

by David Elliott and others

RECENT RELEASES

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 George Clooney stars in "The Good German" 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.

ARTHUR AND THE INVISIBLES -- Luc Besson's new movie is a little like "The Matrix" redone by troll dolls. Its original French title (translated) is "Arthur and the Minimoys," but since it apparently was decided Americans would have no clue what Minimoys are (and the French do?), the movie's animated little people were rechristened the "Invisibles." Which they're not exactly, but, ahem ... we forge ahead. Arthur (Freddie Highmore) is an adventurous and imaginative kid who, for a resident of rural Connecticut, speaks with a startlingly thick British accent. He lives in a cinematically ramshackle house with his good-hearted granny (Mia Farrow), and spends most of his time looking for clues to the whereabouts of his beloved grandfather, an intrepid explorer who vanished some time back while searching for a missing pile of rubies. Director: Luc Besson. Writers: Luc Besson, Celine Garcia. Cast: Freddie Highmore, Mia Farrow. Voice cast: David Bowie, Madonna, Jimmy Fallon, Robert De Niro, Harvey Keitel, Emilio Estevez, Snoop Dogg. Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. Rated PG. 2 stars.

RATINGS 4 STARS - Excellent. 3 STARS - Worthy. 2 STARS - Mixed. 1 STAR - Poor. 0 - Forget It (a dog.)

ALPHA DOG -- Just 12 days into 2007, the bilge pumps are working overtime again down at the multiplex. The new creme de drain is "Alpha Dog." It's all here: a "true to life" story with cheesy docudrama touches, including specific time mentions ("Chucky Mota's apartment, 3:32 p.m."); blurry Southern California mix of low-rent and showplace dwellings; young white studs imitating black argot ("Chill out, dog") while making racist remarks; pitifully childish adults and prematurely jaded "kids"; rivers of casual sex and drugs; crime festering in a sidwinder story vamped with cuts and split screens. It is all so done and overdone, so regurgitated, so late-night TV and what-else-is-new-in-hell. The warnings about drugs and flippant sex are yellowed leaflets, the boys empty preeners, the girls so eager to whore down, the justice system decisive but basically remote from lives frantic to trash themselves. A Universal Pictures release. Director, writer: Nick Cassavetes. Cast: Emile Hirsch, Ben Foster, Justin Timberlake, Harry Dean Stanton, Anton Yelchin, Sharon Stone, Bruce Willis, Dominique Swain. Running time: 1 hour, 57 minutes. Rated R. 1 star.

LETTERS FROM IWO JIMA -- Filmed by Clint Eastwood soon after he made "Flags of Our Fathers,"

"Letters From Iwo Jima" tells of the same battle on the little island, from the Japanese viewpoint. Each film is good. Together, they're quite remarkable. Both are strong and large. Neither shirks from carnage, nor revels in it. Nearly all the Japanese garrison died (and American casualties were among the worst of the war). A film so balanced and incisive as "Letters From Iwo Jima" (Kuribayashi's letters home are an effective, not corny, element) in no way excuses or rationalizes rampant Japanese atrocities in China, the Philippines and elsewhere. Eastwood offers a soberly true sense of how and why the Japanese fought and died, and how personal was the cost of this volcanic island. No famous flag-raising ennobles this occasion (and no publicity campaign disfigures it). But, in a curiously Japanese way, as his art arrives in firm brush strokes, Clint Eastwood has made a deeply honorable film. A Warner Bros. release. Director: Clint Eastwood. Writer: Iris Yamashita. Cast: Ken Watanabe, Kazunari Ninomiya, Tsuyoshi Ihara, Ryo Kase. Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes. Rated R. 4 stars.

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.

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. 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.

Films in Focus -- new and recent releases by David Elliott and others