Films in Focus: New and recent releases

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

'MEET THE ROBINSONS' - Lewis is an inventive orphan who is trying to track down his birth mom in the animated family film 'Meet the Robinsons.' CNS Photo courtesy of Disney. MEET THE ROBINSONS - Many of the digitally shot movies, even those high on effects, are not filmed for serious depth of field. They look pancaked. And so the 3-D effects of a cartoon movie like "Meet the Robinsons" really stand out. And up, enjoyably. Drawn by many computerized hands, and drawn by numerous writers from a novel by William Joyce, Stephen J. Anderson's film probably would have made Walt smile. Basically it's a hip chip off "The Swiss Family Robinson," which daddy Walt filmed in 1960 as a long, sturdy adventure starring Dorothy McGuire and John Mills. Little Lewis, without parents, will only find his Robinson family by going into the future, having been orphaned. Certainly he won't have to meet the Fokkers in this very G-rated show, short on violence, devoid of sex, unprovoking even by 1960 standards. A Buena Vista Pictures release. Director: Stephen J. Anderson. Writers: Jon Bernstein, Robert L. Baird, etc. Voice cast: Angela Bassett, Daniel Hansen, Laurie Metcalf, Adam West, Tom Selleck. Running time: 1 hour, 23 minutes. Rated G. 3 stars.

RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog)

THE LOOKOUT- "The Lookout" opens with one of the most risky or foolhardy gambits in any movie. It empties almost all sympathy for the protagonist. Chris Pratt, played by Joseph Gordon-Levitt, is seen driving at fast speed through the Kansas night, when he turns off his lights. He wants his lovely girlfriend to savor the fireflies flashing overhead, and the resulting smash (a farm combine was left on the road) kills two people, though not Chris. After that stunningly idiotic stunt, we are asked to care about Chris' recovery as the town "gimp" who has some memory lapses, trouble with sequential actions and other issues. Gordon-Levitt, so good as the boyish gumshoe in "Brick," has another burden here; his caring co-tenant is a blind man, acted by the superlative Jeff Daniels. Lewis may be blind, but his mental radar is wide awake and he is full of smart remarks. The better movie lost inside this one is about Lewis the blind man. He could make a great small-town

detective, picking up clues at the Rotary hall, then heading out with his faithful dog, to uncover a body at the grain silo. A Miramax Films release. Director, writer: Scott Frank. Cast: Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Jeff Daniels, Matthew Goode, Carla Gugino, Bruce McGill, Isla Fisher. Running time: 1 hour, 51 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

COLOR ME KUBRICK - Here is a double law about con artist movies: Watching a clever person con bright people can be very entertaining; watching a sloppy hoaxer con stupid or ignorant people is only a fool's delight. The first truth will be affirmed by "The Hoax," the coming (April 6) movie with Richard Gere as con wizard Clifford Irving. The second is confirmed by "Color Me Kubrick," a flippant British comedy about the real but implausible hustler Alan Conway, who pretended to be director Stanley Kubrick while Kubrick was still alive (both have since died). Whatever he thought of Conway, a verbose mess, perfectionist Kubrick probably wouldn't have cared much for the film, a less remarkable mess. He might have enjoyed John Malkovich, who gains some relief from being John Malkovich by impersonating the Kubrick impersonator. It's cute when classical music used in Kubrick films is employed here. And Kubie-baby is quite a name-dropper ("The trouble with Marlon is he thinks he's Brando"). The zinger about "Miss Kirk Douglas" is pushing the pedal too far. Never remotely probing, even when Conway cons himself into psychiatric treatment, "Color Me Kubrick" is a goof and a doodle. It can make you pine for John Hurt in "The Naked Civil Servant" or the truly witty faker played by Peter Sellers in Kubrick's "Lolita." A Magnolia Pictures release. Director: Brian Cook. Writer: Anthony Prewin. Cast: John Malkovich, Jim Davidson, Richard E. Grant, Terence Rigby, Luke Mabley. Running time: 1 hour, 29 minutes. Unrated. 2 stars.

PRIDE - "Pride" is one of those film titles, like "Victory," "Gold," "Winning" and "Perfect," suited to a movie of very obvious purpose and delivery. Not much thinking required. As with those, so again with "Pride," a sincere and plodding treatment of Philadelphia swimming coach Jim Ellis. Terrence Howard, who came to some fame and justified acclaim with "Hustle & Flow," plays Ellis, again uniting soft-eyed charm with harder textures. As a teen, inflamed by racism at a swim meet, Ellis socked a cop. So he has a police record, and since (10 years later) he can't get the job he wanted teaching math, he becomes a coach at Marc Foster Recreation Center, though its slum dilapidation is sized up by the sign: Mrc Foser Recation Cent. Ellis recruits local boys, a muscular, engaging bunch, plus a slight, sparky girl (Regine Nehy). And there's a shrimpy boy with a stutter, as go-for-it mascot. There is a ghetto thug for tension, and sweaty workouts alternate with urgent Ellis speeches like, "You either work as a team, or you're nothing." Even as the black swimmers improve and become competitive, the movie tends to dog paddle. Not even Howard's genuine appeal, or his can-do kids, can keep "Pride" out of the shallow end of the pool. A Lions Gate Films release. Director: Sunu Gonera. Writers: Kevin Michael Smith, Michael Gozzard. Cast: Terrence Howard, Bernie Mac, Kimberly Elise, Tom Arnold, Regine Nehy. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated PG. 2 stars.

PREMONITION - Alfred Hitchcock has been dead since 1980, but he didn't leave his lessons on how to make taut thrillers in an unmarked grave. Somebody, please, get a few of those lessons to the makers of "Premonition." Not exactly a thriller, never quite a chiller, hardly suspenseful, it is, at best, a Sandra Bullock vehicle made of vanishing vapors. As Linda, she goes through the whole movie wondering if husband Jim is dead, or will die, or if she's dreaming, or having a psychic vision, or just having her head bounce as the ball on the script's roulette wheel. Jim, played as a stolid hunk of generic husband and dad by Julian McMahon, is constantly running off to business engagements. Which is, perhaps, a functionally viable definition of death.

One day he's dead, the next day he's in her bed (alive?). The only thing carrying this doozy along is the personality of Bullock: sane, honest, stable, warmly sympathetic. That she has evolved beyond the long girlish phase of her career means she needs womanly options that are not patched together from mindless "concepts" like "Premonition." An MGM release. Director: Mennan Yapo. Writer: Bill Kelly. Cast: Sandra Bullock, Julian McMahon, Kate Nelligan, Nia Long, Peter Stormare. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes, Rated PG-13; 1 star.

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.

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.

Capsules compiled from movie reviews written by David Elliott, film critic for The San Diego Union-Tribune, other staff writers and contributor - Copley News Service

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