

by David Elliott and others

NEW RELEASES

DAN IN REAL LIFE - The two good things in "Dan in Real Life" are right at the center: Steve Carell and Juliette Binoche. They are winsome and winning, but the script is taffy custard. Carell is Dan, a "real life" advice columnist seeking syndication. A widower, he devotedly fathers three girls, 'DAN IN REAL LIFE' - In 'Dan in Real Life,' Steve Carell and Juliette Binoche find that family life includes real workouts. CNS Photo courtesy of Merie W. Wallace. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) the cutest a howitzer of teen attitude. Binoche is Marie, a New Yorker who meets Dan cutely, then keeps meeting him cutely at the grand shoreline home owned by his family. But Marie has just recently taken up with Dan's burly brother Mitch (Dane Cook). So while Dan and Marie are like two pieces of kindling wishing to strike a match, smitten Mitch hovers cluelessly until he hears the backbeat and, of course, gets mad. This is comedy, mainly because Carell is such an inflected comic player, with his darting eyes and bladelike nose. He takes amusing riffs into little corners of pathos and yearning. And it's comedy because Binoche has a swift sense of humor, responds with her native French tact (just a hint of accent) and seeks to cushion her covert suitor's floundering moves. What keeps us watching is that we enjoy Dan and Marie and want them to get together. A Buena Vista Films release. Director: Peter Hedges. Writer: Peter Hedges, Pierce

Gardner. Cast: Steve Carell, Juliette Binoche, Dane Cook, John Mahoney, Dianne Wiest, Alison Pil, Brittany Robertson. Running time: 1 hour, 38 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

SLEUTH - There isn't much point in remaking Anthony Shaffer's stage hit "Sleuth," filmed with very busy stagecraft in 1972 by Joseph Mankiewicz. Proof: Kenneth Branagh's remake, the Shaffer play partly gutted, the rehabby Harold Pinter. No talents better sum up modern British theater than Pinter and Branagh. But they've made a movie. As such, "Sleuth" is like being stuck in a cold locker for preserved hams: Michael Caine as rich, snobbish writer Andrew Wyke, and Jude Law as actor Milo Tindle, who seduced Wyke's wife and is invited to the estate for drastic comeuppance. A lot of talent came together to provide us that rare and saddest gift of British theater to Americans: a bore. No gift for Brits, also. A Sony Pictures Classics release. Director: Kenneth Branagh. Writer: Harold Pinter. Cast: Michael Caine, Jude Law. Running time: 1 hour, 28 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

RECENT RELEASES

RENDITION - There's a curious line in the dialogue of "Rendition": "The CIA calls it 'extraordinary rendition.' It started under Clinton." A big, busy cast moves in intriguing locations in an unnamed North African country, maybe Morocco. At the center is CIA analyst Doug Freeman (Jake Gyllenhaal), new to the job and relaxed about it - until the CIA toughie on duty is killed right next to him by a terror blast. The real target is hefty prison chief and CIA go-along Abasi (Igal Naor, a virtual replica of Telly Savalas, yet less amusing). So vivid is Naor that we even come to feel for his character, a virtuoso of basement torture. Freeman is the CIA witness of this, because the new, screaming object of electric and water torment is an Egyptian-born, American engineer, Anwar (Omar Metwally, fine in a very stressed role). We meet Freeman's local girlfriend, and Abasi's family, and, especially, Anwar's pregnant wife back in Chicago, Isabella (Reese Witherspoon). The movie is a lacing of personal lives, not only plot strings. And yet the basic substance is piercing. The extraordinary, law-subverting nature of "rendition" is rendered viably enough that American citizens should watch and then talk, and not about melodrama. A New Line Cinema release. Director: Gavin Hood. Writer: Kelley Sane. Cast: Jake Gyllenhaal, Reese Witherspoon, Meryl Streep, Peter Sarsgaard, Omar Metwally, Alan Arkin, Igal Naor. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

THINGS WE LOST IN THE FIRE - Benicio del Toro is aging into one of the major, used movie faces, up there near Bogart, Gabin, Von Sydow, Mitchum, O'Toole, Nolte and Tommy Lee Jones. A few times in "Things We Lost in the Fire," he could be James Dean at 40. As an actor, del Toro is imposing but limited. His spaniel eyes and Beat Latin smolder fit Jerry Sunborne, who seems born more for the dark side of the moon. Jerry is a heroin addict in a flophouse, trying to recover with group support, and oddly his best chance comes when his favorite pal, successful Seattle developer Brian (David Duchovny), is killed. The widow, Audrey (Halle Berry), invites Jerry to live and work in the house, partly in guilty charity to a bond she had resented,

partly to balm her grief. Allan Loeb's script doesn't go for the most obvious climax, but at the cost of other, obvious payoffs. The story is built to contour and warmly neuter the growing rapport of Audrey and Jerry. The home is a cherished sanctum of family. The kids (Micah Berry and Alexis Llewellyn) are perfectly pert packages. Flashbacks keep reminding us how superb a spouse and dad Brian was, even dying like a saint. Still, it's a soaper about a dooper and a classy widow. Keep that in mind, even if you give way to seduction. A Paramount Picture release. Director: Susanne Bier. Writer: Allan Loeb. Cast: Halle Berry, Benicio del Toro, David Duchovny, Alison Lohman. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

RESERVATION ROAD - "Reservation Road" hits its marks, but regrettably the marks are made of sponge. There is the squishy tension of a problem drama gone soft. Mark Ruffalo plays Dwight, a lawyer. Returning home with his son from a game of their beloved Boston Red Sox, he veers away from a coming vehicle and fatally sideswipes a boy near the road. This is Josh Learner, son of Ethan (Joaquin Phoenix) and Grace (Jennifer Connelly), instantly plunged into grief along with their younger daughter (Elle Fanning). Terry George's film is about how Dwight, who drove away in panic, feebly tries to duck (but doesn't get rid of his damaged SUV), while feeling damnably guilty. Feeding his misery, he observes Josh's funeral, frantically bonds with his teen son, and picks the scabs of his failure with ex-wife Ruth (Mira Sorvino). If this were not about well-heeled, suburban, educated people, we might at least have the pulp satisfaction of a revenge killing. But "Road" is bound to its plaintive sense of taste. A Focus Features release. Director: Terry George. Writers: John Burnham Schwartz, Terry George. Cast: Joaquin Phoenix, Mark Ruffalo, Mira Sorvino, Jennifer Connelly, Elle Fanning, Antoni Corone. Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

30 DAYS OF NIGHT - "30 Days of Night" has the two things a horror movie most needs: strong atmosphere and creepy monsters. Unfortunately, it also has the common bane of horror movies: stark implausibility. Inevitably, some plot slack must be cut for a Far North (Barrow, Alaska) movie featuring cannibalistic vampire dementos. Josh Hartnett is the young sheriff, first alarmed by a charred body in the snow, then by sled dogs with their throats cut. Not just cut, horribly mangled. Fast and strong, the beast people pounce like nightmares on steroids, wasting nearly as much blood as they suck (scariest element: They wear light clothing in the Arctic winter). Sam Raimi produced, and the craftily made "30 Days" is a slash above your standard gore grab. Speaking of that, remarkably poor use is made of the town's impressive waste disposal machine. After some grinding at the start, it returns for only one grisly, gnawing meal. A Columbia Pictures release. Director: David Slade. Writers: Steve Niles, Stuart Beattie. Cast: Melissa George, Josh Hartnett, Danny Huston, Ben Foster. Running time: 1 hour, 37 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars. GONE BABY GONE - Ben Affleck, who put some reviving luster on his faltering career as an actor with "Hollywoodland," has done a remarkable job directing "Gone Baby Gone." And if any movie can still make a star, the film could do it for Affleck's younger brother, Casey. Often engagingly light in movies, Casey Affleck is lithely boyish but full of aspiring and forceful manliness as Patrick Kenzie, living the role fully. Patrick is from the meanest Boston streets and runs a new, private sleuth service with his lover, Angie. Michelle Monaghan plays her as something of a hovering shadow, her warmly human smile a steady beacon of decency. They take a case looking for a missing child, 4, in Patrick's home turf. The ruly hard cases are the people, often vulgar and slummy and violent, including the girl's conniving, trashy mom (Amy Ryan, superb). The cops are involved, notably the savagely savvy Detective Bressant (Ed Harris, maybe more than superb) and his big, seen-it-all partner (John Ashton, also wonderful). A Miramax Films release. Director: Ben Affleck. Writers: Ben Affleck, Aaron Stockard. Cast: Casey Affleck, Morgan Freeman, Ed Harris, Michelle Monaghan, Amy Ryan, Amy Madigan. Running time: 1 hour, 54 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

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 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.

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.

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