Films in Focus: New and recent releases

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

HAIRSPRAY - It has taken nearly 30 years for John Travolta to make it from 1959 (in "Grease") to 1962 (in "Hairspray"). In his defense, the man's been busy, what with getting a sex change and gaining about 200 pounds. Travolta is the expansive Baltimore mom Edna Turnblad in "Hairspray," the 'HAIRSPRAY' - Christopher Walken, as Wilbur Turnblad, and John Travolta, as Edna Turnblad, star in the remake of 'Hairspray.' CNS Photo courtesy of David James. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) new movie based on the recent musical adapted from the original '88 film. Although racial integration is a key "Hairspray" theme, what's really on the movie's mind is a broader idea of acceptance and the vessel for that message is a bubbly tugboat of a teen, Tracy Turnblad (Nikki Blonsky). Unlike Mom, who has exiled herself inside the family home since before Ike's first inauguration, Tracy refuses to feel shame about her weight. Tracy's life mission is to be anointed a dancer on the Corny Collins Show, a cheerfully bigoted TV dance program run by the frosty ex-beauty queen Velma Von Tussle (Michelle Pfeiffer, filmed deliciously in Vamp-O-Rama). Tracy, though, is all about integration, and when she gets sent to detention and hooks up with the black kids warehoused there (talented Elijah Kelley as Seaweed J. Stubbs among them), their dance moves become her catalyst to blow the Corny show wide open. Director: Adam Shankman.

Writers: Leslie Dixon, John Waters, Mark O'Donnell. Composer: Marc Shaiman. Cast: Nikki Blonsky, John Travolta, Christopher Walken, Amanda Bynes, Zac Efron, Elijah Kelley, Queen Latifah, Michelle Pfeiffer, James Marsden. Running time: 1 hour, 57 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.

I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU CHUCK AND LARRY - Maybe it is a sign of health (but not much) that, nearly six years after the 9/11 disaster, New York firemen are not treated as saints in a Hollywood movie. Instead, "I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry" says they're a bunch of lovable buffoons, prone to silly gags during fires, and suddenly switching from glandular homophobia to get-along PC values. This Adam Sandler comedy grabs its material every which way. So frantically hetero that he has a virtual harem of bimbo dollies, fireman Chuck (Sandler) consents to pretend being gay with fire buddy Larry (Kevin James). He owes Larry a big favor, and widower Larry needs benefits that he will only get by faking a gay marriage - and never mind the entire prior histories of both men. The writers and director Dennis Dugan conspire to be gutsy in a gutless way. The stars barely dabble in gayness (nothing sexual), but they squirm a great deal and camp a little while always being covered: Larry remains fixated on his dead wife and his adorable kids, while Chuck preens a manly cigar, dukes out a nasty homophobe and has a pro-gay lawyer (Jessica Biel) who lets him fondle her prized breasts because she thinks he's gay. A Universal Pictures release. Director: Dennis Dugan. Writer: Barry Fanaro, Alexander Payne, Jim Taylor, Lew Gallo. Cast: Adam Sandler, Kevin James, Jessica Biel, Dan Aykroyd, Steve Buscemi, Richard Chamberlain, Ving Rhames. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. Rated PG-13. 1 1/2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX - Director David Yates' "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" is one of the best in what may prove to be the finest movie series ever made. With Daniel Radcliffe now budding almost manfully, Harry is deep into disturbing adolescence. Nothing like zit problems, more like: Can he save both the magic and mortal worlds from the Dark Lord often called you-know-who? Lord Voldemort (Ralph Fiennes) is taking over the gloriously weird universe again, marking Harry as special victim. In a typical Rowling masterstroke, the new internal evil at the Hogwarts academy of magic arts is Professor Umbridge, a fascistic pedant played by Imelda Staunton in stuffy pink outfits, like Queen Liz II as evil Avon Lady. The ensemble work is flawless, including all the familiars in the grand family of characters.

A Warner Bros. release. Director: David Yates. Writer: Michael Goldenberg. Cast: Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, Rupert Grint, Michael Gambon, Jason Isaacs, Gary Oldman, Imelda Staunton, Alan Rickman, Robbie Coltrane, Maggie Smith. Running time: 2 hr., 16 min. Rated PG-13. 4 stars.

YOU KILL ME - Contract killer Frank Falenczyk (Ben Kingsley) has left Buffalo for San Francisco to dry out after far too much boozing the hard way. No California wines can lure Frank once he gets the earnest hang of his AA meetings. But confession comes hard for a guy used to speaking through a silencer. There, he meets svelte shepherdess, Laurel, played as a comically dry, uplifting martini on legs by Tea Leoni. Her scenes with Kingsley give the movie its zippy sprints of adult charm, a certain pressure and percolation, like the bantering, seductive ploys of Pierce Brosnan and Rene Russo in "The Thomas Crown Affair." Kingsley maintains his usual excellence; for a man with nonstar looks he certainly does turn in star performances, meting out his large talent in fine increments. "You Kill Me" may be the best film endorsement of AA since the TV movie "My Name is Bill W." Despite so wry zigs and crafty zags, the story does tend to end up just where you think it will.

An IFC Films release. Director: John Dahl. Writers: Christopher Markus, Stephen McFeely. Cast: Ben Kingsley, Tea Leoni, Bill Pullman, Philip Baker Hall, Dennis Farina, Luke Wilson. Running time: 1 hr., 33 min. Rated R. 3 stars.

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 - 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.

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.

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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