Rambo": It has about as much to do with Rambo as Dirty Harry does with "Harry Potter" or as Rocky Balboa does with flying squirrels. The second thing to know about "Son of Rambo": It recalls so many other films, you can count the cultural footnotes on your fingers and tributes on your toes. Set in the 1950s, "SON OF RAMBOW" - Starring in the comedy/drama 'Son of Rambo' are, from left, Bill Milner, Jules Sitruk and Will Poulter. CNS Photo courtesy of Maggie Ferreira.

RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) early 1980s but shot with the earth-toned elegance of the 1950s, "Son of Rambo" follows an unlikely friendship between two British boys. Perched on the edge of prepubescent innocence, they attend a school where the girls tower above them like trees in uniforms. Carter (Will Poulter) is a crew-cut bully. Will (Bill Milner) is a religious recluse. The bulk of "Son of Rambo" mirthfully depicts the boys' growing friendship after Carter enlists Will to be the stuntman in a shot-by-shot video remake of "Rambo:

First Blood" he's making for a competitive contest on BBC television. "Son of Rambow." Running time: 1 hour, 36 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

BEFORE THE RAINS - Breathtaking panoramas of southern India and cinematic strokes of artistry fill "Before the Rains." Noted cinematographer and director Santosh Sivan captures memorable images of Kerala, his home state. Set in 1937 against the backdrop of Indian opposition to British colonialism, the film revolves around Henry, an English tea plantation owner and his right-hand man, Neela. For all its loveliness and attempts to be profound, this film is as predictable as a soap opera, albeit in a colonial setting. It is saved by its beauty and well-etched performances. Rahul Bose is wonderfully believable as Neela. His performance is almost matched by Linus Roache as Henry. "Before the Rains." Running time: 1 hour, 38 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

SPEED RACER - Speed kills, but it also thrills. Watching Andy and Larry Wachowski's hyperkinetic, candy-colored "Speed Racer" is like spending two hours caroming through a pinball machine. Sense and subtlety are road kill as the cartoon-deep plot zips by, but your inner third grader will be too jazzed to complain. If, that is, you still have an inner 8-year-old. If you're totally grown-up, you'll find "Speed" a long, dreary, migraine-inducing slog. Speed Racer - yes, that's our hero's name - is no one's savior. He's just a car-crazy kid who grows up to become the hottest new talent in the World Racing League. Speed's father, Pops Racer (John Goodman), runs a family racing business. Mom Racer (Susan Sarandon) encourages Speed to follow in the skid marks of older brother Rex (Scott Porter, the disabled quarterback in TV's "Friday Night Lights") - even after Rex's spectacular career ends in a fiery, and apparently fatal, accident. "Speed Racer" takes audiences for a fast, good-natured ride. A kiddy ride, yes, but on occasion it's a blast to let the youngsters slam the pedal to the metal. "Speed Racer." Running time: 2 hours, 9 minutes. Rated: PG. 3 stars.

THEN SHE FOUND ME - The simple dramedy "Then She Found Me" isn't the kind of thing we usually see at the start of the summer film season. This is the time of year when big stars (Cameron Diaz) and superheroes ("Iron Man") take us as far away from reality as possible. That's why a movie like "Then She Found Me," with

all its complicated emotions and messy relationships, stands out for being a little too real. Helen Hunt directs and stars as April, a 39-year-old schoolteacher who can't get pregnant. April was adopted, and because of it, she's determined to have a child of her own. April marries Ben, an immature colleague played convincingly by Matthew Broderick. That marriage doesn't make it much past the opening credits. April barely has time to process the separation before her pushy birth mother, Bernice (Bette Midler), comes around. Enter Frank (Colin Firth). Frank and April's relationship moves fast even though they're both so raw with pain that they often yell at each other and get jealous when they shouldn't. Hunt uses this subdued approach with all her characters, leaving us to identify with them, and this movie, in a more human way. "Then She Found Me." Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. Rated: R. 3 stars.

REDBELT - Sometimes it seems David Mamet wants to hit audiences with dialogue until their noses bleed down to their waistlines. That might explain why the writer-director's latest film is titled "Redbelt." It's a martial-arts film composed of battling banter - a jujitsu tale centered on verbal wrestling. The characters don't talk so much as deliver wordy wallops. The protagonist, Mike Terry (Chiwetel Ejiofor), the trainer at a struggling Los Angeles martial-arts studio, toughens his students through repetitive phrases that echo the Taiko drumming of the soundtrack. This beat-by-beat, rat-a-tat approach is well known to those who have ever seen Mamet's "Glengarry Glen Ross," "House of Games," or played pingpong with Forrest Gump when he's angry. In "Redbelt," unfortunately, what's missing is the melody over the rhythm. This ambitious yet scattered film hits a series of notes, lays down underlying themes, but doesn't transform into anything hummable. "Redbelt." Running time: 1 hour, 39 minutes. Rated: R. 2 1/2 stars.

MADE OF HONOR - It's only natural to make the comparison between Patrick Dempsey's "Made of Honor" and Julia Roberts' "My Best Friend's Wedding." Both movies are about boy/girl best friends who don't realize how much they love each other until one of them gets engaged. In 1997, Roberts was the anguished "best man" who watched Dermot Mulroney marry Cameron Diaz. Now, in the post-metrosexual age, Dempsey is the maid of honor for his gal pal, Hannah. Dempsey plays Tom, a Casanova with a mean streak who can only say "I love you" to dogs. He and Hannah have one of those flirty platonic relationships. Michelle Monaghan is delightful as Hannah. She's smart and beautiful and has excellent taste in clothes. As the movie unfolds with its gorgeous scenes of New York and Scotland, it becomes more clear that "Made of Honor" isn't like "My Best Friend's Wedding" at all. No, with its easy predictability and super obvious plot, it actually has more in common with another famous boy/girl pair of best friends: Ross and Rachel from "Friends." "Made of Honor." Running time: 1 hour, 41 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

IRON MAN - "Iron Man" is an ironclad jump-start to the summer movie season, a brainy adventure about a snarky, self-centered weapons-of-mass-destruction manufacturer Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) who

suddenly, thrillingly sees the light. The opening segment, with the genius, playboy industrialist riding in a Humvee amid a dangerous war zone, cocktail in one hand, exchanging small talk with the troops, is an example of powerful understatement. Then comes a rebel attack in which Stark is seriously injured and kidnapped. In a dank cell with another captured scientist (Shaun Toub, wearing a tie and vest, inexplicably), Stark's life is saved by the insertion of a glowing, electro-magnet in his chest that keeps shrapnel from creeping to the heart and killing him. Stark is forced by his captors to build a state-of-the-art, missilelike weapon called Jericho, which he planned on selling them in the first place. The cellmates, instead, conspire secretly to construct a flying suit. It works. "Iron Man." Running time: 2 hours, 6 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 3 1/2 stars.

BABY MAMA - Maybe the first point to make about "Baby Mama" is that it's believable. Kate Holbrook (Tina Fey) is 37 and sure her biological clock's about to run out of batteries. A successful executive with a natural foods company, Kate's career has blossomed, while her love life has dried up. As if all that weren't enough, her mother (Holland Taylor) is harping at her and her younger sister ("ER's" Maura Tierney), who's had three babies, is offering advice. She ends up at a place called Chaffee Bicknell, to discuss surrogacy with the owner (Sigourney Weaver). Enter surrogate Angie Ostrowski (Amy Poehler) and her common-law husband (Dax Shepard). Factor in Steve Martin, with a long gray ponytail, as Kate's wacky New-Age boss, Barry. The film is littered with laugh-out-loud moments - especially the sometimes-subtle, sometimes-not jabs at the upscale trappings of well-to-do moms and those well-meaning pregnancy experts - and there are thought-provoking ones as well. "Baby Mama." Running time: 1 hour, 39 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

THE LIFE BEFORE HER EYES - What do you say about an illusive drama like "The Life Before Her Eyes" when you have no idea what's actually happening? At its simplest, "The Life Before Her Eyes" is about a high school shooting in which the gunman forces two best friends to choose which one of them will die. Evan Rachel Wood plays Diana, a mildly rebellious teen who is always searching for something and she only seems at peace when she's with her best friend, Maureen (Eva Amurri). Then we have Uma Thurman as Diana 15 years later. She's a fragile mom, practically crippled with guilt, trying not to have a meltdown on the anniversary of the shooting. A film this vague may be annoying to anyone who likes nice, neat conclusions. Because even after the credits roll, you're still putting pieces together, still wondering what's real and what's not. "The Life Before Her Eyes." Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes. Rated: R. 3 stars.

HAROLD & KUMAR ESCAPE FROM GUANTANAMO BAY - Just by watching it, "Harold & Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay" gives off a comedic contact high. Not only is it a funny stoner comedy, but it coolly takes on contemporary politics, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and stereotypical depictions

of Asians and other minority groups (be prepared black people, Jewish people, Southern white people). Harold (John Cho), the strait-laced accountant, and Kumar (Kal Penn), the bright slacker who at any time could enroll in med school, pick up their adventures following 2004's "Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle." The movie opens with a scene in a bathroom, something about all the White Castle burgers just ingested. From there, it pretty much sticks to bodily function humor, some of it funny, some lame. The men are getting ready to take off for Amsterdam, where the girl Harold fell in love with is on vacation. They run into lots of trouble along the way, including a stay in Guantanamo Bay. "Harold & Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay." Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. Rated: R. 3 stars.

THE VISITOR - "The Visitor" is a film about an economics professor, a bongo player and a nondescript detention center in the middle of Queens. That professor's name is Walter Vale (Richard Jenkins), and as the film begins, this 62-year-old widower is in a personal and professional rut. Enter Tarek (Haaz Sleiman) and Zainab (Danai Gurira), a Syrian musician and his Senegalese girlfriend, whom Vale discovers living in his Manhattan apartment due to a rental scam. At first kicking them out, Vale follows a whim - more from boredom than compassion - and invites the young couple to live with him. This small act of kindness opens the door to the movie: Vale's friendly immersion in the worlds of these two immigrants gradually re-connects him to humanity. "The Visitor." Running time: 1 hour, 48 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 3 stars.

FORGETTING SARAH MARSHALL - With its sweet-and-sour take on relationships and jagged mix of laughter and pain, "Forgetting Sarah Marshall" could be a great movie. Most of the characters are likable enough that you want it to be. It sometimes hits the mark, but occasionally doesn't even come close. In a twist on the geek-gets-gorgeous-girl movie, Jason Segel's Peter is more odd than geeky and he already has the gorgeous girl. But early on, she dumps him. Happy photos of Peter and his girlfriend, Sarah (Kristen Bell), fill the apartment where he lounges, eats, fiddles at the piano and watches TV. Peter soon disintegrates into a constantly crying mess who gets dubious support from his stepbrother (broadly played by Bill Hader). After a series of unhappy and unfunny quickies with other gorgeous women, still-weepy Peter drags himself to a tropical tourist spot Sarah often mentioned. Surprise! She's there, too. The movie may not make you laugh uproariously or cry as much as Peter, but it will definitely make you yearn for a trip to the islands. "Forgetting Sarah Marshall." Running time: 1 hour, 55 minutes. Rated: R. 2 1/2 stars.

WHERE IN THE WORLD IS OSAMA BIN LADEN? - After nearly pushing himself to the brink of diabetes and kidney failure after eating a month's worth of McDonald's for "Super Size Me" and struggling to live on minimum wage in the middle of America in "30 Days," Morgan Spurlock has returned to take on a hunt for the most wanted man alive. Well, as far as most folks in this hemisphere are concerned: Osama Bin Laden. His scavenger hunt across Arabia begins in northern Africa and winds through the Middle East, past high-rise

palaces and deep into pockmarked ghettos. Along his trek from Morocco to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, Spurlock wanders the streets, asking strangers if they've seen Osama Bin Laden or if they have any idea of where he is. The true story begins to unfold when Spurlock's thoughts turn to his wife and their unborn child and what sort of world his offspring will inherit. His queries end up mirroring the words of countless villagers he encounters along his journey, something any human whose heart beats in the name of good, not evil: We want a better future for our children. "Where in the World Is Osama Bin Laden?" Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

YOUNG@HEART - In "Young@Heart," the inspiring documentary about a chorus of 70-, 80- and 90-year-olds zestfully singing tunes by Sonic Youth, the Police, Talking Heads, the Ramones, James Brown and others, you comprehend the power of rock 'n' roll music any old way you choose it. "Young@Heart" doesn't make fun of old people, it celebrates them. The film focuses on a series of rehearsals, as the chorus from Northampton, Mass., prepares for a U.S. and European tour. Its director, Bob Cilman, 53, he of unwavering patience, selects the music and commands his charges to practice, and practice some more. A formidable challenge, for instance: Allen Toussaint's "Yes We Can Can" with 71 "can" mentions in it. The group was formed in the early '80s to reprise vaudeville and Broadway tunes. Then one day, Cilman introduced a version of Manfred Mann's "Do Wah Diddy Diddy." A rock 'n' roll troupe was born. "Young@Heart." Running time: 1 hour, 48 minutes. Rated: PG. 3 stars.

88 MINUTES - The film "88 Minutes" seems to be the shortened title for "88 Minutes of Your Life You'll Never Get Back," or possibly "88 Minutes That Could Be Better Spent Giving Yourself a Series of Paper Cuts." A real-time thriller in the spirit of "High Noon," "24" or an eventful trip to the dentist, the film stars Al Pacino as Dr. Jack Gramm, a famous serial-killer expert who receives a phone call announcing his imminent death. "Ticktock," says the baddie, with voice disguised. "You have 88 minutes to live." Pacino does what any bright professor would do in this situation: He runs away, holes himself up in a hidden location and sets his alarm to 89 minutes. No, wait. That's what would happen in a plausible film. Here, Pacino enlists the help of his irritable graduate students - always a smart move in a crisis - and they run around in the Seattle haze, subjecting themselves to attack while receiving further cell phone warnings. The calls helpfully count down the minutes, sparing audience members the trouble of glancing at their watches in anticipation of exiting the theater. Ticktock. "88 Minutes." Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated: R. 0 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