

Arts and Leisure: Major stars align to brighten normally lackluster fall film season

by David_Elliott

Time to rise for fall, filmgoers.

The narrowest and least celebrated of movie-launch seasons still promises a lot. And after a stunned, often staggering summer (grosses outrun gratitude), we cry out for quality. Or, at least, diverting simulations of quality.

REEL IMPROVEMENT - Major stars align to brighten normally lackluster fall film season. Among the notables are Cate Blanchette in 'Elizabeth, the Golden Age'; Jamie Foxx in 'The Kingdom'; and Halle Berry in 'Things We Lost in the Fire.' CNS Photo. Does it tell us something that three coming fall movies are set in Alaska and another at the North Pole? Will the North Slope be the new Cannes? Will Paris Hilton open the Fairbanks Penguin Plex? Odds are again-it, but we do need such issues to build the buzz.

Traditionally, this period is something of a dead-letter file. The last sad dogs of summer creep in for euthanasia. Stuff not big or confident enough for the holiday push (Nov. 15 to Jan. 15) slips into view, winks, often fades. As a wry Chicago exhibitor told me in my pre-critical days, "October is a good time for movies to die. They drop like leaves."

But Hollywood and the World Biz can't really afford that autumnal pause for breath and reflection. The hype and blog machines need new grist. DVD and cable empires must be served. "Product" will pile up and sink out of sight if not shown. Of course, if not enough rent-a-cops can be hired to prowl theaters looking for picture-phones ...

As of now, fall ascends, and rather promisingly. After all, we have movies coming about Jane Austen, Arabian intrigue, Alaskan vampires, Old Shanghai, Ian Curtis, gays and Christ, Queen Elizabeth I, Russian mobsters, envy of Santa, art-world scandal, Brazil, sports, Jimmy Carter, eco-crisis, a boy Martian, Joe Strummer and Harlem hoods, along with a remake of "The Heartbreak Kid."

Stars? Light 'em up: Cate Blanchett, George Clooney, Jennifer Connelly, Russell Crowe, Tom Cruise, John Cusack (and Joan), Michael Douglas, Jamie Foxx, Morgan Freeman, Daniel Radcliffe, Robert Redford, Jerry Seinfeld, Ben Stiller, Meryl Streep, Tilda Swinton, Vince Vaughn, Mark Wahlberg, Denzel Washington, Reese Witherspoon. Plus, shades of Bruce Lee, and The Rock - twice!

To the sugar we add the usual salt: Some dates will slip, a few films will not open, while surprises will land before our holiday preview in early November. Happy viewing:

Veteran filmer Robert Benton ("The Late Show") lays on romantic drama about friends in Oregon in "Feast of Love." Variations of love tempt Morgan Freeman, Selma Blair, Greg Kinnear, Radha Mitchell, Fred Ward, Jane Alexander.

"The Game Plan" is a Disney jock-and-yocks film with Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson as a big, preening quarterback in Boston whose unexpected daughter (Madison Pettis) teaches him some humility. Kyra Sedgwick plays his agent.

Austen doesn't invoke Texas for fans of "The Jane Austen Book Club," in which six pals - among them Maria Bello, Kathy Baker, Hugh Dancy, Amy Brenneman - worship their literary heroine. Robin Swicord made the modern comedy from the novel by Karen Joy Fowler.

Evan Rachel Wood is the striving, abandoned woman who drops out of school to find a new life and highly hypothetical treasure after her dad (Michael Douglas) returns from a mental institution, in Mike Cahill's "King of California."

A big Universal offering, "The Kingdom" is a thriller that's nicked a few political nerves because of the Saudi Arabian setting and terror issues; Peter Berg directing Jamie Foxx, Chris Cooper, Danny Huston, Jennifer Garner.

"Manda Bala," which means "Sends a Bullet," is debut man Jason Kohn's expose documentary in the fabled "mondo" tradition; all about corruption, violent politics and even cosmetic surgery sleaze in ever-spiced Brazil.

"Trade" could get rough. It's a German crime drama about a girl kidnapped for the sex traffic, and uses Mexico City and Kevin Kline as the leads.

"December Boys" is the non-Potter return of Daniel Radcliffe. Now he's not Harry, but one of four Aussie orphans whose '60s holiday by the sea brings much fun but stress for some. Rod Hardy made it.

In "Feel the Noise," brothers feel the erotic and musical pull of reggae in Puerto Rico, the hot beat tempting even dad Giancarlo Esposito.

Go to or be gone from "Grace is Gone," in which John Cusack is a guy denied military service, faced by tragedy, then facing it with his daughters on a road trip. A theme park promises new options.

Back to the old but tireless remake mill for "The Heartbreak Kid," from the Farrelly Bros. They update the 1972 Elaine May hit in their manner, as Michelle Monaghan tempts Ben Stiller away from new wife Malin Akerman during the Mexican honeymoon.

"Into the Wild" takes college star athlete Emile Hirsch into the Alaskan wilderness and a major rehab of his promising young life. Sean Penn wrote, directed and probably got good work from Hirsch, Vince Vaughn, William Hurt, Marcia Gay Harden and Catherine Keener.

Alaska gets another serve-up in Larry Fessenden's "The Last Winter." The supernaturalized thriller puts an oil-exploration team in the wintry tundra, to run afoul of weirdly malevolent forces. With dependably go-for-it Ron Perlman.

"The Seeker: The Dark Is Rising" is a time-quest fantasy from successful novels by Susan Cooper. Director David L. Cunningham tells of a lad who realizes he is heir to a fab race of warriors.

"Lust, Caution" is a title to give porn lovers pause, but it is also Ang Lee's take on an Eileen Chang story set in '40s Shanghai. It has sex, murder, intrigue, starlet Tang Wei and art-film reliables Tony Leung and Joan Chen, as Lee returns to his roots.

Karl Kozak directs the comedy "Skid Marks." It deals with the rivalry of two competing ambulance firms in "Baytown."

"The Darjeeling Limited" sounds right for Marlene Dietrich, but it's the new Wes Anderson comedy. Owen Wilson, Adrien Brody and Jason Schwartzman are brothers railing across India to find themselves, with spiritual high jinks. Will Wilson's real-life crisis dampen comic response?

She's always a star, so bring her back for "Elizabeth, the Golden Age." Cate Blanchett ("Elizabeth," 1998) repeats as England's greatest monarch, but much of Shekhar Kapur's film centers on studly blade Walter Raleigh (Clive Owen) and Liz's young rival in allure, royal companion Bess (Abbie Cornish). Ermine will fly!

"The Final Season" lets Sean Astin play life-based Kent Stock, who gave up his job and even wedding hopes to become a high school cage team coach. The site is little Norway, Iowa; the cast has Powers Boothe and

Rachael Leigh Cook.

Born for controversy, "For the Bible Tells Me So" documents the long, lousy relationship of gays and organized Christianity, with many variants of homophobia examined.

Pat Healy and Kene Holliday are Dixie guys caught up in a recording talent search in "Great World of Sound," as filmer Craig Zobel bounces off the ongoing "American Idol" mania, aiming at laughs.

While it could be your usual Swedish sex romp, "Lars and the Real Girl" (Oct. 12) is more likely about a Lars (Ryan Gosling) who develops a keen affinity with a doll he finds on the Internet. Filmer: Nancy Oliver.

George Clooney plays a big law firm fixer named "Michael Clayton" who tangles on various levels with star litigator Karen Crowder (Tilda Swinton). The legal eagles include fly-throughs for Tom Wilkinson and Sydney Pollack (but Tony Gilroy directed).

"Rogue" is more gore from Down Under's Greg McLean ("Wolf Creek"), with Radha Mitchell among the potential croc meals in remote wetlands, without help from Paul Hogan.

The brief description, like the title of "We Own the Night," is divinely generic: "A New York nightclub manager tries to save his brother and father from Russian Mafia hit men." But the cast of James Gray's thriller has Robert Duvall, Joaquin Phoenix, Mark Wahlberg, Eva Mendes and veteran tough Tony Musante.

With no respect for "The Final Season" and its sporty cousins, "The Comebacks" (Oct. 19) is a spoof of athletic inspiration movies. With David Koechner, Jackie Long and fabled Carl Weathers among those in the laff team.

Go, or do not, to "Gone Baby Gone" (Oct. 19), in which Ben Affleck directed his brother, Casey Affleck, Morgan Freeman, Ed Harris and Michelle Monaghan in a Boston nightmare world of child abduction and private eyes peeling open the plot.

"My Kid Could Paint That" (Oct. 19), perhaps to set up the sequel "I Know What I Like," is about tiny painting prodigy Maria Olmstead, who may have gotten extra help from dad. Amir Bar-Lev tells how the paint hit the fan.

Pre-Halloween, it's time for a return of "Nightmare Before Christmas 3D" (Oct. 19), Henry Selick's evidently timeless spook comedy overseen by Tim Burton.

Gavin Hood made the movie "Tsotsi," so there has to be some dramatic hope for "Rendition" (Oct. 19), an international intriguer involving CIA analysts, secret detention facilities and Jake Gyllenhaal, Meryl Streep, Reese Witherspoon, Alan Arkin.

"Reservation Road" (Oct. 19) is Terry George's film of a novel. Two couples (acted by Joaquin Phoenix and Jennifer Connelly, and Mark Ruffalo and Mira Sorvino) overlap intensely once a son is killed in a hit-and-run. George previously did "Hotel Rwanda."

Alaska turns hellish in a monthlong darkness afflicted by frigidly motivated vampires in David Slade's "30 Days of Night" (Oct. 19). Sam Raimi produced the slash-and-nosh; those in bloody trouble include Josh Hartnett, Ben Foster, Danny Huston, Melissa George.

C.B. DeMille fans will just have to keep waiting, but we will get a non-DeMille version of "The Ten

Commandments" (Oct. 19). This is from the less fabled Bill Boyce and John Stronach, and starts a new series of Bible-based productions, all animated, with as the voice of God: Elliott Gould!

Rajnish Domalpalli's "Vanaja" (Oct. 19) is from India. It's about a low-caste girl who yearns to be a classic dancer, but romantic moves from a wealthy boy confound her expectations. A Ken offering.

"Things We Lost in the Fire" (Oct. 26) is Susanne Bier's intense drama. Grieving widow Halle Berry turns to one of her late husband's pals, Benicio Del Toro, and they face the hard music with help from David Duchovny, Alison Lohman.

Dane Cook and Steve Carell are brothers suitably bewitched by Juliette Binoche in "Dan in Real Life" (Oct. 26), with Dianne Wiest and John Mahoney nailing down the senior side of the laughs.

A studio's desperate attempt to salvage Bruce Lee's final movie with fresh, fill-in casting gets the spoof treatment in "Finishing the Game" (Oct. 26). Justin Lin directed.

There is something shimmeringly non-PC about the title "Run, Fat Boy, Run" (Oct. 26). Hank Azaria jilts his pregnant fiancée, only to realize years later that she was indeed the one, and David Schwimmer's comedy lays it all out.

Time (Oct. 26) for Darren Lynn Bousman's horrific "Saw IV." Well, time for you, perhaps.

With a title like "American Gangster" (Nov. 2), the portents of importance better pay off. Denzel Washington builds a Harlem crime empire, perhaps with ghostly traces of '70s blaxploitation, and Ridley Scott's violent film also flexes the hard muscles of Russell Crowe, Chiwetel Ejiofor, RZA, Armand Assante and Cuba

Gooding Jr.

"Bee Movie" (Nov. 2) is not another spelling-bee picture. It is Jerry Seinfeld's fantasy about bees in a sitcomical hive and the more human world, with laughs buzzing for him, Renee Zellweger, Chris Rock, Matthew Broderick, Larry Miller and Rip Torn.

"Control" (Nov. 2) has acclaimed (so far) Sam Riley as Ian Curtis, famed (to some) leader of the '70s post-punk UK band Joy Division until epilepsy compounded his other problems. Samantha Morton is his wife, video maker Anton Corbijn put it together.

Yep, "Jimmy Carter, Man From Plains" (Nov. 2) is a fond documentary on the former president and present humanitarian.

"The Kite Runner" (Nov. 2) is Mark Forster's film from the hot book by Khaled Hosseini, about an Afghani novelist who returns from the U.S. to track the fate of a boy who offended the ruthless Taliban.

Save up your red party balloons for "Martian Child" (Nov. 2), in which John Cusack is a sci-fi writer who claims to have adopted a kid from Mars. Amanda Peet, Oliver Platt and lovable Joan Cusack also got directed by Menno Meyjes ("Max").

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