

DVD Select: A grave new world in 'Children of Men'

by Robert J. Hawkins

If you think the futuristic action-thriller "Children of Men" (Universal, 3 1/2 stars) is depressing, you should listen to the parade of philosophers, futurists, deep thinkers and cultural critics who chew over the 21st century in the DVD's extras under the ironically titled feature "The Possibility of Hope."

The world they grimly portray is pretty much the one Alfonso Cuarón has conjured on film. It is a gray-beige despairing world of walled communities and vast inequalities. Global warming and the subsequent rising waters have triggered waves of involuntary migration - which have in turn triggered waves of fear - rational and irrational fear. This has given rise to societies that revere rules over people. The collapse of society into smaller tribes has meant the breakdown of public services, food chains and productivity. There is garbage everywhere. Urban decay defines the landscape. Individual acts of terrorism are daily occurrences. People are rounded up like cattle and put into wire holding pens.

'THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS' - Jaden Christopher Syre Smith and Will Smith star in the family drama 'The Pursuit of Happyness.' CNS Photo courtesy of Zade Rosenthal.

Here's the depressing part: These thinkers seem to feel this is our tomorrow, Cuarón, at least, places his universe in the year 2027. Although it could be Baghdad today, or Beirut, or Jerusalem.

Cuarón's image goes still further. In his 2027, all women have been barren for 18 years, due to some unexplained apocalyptic event. There are no more children, and this has taken a horrible toll on the human psyche.

Moving numbly through this London wreckage is our anti-hero Theo Faron (Clive Owen). He long ago stopped living and started drinking. He remains upright just enough to perform his meaningless civil service job.

Faron's life takes an abrupt turn when he is recruited by the leader of a rebel group, Julian Taylor (Julianne Moore) with whom Theo once had an intimate relationship and a child.

Julian needs Theo's help in transporting a precious cargo to the coast, past the countless barriers, gates and military posts. The "cargo" is a quiet young woman named Kee (Claire-Hope Ashitey). She's pregnant. And as such, she holds enormous potential for whoever possesses her - government, rebels or terrorists. Imagine having in your camp the first pregnant woman in England in 18 years.

Cuaron's movie also takes a turn here, into a heart-stopping action thriller with chase scenes, explosions, betrayals, intrigue and close calls.

The trick is to never lose sight of the background. That's where the real story is going on. Cuaron has filled his film with elaborate and intricate detail. Look for graffiti as code, posted signs and guides to the nature of the future, incidental activity that speaks volumes about society in 2027.

And the really scary part?

A lot of that background looks like today: Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, hooded prisoners, well-equipped and repressive security forces, millions idled by unemployment and homelessness.

"Children of Men" is a stunning and provocative accomplishment that was poorly served by critics who'd rather piddle over the waning influence of French auteurs and blow literary air-kisses to the very late-Pauline Kael. They blew it on this one and they blew it on the Spartan epic "300."

A movie can have a lot to say and entertain in the old fashioned popcorn way - "Children of Men" is a terrific example of that.

And it ends on an upbeat note.

DVD extras: One of the film's showpieces is a 12-minute uncut scene in which Theo, Julian, Kee and a carload of others are attacked by a rural horde. It is a frightening scene with intense action around which the camera swirls, seemingly moving right through people and the sides of the car. It picks up 360 degrees of action. But how? Check out the feature "Under attack" for the answer.

And finally not to be overlooked is the performance of Michael Caine as a randy old unreconstructed hippie named Jasper Palmer. He gives Theo and Kee refuge and eventually makes even greater sacrifices on their behalf. It is a masterful performance by a veteran actor.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Curse of the Golden Flower" (Sony, 2 1/2 stars) A visual feast indeed. In fact, I was so distracted by the lush scenery and costuming I was easily distracted from the subtitles - and thus the story. Underneath all that extravagant beauty and popping effects is a gritty story of palace intrigue and murderous familial relations worthy of "Hamlet" and an American soap opera. The director is Zhang Yimou, architect of "House of Flying Daggers," "Hero" and "Raise the Red Lantern."

"The Pursuit of Happyness" (Sony, 3 1/2 stars) Based on a true story, Will Smith is Chris Gardner, a struggling salesman in 1980s San Francisco who takes custody of his young son Christopher (Jaden Smith) and struggles to make ends meet. Gardner, with his son in tow, improbably pursues a career as a stockbroker, through an unpaid internship, poverty, homelessness, and even more daunting obstacles. The story is a tribute to tenacity, resolve, savvy, and the huge heart and ambition of Chris Gardner, informed by his unstinting love for his son. The all-time, hands-down, inspirational story of the year. And proof yet again that Will Smith can play with style and power any role his heart desires.

"Happy Feet" (Warner, 3 stars) Be true to who your are, even if you are a tap dancing penguin in a sea of singers - or some such message comes through in the highly entertaining animated feature from the studio whose name was once synonymous with animation. Mumble (voiced by Elijah Wood) can't warble to save his cold feet. But, man, can he dance. That doesn't carry much weight in the nation of Emperor Penguins. Mumble is, gasp, different. That's hard on his hot flame Gloria (Brittany Murphy) who happens to be the best singing penguin in this stretch of the iceberg. Cast out, Mumble casts his lot with a lot of outcasts lead by the unreformed chief whacko Ramon (Who else? Robin Williams). More stuff happens and everyone ends the tale happy, of course, Others lending their voices include Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman and Hugo Weaving.

"National Lampoon's Van Wilder the Rise of Taj" (Fox/MGM, 1 star) Please let this be the last dues to be paid by the woefully underappreciated Kal Penn. More garbage from the National Lampoon Refuse Pile. Here's the thing, Penn has a truly adult film role in the sweeping epic "The Namesake" which opens shortly. He's terrific, the story is terrific and the movie will be one of the better indie pictures you'll see this year. Save your money, go see "The Namesake." Forget National Buffoon.

"Color Me Kubrick: A True ... ish Story" (Magnolia, 2 1/2 stars) We see and hear only that which we want to see and hear. So, true. For a while, a fellow named Allan Conway (the always amazing John Malkovich) assumed the identity of prominent director Stanley Kubrick - and boy, did he get away with it. Even though he knew next to nothing about Kubrick and looked nothing like him. Kubrick was busy filming "Eyes Wide Shut" at the time. The story is very loosely based on actual events - Conway wasn't the actual perp's name. The director however, Brian W. Cook, served as an assistant director on a number of Kubrick projects.

"Princesas" (Genius, 2 1/2 stars) A pair of prostitutes (Candela Pena and Micaela Nevarez) are rivals on the streets who become fast friends and each other's own support system. An official selection at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival.

"Docurama Film Festival III" (Docurama) Give them points for trying: The folks at this label which distributes documentaries exclusively have organized 10 titles into a film festival scenario. The fest "opens" March 27 with the release of "Following Sean" in which the film maker tracks down the 4-year-old subject of "Sean" his 1969 film on a hippie family and brings his audience up to date. The festival "closes" April 3 with the debut of "Stagedoor," a sweeping yet intimate look at Broadway and those who would star in its fabled theaters. Get all the details and titles at www.docurama.com.

IT CAME FROM TV

Season five of the FX copper series "The Shield"; fourth season of family values show "7th Heaven"; fourth season, Vol. 1 of "Touched By an Angel"; move on up with the sixth season of "The Jeffersons"; a Norman Lear classic's first season "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman"; and the animated super hero series "Fantastic Four."

FROM THE VAULTS

"The Shirley Temple Collection" (Fox) In volume five of this release are three films starring the pint-sized actress: she battles an evil headmistress in "The Little Princess," magical creatures visit her in "The Blue Bird" and that Great Depression elixir "Stand Up and Cheer!"

"The Judi Dench Collection" (BBC Worldwide) Ah, the perfect antidote for the sickly sweet Shirley Temple ... This eight-disc box holds nine BBC productions, spanning four decades, all starring this grand actress, (and as a bonus, three radio plays). The box includes a 20-page booklet on the life and career of Dame Judi Dench. The set includes two productions of "The Cherry Orchard" (1962 and 1981) as well as Georges Fedeau's French farce "Keep an Eye on Amelie" and Ibsen's "Ghosts" (1986).

"Tempest" (Sony, 1982) Paul Mazursky directed this loose interpretation of Shakespeare's play starring John Cassavetes, Gena Rowlands, Susan Sarandon, Raul Julia, Molly Ringwald and so many more.

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

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