

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

'THE ASTRONAUT FARMER' - Billy Bob Thornton portrays retired NASA astronaut Charles Farmer in the family film 'The Astronaut Farmer.' CNS Photo courtesy of Richard Foreman.

THE ASTRONAUT FARMER -- Heading south from the quirks of "Twin Falls Idaho," the Polish brothers (Mark, Michael) have gone to New Mexico, which subs for Texas, and made a sweet, congenial comedy of dreams. "The Astronaut Farmer" contains no murderously jealous astronauts. Billy Bob Thornton, looking more than ever like a Dust Bowl version of Humphrey Bogart, is the dreamer named Farmer who wants to be an astronaut. Charles Farmer was once a hot Air Force pilot, but when his father died (suicide), he fell from NASA training and settled on the ranch, where cattle deposits and bank debts pile up. So what to do, stuck with 300-plus acres, a big barn and time to tinker? Of course: build a mighty rocket, with flight capsule on top. This oddball has something beyond root-for-the-roots sentiments. Thornton, well into his own orbit, is very genuinely appealing as a guy who wires his big dream machine to a loose but glowing screw in his head. Rise up, farm bird. A Warner Bros. release. Director: Michael Polish. Writers: Mark and Michael Polish. Cast: Billy Bob Thornton, Virginia Madsen, Bruce Willis, Bruce Dern, J.K. Simmons, Gary Houston, Tim Blake Nelson. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.

RATINGS4 STARS -- Excellent.3 STARS -- Worthy.2 STARS -- Mixed.1 STAR -- Poor.0 -- Forget It (a dog.) THE NUMBER 23 -- It's supposed to get downright spooky after a while. Except it doesn't. Animal-control guy -- that is, dogcatcher -- Walter Sparrow (Jim Carrey) starts reading a tattered little self-published novel called "The Number 23" that his wife, Agatha (Virginia Madsen), picked up in a used bookstore. Eerily, the plot of the book parallels his own life. Eerier still -- except it's not -- is the book's fascination with what's known in certain more suggestible circles as "the 23 enigma." Carrey for the most part dials down his energy level, but given that he's calibrated differently from the rest of us, his Walter is strung taut enough that even semi-dozing in his doggie van he suggests oncoming heebie-jeebies. A New Line Cinema release. Director: Joel Schumacher. Writer: Fernley Phillips. Cast: Jim Carrey, Virginia Madsen, Danny Huston, Rhona Mitra, Lynn Collins. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes. Rated R. 1 1/2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA -- "Bridge to Terabithia" takes us down the old pike of Disney dreams, out past Norman Rockwell Estates toward Narnia City. It's a good trip. Katherine Paterson's prize-winning family novel has been adapted (partly by her son David) into a fluent, winning Disney vehicle. Set in one of those cozy, idyllic towns that is partly suburban, mostly country, never urban enough to feel threatening, it is a story of youth surviving the puberty years (with mere winks of sexual interest). Josh Hutcherson is appealing Jesse, son in a large rural family, quietly artistic but all-guy. He is befriended by the spunky new neighbor, Leslie, played by hugely engaging AnnaSophia Robb. Her brisk, captivating smile is the golden ticket to a fantasyland in the woods that she names Terabithia. A lot of parents beg, bark and whine for family fare at the

movies. "Bridge" shucks even its corn quota well, giving those parents (and their kids) what they claim to want. Folks, don't wait for the DVD. A Buena Vista Pictures release. Director: Gabor Csupo. Writers: Jeff Stockwell, David Paterson. Cast: Josh Hutcherson, AnnaSophia Robb, Zoey Deschanel, Robert Patrick. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.

MUSIC AND LYRICS -- First, before the critical "meat" of "Music and Lyrics" -- meat more like a taffy apple -- let us light a perfumed candle for Drew Barrymore. Drew is dependably darling as Sophie Fisher, aspiring writer turned songsmith in "Music and Lyrics." She turns because Alex Fletcher (Hugh Grant), a musician, tells her that she has an innate flair for song lyrics, which we take at face value because the face is Barrymore's. Grant is the main but not broad stem of comedy as Alex, a has-been '80s pop sensation. He was the second-tier star of a group called Pop, their big hit being (such inspiration) "Pop Goes My Heart." After breaking away for a solo career that tanked, Alex is now a winsomely dutiful throb on the nostalgia circuit, playing venues like Busch Gardens and Knott's Berry Farm for fully ripened but giddy women. Grant happily rummages through his role, Barrymore is splendid with gulps and goofs, and Campbell Scott is an impeccably pompous author. A Warner Bros. release. Director, writer: Marc Lawrence. Cast: Drew Barrymore, Hugh Grant, Haley Bennett, Campbell Scott. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

BREAKING AND ENTERING -- Acting arrives in bracing streaks and packets in Anthony Minghella's "Breaking and Entering." In sync arrive the panting themes -- virtually posed in order, almost cross-indexed for our study. Minghella, whose big Oscar hunters include "Cold Mountain," "The Talented Mr. Ripley" and "The English Patient," makes film ambition quite a heavy sport, but with grace notes. Loyally bound to his actors, he recruited Jude Law from "Talented" and "Cold," and paired him with Juliette Binoche, the amazing center of "English." The place is London, now. Law is Will, a young architect aggressively engaged in redoing the old urban fabric 'round King's Cross Station, an act of progress but also pathos for anyone who recalls the terminal's use in Alec Guinness' "The Ladykillers" (1955). Will is a modern man all the way -- bright, glibly charming, teeming with insecurities. Chief nest of anxiety is Liv (Robin Wright Penn), his long-term Swedish love, who mothers her smart, autistic and hyper teenager. Mom and girl are locked into stress bond, and caring Will, feeling left out, doses himself with work. Then, his new, raw-glam office near King's Cross is burgled. An MGM release. Director, writer: Anthony Minghella. Cast: Jude Law, Juliette Binoche, Robin Wright Penn, Ray Winstone, Juliet Stevenson, Martin Freeman. Running time: 1 hour, 57 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

NORBIT -- "Norbit" is not a thriller, action film or suspense story. Still, it achieves the assassination of comedy. A sort of compost pile of cellulite gags, and humor so broad it is almost a new dimension in physics, this one ostensibly stars Eddie Murphy. The "funny" thing is that we never see Murphy as himself. His talent isn't recognizable, either. He has three roles. As Norbit, he is first an infant hurled from a speeding car, tossed at an orphanage that doubles as a Chinese restaurant. The place is run by a jokey racist, Mr. Wong (Murphy in thick prosthetic makeup). Norbit later marries another orphan, the obese Rasputia (Murphy rigged up as humongo fatso). Shot cheaply on studio sets -- all the budget fat must have gone into the body enhancements -- the movie resorts to such humor as Rasputia gleefully running over Norbit's pug. And though a kids' puppet show is ruined by coarse talk, ninny Norbit whines to the dog, "Why does it have to hurt so g.d. much?" How nice to spare the pooch, if not the kids. A Paramount release. Director: Brian Robbins. Writers: Jay Scherick,

David Ronn, Eddie Murphy, Michael Tollin. Cast: Eddie Murphy, Thandie Newton, Cuba Gooding Jr., Eddie Griffin, Katt Williams, Marlon Wayans. Running time: 1 hour, 41 minutes. Rated PG-13. 0 stars.

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.

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.

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