

DVD Select: In love with an illusion

by Robert J. Hawkins

In "The Illusionist" (Fox, 3 stars), a mysterious young man becomes the toast of turn-of-the-century Vienna when his elaborate magical tricks dazzle audiences. Eisenheim (Edward Norton) inevitably draws the attention of Crown Prince Leopold (Rufus Sewell), but it is the Duchess Sophie (Jessica Biel) on whom Eisenheim's eyes fall.

'THE ILLUSIONIST - Edward Norton and Jessica Biel star in the romantic drama 'The Illusionist.' CNS Photo courtesy of Glen Wilson. Some 15 years earlier, when Eisenheim was merely Edward, the poor son of a cabinetmaker, he and Sophie fell in love. Sophie's family would have none of it and the two were brutally separated.

Edward, threatened with prison, slipped away to wander the earth in search of the magic that would reunite him with his beloved Sophie.

He learned much magic and unlocked many mysteries of illusion in his travels but, Eisenheim tells Sophie when they are finally, if secretly, reunited, "the only mystery I couldn't solve was why my heart couldn't let go of you." Unfortunately, Sophie, if not her heart, seems committed to the powerful and volatile Leopold - the convenient merger of two strong families.

How to secure Sophie for himself, and not raise the wrath of Leopold - that would require Eisenheim's greatest illusion ever.

Needless to say, "The Illusionist" is a beautiful Gothic love story, filled with intrigue, mystery, tension and tragedy. Writer/director Neil Burger has filled the screen with a compelling tale and washed the images in warm amber hues. An edgy Philip Glass soundtrack keeps the viewers at the very edge of their seats. Horton is mesmerizing as the mysterious Eisenheim - coolly assured, commanding in presence. He is an island of calm and control as a storm of his own making swirls about.

The exotically beautiful Biel dresses down for this role - imbued with the propriety of her class and yet barely able to contain the passion she feels for her Edward. Sewell, meanwhile, is a raging snake as the crown prince - a man of nasty demeanor who holds his own intelligence in high regard, a fatal character flaw that Eisenheim aims to exploit.

Shadowing Eisenheim through this entire adventure is Chief Inspector Uhl (Paul Giamatti), a commoner who has risen by doing the bidding of the upper class - with discretion. It is Leopold to whom he owes allegiance, although Uhl greatly admires the skills of Eisenheim. Needless to say, he is conflicted. The finale of

Eisenheim's greatest illusion is no mystery - but watching him pull it off and understanding how it is done provides tremendous pleasure for audiences.

There have been few movies this luscious to watch and satisfying to devour in 2006.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Idiocracy" (Fox, 2 stars) So, a hooker and an Army private of average intelligence are cryogenically frozen and wake up in the year 2505 to find that society has become one long living "Beavis and Butt-Head" cartoon. What else did you expect? This sci-fi satire comes from the fecal and fertile imagination of B&B creator Mike Judge.

In the future, everyone is an idiot, thanks to the superior and prolific breeding tendencies of low-IQ folk. Junk food, fart jokes, incredibly stupid reality TV shows, massive Costco stores and pervasive corporate logos are the sum total of culture. And trash is piled up as high as Mount Whitney. This is the world in which Joe Bowers (Luke Wilson) and Rita (Maya Rudolph) wake up.

Street-savvy Rita quickly figures out that she can hustle to survive. Joe is immediately perceived as an effeminate intellectual for the way he speaks in complete sentences, and gets into a pile of trouble. His slack-jawed lawyer Frito (Dax Shepard) isn't much help.

The world is running out of food because sodium-enhanced sport drinks have completely replaced water for everything but flushing toilets. How dumb is that? OK, it is ironic that Judge, of all people, should be satirizing the direct descendent of the world he's so capably exploited for our amusement. I can live with irony. But this one isn't destined to gain the cult status of Judge's savvy "Office Space" - at least, not until it is rediscovered in 2501.

"Bandidas" (Fox, 2 stars) There's no other way to describe this flirty little entertainment: The two sexiest and most powerful Latina actresses in the world join forces to make a silly turn-of-the-century Western about greedy gringos and the women who thwart them. Salma Hayek and Penelope Cruz are, respectively, the pampered princess Sara and the resourceful peasant Maria. When railroad henchmen plow through their bucolic Mexican community, led by the dastardly Tyler Jackson (a greasy and deadpan Dwight Yoakam), the women unite to rob the banks the Americans stole from their people.

While there's more cleavage than cattle, and Hayek and Cruz spend an awful lot of time wrestling with each other (in water and out), the whole thing is played for PG-13 giggles. I suppose in a year in which Cruz gave us Raimunda in "Volver" and Hayek gave us Camilla in "Ask the Dust" - a little fluff can be forgiven.

Steve Zahn is eerily Michael J. Fox-like as a greenhorn forensics specialist. And a dour Sam Shepard is a retired bank robber and mentor to Sara and Maria.

"Conversations with Other Women" (Hart Sharp, 2 1/2 stars) Aaron Eckhart and Helena Bonham Carter, seemingly strangers at a wedding, flirt then hook up. Soon, we learn, they share a very long past. The entire movie is presented on split screens, a device that (once you get used to it) enhances and drives the story. There's warmth, humor, sadness and very smart dialogue to be found in this Hans Canosa directed film from a Gabrielle Zevin script. Remember those names. In the DVD extras, Canosa talks about the split screen and why he chose to use it.

"Quinceanera" (Sony, 2 1/2 stars) Magdalena (Emily Rios) has big expectations for her coming 15th birthday party, the traditional coming-out party for young Mexican girls known as a quinceanera. It isn't only her parents' near-impooverished state that stymies her plans. Magdalena is also pregnant. Kicked out by her preacher father, Magdalena takes shelter with her great-uncle and gay cousin in the Los Angeles community of Echo Park. It's a touching story of survival, coming of age, change and redefining family.

"Color of the Cross" (Fox, 2 1/2 stars) This is the one that Christian churches should be prodding their flocks to see, not Mel Gibson's sado-masochistic flog fest. Imagine, Jesus Christ was a black man. If you can imagine it, perhaps whole armies can put down their weapons and live in peace. Director/actor/writer Jean-Claude La Marre also suggests that the crucifixion was racially motivated. Imagine.

THERE'S MORE

Political documentary "Street Fight" (Genius Products); action-thriller "Crank," starring Jason Stratham and Amy Smart (Lionsgate); suspense-thriller starring Robin Williams, Toni Collette and Sandra Oh "The Night Listener" (Miramax).

IT CAME FROM TV

"The Snow Queen" (BBC Video) Live drama and animation are combined for this exciting and fresh retelling of a Hans Christian Andersen classic. Just right for kids and with a superb musical score from Paul Joyce (performed by the Royal Philharmonic) that should please parents. Patrick Stewart voices The Raven. "Broken Bridges" (Paramount/CMT) Country singer Toby Keith takes a whack at acting. He plays - surprise - a failing country singer, who returns home and tries to connect with his childhood sweetheart (Kelly Preston) and the teenage daughter he's never met (Lindsey Haun).

ALSO: Season one of the Martin Lawrence sitcom "Martin"; the first season of the comedy series about

actors who don't get film credits "Extras"; and season four, volume two of the animated kiddie series "SpongeBob SquarePants."

FROM THE VAULTS

"Van Gogh" (Sony, 1991) Writer/director Maurice Pialat examines the final months of the life of the Impressionist painter Vincent Van Gogh. Beautifully filmed and unromanticized. Jacques Dutronc won the Cesar for Best Actor for his portrayal of the painter.

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin

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