Films in Focus - New and recent releases

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

'300' - From left, Vincent Regan, Gerald Butler and the Spartans stand ready to halt the advance of the Persian army in the action movie '300.' CNS Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures.

300 - Some movies of carnage open our minds to war, death and history in a valid way, like Clint Eastwood's Iwo Jima films. And then there are the bloody piles of raw meat for finger-lickin' oafs, like "Apocalypto" and "300." The movie has even more death than Mel Gibson's Mayan epic, a gain that adds up to a minus. Zack Snyder of "Dawn of the Dead" (the 2004 version) filmed Frank Miller's graphic novel, about the brave 300 Spartans who blooded the huge Persian army at Thermopylae in 480 BC. It sure is graphic. And ugly. Shot as a vision of digital mud smeared with frosty whites and spraying spots of computerized blood, "300" is not for fans of Richard Egan in "The 300 Spartans" (1962). There are endless spearings and beheadings, plus dying horses and a whole wall made of corpses. You wouldn't wish to smell this movie, but we nearly can. It is too dumb as drama, even as war spectacle, to be transporting, frightening or sickening. Just numbing. A Warner Bros. release. Director: Zack Snyder. Cast: Gerard Butler, Lena Headey, Dominic West, Rodrigo Santoro. Running time: 1 hour, 57 minutes; Rated R; 1 star.

RECENT RELEASES

RATINGS4 STARS - Excellent.3 STARS - Worthy.2 STARS - Mixed.1 STAR - Poor.0 - Forget It (a dog.) BLACK SNAKE MOAN - Perhaps not since Susan George slathered her body all over Sam Peckinpah's "Straw Dogs" (1971) has an actress achieved such sluttiness as Christina Ricci in "Black Snake Moan." The title alone should warn off Ricci's early fans, who loved the moon-faced cutie of "The Addams Family" (1991). That girl is gone. Now, as sexpot Rae, Ricci is slenderly nubile and runs around clothed in sweat, a skimpy half-top and tiny panties. Old abuse vibes trigger nymphomania in Rae, who adores bullet-headed lover Ronnie (Justin Timberlake) but, once he exits, is available to his best friend and other studs. With less verve, Rae is a waif-eyed young woman, treated as less than a whore. Director and writer Craig Brewer wallows luridly with her, while Samuel L. Jackson steals the movie as Laz (Lazarus). When Laz discovers Rae bloodily beaten on the road after her latest rape encounter, he takes her in, charitably. The ruling idea is that Laz, though full of blues old and new, will deny himself devil lust and so save them both. There are facile abortion mentions and dim stuff about Rae's miserable mother. But the movie snakes along with an earthy hiss, thanks to music, Jackson and Ricci's painful availability. A Paramount Vantage release. Director, writer: Craig Brewer. Cast: Samuel L. Jackson, Christina Ricci, Justin Timberlake, John Cothran Jr., Michael Raymond-James. Running time: 1 hour, 56 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

ZODIAC - "Zodiac," the movie, is a killer. Zodiac, the killer, is an elusive psychopath who terrorized and taunted the Bay Area beginning in the late '60s, mocking police and newspaper reporters who became fixated on nailing him. They never did. Director David Fincher, noted for dark and disturbing tales like "Fight Club" and "Seven," has made a provocative film that is less about the grisly details of the murders - though they are

presented in gripping set pieces - than what the obsession to find the manipulating maniac did to the journalists and detectives enveloped by this grim, tough case. At more than 2 1/2 hours, "Zodiac" is like a deep, involving book, a page-turner that you can't put down. You keep reading and, in this case, you keep watching. A Paramount Pictures and Warner Bros. Pictures release. Director: David Fincher. Writers: James Vanderbilt (screenplay) and Robert Graysmith (book). Cast: Jake Gyllenhaal, Mark Ruffalo and Robert Downey Jr. Running time: 2 hours, 34 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

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.

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.

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, Zooey 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.

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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