

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

ACROSS THE UNIVERSE - The oomph-driven theatrical director Julie ("Lion King") Taymor can really ride herd on a film. Now, Taymor ropes, brands and stampedes the Beatles into her showbiz corral. In "Across the Universe," she and the writers serve up the fabled tunes and the 1960s fondly and as 'ACROSS THE UNIVERSE' - Eddie Izzard is featured in 'Across the Universe,' a love story set in the turbulent '60s. CNS Photo courtesy of Abbot Genser. RATINGS

4 STARS - EXCELLENT.

3 STARS - WORTHY.

2 STARS - MIXED.

1 STAR - POOR.

0 - FORGET IT (A DOG.) deep as a peace decal in rainbow hews. The result is a kind of astral haze of newborn nostalgia, trying to invoke a legendary era as if it were freshly happening. So, period trappings embellish the deathless tunes, but the actors could fit any current musical. This often seems less a Beatles memory ride than an attempt to redo "Rent" with a hugely improved score. Taymor piles and pinwheels the big rousers with sets, effects, 'toons. Joe Cocker's guest intro of "Come Together" really rocks it open. But Taymor dips characters in cliché mulch. The psychedelic phase is a rush, man, yet when Taymor serves up the gassy, grassy trip to la-la as pure escape, you might crave a little wake-up acid from Tom Wolfe. A Revolution Studios release. Director: Julie Taymor. Writers: Dick Clement, Ian La Frenais. Cast: Evan Rachel Wood, Jim Sturgess, Joe Anderson, Dana Fuchs, Martin Luther McCoy. Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes. Rated PG-13.

2 1/2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

EASTERN PROMISES - It's curious that the best thrillers of recent vintage, "The Invasion" and "Eastern Promises," pivot on a child and a surge of maternal feeling. Instead of Nicole Kidman as a doctor rescuing her boy from invasive creeps, David Cronenberg's "Eastern Promises" has Naomi Watts as Anna, maternity nurse in an old London hospital, plus a girl baby in peril. Anna is of Russian descent, and the resident aliens are Russians even more descended, a crime mob codified by tattoos. Armin Mueller-Stahl is almost Stalin pulled up from his grave as Semyon, the transplanted mob don who runs a posh, Muscovite supper club famed for his borscht. Son Kirill (Vincent Cassel) is an alcoholic brute, the heir but a loose cannon. The firm cannon, though never a fan of guns, is the new soldier Nikolai (Viggo Mortensen). The revealing diary spins the plot, yet Cronenberg (with writer Steven Knight) adds his own special pages. No big chases or effects. Just enough mob talk to tap in iced fear, the best Turkish bath scene since Orson Welles' "Othello" and acting aces like Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski as a rude uncle. A Focus Features release. Director: David Cronenberg. Writer: Steven Knight. Cast: Viggo Mortensen, Naomi Watts, Vincent Cassel, Armin Mueller-Stahl, Jerzy Skolimowski. Running time: 1 hour, 36 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

THE BRAVE ONE - "The Brave One" opens with an ode to Eloise, the kid-lit character who lives at the Plaza Hotel in New York. Eloise likely never ran into Sid Vicious there (he preferred to hole up over at the Chelsea), although the late Sex Pistols bassist is among the progressively less-adorable New York types whom the movie name-drops after her. As a public radio host named Erica Bain, Jodie Foster patrols the movie's urban purgatory, scavenging for sounds to weave into her somewhat overwrought aural portraits of the city. After she and her fiance (Naveen Andrews) fall victim to a savage attack - an episode that director Neil Jordan portrays in graphic detail, down to the last head-thwack and bone-crack - Erica first cocoons herself in fear, then bursts forth, fully morphed into an angel of vengeance. (Shades of that scary butterfly in "The Silence of the Lambs.") But by the time her vigilante campaign has made her a media sensation (public fascination is heightened by the continued mystery of the shooter's ID), Erica is well past the "Why am I doing this?" phase and deep into "Let's do it some more." Jordan wraps things up with a twist that's more startling than it is plausible. You could call it bold in a way, but if that's the case, it's one of the few moments where "The Brave One" really musters much courage. Director: Neil Jordan. Writers: Roderick Taylor, Bruce A. Taylor, Cynthia Mort. Cast: Jodie Foster, Terrence Howard, Mary Steenburgen, Naveen Andrews. Running time: 1 hour, 59 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

3:10 TO YUMA - "3:10 to Yuma" is a slow train to dumb brutality, a countdown to the latest, gratuitous death of the Western. Fifty years ago, Delmer Daves made a tight, suspenseful film from Elmore Leonard's story (non-urban, pre-fame Leonard, but taut as a driven nail). Glenn Ford was smoothly amusing as menacing

desperado Ben Wade, whom hard-luck rancher Dan Evans (Van Heflin) was paid to escort perilously to a train, for a date with the noose. Now, Christian Bale is Evans, a gnawed but credible variant on Heflin's sober, fretful decency. As Wade, Russell Crowe is less a Ford than a Humvee on a horse. He's a sly, teasing sadist who revels in cruelty, but to make him vaguely human he does pencil sketches, and his main sidekick is a vile, trigger-happy psycho (Ben Foster). The story's females (Gretchen Mol, Vinessa Shaw) are marginal softies in the old Western tradition. But Evans has a teen son (Lennie Loftin) who thinks dad is weak and has some sneaking admiration for Wade's deadly machismo. The "moral" is how the boy finally sees Evans as a hero. A Lionsgate release. Director: James Mangold. Writer: Halsted Welles, Michael Brandt, Derek Haas. Cast: Russell Crowe, Christian Bale, Ben Foster, Peter Fonda, Gretchen Mol, Logan Lerman. Running time: 1 hour, 55 minutes. Rated R. 1 1/2 stars.

SHOOT 'EM UP - "Shoot 'Em Up" targets the audience and splatters 'em, though some will go down laughing. Clive Owen is Smith, the deadly gunman who lives in an under-zone of New York, likes dogs, has a rat as butler, can turn on a dime's shadow and eats carrots to keep his trigger-happy eyesight sharp. Owen smartens up a lot of idiocy. No need to seek for psychic tissue (motivation, etc.), but there are many ruptured and flying body parts. Owen gets tortured by grinning creep Paul Giamatti in a way that rivals the screws put to Robert Mitchum by Raymond Burr in "His Kind of Woman." Owen's kind of gal is Monica Bellucci. "Shoot" is a pinballing gore spree with cackling dialogue and frank divulgence of its core source in old Warner Bros. cartoons. The movie is sporty with love for its rampages, never more than when Bellucci has a screaming orgasm while, in a lusty pivot, Owen also mows down a squad of assassins. A New Line Cinema release. Director, writer: Michael Davis. Cast: Clive Owen, Paul Giamatti, Monica Bellucci, Greg Bryk. Running time: 1 hour, 22 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

THE 11TH HOUR - The facts are in. Flooding in (Katrina was an early sprinkle). If you didn't quite go for "An Inconvenient Truth" - maybe had some twinge of resistance to former candidate Al Gore, or didn't quite trust the snappy seminar packaging - another chance has come to pay attention and to be a better citizen of our groaning world. After all, nobody is nested on the moon. We live the mess we're making. "The 11th Hour" is the new documentary pitch on climate change and ecological crisis. Produced and narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio, who appears briefly, it has news reports, nature shots and some graphics. The format is talky. Comments often underline each other. Visuals do not reach for art. But to quibble in that way about this urgent, startling and absorbing movie is to be a niche twit. How many people into denial can the world stand? A Warner Independent release. Directors: Nadia Conners, Leila Conners Petersen. Writers: Nadia Conners, Leonardo DiCaprio. Cast: Leonardo DiCaprio, Stephen Hawking, Mikhail Gorbachev, Thom Hartmann, Bill McKibben, Andrew Weil, others. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. Rated PG. 4 stars.

2 DAYS IN PARIS - "2 Days in Paris" packs a lot in. At moments, you might wish Julie Delpy had spent a few days taking some stuff out. Delpy wrote, directed, edited, composed and stars as Marion, a photographer despite her retinal birth scar. But she lives verbally, often with sex as useful syntax. Even more photo-snappish is lover Jack (Adam Goldberg), who jammed their visit to Venice into his tourist camera. On a brief stop in Paris, visiting Marion's parents before the couple return home to New York, Jack finds his lens is no refuge. She and Jack keep meeting her ex-lovers, who often carry a torch for her (Delpy, though age candid and gutsy

as always, didn't shrink her ego for this). Delpy wrote cleverly, flicking zings with ease through a free spillage of seemingly caught life. And some comedy even pivots as both pro-French and anti-French. But Jack remains a caricatural New Yorker, a brainy hunk defined by phobias. Frisky and compulsively Parisian, "2 Days" builds to the showdown of verbal overspill. Jack is scarcely heard, overruled by Marion's fretful, wise, forgiving voice-over. But, of course, it's "a Julie Delpy film." A Samuel Goldwyn Films release. Director, writer: Julie Delpy. Cast: Julie Delpy, Adam Goldberg, Daniel Bruhl, Marie Pillet, Albert Delpy, Alexandre Nahon. Running time: 1 hour, 48 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

THE NANNY DIARIES - At 22 years old, Scarlett Johansson has already played everything from a high school outcast ("Ghost World") to a seductive vixen ("Match Point"). But in "The Nanny Diaries," she crosses into totally new territory: super cute. In "The Nanny Diaries," Johansson stars as Annie, an adorable-but-confused college graduate who can't figure out what to do with her future. Too afraid to follow her heart toward anthropology and too stubborn to go into finance as her mom wants, she instead takes a job working as a nanny for one of Manhattan's richest families. The movie was adapted from a book - the memoirs of real-life nannies Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus - and follows the story almost too closely. Perhaps the most revealing discoveries about this Upper East Side lifestyle in "The Nanny Diaries" are the eccentricities of those people making all that money. So even though "The Nanny Diaries" suffers from being too cutesy, it is a rare chance to have this superstar Hollywood actress feel like your best friend. If only for a few hours, anyway. A Weinstein Co. release. Director: Shari Springer Berman, Robert Pulcini. Writers: Shari Springer Berman, Robert Pulcini (screenplay); Emma McLaughlin, Nicola Kraus (novel). Cast: Scarlett Johansson, Laura Linney, Paul Giamatti, Alicia Keys, Chris Evans, Donna Murphy, Cady Huffman. Running time: 1 hour, 47 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

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 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.

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