

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

THE DARJEELING LIMITED - When you hear music from Satyajit Ray's arcane classic "The Music Room" at the start of Wes Anderson's "The Darjeeling Limited," you realize that Anderson is one hip guy. Savvy thief, too. "Limited," a comedy of "spiritual" seekers, has about as much to do "THE DARJEELING LIMITED" - Trying to be pious, often failing, brothers played by Jason Schwartzman, Adrien Brody and Owen Wilson strike an Indian shrine pose in 'The Darjeeling Limited.' CNS Photo courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) with Ray's work as it does with the Gandhi family. Best known for "Rushmore" and "The Royal Tenenbaums," Anderson is a sly, pitter-pat jester, and the new comedy is a genially flowing spoof of India as holy land for those who settle for mantra-mumble tourism. Owen Wilson is wealthy Francis Whitman, recently banged up in a car but ready to tap the Indian soul with brothers Peter (Adrien Brody) and Jack (Jason Schwartzman). Both are laid-back guys with other concerns, but fussy Francis has everything planned, including "the temple of a thousand bulls, probably one of the most spiritual places in the entire world!" It is charmingly done, with Wilson a bit in the comic lead, but not by much. Brody is good at being peeved, and Schwartzman's moves on a saucy train stewardess, Amara Karan, are fine. Anderson is a bit cruel to tease us

with just two glimpses of Bill Murray, but up in the Himalayan foothills compensation arrives as Anjelica Huston, a nun of the flinty sort. A Fox Searchlight Pictures release. Director: Wes Anderson. Writers: Wes Anderson, Roman Coppola, Jason Schwartzman. Cast: Owen Wilson, Adrien Brody, Jason Schwartzman, Anjelica Huston, Amara Karan. Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

MICHAEL CLAYTON - "Michael Clayton" is from writer Tony Gilroy, who scripted the similarly named "Dolores Claiborne." Gilroy is best known for smartly padding out his action plots for the profitable Jason Bourne series. Now Gilroy gets to direct his padding, around a frail thriller full of murk and menace. He has George Clooney to carry it, though Clooney often visibly sags. Clayton is the nimble troubleshooter for a very big New York law firm ruled by Marty Bach (Sydney Pollack). Clayton does some dirty work and calls himself a janitor, though the entire outfit is seamy under its granite cladding. This disgusts the weary and mentally dicey partner Arthur Edens (Tom Wilkinson). After thousands of highly paid hours on a huge class-action suit, trying to cover for a polluting, cancer-causing corporation, Edens is ready to blow away the legal fig leaves. Tilda Swinton, elegantly suited but swinish as corporate legal dominatrix Karen Crowder, gets very ugly to keep secrets hidden, and Edens is sloppy about his scheme. A Warner Bros. release. Director, writer: Tony Gilroy. Cast: George Clooney, Sean Gullen, Tom Wilkinson, Sydney Pollack, Tilda Swinton, Ken Howard. Running time: 2 hours. Rated R. 2 stars.

ELIZABETH: THE GOLDEN AGE- Was the greatest Englishman a woman? Quite possibly, but with due respect to Cate Blanchett, "Elizabeth: The Golden Age" cannot make the case. This sequel to 1998's more visceral and stylized "Elizabeth," in which Blanchett was a startling, emergent star as Elizabeth I, has Liz in middle age. She sits not very securely on the throne. Much of her population roots for the Catholic cousin Mary Stuart, queen of Scots and aspiring queen of England, kept under house arrest while Spain's Philip II works up his lordly nerve to launch the grand Armada of 1588. Again balancing the stately with the personal, director Shekhar Kapur packs in Elizabeth's cryptic "affair" with sea hawk Walter Raleigh (Clive Owen). The queen dangles interest, but since she is iron-willed to remain the Virgin Queen, Raleigh turns his virile attention to the queen's favorite lady-in-waiting, Bess (blond Abbie Cornish, sort of like Grace Kelly upholstered). Nothing stays secret for long from Liz and her devoted and conniving chief minister, Francis Walsingham (Geoffrey Rush), though history is murky about how far Walsingham concocted Mary's complicity in an attempt to kill Elizabeth. Mary, played with remarkable conviction by Samantha Morton, is a fanatic ready for martyrdom under the ax. A Universal Pictures release. Director: Shekhar Kapur. Writers: William Nicholson, Michael Hirst. Cast: Cate Blanchett, Clive Owen, Abbie Cornish, Rhys Ifans, Samantha Morton, Geoffrey Rush. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

WE OWN THE NIGHT- "The Godfather" looms like a stern, judging father over almost every American crime film and TV cop or mob show since 1972. The young writer and director James Gray is, at least, bluntly frank about his debt. With "We Own the Night," Gray finishes a New York crime trilogy begun with "Little Odessa" (1994) and followed by "The Yards" (2000). He even brings back the buddy leads of that second film to play the Grusinsky brothers, Joseph (Mark Wahlberg) and Bobby (Joaquin Phoenix). Joe, who has followed in his revered dad's work in the NYPD, is clearly a Polish-American variant on Al Pacino's dutiful Michael Corleone. Bobby, who changed Grusinsky to Green and manages the party life in a dance, drink and (covertly)

drug club in a former Brooklyn movie palace, is a volatile cocktail mix of Sonny and Fredo Corleone. What, no godfather? Yep, two: a creaky Russian mobster who hires Bobby to run the club, and "Godfather" totem Robert Duvall as police patriarch Burt Grusinsky. Duvall looks old, but can still dominate with his steel-clamp voice and savvy, lie-detector eyes. A Columbia Pictures release. Director, writer: James Gray. Cast: Robert Duvall, Joaquin Phoenix, Mark Wahlberg, Eva Mendes, Alex Veadov. Running time: 1 hour, 49 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

INTO THE WILD - As the words of Chris McCandless' favorite writers float through "Into the Wild," it's tempting to think a different literary diet might have saved the doomed adventurer from starvation in Alaska. Less Byron; more Darwin. But the quotes from Thoreau, Tolstoy, Byron and others fit beautifully into the movie, an ambitious and evocative biography that at times achieves a poetry all its own. Sean Penn's film about McCandless, the young wanderer who died in 1992 after stranding himself in the Alaskan bush, shares some of its subject's grandiose notions. It feels drunk on nature and the romance of loneliness, and its busy, almost baroque structure (including quasi-mystical "chapter titles") reflects the self-conscious drama in McCandless's journals and other writings. The movie, based on Jon Krakauer's 1996 book, also is sympathetic to the point of nearly beatifying the late 24-year-old. It depicts McCandless as a bold searcher whose ideas leave an unmistakably spiritual impression on the people he encounters during two years on the road. There's a striking final image of Hirsch's sallow, scraggle-bearded face turned up to the sky, a slight smile on his lips. Maybe McCandless did find what he wanted, Penn seems to suggest. All it cost him was everything. Director: Sean Penn. Writers: Sean Penn, Jon Krakauer. Cast: Emile Hirsch, Catherine Keener, Vince Vaughan, William Hurt, Marcia Gay Harden, Jena Malone, Hal Holbrook, Kristen Stewart, Brian Dierker. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

THE HEARTBREAK KID - In a sensible and well-mannered universe, the things the Farrelly brothers pull in "The Heartbreak Kid" would do little but stimulate the gag reflex. Instead, the directors' gags trigger a different reflex entirely - one that may alarm your neighbors, one you may even try desperately to suppress. Let's call it "laughing." Get friendly with it. Like the uncomfortably married couple in the movie, you two will be spending a lot of time together. In this remake of the 1972 film, the Farrellys - proud perpetrators of "Dumb and Dumber," "There's Something About Mary" and other jolly assaults on good taste - turn Neil Simon's script inside out and flog it like a pinata. The original (which Elaine May directed and Simon adapted from Bruce Jay Friedman's story) had a groom straying on his honeymoon. It did not have rat-based physical comedy, talk of an erotic maneuver called the "Swedish helicopter," urination as a medical procedure or an 80-year-old man in a hot tub with a naked, alarmingly inflated porn star. (So far as we can recall.) David Bowie and his music thread through the movie, and when things climax with "Suffragette City," Ziggy is definitely singing the Farrellys' tune: Wham, bam, thank you ma'am. Directors: Bobby Farrelly, Peter Farrelly. Writers: Scot Armstrong, Leslie Dixon, Bobby Farrelly, Peter Farrelly, Kevin Barnett. Cast: Ben Stiller, Malin Akerman, Michelle Monaghan, Jerry Stiller, Rob Corddry, Carlos Mencia. Running time: 1 hour, 55 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

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 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.

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