

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

'SPIDER-MAN 3' - Tobey Maguire returns as Peter Parker/Spider-Man in 'Spider-Man 3.' CNS Photo courtesy of Peter Lovino.

SPIDER-MAN 3 - By the Big Three "event" criteria, "Spider-Man 3" qualifies: 1) It cost a lot; 2) It will earn a lot; 3) Hype matches 1 and 2. You can skip all the merchandising and avoid saying "Spidey" but still have a good time with "Spider-Man 3." It's a dynamic Spider-Man movie. The first sequel (2004) was harried by the "can we do it again?" syndrome, though it had classy villains (Alfred Molina, Willem Dafoe, together a hambone duet of orchestral size). Now relaxed into its highly costumed skin, the new epic lets James Franco as Harry, the gone Dafoe's son, cut loose for some embittered villainy a lot like crazy old dad's. And Thomas Hayden Church, who looks more like Dafoe than Franco does, rips around as another villain. The story's "heart" includes making Church a sorrowful thief, Flint Marko, who misses his dear, sickly daughter. "I'm not a bad person, I've just had bad luck," Marko mutters sadly, and to prove it he stumbles into a secretive physics lab and is disintegrated into a weirdly buff pile of sand. "De-molecularized" and then re-formed as Sandman, he is the most beautiful effect this series has achieved. The appeal goes well beyond the plot doodles, or even the gorgeous use of the skyline and the tremendously engineered effects. It's rooted less in the Marvel Comics source than in director Sam Raimi's fierce faith in that source as a field of imaginative play, RATINGS4 STARS - Excellent.3 STARS - Worthy.2 STARS - Mixed.1 STAR - Poor.0 - Forget It (a dog)

building upon the comics, freshly expanding the ka-pow! of the paper originals. When S-man turns aerial, we soar along. When he falls, stuck to a blasted slab of wall, gravity grabs us by the throat. A Columbia/Sony Pictures release. Director: Sam Raimi. Writers: Ivan Raimi, Alvin Sargent. Cast: Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, James Franco, Thomas Hayden Church, Topher Grace, Bryce Dallas Howard. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 stars.

LUCKY YOU - "Lucky You" has (lucky us) Drew Barrymore, now looking more woman than girl, yet still the cutest star on fizzy tap, still a honey of charm, still graced by that glorious chin. But "Lucky You" is a Barrymore film sort of like "The Hustler" was a Piper Laurie picture. Both films are about the preening rivalry of two guys. Eric Bana is Las Vegas poker prince Huck Cheever (hustler Paul Newman played pool), and Robert Duvall the old fox of the game (Jackie Gleason shot pool and looked better than Duvall). That L.C. (Duvall) is also named Cheever labels the basic bond and split, one not shared in 1961 by Newman and Gleason. Can the son finally defeat his father? Can the father, who's even up (or down) for cheap challenge in a diner, go beyond stripping the son of his game stake and chipping off another piece of his pride? Not an ace, not a deuce, but gambling with the middle numbers, "Lucky You" does manage to sportingly pass the time. Even in Vegas in 2007, that might not be a big, winning hand. A Warner Bros. release. Director: Curtis Hanson. Writers: Eric Roth, Curtis Hanson. Cast: Drew Barrymore, Eric Bana, Robert Duvall, Robert Downey Jr., Charles Martin Smith. Running time: 1 hour, 44 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

THE CONDEMNED - Wrestling star "Stone Cold" Steve Austin can't act. His compensation, at least in "The Condemned," is that he can't be killed. As Riley, a federal undercover agent and commando so bulky he could

only go undercover in a titanic black hole, Austin is roped in with other "Death Row contestants from Third World prisons" for a "reality" snuff program. Much as in the wittier Japanese film "Battle Royale," they're dropped on an obscure Asian island to kill one another off for the video cameras, with explosive devices strapped to their ankles. Gross, serial sadism quickly eliminates most fighters, including the svelte black girl who looks like her top previous action was elbowing into a changing booth at a fashion shoot. A Mexican hulk gets burned alive after watching his girlfriend tortured, raped and killed. "The Condemned" invites us to condemn our own wallowing. Shouldn't that lead to refunds? This movie has all the appeal of road kill repeatedly worked over by insane truckers. A Lionsgate Films release. Director: Scott Wiper. Writers: Scott Wiper, Rob and Andy Hedden. Cast: Steve Austin, Vinnie Jones, Robert Mammone, Rick Hoffman, Sam Healy, Madeleine West. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated R. 0 stars.

NEXT - String theory postulates, among other things, that ours is but one of many universes. Furthermore, the future is continually fracturing into an infinite number of alternative universes. In one of them, "Next," yet another adaptation of a Philip K. Dick tale, is the swift, nifty, semi-sci-fi thriller it's supposed to be. In this one, it comes pretty close. Cris Johnson (Nicolas Cage) is a small-time Las Vegas magician who occasionally throws real magic into his act - or at least, what looks like magic: He was born with the ability to see up to two minutes into his future. If he doesn't like the looks of things, he can alter his actions, and thus change ... everything. As you can imagine, this comes in handy at blackjack. Only for low stakes, though; he's living below the radar and wants to keep it that way. But he's come to the attention of three factions: the casino, which is getting steamed at his constant winning; the FBI, which needs his help in locating a loose nuke some terrorists have smuggled into L.A.; and those very terrorists themselves. Not overly ambitious, "Next" nonetheless keeps you thinking, guessing and entertained. In some universe there's probably even an explanation for Peter Falk's folksy cameo. Not in this one, though. Not now, and, I predict, not two minutes from now. A Paramount Pictures release. Director: Lee Tamahori. Writers: Gary Goldman, Jonathan Hensleigh, Paul Bernbaum. Cast: Nicholas Cage, Julianne Moore, Jessica Biel, Thomas Kretschmann. Running time: 1 hour, 36 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 1/2 stars.

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, 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.

FRACTURE - When an actor becomes so imperial in evil authority as Anthony Hopkins in "The Silence of the Lambs," that can distort his career. In "Fracture," Hopkins does a new variant on grisly Hannibal Lecter as Ted Crawford, a rich aeronautics genius who loves his trophy wife so much that he calmly plots to murder her (for infidelity) and beat the rap. As the wife, gifted Embeth Davidtz is a hot body made cold. And Rosamund Pike is more plot fodder as the other key woman, a sort of trophy lawyer who makes her move on the young

hunk who will try to convict Crawford, the L.A. prosecutor Willy Beachum (Ryan Gosling). Gosling is a smart young actor, yet he seems too much a preening puppy to handle a grizzled dominator like Hopkins. And the plot twist, by which the freshly humanized Beachum finally gains an edge, is too dumbly clever. Crawford, a chess master of immorality, would have seen it coming. Movies like this, side ventures of the John Grisham franchise, are meant to entertain with "substance" that never risks actual depth. Watching in mild suspense, we might as well be the balls rolling down tracks in Crawford's toys. A New Line Cinema release. Director: Gregory Hoblit. Writers: Daniel Pyne, Glenn Gers. Cast: Anthony Hopkins, Ryan Gosling, David Strathairn, Embeth Davidtz, Rosamund Pike, Joe Spano. Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

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.

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