Films in Focus: New and recent releases

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

'DISTURBIA â€“ Aaron Yoo and Shia LeBeouf stars in the thriller 'Disturbia.'

DISTURBIA - If you're going to remake (or salute) a Hitchcock classic, it's fine to start off like "Disturbia." It is not fine to end up like "Disturbia." Probably the title, and the way D.J. Caruso directed a grim road crash at the start, tell us that crafty homage to the Old Master is not quite what the movie has most in mind. Caruso and the writers are bouncing off Hitchcock's 1954 marvel "Rear Window." Instead of James Stewart strapped into a cast and wheelchair, we now have Shia LaBeouf as Kale. Stewart was a photographer, voyeurizing a huge, deadly, gray-haired hulk (Raymond Burr) across the courtyard of his apartment complex. Bored Kale voyeurizes a huge, deadly, gray-haired hulk (David Morse) who lives next door. Rather than a sullen wife-disposer like Burr, he is a serial killer of women and likes to coyly wink at his viciousness. Instead of Grace Kelly dropping by as Stewart's vampy vision, helping him stake out Burr, we get Sarah Roemer as a coltish dish. The old Hitch witchery is in watching pieces fall into place like pegs, inlaid expertly. Here the pieces are mostly body parts, and old floorboards creak and nothing rivals Stewart's superbly predatory camera. What began as a Hitch party turns to gore, with a closing nod to YouTube. A DreamWorks SKG release. Director: D.J. Caruso. Writers: Christopher B. Landon, Carl Ellsworth. Cast: Shia LaBeouf, Sarah Roemer, David Morse, Aaron Yoo, Matt Craven. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

THE REAPING - Hell must be made of gumbo, moss, mud and blood. At least, that's the recipe you might derive from "The Reaping," which cooks the old hocus-pocus into bogus hokum. Katherine (Hilary Swank) is a former minister - faith and family lost in disastrous Sudan - who has become a sort of secular exorcist at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. She exposes miracles as moonshine. But her big test is bayou country, a place now unhappily visited by the 10 biblical plagues of ancient Egypt (shouldn't Katrina count as the first?). She goes down with loyal Ben (Idris Elba), meets hunky local squire Doug (David Morrissey), encounters Loren RATINGS4 STARS - Excellent.3 STARS - Worthy.2 STARS - Mixed.1 STAR - Poor.0 - Forget It (a dog)
(AnnaSophia Robb), a vaguely supernatural teen whose brother is dead and mother is nuts. "Religious" hicks hex the girl as pure evil, as scheduled plagues arrive (frogs rain down, and the bayou turns to blood, symbolically and unfortunately related to the girl's first menstrual cycle). As locusts hit town, scientific Katherine starts getting her faith back. That is, she gets really scared. By then, the floating fish and bloated cattle, and the brother who looks like Satan's beef jerky after a nasty chaw, have made this the stunted, drive-in spawn of "The Exorcist" and "Deliverance." A Warner Bros. release. Director: Stephen Hopkins. Writers: Carey Hayes, Chad Hayes, Brian Rousso. Cast: Hilary Swank, David Morrissey, Idris Elba, AnnaSophia Robb, Stephen Rea. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes. Rated R. 1 star.

GRINDHOUSE - How do you like your pulp - baked or fried? In the pulp double that is "Grindhouse," Robert Rodriguez bakes a load of stale if bloody pastry called "Planet Terror," while Quentin Tarantino fries up a tasty mess of fun with "Death Proof." "Planet Terror," the most intentionally aged and streaked movie since part of the "Citizen Kane" newsreel was tortured at RKO, is a shapeless cram session of zombie hokum about toxic pollution driving hicks and go-go girls to morbid excess. Rose McGowan is fairly amusing as a pole dancer who loses her leg, jams in a stick of wood, then trades in that for a machine gun. Tarantino's party, "Death Proof," puts burning wheels on pop feminism. Eight beautiful women turn up, though not Pam Grier. Four (including Sydney Tamiia Poitier) are tracked by Elvistic stunt driver and thrill maniac Kurt Russell, while four others teach him not to mess with Texas (or Tennessee, or New Zealand) females. Russell turns superbly from stud sneers to whining, while the women (notably Rosario Dawson and Zoe Bell) inject current go-girl vitamins into the male road rampage genre. A Dimension Films release. Directors, writers: Robert Rodriguez, Quentin Tarantino. Cast: Michael Biehn, Jeff Fahey, Michael Parks, Freddy Rodriguez, Naveen Andrews, Kurt Russell, Rosario Dawson, Tracie Thoms, Zoe Bell, Rose McGowan. Running time: 3 hours, 7 minutes. Rated R. "Planet Terror" 1 star. "Death Proof" 3 stars.

THE HOAX - "The Hoax" contains a mention of Shakespeare and, while never at the bard's level, might have made the old master smile. It's a paranoid party about what fools we mortals be. Richard Gere plays Clifford Irving, the handsome (like Gere), suave (like Gere), slightly oozy (like Gere) writer who nearly pulled off the top literary larceny in a perfect season (the Nixon '70s). Expatriate Irving, having primed himself with a book on an Ibizan art forger, sought to fake the autobiography of mentally otherworldly billionaire Howard Hughes. And Hughes was in bed (all except literally) with another master paranoid, Richard M. Nixon. Irving never met Hughes, but faked letters and signatures for his whopper book and did tons of research that he embellished. As presses rolled, he was ousted from his plush deal by the dismissive drawl of old HH himself, speaking by phone on TV. Lasse Hallstrom's film treats the whole mad circus with whippy urgency, and its spiraling mischief (which Irving did for money, but also ego and the joy of the game) becomes deeper, darker, wilder. Along with funny bits like "Don't throw money at me!" and the swell helicopter gambit, there is prime meat. Irving hated Nixon and thought his book might even bring down Hughes' White House pal. Hughes squelched the book, but Irving's flamboyant fakery greased the Watergate paranoia that became Dick's Last Trick. Go figure. A Miramax Films release. Director: Lasse Hallstrom. Writer: William Wheeler. Cast: Richard Gere, Alfred Molina, Hope Davis, Marcia Gay Harden, Stanley Tucci, Julie Delpy. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

BLADES OF GLORY - The PG-13 rating for "Blades of Glory" must mean "preferred goody for boys of 13." For anyone much younger the movie is too raunchy, and for anyone much older it has to seem awfully juvenile. "Blades" has a surefire premise, the built-in spoof potential of championship figure skating. Admit it, even if you adored the Olympic glory of Dorothy Hamill and love every Lutz and Salchow and triple axel, the essence is campy: pretentious "balletic" skating, often pompous music, breathless commentary by TV cheerleaders, or even simply the name "Dick Button." "Blades of Glory" is the satirical expansion, then reduction of the premise. It's about the male rivalry of two ice follies of vanity skating. Will Ferrell is Chazz Michael Michaels, an "ice demon sex tornado" with a "rebel" style and miles of chest hair. Jon Heder is pretty boy Jimmy MacElroy, a perfumed poodle of exhibitionism. A DreamWorks release. Directors: Josh Gordon,

Will Speck. Writers: Jeff Cox, Craig Cox. Cast: Will Ferrell, Jon Heder, Craig T. Nelson, William Fechtner, Romany Malco. Running time: 1 hour, 36 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

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.

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.

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.

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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