DVD Select: 'The Guardian' reels in the audience

by Robert J. Hawkins

Kevin Costner nicely summarizes the appeal of the Coast Guard thriller "The Guardian" (Touchstone, 3 stars): "It got to me," he says on the DVD extras for the film, "the mythological quality of someone going to save you. The guardian."

There's nothing more mythological than the Coast Guard flying out to a distressed boat in stormy weather where rescuers drop from 40 feet into a roiling sea to swim toward the victims, so that they might be hoisted to safety.

'THE GUARDIAN - Kevin Costner stars in the action movie 'The Guardian.' CNS Photo courtesy of Ben Glass.Rescues aren't always so dramatic but rarely are they anything less than dangerous.

Of course, in "The Guardian," it is the rescuers who usually need rescuing when it comes to their private lives.

Costner is the aging chief Ben Randall, whose rescues are prodigious and legendary. The only number he remembers though, are the lives he couldn't save. His marriage to Helen (Sela Ward) is crumbling but he can't respond to that beeper. Think back to Crash Davis in "Bull Durham," Roy McAvoy in "Tin Cup," Billy Chapel in "For Love of the Game" - men past their prime who can't let go are a Costner specialty.

Forced to take leave of the rescue team after a tragic rescue gone wrong, Randall is assigned a teaching post at the Guard's A School for rescue recruits.

He must confront and train his virtual replacement, the cocky and talented Jake Fischer (Ashton Kutcher), whose baggage includes a tragic past of his own. It is a love-hate relationship from the start that predictably but appropriately grows.

While a lot of the movie is consumed with low-cost footage of the training process, the money shots - the sea rescues - are worth the wait. They are spectacular with angry seas that rival the heart-stopping scenes of "The Perfect Storm."

In the DVD extras, you can learn about how those shots were made; it is well worth your time. The crew built a wave tank in Shreveport, Miss. - after a first one, nearly completed, was wiped out in New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina. There is a second mini-documentary titled "Unsung heroes - So others may live" about the real guardians of the Coast Guard. You can compare the live rescue footage against the fictional film, and conclude that not a lot of artistic license was taken.

These folks fly into the jaws of death to rescue people they don't even know.

As one real rescuer puts it: "It can be a dangerous business. Luckily there are a lot of happy endings."

This brings up one final note. Director Andrew Davis shot a second, happier, ending for "The Guardian" as insurance. It's on the DVD and all I can say is thank goodness it never got serious consideration.

ALSO THIS WEEK

This week we are blessed with a number of smaller movies and documentaries that might have been overlooked or crowded out in the last couple of months of 2006 as the big guns hustled their Oscar-bait onto screens. The following are well worth adding to your Netflix queue:

The movies:

"La Moustache" (Koch Lorber) In this small French comedy - dark and surreal comedy - middle-aged Marc Thiriez (Vincent Lindon) rises one day and in a simple act, shaves off his moustache. Not only does no one notice, there is strong speculation about whether he ever had a moustache at all. After, reality spirals out of control, and you may as well; however, wait for the last 10 minutes.

"The Puffy Chair" (Genius Products) Road trip! Josh Sagers (Mark Duplass) finds a vintage purple La-Z-Boy recliner online and buys it for his father - who had a similar recliner in Josh's youth. Josh's plan to drive the chair across country is complicated when his needy girlfriend Emily (Kathryn Aselton) and his brother Rhett (Rhett Wilkins) invite themselves along.

"SherryBaby" (Screen Media) Maggie Gyllenhaal is a recovering addict fresh from a three-year prison stint eager to get her life back together, especially reuniting with her young daughter. As you might surmise, little unfolds the way she might have imagined it. Gyllenhaal's performance is heartbreaking and unforgettable. She received a Golden Globe nomination and now she deserves your attention.

The documentaries:

"This Film Is Not Yet Rated" (IFC) Ever wonder how films get their ratings? Filmmaker Kirby Dick did and set out to get answers. He found a secretive, Byzantine process that is operated in the shadows and wildly inconsistent. In this provocative documentary he talks with writers, directors, producers and others affected by the Hollywood system.

The film found the right audience. Recently, the Motion Picture Association of America and National Association of Theater Owners announced the first significant overhaul of the rating system in ages. You can't

get a better endorsement than that.

"Jesus Camp" (Magnolia) Filmmakers Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady spent their summer at an evangelical Christian camp where Christian militant Becky Fischer molds fresh young minds into loyal zealots in God's Army. This documentary has disturbed Christians and non-Christians alike. Can zealotry be taken too far?

"Cowboy Del Amour" (Genius Products) New Mexico rustic Ivan Thompson, 60, is the self-proclaimed "Cowboy Cupid" who finds Mexican brides for American men for $3,000 and a 600-mile bus trek into the heart of Mexico. He's been at it 16 years. Documentarian Michele Ohayon follows the fate of three of his clients.

"Cocaine Cowboys" (Magnolia) A very different sort of cowboys - filmmaker Billy Corben looks at the violent drug trade fed by the Medellin cartel, which turned Miami into a wild frontier town in the 1970s and '80s. This is the real "Miami Vice." You will start to think the TV show was a bit soft on the story.

IT CAME FROM TV

Season one of the hip animated series "Hopeless Pictures" (Genius/IFC). The fourth season of the family epic "The Waltons" (Warner). The eighth installment of the Nickelodeon kid-favorite "The Wubbulous World of Dr. Seuss: The Cat's Family and Friends" (Sony). A legend continues with animated epic "Avatar: The Last Airbender - Book 2: Earth, Volume 1" (Paramount).

FROM THE VAULTS

"Fiddler on the Roof" (MGM, 1971) This Norman Jewison film is a much beloved musical classic, and it

returns in a two-disc set. What's new? Some documentaries (some old, some new), a deleted scene with the song "Any Day Now," photo galleries, movie trailers and a hidden feature (called an Easter Egg) titled "The Tale of the Begger."

Two double-feature, rock-and-roll exploitation compilations from the 1950s and '60s feature the likes of Little Richard, Chubby Checkers, Bill Haley and Dion. The first pairing is "Don't Knock the Rock" with "Rock Around the Clock." The second is "Don't Knock the Twist" and "Twist Around the Clock."

Hey, kids, your mom and dad were all wrong about the evils of rock 'n' roll. It didn't turn evil for another 20 years.

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

Â© Copley News Service

DVD Select: 'The Guardian' reels in the audience by Robert J. Hawkins