Films in Focus - new and recent releases

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

'BECAUSE I SAID SO' - Diane Keaton and Mandy Moore star in the romantic comedy 'Because I Said So.' CNS Photo courtesy of Suzanne Tenner.

BECAUSE I SAID SO - Lord knows, Diane Keaton is a trouper. Looking at her in "Because I Said So" might make you reach for a trouper scooper. As Daphne, Keaton has gone beyond her famously trademark fizz into something like doomsday daffiness. The hip queen of cutes is here ginchy in a weirdly geriatric way. Every line in her face screams "adore me." Daphne keeps smiling, even during hissy fits about her effort to marry off daughter Milly (Mandy Moore), a caterer in Venice (California, not Italy). Sisters Mae (truly cute Piper Perabo) and Maggie (Lauren Graham, the only one to seem viably adult) are marginalized, while Milly rules mom's smothering agenda that shoves her into meet-cutes with hunkos Jason and Johnny. Jason (Tom Everett Scott) is a smug architect who preens his good taste in Italian wines and patronizes Milly (easy to do). Johnny (Gabriel Macht) is a sensitive single with an obnoxious show-brat kid. The plot pinballs Milly between them, while Daphne connives and twitters, and the sisters crack gags or join in snappy singalongs. A Universal Pictures release. Director: Michael Lehmann. Writers: Karen Leigh Hopkins, Jessie Nelson. Cast: Diane Keaton, Mandy Moore, Tom Everett Scott, Lauren Graham, Piper Perabo, Gabriel Macht, Stephen Collins. Running time: 1 hour, 47 minutes. Rated PG-13. 1 star.

RECENT RELEASES

RATINGS4 STARS - Excellent.3 STARS - Worthy.2 STARS - Mixed.1 STAR - Poor.0 - Forget It (a dog.) SMOKIN' ACES - "Smokin' Aces" excavates a hole, then eats dirt. It has the brash, eager rottenness of a cynical movie for cynical people. The intended audience must be the fan club for "Scarface" (Al Pacino's), anyone who has made a superficial pass at Quentin Tarantino's work, and anyone who felt challenged by "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas." This could be "Fear and Loathing and Nausea and Nonsense in Reno," where Buddy "Aces" Israel bunkers conspicuously in a casino hotel penthouse, even though wanted by the mob, about a dozen angry law agencies and numerous hired assassins. Buddy seems to be the partner, son or fallen alter-ego of a dying don. He is also a legendary lounge headliner, though his talents are, a) insulting people, and b) doing card tricks on stage, introduced by Wayne Newton. "Smokin' Aces," which quickly offs Ben Affleck but lingers piously over the slow death of a hotel guard, packs even dermatological heat. Deadly lighting emphasizes sores and blemishes. Only sleek rapper Common, as a bodyguard and love hunk, glowing even in shadows, doesn't seem stuck in a cheap photo booth. Less favored is Alex Rocco, forever memorable as Moe Greene in "The Godfather." Such careers always come down - but down to this? A Universal Pictures release. Director, writer: Joe Carnahan. Cast: Ben Affleck, Jason Bateman, Andy Garcia, Wayne Newton, Ray Liotta, Common, Jeremy Piven, Taraji P. Henson. Running time: 1 hour, 44 minutes. Rated R. 0 stars.

CATCH AND RELEASE - As written and directed by Susannah Grant - her top time as a film writer was "Erin Brockovich" - "Catch and Release" is like a box of tissue she's given herself: pastel, nicely scented, with

cute stick figures on the box. Jennifer Garner is Gray, whose scrubbed, squared prettiness is fit for a Mother Jones cover. But Gray is sad. Fiance Grady has died, his funeral happening on what was to be their wedding day (just the thought of Gray plus Grady is a bit depressing). She mourns with his pals, and bunks down in a fine old place in Boulder, Colo. Sensitive, gardening Dennis (Sam Jaeger) pines for Gray but can't find a girlfriend. Sam, the big chunk with Jack Black zingers and quality quotes is acted amiably by Kevin Smith. The stud from Malibu, Fritz (Timothy Olyphant), even gets called Mr. Yummy. Calling this a chick flick is maybe too easy. The film is for people who want to leave the house but watch TV without going to a bar or hotel. Bring along a remote and you can be fully comfortable. A Columbia Pictures release. Director, writer: Susannah Grant. Cast: Jennifer Garner, Kevin Smith, Timothy Olyphant, Juliette Lewis, Sam Jaeger, Fiona Shaw. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated PG-13. 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.

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 sidewinder 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.

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.

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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