

NEW RELEASES

CHILDREN OF MEN -- Here is your post-holiday depression pill: "Children of Men." Not to relieve depression. To cause it. Alfonso Cuarón's film, from a P.D. James novel, should be called "Children of Women." After all, it's about a near-future in which women have been infertile for around 18 years, no babes live (except animals), and only women could stage the natal recovery to get humanity breeding again. It feels like a loose thinker's remake of "1984" in the manner of sci-fi catastrophist J.G. Ballard. Clive Owen, not so much Mitchum-esque this time as a rancid Mitchum hangover, plays Theo. A variant on George Orwell's Winston, the decent guy drinks hard for good reason -- the whole bloody world has gone crazy. Mostly the story kills off good actors. Among them are Michael Caine, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Peter Mullan and, as the final, mordant director of the Tate Gallery, grimly glad to have filched Picasso's "Guernica" and Michelangelo's David out of ruined Europe, the suavely sad Danny Huston. Bodies pile up. Rot fosters. But an infantile cry is heard in the world, and the depressed nanny in us stirs, having nursed this baby through a bad night and wanting a better sequel.

Clive Owen stars in "Children of Men", a Warner Bros. and DreamWorks release. 2 stars. A Warner Bros. and DreamWorks release. Director: Alfonso Cuarón. Writers: Alfonso Cuarón, Timothy J. Sexton. Cast: Clive Owen, Julianne Moore, Michael Caine, Clare-Hope Ashitey, Peter Mullan, Chiwetel Ejiofor. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

NOTES ON A SCANDAL -- When British actors are on a mighty rip -- or the slow, sure buildup to a grand convulsion -- the pressure can turn dizzy. This happens in "Notes on a Scandal." Judi Dench has one of the plummiest roles in her cake of a career, as lonely, treacherous teacher Barbara Covett. This is perhaps the greatest performance of a bitter, conniving spinster since Agnes Moorehead in "The Magnificent Ambersons" (1942), but Moorhead had a fairly small role, while Dench rules this film like an evil queen. She must split the spotlight with another champion, Cate Blanchett. As Sheba, the new, rather naive teacher at a tough London school, Blanchett is lured into the web that Barbara spins. The old spider has a lesbian crush on the chalk-white beauty, but her need to pull strings on people far exceeds any sexual urge. Barbara keeps a diary, and narrates her scheming with poisonous pedantry. She's a snob and a shrew, but articulate. She envies Sheba's youth and fuller life, although husband Richard (Bill Nighy) is much older and drinks, the teen daughter pouts and the son is mentally handicapped. Nobody snuffs Blanchett, but Dench, the older pro, has the best lines and the ruling role. Few actresses have allowed themselves to look so ugly (physically and inwardly) on screen. Barbara's vile corruption is not a gargoyle jamboree like Bette Davis in "What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?" If enough Oscar voters can see this movie without flinching, Helen Mirren ("The Queen") may have to forfeit the crown many have prematurely awarded her. If Dench takes the prize, and Forest Whitaker does for his Idi Amin, it will truly be a monsters' ball.

A Fox Searchlight release. Director: Richard Eyre. Writer: Patrick Marber. Cast: Judi Dench, Cate

Blanchett, Bill Nighy, Andrew Simpson, Alice Bird. Running time: 1 hour, 51 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars. RECENT RELEASES

RATINGS 4 STARS -- Excellent. 3 STARS -- Worthy. 2 STARS -- Mixed. 1 STAR -- Poor. 0 -- Forget It (a dog) THE PAINTED VEIL -- Cholera is one of the most awful of diseases, and to its credit, "The Painted Veil" does not gingerly shy from some physical details. That's one value of refilming the old Somerset Maugham story in 2006, a clear advance on the 1934 version. That piece of lacquered exotica was a vehicle for Greta Garbo, and lesser decals of studio quality like Jean Hersholt and Herbert Marshall. Naomi Watts, though no Garbo, acquits herself well as Kitty Fane. She's newly a Mrs., having fled into marriage with bacteriologist Walter Fane (Edward Norton) to escape the curdling judgments of her snobbish mother. Kitty expects comfort, ease and fun, and is not in love with Walter, who is not very accessibly lovable. He insists on lights out during sex, and the result is quite clinical, so that downcast but frisky Kitty is soon covertly bedded by the business sharpie Townsend (Liev Schreiber). The affair is hot and facile, yet Walter isn't prepared to forgive. He responds with a cuckold's spite, and makes a severe offer: You can have a divorce if your rising, cagey lover gets one also (fat chance), otherwise you're away with me to the cholera-stricken innards of China, during the 1920s phase of warlords and Chiang Kai-Shek's rising KMT (Kuomintang party).

A Warner Independent release. Director: John Curran. Writers: Ron Nyswaner, W. Somerset Maugham. Cast: Naomi Watts, Edward Norton, Toby Jones, Liev Schreiber, Diana Rigg, Sally Hawkins. Running time: 1 hour, 52 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars. THE GOOD GERMAN -- In "The Good German," George Clooney is a former American correspondent in Hitler's Berlin, he returns in uniform in 1945 to cover the postwar Potsdam Conference and gets caught up in intrigue. His private agenda beats world politics: He's still in love with ex-stringer Lena Brandt (Cate Blanchett), who served the Nazis and is still married to a fugitive German intellectual (Christian Oliver). The story is a grimy curtain to a rancid past. The film has no weight of history or nostalgia, just a serial-worthy plot involving Nazi secrets and the tech-nerd husband to whom Lena still feels loyal, hoping to escape the new Russian zone with help from the remarkably hapless Jake.

A Warner Bros. release. Director, cinematographer: Steven Soderbergh. Writer: Paul Attanasio. Cast: Cate Blanchett, George Clooney, Tobey Maguire, Beau Bridges, Jack Thompson, Christian Oliver. Running time: 1 hour, 52 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars. NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM -- "Night at the Museum" is a pretty big bag of candy. It takes awhile for director Shawn Levy and the writers to find the fun-show rhythm, and during that time Ben Stiller seems only about half employed. But then he, the plot and the crafty effects sync into quite an amusing light entertainment. Stiller is a failed New York inventor who can't keep a job and takes a dull job as night guard in the massive Museum of Natural History. With obvious but nicely earned debts to "Gulliver's Travels," "Jumanji" and "The Incredible Shrinking Man," this Fox fantasy cranks up speed. As cave men, an Egyptian mummy, a skeletal dinosaur, Civil War troops and various critters come briskly to life, the feeling arrives of a Hardy Boys yarn tooled by hipsters on a budget. Robin Williams is about perfect as Teddy Roosevelt, liberating Larry from nerd doldrums, and Mizuo Peck is wistful Sacagawea, demurely weary of being trapped behind glass with Lewis & Clark.

A 20th Century Fox release. Director: Shawn Levy. Writers: Ben Garant, Thomas Lennon. Cast: Ben Stiller, Carla Gugino, Mickey Rooney, Robin Williams, Dick Van Dyke, Bill Cobbs, Steve Coogan. Running

time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.**THE GOOD SHEPHERD** -- In "The Good Shepherd," Matt Damon is a WASP who joins Yale's secretive Skull & Bones Society. The secretive male club is for coming and current national leaders and a seed bed for the coming OSS spy network of World War II -- and its postwar heir, the CIA. Presumptive elitist Ed fits right in. The plot piles up, from prewar Nazi intrigues to Blitz London, then postwar Berlin and the long Cold War. As framing device there is the CIA's big flop in 1961 at the Bay of Pigs, Cuba. Old news shots are livelier than the drama, but director Robert De Niro took trouble to texture and weight each scene. As Damon becomes more caught up in the spy world, we are left with lessons about parallel KGB and CIA cynicism, about sadly twisted love, about how bad choices can leave you empty.

A Universal Pictures release. Director: Robert De Niro. Writer: Eric Roth. Cast: Matt Damon, Angelina Jolie, Robert De Niro, Tammy Blanchard, Alec Baldwin, William Hurt, Billy Crudup. Running time: 2 hours, 7 minutes. Rated R. 1 1/2 stars.**WE ARE MARSHALL** -- "We Are Marshall" is a sports inspiration picture based on an actual tragedy: the Nov. 14, 1970, crash of a chartered plane near the airport at Huntington, W.Va. Nearly all of the Marshall University football team was wiped out. A lot of slashing edits gets us through the crash, the carnage, the engulfing shock as word spreads. For the Ohio River town, with the university as chief employer apart from an aged steel mill, football was the sport that mattered. The movie treats how, after the calamity, Marshall's president chose to rebuild "the thundering herd." The search for a new coach was tough. It led to Jack Lengyel, pulled out of an obscure school, looking to make a name. As Lengyel, Matthew McConaughey anchors the movie in one of his best roles. It's a savvy, funny performance that tends to sneak up charmingly on required pep talks and the big "up from ashes" speech at a cemetery.

A Warner Bros. release. Director: McG. Writer: Jamie Linden. Cast: Matthew McConaughey, Matthew Fox, David Strathairn, Anthony Mackie, Ian McShane. Running time: 2 hours. Rated PG. 2 stars.**ROCKY BALBOA** -- "Rocky Balboa" is about nostalgia. Star Sylvester Stallone is now 60. He tends to look it, though with good hair and a big rack of upper-body muscles. In this surely last sequel, Rocky hosts fans at his diner, tells boxing yarns, poses for snapshots, touts his food as "edible." He's affable but lonely, more sad-eyed than ever. In a Rocky movie that can mean only one thing: a miracle. So, current champ Mason "The Line" Dixon (Antonio Tarver) is a big brute, unbeaten but getting meager respect because he usually fights softies. What better image boost (and fast money haul) than a 10-round "exhibition" match with the old, flabby god of palookas?

An MGM release. Director, writer: Sylvester Stallone. Cast: Sylvester Stallone, Burt Young, Milo Ventimiglia, Talia Shire, Antonio Tarver, Mike Tyson. Running time: 1 hour, 47 minutes. Rated PG. 2 1/2 stars.**THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS** -- "The Pursuit of Happyness" is "inspired by a true story" and is, lo and behold, actually inspiring. One suspects that Thomas Jefferson, quoted in the movie, would have savored it. Jefferson's Declaration of Independence words about happiness keep recurring to Chris Gardner (Will Smith). In the story Chris must, to find happiness, endure quite a pursuit. Set in the early 1980s as the Reagan boom cooks, Steve Conrad's script is based on the actual Chris Gardner. He is a bright guy starting to feel some age, with limited prospects -- he sells bone-scanning equipment to doctors but is often rejected, and before the movie's end we hate the boxed machine as if it were a hound of fate. Tragedy is no option here,

despite some vapors of it, and though the ending is expected it's also quite moving. This is one of the few American movies to deal with how people live and survive. It admires smart brokers but also feels for the many people down below, and we know that Chris will not claim his "happyness" by becoming a cold fish in a glass office.

A Columbia Pictures release. Director: Gabriele Muccino. Writer: Steve Conrad. Cast: Will Smith, Jaden Christopher Syre Smith, Thandie Newton, James Karen, Brian Howe. Running time: 1 hour, 56 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 1/2 stars.ERAGON -- The most frightening moment in "Eragon" comes early and passes quickly. Relief in the theater is palpable when it is revealed that the blue, giant-football-size capsule discovered by Eragon the farm boy is not, in fact, what it first appears to be: the biggest damn suppository you've ever seen in your life. "Eragon" is taken from the 2002 dungeons and dragons/sword and sorcery novel by (then) teenager Christopher Paolini. An evil king (John Malkovich) has subjugated a peace-loving people; his eviller henchman (Robert Carlyle) does all kinds of evil henching; an innocent boy (newcomer Edward Speleers) with undreamed-of powers bonds with a nearly forgotten tradition of magical warriors, the last of whom (Obi-wan Irons ... Jeremy. Jeremy Irons) will be his reluctant mentor. Also: a beautiful, tough-as-spikes princess (Sienna Guillory) held captive, about whom the boy has a vision; a band of freedom-loving warriors waiting for someone to lead them in rebellion; a wisecracking ne'er-do-well (Christopher Egan) ... Been to that galaxy, done that ring. Another problem with "Eragon" is its confused tone: It seems geared to older children and young to middle teens, but there are many too many dark, brutal images, and the violence, though not lingered on, is occasionally gruesome.

A Twentieth Century Fox release. Director: Stefen Fangmeier. Writers: Peter Buchman, Lawrence Konner. Cast: Edward Speleers, Jeremy Irons, Sienna Guillory, Robert Carlyle. Running time: 1 hour, 43 minutes. Rated PG. 2 stars.Capsules compiled from movie reviews written by David Elliott, film critic for The San Diego Union-Tribune, other staff writers and contributors. Copley News Service

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