Films in Focus: New and recent releases

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

'TRANSFORMERS' - Mankind's fate hangs in the balance as berserk machines battle each others in the sci-fi thriller 'Transformers.' CNS Photo courtesy of DreamWorks. TRANSFORMERS - It's a Hasbro ad. It's a Chevy commercial. It's a pitch for Homeland Security. (A pretty ineffective one.) There's a whole lot of shape-shifting going on in "Transformers," and that's not even counting the movie's hulking robots. Actually, the movie - "based on" the '80s toy line (the way a pit-bull attack is based on a flea) feels more like a commercial for its director, Michael Bay. Give Bay and company credit: The effects are amazing. The Transformers - RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) they're robots from another planet, and beyond that it's not worth asking - morph from cars, trucks, planes and tanks into walking, stalking, lethal machines in a dizzying whirl of wheels and steel. As they transform, they look a bit like the world's most complicated Rubik's Cubes. By the end, though, the humans feel reduced to robots by the movie's crushing, numbing orgy of action. For the audience, the transforming gets lost in the translation. Director: Michael Bay. Writers: Roberto Orci, Alex Kurtzman, John Rogers. Cast: Shia LaBeouf, Jon Voight, John Turturro, Megan Fox, Josh Duhamel, Tyrese Gibson, Rachael Taylor, Anthony Anderson. Running time: 2 hours, 24 minutes. Rated PG-13. 1 1/2 stars.

LICENSE TO WED - "License to Wed" has a license to drop dead, and does. Directed by Ken Kwapis, a TV titan whose very name settles in quippishly with the quality of humor in the script, this laff pile was compiled (or composted) by writers we shall mercifully just call Kim, Tim, Vince and Wayne. That is more mercy than the movie extends to us. Mandy Moore and John Krasinski play Sadie and Ben, who meet cute, fall in love cute, tease cute, quarrel cute. The setting is Chicago, which often looks rather cutely like Los Angeles. But

then comes the Ken Kwapis ace card, burning a hole right through the comic deck: Rev. Frank, played at the motorized lower level of his talent by Robin Williams. In order for Sadie to marry at her family church, she and Ben must submit to Frank's crash course in prenuptial exploration. This involves fake psychology, idiotic word games, queasy embarrassments, bits of physical cruelty, high-tech spying and Frank's indulging in fundamentalist "healing" even though he doesn't believe in it. A Warner Bros. release. Director: Ken Kwapis. Writers: Kim Barker, Tim Rasmussen, Vince Di Meglio, Wayne Lloyd. Cast: Robin Williams, Mandy Moore, John Krasinski, Josh Flitter, Peter Strauss, Grace Zabriski. Running time: 1 hour, 38 minutes. Rated PG-13. 1 star.

RECENT RELEASES

RATATOUILLE - Only one letter separates pet from pest, and that "s" attaches to the tiny hero of "Ratatouille" like a stigma. After all, Remy is a rat. And he is in Paris, a great rats' city but also the capital of French cuisine. And never the deux should meet, as Remy discovers when he rises from the alleys and sewers to high cuisine (though raised on trash, this rodent has Remy Martin tastes). Inspired by the fabled cookbook of the late, five-star chef Auguste Gusteau, who lives large in Remy's imagination, the little hero finds his way to Gusteau's restaurant, which has fallen to three stars. Only Remy can fix that, allied with the clean-up boy Linguini, a shy teen probably related to the late Gusteau but not a cookery natural. In the new Pixar animation comedy, Remy first dazzles with a superbly improvised soup. He scampers its elements into a bubbling pot, and every bit of food or spicing seems to flavor the film. "Waitress" is a fine slice of pie, but "Ratatouille" is a gourmet occasion. Amusingly fine voices include Patton Oswalt as Remy, Lou Romano as Linguini, Janeane Garofalo as Colette, Ian Holm as Skinner and Brian Dennehy as Remy's dad, named for Django Reinhardt. If a bit long for a cartoon feature - probably a sign that its makers fell in love with it - "Ratatouille" is the eighth and one of the best Pixar features. A Disney/Pixar release. Director: Brad Bird. Writers: Jan Pinkava, Brad Bird, Jim Capobianco. Voice cast: Patton Oswalt, Peter O'Toole, Lou Romano, Janeane Garofalo, Brian Dennehy, Ian Holm. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated G. 3 stars.

EVENING - People who call "Evening" a chick flick are not far wrong but may be ducking what the film offers. The best element is casting, possibly the most elite gallery of women this year. Can a film go wrong that has Vanessa Redgrave, Claire Danes, Toni Collette, Natasha Richardson, Meryl Streep, Glenn Close, Eileen Atkins and endearing young Mamie Gummer? At times, "Evening" is ripe to go wrong. The scene of old Ann (Redgrave), who is dying through the entire film, chasing a moth in her childish trance is just mawkish. And there are some lines like "Nice hair is nice." Adapted by Susan Minot (with another writer) from her novel, the movie keeps a double ledger of plot. Ann is dying while grown daughters Nina (Collette) and Connie (Richardson) fret and watch over her deathbed. A night nurse (Atkins) also hovers, sometimes seen by Ann as an angel. Pillowed by lush imagery, the cast remains alert, and there is a very moving bed scene of Redgrave and Streep. How can you not be moved by the heartfelt quavering of adorable Lila (Gummer is Streep's daughter) or by the wistful last talk of Redgrave and Richardson (Redgrave's daughter)? Good acting makes a big difference. A Focus Features release. Director: Lajos Koltai. Writers: Susan Minot, Michael Cunningham. Cast: Vanessa Redgrave, Claire Danes, Toni Collette, Meryl Streep, Patrick Wilson, Hugh Dancy, Natasha Richardson, Glenn Close, Mamie Gummer. Running time: 1 hour, 53 minutes. Rated

PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

EVAN ALMIGHTY - "Evan Almighty" is odd, as if Cecil B. DeMille and Frank Capra once got drunk over lunch, sketched silly plot notes on a napkin, and left it in a studio file where this film's makers could find it. Director Tom Shadyac is no Capra or DeMille, but he had a $240 million hit with 2003's "Bruce Almighty," a figure even those commercial gents would have envied. He also had Jim Carrey to star. Now he has Steve Carell, plus God. God is Morgan Freeman, and who would dispute it? George Burns ("Oh, God!," 1977) long ago retired to Friars Club heaven. And so Freeman is free to brandish his almighty voice and lordly twinkle, telling new Congressman Evan Baxter (Carell) to build a big boat just like Noah's, blueprint from Genesis 6:14: "Make thee an ark of gopherwood; rooms shalt thou make ..." Sure enough, a flood must come to Washington, and only Evan's ark can foil the grasping schemes of hoggish Rep. Long (John Goodman, who is like Huey Long multiplied). But there are laughs, good effects, fine beasts and a mood of goofy apocalypse. Our national capital is flooded, though all the good stuff is left standing. The ark sweeps past Lincoln's memorial, where Abe most likely prays to Morgan Freeman. A Universal Pictures release. Director: Tom Shadyac. Writer: Steve Oedekerk, Joel Cohen, Alec Sokolow. Cast: Steve Carell, Morgan Freeman, Lauren Graham, John Goodman, Molly Shannon, Wanda Sykes. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. Rated PG. 2 1/2 stars.

A MIGHTY HEART - "A Mighty Heart" uneasily pops a question beyond (and also below) the timely issues that it mostly raises well: How far should a real-life tragedy become the pedestal for a brand-name movie star? This is not like Nicolas Cage sweating through fireman heroics in "World Trade Center," which went from stunning start to fairly generic survival drama. No, this is Angelina Jolie as Mariane Pearl, wife and then widow of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, gruesomely beheaded (Feb. 1, 2002) in Karachi, Pakistan, by jihadi fanatics. Using Mariane Pearl's memoir as the main source, Michael Winterbottom's often brilliantly entrenched film takes us into the crucible. Seeking to meet a radical leader, Pearl was abducted only months after the 9/11 disaster in a part of the world inflamed by American troops in Afghanistan and Pakistan's likely, covert linkages to terrorists (Pakistani's president later suggested that Pearl was slain by a British agent). Earnest and appealing Dan Futterman plays Daniel Pearl, more than symbolically if not in depth of detail. The movie pivots on Mariane's shocked response to his absence, then the long days and nights waiting to discern his status, and the efforts of American and Pakistani agencies to track down the culprits. This is not "Casablanca," but living nightmare. A Paramount Vantage release. Director: Michael Winterbottom. Writer: John Orloff. Cast: Angelina Jolie, Dan Futterman, Irfan Khan, Archie Panjabi, Will Patton. Running time: 1 hour, 47 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

FANTASTIC FOUR: RISE OF THE SILVER SURFER - Like a packaged spree of trailers for itself, "Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer" also seems like a concentrated preview of July's Comic-Con, a clue that nerds, post-event, will need to lease new storage rooms. Ioan Gruffudd is back as endlessly elastic Reed Richards, top science brain of the 21st century. Michael Chiklis hulks as clay-monster-dearie Ben Grimm, doing dem-dese macho lines ripe from the "Slapsie Maxie" Rosenbloom era (early '50s). Jessica Alba is again Sue Storm, bubbly vavoom with invisibility gifts, prone to theme-park acting that will make her a fine Ophelia at Disney World, unless Paris Hilton claims that gig as community service. Reed dreams up scientific

breakthroughs and gizmos so fast that he makes Capt. Nemo seem a merit-badge flunkie. He needs to, once the Silver Surfer (Doug Jones, voiced by Laurence Fishburne) arrives, harbinger of an apocalyptic mega-blob of interstellar dust and gas, The Destroyer. As some kind of cereal-box bonus, there is the return of villain Victor Von Doom (who could have guessed, with that name?). Julian McMahon as Victor preens like a smarmy merger of Kevin Spacey and young Robert Goulet. The pieces plug into place, but without the escalating, party-high zest of the new "Pirates" movie. If not entirely a downer, this is no topper. A 20th Century Fox release. Director: Tim Story. Writers: Don Payne, Mark Frost. Cast: Ioan Gruffudd, Jessica Alba, Chris Evans, Michael Chiklis, Chris Evans, Julian McMahon. Running time: 1 hour, 31 minutes. Rated PG. 2 stars.

NANCY DREW - Emma Roberts, spawn of actor Eric Roberts and niece to fabled Julia, is so cute and squinchy and crisply endearing, she was clearly fated to star in "Nancy Drew." She's just right for a demographic slice that figures perfectly fresh Anne Hathaway ("The Devil Wears Prada") is now on the downslope, putting on her Norma Desmond cobwebs. Speaking of which, teen sleuth Nancy moves from her perfect Midwestern town (on or near the Burbank lot?) to deep, retro-rooted Beverly Hills. She and dad (Tate Donovan, the current Dean Jones) lease a grand mansion of "Sunset Boulevard" vintage. It's the past and haunted home of mysteriously dead '50s star Dehlia Draycott (Laura Harring, mostly in stills), and sooner than you can squeak "awesome," Nancy sets out to solve the case. Of course, the Draycott case is cake for Nancy. There's a weird caretaker to deal with, and a massively menacing lawyer, and some thugs from Central Plastic Casting. But our heroine is always first with a hunch and a smile, even bribing a clerk with the immaculate homemade brownie from her purse. Roberts is surely a charmer, and the quaint plot and middle school (or earlier) spots of humor worked fairly well for a Saturday preview crowd. A Warner Bros. release. Director: Andrew Fleming. Writers: Andrew Fleming, Tiffany Paulsen. Cast: Emma Roberts, Josh Flitter, Rachael Leigh Cook, Max Thieriot, Laura Harring. Running time: 1 hour, 28 minutes. Rated PG. 2 stars.

OCEAN'S THIRTEEN - Lots of people bought into the smug fun of "Ocean's Eleven," the Rat Pack caper film. Sinatra and his pals had a good time doing it, Las Vegas (1960) glowed, and there was a functional plot. Who would have imagined that their Vegas would seem a lost Eden of male togetherness, compared to the creepily indulgent retreads Steven Soderbergh has been churning out? His third, "Ocean's Thirteen," has a plot like confetti vacuumed off a casino floor, and the nostalgia seems buried under massive piles of neon tubing. Who's more preeningly cute - Danny (George Clooney), Linus (Matt Damon) or Rusty (Brad Pitt)? They guess one anothers' thoughts, finish one anothers' lines and hang tight in a very loose way, a go-guy trio of neo-Sinatras surrounded by devoted stooges (Don Cheadle, Casey Affleck, Bernie Mac, Carl Reiner, etc.). This crew makes Sinatra's mob seem like the knightly circle of King Arthur, but they do feel loyalty. After their Old Vegas buddy Reuben (Elliott Gould) is insulted into a stroke by Trump-like hotel mogul Willie Bank (Al Pacino), they scheme to wreck the opening of Bank's new casino, a double-phallic tower for high-rollers. Their scheme involves big computers and stacked dice, a giant tunnel digger and a phony FBI sting with Bob Einstein doing paralyzed acting. Do you sense the jackpot? Films this cynical and this heavily sold often find a way. No need to count the coming pile. The movie is pile enough. A Warner Bros. release. Director: Steven Soderbergh. Cast: Brad Pitt, George Clooney, Matt Damon, Elliott Gould, Ellen Barkin, Don Cheadle. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. Rated PG-13. 0 stars.

SURF'S UP - Are they more endearing than the very cool birds of "March of the Penguins"? Maybe not. Are they cuter than the cartoon birds of "Happy Feet"? You bet your bottom clam they are. In "Surf's Up," they mostly inhabit an Antarctic crust of ice, but northerly lies the lush, tropic isle Pengu, where birds flock for the annual Big Z Memorial surfing showdown. The host is TV ratings hustler (and beaver) Reggie Belafonte, who has a Don King stack of hair and the jackhammer juice of James Woods. Star time really belongs to Cody Maverick (Shia LaBeouf), a young surf wannabe from way down south with rakish feathered brows, eager to challenge reigning wave titan and egotist Tank Evans (Diedrich Bader). "Surf's Up" is animated in all ways, cleverly. It's a tiki shrine of surfer cultism, with funny and fond spoofs of beach boy documentaries like "Riding Giants" (during a huge curler, we hear the voices of actual surfers). Cartoonishly surging with liquid color, digital waves and jokes that even include gefilte fish, "Surf's Up" never forgets to have fun. Consider Chicken Joe (Jon Heder), a skinny fowl who has learned to surf on Lake Michigan but now challenges Tank, perhaps as compensation for his father's having become "a six-piece combo" of fast food. A Sony Pictures release. Directors: Ash Brannon, Chris Buck. Writers: Lisa Addario, Christian Darren. Voice cast: Jeff Bridges, Shia LaBeouf, Zooey Deschanel, Jon Heder, James Woods, Diedrich Bader. Running time: 1 hour, 27 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.

KNOCKED UP - What an odd comedy (and a sure hit) "Knocked Up" is - an attitude bazooka full of sex, drugs and raw language, yet so high on babies and family values that this must be the first R-rated film for both sleazoid slackers and earnest right-to-lifers. There are jokes about condoms, throw-ups, lap dancers and sex "doggie style." But when rising E! channel show cutie Alison gets pregnant, abortion is barely considered. Alison's one-night lover, the Web-siter and party dude Ben, turns the word to gibberish, and it's dismissed. Onward, fertile America! Judd Apatow of "The 40-Year-Old Virgin" wrote and directed, connecting the dots so that many explode into laughs. His casting is super. Katherine Heigl is a peachy blonde in the Cameron Diaz mode, but also like Doris Day rescued from prudery. Seth Rogen as funny stoner Ben drips deadpan zingers and seems to have studied the inflections of Albert Brooks. It's amazing how much cultural confetti Apatow has packed into this comedy, a cram session of cameos, plugs and nods: Chewbacca, "the Dice thing" (Andrew Dice Clay), Cat Stevens, Meg Ryan, Tom Waits, Ryan Seacrest, "Munich," Robin Williams, Felicity Huffman, "The Sopranos," the Xbox 360, James Franco, Robert De Niro, Bob Marley, Red Bull drinks, Al Jarreau and several mentions of "Spider-Man 3" (an odd effect when this film previewed before "S-M3" opened). The air-gunned plot shoots past slackerdom into pregnancy crises, then childbirth and baby snapshots. Call it love. However driven to girl talk and guy guff, the deft cast is winning, and the sweetest funny work is old pro Harold Ramis as Ben's supportive dad. A Universal Pictures release. Director, writer: Judd Apatow. Cast: Katherine Heigl, Seth Rogen, Paul Rudd, Leslie Mann, Harold Ramis, Craig Robinson. Running time: 1 hour, 39 minutes. Rated R. 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

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