

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

THE KINGDOM - A thriller set in Saudi Arabia, "The Kingdom" seems less ripped from the headlines than drawn from past thrillers based on previous headlines - but in a highly ballistic way, it often works remarkably well. The Saudi realm, triangulated by Islam, oil and royal autocracy, is called "the **THE KINGDOM**" - In 'The Kingdom,' Jamie Foxx plays the leader of a FBI team investigating the bombing of an American facility in Saudi Arabia. CNS Photo courtesy of Frank Connor. **RATINGS**

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) moon" by one character. There is an aura of the lunar, and the lunatic, when the elite FBI team led by Fleury (Jamie Foxx) lands in Riyadh, by very special (princely) permission allowed to investigate, for five days, a horrific terror bombing at a U.S. compound. Director Peter Berg stages that nightmare in broad daylight with innocents observing and jams the story along without a pause. Opening with a sort of graphic newsreel of Saudi-American relations, the film is all quick cutting and convulsive pressure, with some dialogue simply tossed out like excess baggage. Pretty plainly staffed with stereotypes, "The Kingdom" is still humanly alert and not just an ammo party. While it sneers at a squishy diplomat (Jeremy Piven), and lets Danny Huston huff and sneer as a D.C. power player, it also is aware that the cost of obvious payback is more of the same, endlessly, Biblically. It is this note of tragedy breeding sequels, each generation damned by a

cycle of retribution, that gives "The Kingdom" resonance beyond its absorbing mayhem. A Universal Pictures release. Director: Peter Berg. Writer: Matthew Michael Carnahan. Cast: Jamie Foxx, Chris Cooper, Jennifer Garner, Jason Bateman, Danny Huston, Ashraf Barhom. Running time: 1 hour, 44 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

TRADE - Some films can make you squirm and resist, even resentfully, but then you add up the effort as valid. "Trade" crosses that saving line. Made by Marco Kreuzpaintner, the German director whose "Summerstorm" was sensitively gay-themed, "Trade" is about the world trade in children as sex slaves, as catnip for creeps. It first depicts Mexico City as hell, but then you realize that's just a blighted purgatory - hell is north. "Gringoland" is where some Mexican kids are headed after abduction, plus the Polish teen Veronica (Alicia Bachleda-Curus). She has the worst language problem and is made to pay for it, partly because she offers the clearest moral resistance to her vile transporters. The story focus is the Mexican child Adriana (Paulina Gaitan), seized on the street while relishing her new bike. Her older brother Jorge gave her the bike, and so feels very guilty. Against steep odds, he tears off to find the terrified virgin, who can fetch a big price in an American sex auction (ah, more glory for the Internet). If movies like this don't change the facts of a mean world, they do serve as blunt witnesses. A Lionsgate release. Director: Marco Kreuzpaintner. Writer: Jose Rivera. Cast: Kevin Kline, Cesar Ramos, Paulina Gaitan, Alicia Bachleda-Curus, Marco Perez. Running time: 2 hours. Rated R. 3 stars.

FEAST OF LOVE - The sustaining dish in "Feast of Love" is Morgan Freeman as savvy old Harry Stevenson, a professor on leave from his Oregon university (the other main dish is Portland, beautifully shot). Wise, attentive, always a bit too human to be pompous, Harry is a role dependent on Freeman's warmth, ease and sly gravity. This could have been a foxy corn dispenser, in the Lionel Barrymore or Wilford Brimley mode, but Freeman (despite some Hallmark card truisms) laces together Robert Benton's sensual comedy, scripted by Allison Burnett from Charles Baxter's novel. In mourning for his dead son, along with his wife Esther (Jane Alexander), Harry seeks solace in the quickening amours around him. He becomes a sort of courtly Prospero and nudging Cupid, notably for the hopeful, often hapless Brad (Greg Kinnear), a coffeehouse owner whose wife (Selma Blair) dumps him for a very forward lesbian. Soon, Brad finds a glowing Realtor (Radha Mitchell), a sex siren who marries him to spite her married lover (Billy Burke). And there are young romancers, Chloe (Alexa Davalos) and equally pretty Oscar (Toby Hemingway), whose lives fall under Harry's wistful, kindly regard (as Chloe's dad, a brutal drunk, Fred Ward is the bogeyman). Putting good, glad-to-serve actors in those heart places pretty well defines his talent. "Feast of Love" often purrs, thumping its tail on a sensual bed. An MGM release. Director: Robert Benton. Writer: Allison Burnett. Cast: Morgan Freeman, Alexa Davalos, Greg Kinnear, Radha Mitchell, Selma Blair, Jane Alexander, Billy Burke. Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

THE JANE AUSTEN BOOK CLUB - Chick flick, a term sadly unknown to Jane Austen, gets some new plumage in "The Jane Austen Book Club," Robin Swicord's film of the hit novel by Karen Joy Fowler. If you call Austen's work "chick-lit," please restrict yourself to a diet of literary Chiclets. The Sacramento gals who gather to read one Austen novel a month are steeped in fictions they take very seriously. The one male, Grigg (Hugh Dancy), is an "Austen virgin" who comes through with some discerning comments. More honor-bound to Fowler than Austen, Swicord (who adapted) uses Austen as a minor plot asset and key linkage device for

soaped lives. Austen may have lessons for our time, but remains very much of her time, which is the core appeal of her classically subtle, romantic sobriety. We escape into her cadenced dance of lives, we don't drag her into our mosh pit. To do that is to find a dizzy blur of superficialities, like this movie. A Sony Pictures Classics release. Director, adapter: Robin Swicord. Cast: Kathy Baker, Hugh Dancy, Maria Bello, Emily Blunt, Jimmy Smits, Amy Brenneman, Lynn Redgrave. Running time: 1 hour, 46 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

THE GAME PLAN - The Rock - oops, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson - has the whitest teeth in the world. As he lobs vast, blinding smiles in "The Game Plan," we can admire every pearly tooth. The Rock plays Joe Kingman, king of Boston football, a quarterback so egotistical he considers Elvis his only rival monarch. He preens in his high-tech apartment rich in deluxe Elvisiana, pointing out his \$40,000 sofa and his \$20,000 orthopedic bed (we never find out how much the teeth cost). But he's no match for little Peyton, acted by Madison "The Pebble" Pettis. OK, Pebble she isn't, but her ego is a glowing chip off Joe's, as the little surprise announces she is his daughter. Mom's away, and Peyton proves more of a challenge to Joe than Chicago running back Walter Payton could have ever been. This could be the first movie that gives kids a case of dental envy. Even Bugs Bunny didn't do that, despite marvelous buck teeth. A Disney release. Director: Andy Fickman. Writers: Nichole Millard, Kathryn Price, Audrey Wells. Cast: Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Madison Pettis, Kyra Sedgwick, Roselyn Sanchez, Morris Chestnut. Running time: 1 hour, 29 minutes. Rated PG. 2 stars.

DECEMBER BOYS - "December Boys" manages oddly to be Catholic but sexually charged, and both rather childish. It also enshrines family values with sincere, shallow obviousness. Daniel Radcliffe, famous (and now rich) as Harry Potter, is fairly bland as Maps, a moody teen. He's the oldest of four pals; the smaller kids are nicknamed Spark, Misty and Spit. They are sent from their Australian orphanage on a first vacation, leaving the desolate Outback for what you might call Laidback. That's Ladystar Cove on the coast, with gorgeous surf and wind-carved, almost unearthly boulders. The bonded pals are taken in by an old Catholic couple, including very fine but skimpily used Jack Thompson. And there's a younger couple, including French and saucy Terese (Victoria Hill), childless and perhaps in the adoption market. Much of the story centers not on movie star Radcliffe but Lee Cormie as Misty, who's cute, needy and very Catholic. He sees the trip as his special "mission" from the Virgin Mary. As for Catholicism, please ask: Does this very old and large religion need to become fantasy pudding with Cirque de Vatican nuns? As the boys dream of family life, ponder faith and feel the first sparks of sex on holiday, their ups and downs are leveled by a tone of trite, beachy escapism. An IFC Films release. Director: Rod Hardy. Writer: Marc Rosenberg. Cast: Daniel Radcliffe, Christian Byers, Lee Cormie, James Fraser, Jack Thompson, Teresa Palmer. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

RECENT 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 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.

IN THE VALLEY OF ELAH - The war, the endless one we're stuck with, "comes home" with poignant force in Paul Haggis' "In the Valley of Elah." His last film as director was "Crash," and this one could be "Smash-up." Trying hard not to smash emotionally is Hank Deerfield (Tommy Lee Jones), a former military police officer retired, now driving a gravel truck and living simply with his wife (Susan Sarandon, under-seen but ace). He's proud that his first son went into the the Army despite a tragic end, and proud that second son Michael enlisted and is coming home safe after harsh duty in Iraq. Michael returns and then, before discharge, goes AWOL. As father, and as former cop, Hank climbs into his pickup to go find the young soldier. A Vietnam War veteran, Hank loves the military with some ambivalence, but is a firm patriot and the sort of guy who makes up his motel bed military style and buffs his shoes daily. Down in this modern valley of Elah, you can't think editorially or generically, in cop movie or war movie terms. What is felt, very personally, is the need for plain truth to hell and back and beyond. A Warner Independent release. Director, writer: Paul Haggis. Cast: Tommy Lee Jones, Charlize Theron, Susan Sarandon, Jason Patric, Jake McLaughlin. Running time: 2 hours. Rated R. 4 stars.

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 fiancé (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.

Capsules compiled from movie reviews written by David Elliott, film critic for The San Diego Union-Tribune, other staff writers and contributors.