Films in Focus: New and recent releases

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

'PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: AT WORLD'S END' - Johnny Depp is navigating treachery again in 'Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End.' CNS Photo courtesy of Peter Mountain. PIRATES OF THE CARRIBBEAN: AT WORLD'S END - Compact the title of "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End" to its acronym - "PC: AWE" - and the message is clear. It seems PC (piratically correct) to feel some awe. Capt. Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) is like a master mascot. "You add an agreeable sense of the macabre to any delirium," chirps Sparrow, haughty and preening and tipsy by nature. Depp wears his stardom so lightly that Sparrow not "getting the girl" is acceptable, even witty as the camera gazes upon the carved cheekbones and sun-gilt thighs of Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Swann, who also can be a toughie. Against odds, director Gore Verbinski keeps the whole thing buoyant and fun. He swerves from comedy (even farce) to pathos (notably Jack Davenport as gallant Norrington), from theme park thrills to antic, cartoonish madness. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.)

The screwball momentum favors gaudy villains like Geoffrey Rush's superb pirate rascal Barbossa, Bill

Nighy's tentacled Davy Jones, Chow Yun-Fat as a Singapore menace and Tom Hollander as prissily vicious Lord Beckett. This is a voyage on salty but carbonated seas, and something always comes along to dazzle our attention. Briney mutations abound. Gorgeous maritime shots suddenly melt by magic into a desert, with Sparrow turning cuckoo in the fabled Bonneville Salt Flats. A mob of crabs hauls his ship across dunes. A Buena Vista Pictures release. Director: Gore Verbinski. Writers: Ted Elliott, Terry Rossio, Stuart Beattie. Cast: Johnny Depp, Geoffrey Rush, Keira Knightley, Orlando Bloom, Bill Nighy, Tom Hollander, Naomie Harris. Running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 1/2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

SHREK THE THIRD - Shrek, green hero of "Shrek the Third," gets primped and pampered, as well he might, since the series has had a golden chain of box-office success. But the third movie has the look of royal inbreeding. The fun bunch is back, including the giant, green, lovable ogre Shrek (voiced by Mike Myers) and his chum Donkey (Eddie Murphy). Princess Fiona (Cameron Diaz) is still a dearie. Kids will relish the poop jokes. Older kids (really old) might go for the early schtick about dinner theater, and maybe having Julie Andrews on board OKs the silly dud musical at the end, an ego preen for obnoxious Prince Charming (Rupert Everett). Some of the gags slip in well. Having Donkey do a cat hiss is cute, there's a swell nightmare about ogre babies, and the idea of Andrews (as starchy Queen Lillian) head-butting a stone wall is almost satire. Essentially the movie is saying to its loyal crowd: You bought this stuff before, now take it re-canned. There is nothing really happening but the breezy ricochet of gags, the rote sitcom types, the star voices that are phoning in performances, the cuteness given a little by riffs about sexual attraction or body functions, the ruling swagger of assured box office. Inside the packaging is more packaging. Those who rally to it with, "So it isn't a critics' picture," had better be under 10 years old. A DreamWorks Animation SKG release. Directors: Chris Miller, Raman Hui. Writers: Andrew Adamson, Howard Gould. Voice cast: Julie Andrews, Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy, Cameron Diaz, Eric Idle, Justin Timberlake, Antonio Banderas. Running time: 1 hour, 37 minutes. Rated PG. 2 stars.

FAY GRIM - Parker Posey has seemed a little grim in recent years, so "Fay Grim" is a good fit for her. As pinballing Fay, always off balance but never defeated, Posey's famous hip-girl charm has become womanly and packs more punch. Hal Hartley's crafty entertainment derives from his 1998 art-cult film "Henry Fool." Henry (Thomas Jay Ryan), the ratty spitball of pontifical posturing whose diaries may out-gab Casanova's, is mostly gone, even reported dead. But the scattered diaries, recurrent rumors from foreign lands and the ambivalence of wife/widow Fay cause Henry to hover still, like Harry Lime in "The Third Man." Also festering is Fay's brother, Simon, cult bard mentored by Henry, now "the incarcerated garbage-man poet of Woodside, Queens." A chance to spring Simon from the can comes after pesky CIA agent Fulbright, a prodigy

of alert paranoia, maneuvers Fay into espionage abroad that may find some of the lost diaries, even Henry. Fulbright is Jeff Goldblum, deadpan but less teasingly sardonic than usual.

Violence is minimal, the basic thermostat being set by dotty but decent Fay. Parker Posey is one of the indie queens (Hope Davis, Rachel Griffiths, Julie Delpy, Lily Taylor, Laurie Metcalf) used feebly by Hollywood, but in the hands of Hartley she is the star needed and right on schedule. A Magnolia Films release. Director, writer: Hal Hartley. Cast: Parker Posey, Jeff Goldblum, James Urbaniak, Saffron Burrows, Liam Aiken, Thomas Jay Ryan, Anatole Taubman. Running time: 1 hour, 55 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

28 WEEKS LATER ... - About 28 hours after viewing "28 Weeks Later ...," I woke up sweating, staring hungrily at my arm through scarlet eyeballs, and babbling, "No more reviews! No more reviews! No more. ..." But that passed. And in less than 28 days, "28 Weeks Later ..." will have fallen into the compost of memory where compulsively generic movies that rely on fiercely gullible viewers all tend to retire, hazily. Sequel to Danny Boyle's cult-hit "28 Days Later ..." - may we please have the next sequel in 28 years? - this one takes place after the plague of zombies has eaten Britain. Nearly all the humans got munched, and the rapacious zombies have died off like pigs after a toxic binge. Robert Carlyle and Catherine McCormack are Don and Alice, surviving couple. The Yanks bring in "repatriated" Britons to restock London (forget Liverpool). Coming back are the couple's kids, a spunky Artful Dodger type played by superbly named Mackintosh Muggleton, and his lovely teen sister (almost equally well-named Imogen Poots). The movie has some vivid shock touches and the scenes of depopulated London are queasily strange. Still, this is really about a grimly ravaged couple and two kids put through hell. Your idea of fun? Munch on it. A 20th Century Fox release. Director: Juan Carlos Fresnadillo. Writers: Rowan Joffe, Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, Jesus Olmo. Cast: Robert Carlyle, Catherine McCormack, Jeremy Renner, Imogen Poots, Mackintosh Muggleton, Rose Byrne. Running time: 1 hour, 39 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

THE EX - Zach Braff is fine on TV and did a nice job writing, directing and acting in "Garden State." But his meal ticket is boyish cuteness - he's like a teen girls' chat room overhaul of Jon Lovitz. Braff smiles and gulps and double-takes cutely in "The Ex" as Tom, an aspiring New York chef. He exits job and city to move with wife Sofia (Amanda Peet) back to her Ohio roots. They've got a new baby, and Tom's a bit of a baby, a good guy prone to well-meant but klutzy gaffes. It doesn't help that his father-in-law (Charles Grodin) gets Tom a starter job at an ad agency, a place so fiercely hip and feely and PC it's like a Stepford Bosses version of Pee-wee's Playhouse. It helps less that his given "mentor" is an ambition freak and vicious mind-gamer in a wheelchair, Chip (Jason Bateman), a smarmy egotist who once dated Sofia. With snake-on-wheels Chip, who might (we can easily guess) be faking his "lifelong" paraplegia, Jesse Peretz's movie offers a few risky snaps of anti-PC impudence. But it's also crawly with cartoonish attitudes, dumb

twists, embarrassments, baby close-ups, joke violence, a windup kid actor named Lucien Maisel, Grodin echoing past glory as a top comic actor, Mia Farrow as his wife reduced to being a dim, dotty collectible (and not for her real fans). An MGM release. Director: Jesse Peretz. Writers: David Guion, Michael Handelman. Cast: Zach Braff, Amanda Peet, Charles Grodin, Jason Bateman, Mia Farrow. Running time: 1 hour, 33 minutes. Rated PG-13. 1 1/2 stars.

GEORGIA RULE - A bar of soap is a repeated element in "Georgia Rule," and rightly so. Suds rise in this capably acted fem-drama laced with slap-in comedy. It's a story of three women, plus male appendages (sometimes rather literally). Jane Fonda is Georgia, lonesome and decent widow in wholesome Hull, Idaho. Her morally wayward granddaughter, Rachel (Lindsay Lohan), is sent to live with Georgia for a summer of strict straightening. Arriving later is Rachel's mother, Lilly (Felicity Huffman), an alcoholic whose life is all wobble and worry (Georgia - what a dear - washes out the liquor bottles before trashing them). It gets sticky once Rachel, mischievous to the verge of trampiness, says stepfather Arnold (Cary Elwes) used to molest her. This whopper comes soon after Rachel goes off in a rowboat with Idaho stallion and future Mormon missionary Harlan (Garrett Hedlund) and, with a naughty twinkle, eagerly tends his unexplored needs. The three women spin this bubbly bar of soap on their emotional tripod. Watching it foam, twirl and nearly tip over is family drama of an unusually spiced kind, for Mormon Idaho. A Universal Pictures release. Director: Garry Marshall. Writer: Mark Andrus. Cast: Jane Fonda, Lindsay Lohan, Felicity Huffman, Dermot Mulroney, Laurie Metcalf, Cary Elwes. Running time: 1 hour, 44 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

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, 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 Haden 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.

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.

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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