DVD Select: 'Last King of Scotland' a compelling tour de force for Forest Whitaker

by Robert J. Hawkins

Back in 1979, Idi Amin fled Uganda and began an odyssey that took him to several countries before he settled in Saudi Arabia. Every morning, disc jockey Don Imus would call an embassy or government functionary somewhere in the third world and demand to know the whereabouts of the fallen dictator.

The man had the blood of more than 300,000 people on his hands and his whereabouts was a funny little bit on a radio program.

For me, it was the beginning of scum radio - the vapid, cruel, gutter-wallowing that dominates morning radio today.

I was reminded of those days twice last week. Once, by the latest racist venom to spew from Imus and the indignation that it (finally) stirred. (Obviously the politicized world smells his blood on the waters. His reign must be nearly at an end.)

The second reminder was in watching Forest Whitaker's brilliant Academy Award-winning portrayal of the brutal tyrant Amin in "The Last King of Scotland" (Fox, 4 stars).

'LAST KING OF SCOTLAND' - Forest Whitaker portrays Idi Amin in 'The Last King of Scotland. CNS Photo courtesy of Neil Davidson.

How could we ever have laughed at the man?

Amin's story is filtered through the fictional persona of a young Scottish doctor Nicholas Garrigan (James McAvoy) whose arrival in Uganda coincides with Amin's overthrow of his predecessor Milton Obote.

A chance meeting between the young doctor and Amin, who had a voracious appetite for all things Scottish leads to the young man becoming his personal physician. Like many, Garrigan is beguiled by the dictator's charm and seduced by the trappings of power.

On a good day, Garrigan is a prized advisor to Amin. On a bad day he is Amin's little "Scottish monkey" the subject of scorn and ridicule.

Just the same, Garrigan is drawn deeper and deeper into Amin's madness until his own flight from Uganda is both necessary and impossible.

McAvoy's doctor is no prize. He is young, shallow and callow. Right up until near the end, he is blind to the murderous excesses of the dictator. And he has no grip on the consequences of his own behavior. More than one person, including one of Amin's wives (Kerry Washington), ends up dead because of Garrigan.

It's a tough way to grow up, kid.

ALSO THIS WEEK

School is in this week with three top-notch dramatic productions that take place (mostly) within the four walls of education:

"Notes on a Scandal" (Fox, 3 stars) With befriending like this, who needs enemies? Barbara Covett (Judi Dench) is a hardened veteran of the trenches who has been teaching at a seedy secondary school for at least a decade too long. Teaching? She keeps order. It is always she who scoops up the new female teachers, befriends them, shows them the ropes, makes herself available of any needs. This year her unsuspecting prey is Sheba Hart (Cate Blanchett) a late bloomer and art instructor married to an older gent of the threadbare upper middle-class (Bill Nighy). When Sheba falls into a dicey affair with one of her young students, Barbara is the first to whiff the odor in the air. Under the guise of friendship, Barbara weaves a web of dependency around Sheba. Pathetic Sheba's illicit transgressions pale next to the desires of Barbara. In lesser hands this film would be the stuff of cheap paperbacks but Dench and Blanchett elevate the experience to exhilarating heights. Dench's Barbara is at once pathetic and repellent. Blanchett's Sheba, even in her most despicable moments cries for some compassion. This, my friends, is a real movie.

"The History Boys" (Fox, 2 1/2 stars) Still in England, this time another working-class public school in which a group of boys have a real shot at gaining admission to the two most prestigious schools in the country, Cambridge and Oxford. The battle for their hearts and minds is waged between a portly old poof named Hector (Richard Griffiths) and Irwin (Stephen Campbell Moore), with a freshly minted scroll from Oxford. Hector tries to instill a passion for knowledge, Irwin tries to drill in the skill to pass tests. Fast paced, loaded with charm, "History Boys" pulled its cast straight off the theater stage where it has been wowing audiences and into the film. And for once it works.

"Freedom Writers" (Paramount, 2 1/2 stars) Based on a true story, Erin Gruwell (Hilary Swank) steps into the classroom a bright-eyed idealist ready to enlighten the young - only to discover that she has inherited the dregs

of the Long Beach, Calif., public school system. It takes a while but Gruwell finally learns how to sync the pain of today's lost generation to the pain that inspired great literature throughout history. She gets her students to write about their own lives and the dangers they face on the streets. Brilliant and uplifting results.

Also this week: "Smokin' Aces" (Universal, 2 stars) All it takes is a six-figure bounty to unleash a world of nastiness on the head of mob stoolie Buddy "Aces" Israel (Jeremy Piven). The feds have Buddy holed up in the penthouse of a South Lake Tahoe casino but that isn't going to hold back the small army of assassins, hoodlums, thugs, bounty hunters and other psychos bent on collecting the bounty. The violence in this film knows no bounds.

IT CAME FROM TV

"Not Just the Best of the Larry Sanders Show" (Sony) Garry Shandling broke lots of new ground in his reality bending talk-show-within-a-sit-com which commingled reality and real people with fictional situations. This four-disc set features 23 episodes from the six-year run, but it is the extras that prove even more staggering. Sanders went back and interviewed past guests and co-stars from the show, some of whom he's alienated and some of whom he'd lost as friends. Well, presumably. Where does reality end and fiction begin with Garry Shandling? Among those he interviews: Alec Baldwin, Tom Petty, Ellen DeGeneres, Jerry Seinfeld and Jon Stewart.

"Foxworthy's Big Night Out" (Paramount) Comic Jeff Foxworthy's often corny humor works well on CMT (Country Music Television) and ought to work better on DVD with a cold six-pack beside the overstuffed lounge chair. Lots of very safe country music performers are in the sketch comedy routines, too.

FROM THE VAULTS

With the heavily overpromoted "Spider-Man 3" en route, now is a good time for "Spider-Man 2.1: Extended Cut" to issue forth. What do you get on your fractional release? Eight minutes of previously unseen footage.

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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