

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

'HOT FUZZ' - Simon Pegg plays Sgt. Nicholas Angel in the comedy cop movie 'Hot Fuzz.' CNS Photo courtesy of Matt Nettheim.

HOT FUZZ - Cuteness needs to stay cute. Turning blatant, it crams in cutes like "Hot Fuzz." Of course, the title of this British comedy indicates that we will not get another "Kind Hearts and Coronets." And the Brits do have a tradition of broad comedy, as anyone can attest who knows of Benny Hill or the old "Carry On" films. The somewhat schizo "Hot Fuzz" is a double spoof: of the old Ealing comedies and Miss Marple funnies often set in cozy towns and manor houses, but also ramrod action movies and cop shows (mostly American) that tend to rule the English market. That twin premise is fetching but, as always with humor, fun is in the follow-through. Director Edgar Wright, scripting with star Simon Pegg, winds it up and lets it fly. The result, even hitting its target, tends to splat. Some chuckles expand well. The silly action delivers here and there,

RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.)

with Timothy Dalton as a smugly grinning country squire having more of a virility blast than he ever did as James Bond. Pegg's terrier moves offer some fine physicality. But "Hot Fuzz," which careless video clerks will soon be putting on porn shelves, is spoofing elements that went down the camp trail a long time ago. And Pegg, a good actor, is rather a wet blanket - or a dry tea bag. A Rogue Films release. Director: Edgar Wright. Writers: Edgar Wright, Simon Pegg. Cast: Simon Pegg, Bill Nighy, Timothy Dalton, Jim Broadbent, Martin Freeman, Billie Whitelaw. Running time: 1 hour, 47 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

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.

PERFECT STRANGER - When Matthew Broderick hacked into his high school's computer system in "WarGames" and changed Ally Sheedy's biology grade, it was downright thrilling: There was Broderick, hunched over the keyboard, Sheedy peering over his shoulder. Close-up on the keys! All that mysterious tap-tap-tapping! On his screen, a blinking cursor moved to the D; a tap of a key, and it became a B. Then - and this was kind of romantic - another tap, and she had an A! Yowza! Of course, that was 1983, just about a quarter of a century ago. Take "Perfect Stranger," a Halle Berry-Bruce Willis vehicle fresh as a Commodore 64. Berry is Rowena, ace investigative reporter for the New York Courier, whose latest story, which uncovered corruption and worse involving a U.S. senator, just got killed, so she's quit in one of those huffs. How she's going to pay the rent on an Upper West Side apartment that would do a multimillionaire proud doesn't seem to concern her - in part, to be fair, because Grace (Nicki Aycox), an old friend from childhood, also just got killed. Rowena vows to nab the killer, who very well may be Harrison Hill (Bruce Willis), powerful head of an advertising agency with top-of-the-line clients such as Victoria's Secret and Reebok, for whom he perhaps arranges shameless product placement in movies like, say, "Perfect Stranger." A Columbia Pictures and Revolution Studios release. Director: James Foley. Writer: Todd Komarnicki. Cast: Halle Berry, Bruce Willis, Giovanni Ribisi, Nicki Aycox. Running time: 1 hour, 49 minutes. Rated R. 1 star.

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 (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 chew, 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 Ibiza 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.

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.

Films in Focus: New and recent releases by David Elliott and others