

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

ROCKET SCIENCE - "Rocket Science" is about a New Jersey teen named Hal (not Hugh) Hefner who considers clear speech "not like rocket science" - if only he could get the phrase out of his mouth fluently. The small inside 'ROCKET SCIENCE' - Reece Thompson plays a stuttering boy who joins his high school's debate team in the coming-of-age drama 'Rocket Science.' CNS Photo courtesy of Jim Bridges. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) joke is that the movie is from Jeffrey Blitz, who made the widely seen indie documentary "Spellbound," about kids who know very big words but spell them ve-ry s-l-o-w-l-y. Hal is more like Halt. His stuttering speech lurches and jolts from one verbal pothole to the next. The excellent Reece Thompson plays Hal so earnestly that his shy, gentle frustration with not being fluent becomes more affectingly serious than Blitz's tone and tactics can serve. Hal is surrounded by the fixated: a broken pair of sad sitcom parents; a pushy brother far more sullenly alienated than himself; a school debating hero Hal idolizes (big Nicholas D'Agosto), whose speed-talk brilliance trips him into an existential value crisis; and that boy's fierce rival in competition, acted by Anna Kendrick as a sly variant on Reese Witherspoon in "Election." Toss in idiotic speech therapists, and a loyal (to Hal) Korean kid apparently named for Charlton Heston. And repeat jokes about Hal trying to order pizza. A Picturehouse Entertainment release. Director, writer: Jeffrey Blitz. Cast:

Reece Thompson, Anna Kendrick, Nicholas D'Agosto, Margo Martindale. Running time: 1 hour, 41 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

THE TEN - Winona Ryder has had embarrassments, like the film "Lost Souls," and her 2002 conviction for shoplifting. None of that rivals her attempt at comedy in "The Ten" as a woman sexually wild for a wooden dummy. OK, give The Ryder credit for go-for-it zest. But director David Wain and co-writer Ken Marino are beyond forbearance. They've made a crunchingly awful, creepily upbeat, segmented comedy about the fabled moral commandments. Paul Rudd serves as giddy host at a comedy club for soused nudists, introducing each skit piece with linkage filler about his marital woes (boy, does that eat dust). Soon, we're watching a guy (Adam Brody) jump without parachute, landing alive but stuck in the ground, then worshipped like an Easter Island statue - this riffs on the command to have no other gods but God. Viewers juiced may have fun, yet forget why. The rest of us, soberly trapped, will not forget easily. A ThinkFilm release. Director: David Wain. Writers: Ken Marino, David Wain. Cast: Paul Rudd, Winona Ryder, Adam Brody, Gretchen Mol, Oliver Platt, Liev Schreiber, Jessica Alba, Ron Silver. Running time: 1 hour, 33 minutes. Rated R. 0 stars.

THE INVASION - As if by evolving, cultural necessity, "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" keeps returning. Its potent new morph is "The Invasion," from a director whose previous film horror was Adolf Hitler ("Downfall"). Nicole Kidman portrays a psychiatrist who is also a desperately protective mother in "The Invasion," which co-stars Daniel Craig. Oliver Hirschbiegel joins the creeper caravan so chillingly begun in a small town by Don Siegel in 1956. Next came a succulent, San Franciscan update in 1978 from Phil Kaufman and a tasty Southern treatment by Abel Ferrara (1993's "Body Snatchers"). "The Invasion" is one of the best chillers ever made. It has little suspense foreplay but plunges right in and is packed with startling moments. Instead of pods for transition, people seem to suddenly just become robotized aliens. One of the space shuttles fell in broken pieces, scattering a viral contagion over much of the Earth. Pandemic infections include the movie's one brazenly visceral touch: Aliens spew internal juices by mouth onto victims. They must then fall asleep to morph into emotionless beings who never blink, talk with rote precision and have all the charm of bacteria. "The Invasion" is an alarm bell that might keep you awake at night. A Warner Bros. release. Director: Oliver Hirschbiegel. Writer: Dave Kajganich. Cast: Nicole Kidman, Daniel Craig, Jeremy Northam, Jeffrey Wright, Veronica Cartwright. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes. Rated R. 4 stars.

RECENT 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 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.

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.

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