

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

RUSH HOUR 3 - "Rush Hour 3" is a traffic jam of cliches that doesn't achieve gridlock mainly because the stars, Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker, are too tireless to quit. They do slow down. Chan, at 53 showing touches

'RUSH HOUR 3' - Crime fighting comedians Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker are back in 'Rush Hour 3.'
CNS Photo courtesy of Glen Wilson. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) of wax in the face, is again game to go as Inspector Lee. Tucker, a spring rooster of 34, returns as Lee's silly and babe-chasing pal, Carter, an LAPD detective who also directs traffic. The guys fondly trade black and Asian racial digs while pursuing a vast Chinese crime cartel. One so secretive that its leaders' names are demurely written on the shaved head of a tall showgirl (Noemie Lenoir, a giraffe va-voom). There also is petite Roman Polanski as a cruel Paris police chief, evoking for some of us a smiling memory: Jack Nicholson's greeter line in "Chinatown" ("Hey Claude, where'd you find the midget?"). And there is Yvan Attal as a French cabbie who comes to relish imported American violence, yet pops a boldly political (for a mainstream film) put-down: "You lost in Vietnam. You lost in Iraq." Other rewards? Many showgirls. A New Line Cinema release. Director: Brett Ratner. Writers: Jeff Nathanson, Ross LaManna. Cast: Jackie Chan, Chris Tucker, Noemie Lenoir, Max von Sydow, Yvan Attal, Tzi Ma. Running time: 1 hour, 38 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

STARDUST - There may not be a more beautiful sound in popular music than Nat King Cole singing Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust." Which is the sort of sure, deft magic absent from "Stardust," a fantasy lacking liftoff. Ol' Hoagy is long gone, and what we get is more like a cheese-steak hoagy reworked for a British pub's Fairie Tale Happie Hour. Make that two long hours, as Matthew Vaughn's lavish blowout (from a novel by comic book writer Neil Gaiman) winds and loops through an energetic but draining plot. Cute, bland Charlie Cox is the hero, Tristan, offspring of a bold hunk who got through the not very imposing wall around a mythic plot of England, out where the town of Wall leads to mysterious Stormhold. After ripe narration by Ian McKellen, Peter O'Toole as the supine king dies after gleefully relishing his sons turning upon one another. Ye olde elements doth duly appear: curses, reading of entrails, casting of runic stones, animal morphings, a pirate ship that flies. The last bit features Robert De Niro as Capt. Shakespeare, not trying for an English accent but doing show-laff routines. "Stardust" staggers with end-of-summer excess, seldom winning (except from the quite young) more than a weary gasp. No doubt the British are worried about maintaining a movie income flow once the Potter saga ends, but if this thing is setting up a sequel, they need to begin again. A Paramount Pictures release. Director: Matthew Vaughn. Writers: Jane Goldman, Neil Gaiman. Cast: Michelle Pfeiffer, Claire Danes, Robert De Niro, Sienna Miller, Charlie Cox, Rupert Everett, Peter O'Toole. Running time: 2 hours. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

THE BOURNE ULTIMATUM - Promo ads have been excitedly telling us that Jason Bourne "comes home" in "The Bourne Ultimatum." Which must bring him back to the bank, making another massive deposit for

Universal Pictures. And back in New York, where his secretly filed identity will finally be divulged. After many killings, a few more should do the job - he is haunted by their faces, but doesn't know their names. Bourne (Matt Damon) has been on the run for years, much like David Janssen's Richard Kimble in the old show "The Fugitive." But Kimble was highly human and vulnerable, while Bourne is more a Teflon torpedo: Damon plays him as if he had one tiny strand of DNA for emotion; the rest is all muscle and reflex. At the start he's wounded, being chased in Moscow then lams off to Paris, then Madrid, then Tangier, then "home." Though a solo fugitive pursued by ruthless black-op agents led by the world's most diabolical men, he can always find money, or a passport, or an access card. And a little quality time with nice Nicky (Julia Stiles) - she's about it for soul luggage. The story stays in overdrive. Every few minutes brings a frantic chase, explosion, fights, deaths, juiced by high-tech (computers, phones, spy cams) as Bourne's zigzag path confounds and frustrates the CIA master creep (David Strathairn). "Ultimatum" tries to stir sympathy for its indestructible hero. But Jason Bourne has all the charm of a howitzer. He needs some time with the Harry Potter bunch. A Universal Pictures release. Director: Paul Greengrass. Writers: Tony Gilroy, Scott Z. Burns, George Nolfi. Cast: Matt Damon, Joan Allen, David Strathairn, Julia Stiles, Albert Finney. Running time: 1 hour, 51 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

HOT ROD - "Hot Rod" is a cinematic shot of silliness, a simplistic speck at barely more than 80 minutes. You could do worse - "I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry" or "License to Wed," for instance - than spend a spell with winsome Andy Samberg. The rudimentary plot of "Hot Rod" (shot in Vancouver, B.C., on a skimpy budget) focuses on an immature, small-town guy named Rod (Samberg), with a moped and ambitions to be a stuntman. He seeks to follow the path of his dad, who died apparently while toiling as a test rider for Evel Knievel. He's also dealing with a nasty stepfather (Ian McShane of TV's "Deadwood") and a doting mom (Oscar-winner Sissy Spacek, a long way from "Coal Miner's Daughter"). McShane needs a heart transplant and Samberg wants to get him one by winning \$50,000 for a huge jump over 15 school buses. That way, when his stepdad is better, he can whip him in a fight and gain the respect for which he yearns. A Paramount Pictures release. Director: Akiva Schaffer. Writer: Pam Brady. Cast: Andy Samberg, Jorma Taccone, Bill Hader, Danny R. McBride, Isla Fisher, Sissy Spacek, Ian McShane. Rated PG-13. Running time: 88 minutes. 2 1/2 stars.

NO RESERVATIONS - Beware of elite restaurant stories that taste like processed cheese. Is that a special frisson de Velveeta we detect in the glowing, plushly served "No Reservations"? Catherine Zeta-Jones is a classy truffle as Kate, workaholic star chef at a Greenwich Village trendy spot, 22 Bleecker. Aaron Eckhart's Nick, a charmboy chef who challenges Kate's kitchen queendom, is a hearty steak. And as Kate's adoptive niece, Zoe, Abigail Breslin is still the fuzzy peach we adored in "Little Miss Sunshine." Now, she's Little Miss Mascot and wide-eyed cupid, much like fabled Eloise of the Plaza Hotel. Zoe sniffles moodily about her dead mom, but cozies into Kate's busy, busy kitchen. And she prods the budding, frisky romance of Kate and Nick that, as main course, is strictly lean cuisine. Carol Fuchs helped redo the menu, from Sandra Nettelbeck's 2002 "art" hit "Mostly Martha." Zeta-Jones subs just fine. But Eckhart, for all his manly stubble and dental dude smile, is just a big American stud who "loves all things Italian." From "Mostly Martha" to "Mainly Comfort Food" - by way of the Hollywood microwave. Even maternal death is just another flavor at the snack bar. A Warner Bros. release. Director: Scott Hicks. Writers: Carol Fuchs, Sandra Nettelbeck. Cast: Catherine

Zeta-Jones, Aaron Eckhart, Abigail Breslin, Bob Balaban. Running time: 1 hour, 48 minutes. Rated PG. 2 stars.

THE SIMPSONS MOVIE - Don't have a cow, man, but "The Simpsons Movie" is an underachiever. For reasons either not fully explained or not at all memorable, Homer (voiced, as always, by Dan Castellaneta) becomes infatuated with a pig, which he brings home to become the latest member of the Simpson household. Marge (Julie Kavner) is aghast: A twirly tail is one of the ominous signs portended by Grandpa Abe in the speaking-in-tongues vision he experienced in church. Doesn't take long for the other signs to manifest themselves, and for Homer's blundering selfishness (triggered by - what else? - doughnuts) to engineer what seems will be the destruction of the town of Springfield. Various plot lines don't so much intertwine as take turns. Bart (Nancy Cartwright), fed up with his old man at last, eyes Flanders as a possible substitute. Lisa (Yeardley Smith) finds a kindred soul in a young musician/environmentalist from Ireland, whose father is not, he must keep insisting, Bono. At the outset, Homer ridicules us for paying for what we get for free on television. For once, Doughnut Man is onto something. A 20th Century Fox release. Director: David Silverman. Writers: Matt Groening, James L. Brooks, Al Jean, Ian Maxtone-Graham, George Meyer, David Mirkin, Mike Reiss, Mike Scully, Matt Selman, John Swartzwelder, John Vitti. Cast: Dan Castellaneta, Julie Kavner, Nancy Cartwright, Yeardley Smith, Hank Azaria, Harry Shearer, Albert Brooks, Minnie Driver. Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

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 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.

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 hours, 16 minutes. 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 hour, 33 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.

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