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THE ADVENTURES OF TINTIN

US, 2011.

Voices of Jamie Bell, Andy Serkis, Daniel Craig, Toby Jones, Simon Pegg, Nick Frost,

Directed by Steven Spielberg

The comic strips by Belgian cartoonist, Herge, have been around for a long time. Steven Spielberg discovered them in the 1980s, the time when he was making *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *ET*. Obviously, they appealed to his sense of adventure and the kind of action that might be undertaken by a young Indiana Jones. It has taken a long time for him to film a Tintin story. He has chosen to make an animation film using performance capture where the actors perform their roles and the animated characters are drawn over them (seen in *Polar Express*, *Beowulf* and *A Christmas Carol* with Jim Carrey).

Commentators and fans have been blogging opinions on whether Spielberg and his writers (including Edgar Wright, *Shaun of the Dead*, and Joe Cornish, *Attack the Block*) are faithful to the vision and style of Herge. Most agree that they are, that Tintin is a rather bland looking character (younger looking even than Dougie Howser was when he was an MD, even resembling Neil Patrick Harris) who is a journalist with a track record of solving investigations (as seen in the cuttings on his wall) but who has a zest and confidence for action – and the support of his rather engaging and interesting dog, Snowy. He is voiced by Billy Elliot himself, grown up, Jamie Bell. On the other hand, someone suggested that the alcoholic survivor, Captain Haddock, is the alter ego of Tintin, reckless, grizzled and landing (on sea and land) in all kinds of messy situations. He is voiced by Gollum himself, and Caesar from *The Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, Andy Serkis.

Daniel Craig makes a good sneering villain, though the animation looks nothing like him. By contrast, the two rather plodding Interpol detectives, Thomson and Thompson, are played for laughs by Simon Pegg and Nick Frost. And the compulsive, tall, wallet kleptomaniac is played also for laughs by the short Toby Jones.

This is a Boys Own Adventure, Herge plus Spielberg style, lots of pace and action. Tintin buying a model ship, is almost immediately set on by Interpol and the sinister Sakharine. Secret messages, searches of other model ships, setting sail and discovering Captain Haddock, flashbacks to pirates, stranding on the high seas, a plane to Morocco, calamities as a dam bursts and races through the city, final confrontations with sword and wrench and heavy lifting machinery.

Another reviewer said that it seemed like a visit to a theme park and that seemed to summarise this reviewer's experience of a cleverly crafted film (and in 3D), an old-fashioned adventure, a big 2011 matinee show.

ARIETTY

Japan, 2011,

Voices of: Saoirse Ronan, Tom Holland, Mark Strong, Geraldine McEwan, Olivia Colman, Phyllida Law.

Directed by Hiromasa Yonebayashi.

‘Charming’ is probably the most apt word to describe this Japanese animation film. It is probably the most useful as well. It is not a film for those who find charming uninteresting or distasteful.

Arietty is one of the little people, one of The Borrowers (from the novel by Mary Norton), a member of the Clock Family who live in the corners and spaces in an old house. They seem to be the lone survivors, not knowing any more Borrowers, and with a strict code not to be seen by humans. (There was a live action version of The Borrowers in the 1990s with John Goodman.)

When Arietty is out one day, Sho, a little boy who is resting at his grandmother’s before an operation, glimpses her. This creates confusion for the Borrowers, some upheaval in the house, especially from the ill-tempered maid who wants to call in exterminators.

While the idea might seem more than a little fey or twee, the charm carries it along. Arietty is no wallflower. She is very active, admired by her father, worried about by her mother – who is captured in a bottle by the maid and imprisoned in a cupboard which requires Arietty to use her brains and her skill to rescue her. In the meantime, the friendship between Arietty and Sho develops quite sweetly after initial suspicions.

This is Japanese animation. In the last decade, these animators have produced beautifully drawn films (rather than rely on computergraphics) including Oscar-winner, *Spirited Away*. Interestingly, they have taken on a number of British stories, *Steam Boy*, *How’s Moving Castle*. The director is Hiromasa Yonebayashi in his first film in this capacity. He worked as an animator on *Spirited Away* and *Howl* and was assistant to their director, Hayao Miyazaki, for *Ponyo*. His work is certainly in that tradition.

With all respect to American dubbing and the casts (Amy Poehler, Will Arnett and Carol Burnett), the version under review is the British dubbed version with such excellent actors like Saoirse Ronan as Arietty, Tom Holland as Sho, Mark Strong as her father, with Olivia Colman, Geraldine McEwan and Phyllida Law.

As said before, charming.

AUTOLUMINISCENT

Australia, 2011,

Rowland S. Howard, Genevieve McGuckin, Nick Cave,

Directed by Richard Lowenstein, Lynn-Maree Milburn.

An intriguing documentary even for those who know nothing of its subject, musician and composer, Rowland S. Howard who died in 2009 but who was interested in this film being made and gave interviews in the period before his death. The film also incorporates a great deal of archival footage as well as performances of many of his songs.

Richard Lowenstein made the feature film *Dogs in Space* in 1986, chronicling the lives in the rather chaotic music scene (and drugs) in Melbourne's inner-city Richmond in the 1970s. Michael Hutchence played the central role. Lowenstein and his co-director and editor Lynn-Maree Milburn made further documentaries on Australian bands.

Interviewees express their admiration for Howard's musical talents, his gift for lyrics, his performance. He seemed an unlikely musical hero when he was very young, rather weedy, but soon emerged as someone to be reckoned with (and some, including Nick Cave, reckoned with him).

The film does not try to trace a chronological path of his career, but that emerges: his bands in Australia, his going overseas and career in London, on the continent (including involvement with Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* with Wenders speaking warmly of him in the film), his return home, his marriage, his illness.

Genevieve McGuckin, who was his companion for many years, collaborated on this film and contributes a great deal of biographical information as well as commenting on the period and how it affected Howard and his friends (including drugs). For a time, Howard was married and there is testimony from his stepson, putting more of a human face on Howard.

As a documentary, there is enough information about Rowland S. Howard and his career for audiences to have a feel for and some understanding of his life within the decades of his career. There is enough testimony, from members of his band, to international commentators, to friends and family (especially his brother, who worked with him, and his sister) to appreciate the complexities of Howard's life. And there is enough music to indicate his development over the decades, and, with the music videos reminding the audience of the different styles of the times, what he contributed.

One of his songs was Autoluminescent, a great word to describe Howard's self revelation through his songs.

THE DESCENDANTS

US, 2011,

George Clooney,

Directed by Alexander Payne.

US, 2011,

George Clooney, Shailene Woodley, Matthew Lillard, Judy Greer, Robert Forster, Beau Bridges,

Directed by Alexander Payne.

Subject of a lot of hype and promotion, The Descendants turned out to be much better than anticipated. Director, Alexander Payne, has made only a few films but they have a strong humanity (About Schmidt) and sometimes quite a sardonic tone (Election, Sideways). The Descendants is strong on humanity.

In fact, there is quite a lot of depth to the characters and to the situations (ordinary enough in the lives of many people).

The film has been adapted from a Hawaiian novel by Kauai Hart Hemmings, who has a brief cameo as George Clooney's secretary. While events like those in the film can occur anywhere, the striking, often beautiful, location photography of islands and sea, beaches and mountains, ensure that the audience has a Hawaiian experience. And many Polynesian songs and music in the score.

We glimpse a happy water skier in the first few moments of the film. We soon learn that she has had an accident and is in coma, lying almost lifeless in hospital. Her husband Matt (George Clooney) is in the middle of an important business venture for his extended family (there are lots of cousins in the clan). Land their family was granted in the 1860s has to be sold according to law. It is an opportunity for the family to become comfortable, even wealthy. Most are for the sale, a few not. Later in the film we see the property, pristine beach and valley acreage – seemingly destined for more hotels and yet another golf club.

That would give Matt enough to worry about, but there is a great deal more. Wrapped up in business matters and rather restrained in emotional expression, he and his wife have become distant. Then he

learns from his 17 year old daughter, Alex (Shailene Woodley who brings sullenness, yet love and warmth to the role as she faces up to her mother's plight and her father's difficulties in handling problems, especially looking after her ten year old sister) that all has not been well.

Matt is quite a strong character but realises he has been cold as a husband and very much ignorant as to how to bring up his daughters. His father-in-law (Robert Forster) who has idealised his daughter is no help at all – and his wife is suffering from dementia.

As Matt investigates what has happened to his marriage and has to decide what steps to take, as well as how to inform the relatives and his daughters that the life support system has to be turned off, he takes his daughters to Kauai. He finds ways to try to resolve the problem which means a difficult meeting with an estate agent (Matthew Lillard) and his wife (Judy Greer). Along for the trip and moral support (which is gauche and offensive at first) is Alex's friend, Sid. Annoying at first, we learn more about him and change our minds somewhat. A reminder that we need to listen to people and their stories first before rushing to judgment.

The resolutions of the two crises, the life support system and the deal about the land, are both satisfyingly presented, full of different kinds of emotion, but judicious in the presentation of feelings and sentiment. Matt's final farewell to his wife is a moving and tender reminder that love should be unconditional and forgiving.

We get to know the King family very well. They are dysfunctional and, if tragedy had not intervened, the dysfunction might have greatly increased. However, with all their uncertainties and faults, they grow in awareness of themselves and loving relationships. The dynamic of the film is a blend of love, honesty, anger, forgiveness – and hope.

THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO

US, 2011

Daniel Craig, Rooney Mara, Stellan Skarsgaard, Christopher Plummer, Joely Richardson,

Directed by David Fincher.

Stieg Larsson's Millennium trilogy reached a vast number of readers. The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo introduced one of the standout idiosyncratic characters in fiction, Lisbeth Salander. Amongst other piercings, rings and sometime Mohawk hairdo, she has a dragon tattooed on her back. She is abrupt in manner, quick in retort, exhibits signs of Asperges syndrome, but is a whiz in information technology and computer hacking. She has worked on an assignment, investigating a journalist,

Michael Blomquist, who has lost a libel case, his reputation and his savings. He had published an article in the magazine Millennium and had not thoroughly checked his sources.

In the film, we spend a great deal of time involved with each of these two characters, their lives running parallel. Eventually, they meet when she is employed by the family who commissioned her investigation into Michael, to help him in researching the unexplained disappearance forty years earlier of a young member of this Vanger family, Harriet.

This means that the drive in the film is the mystery and the attempts to solve it as well as the action taken to stop the investigation. Stieg Larsson was a journalist, so the film, which (it is said) is close to the book, takes us step by step on the investigative journey, where we meet a great number of the Vanger family, many of them quite unpleasant. While Michael uses the tried and thorough methods of research, using, scanning and editing old photos, for instance, to discover leads, Lisbeth is smart, more than adept at the technology and impatient with Michael's slow touch with computers and his making deductions. While he does reach the right conclusion, he does make mistakes which she has to rectify.

The director is David Fincher who has done sinister (Se7en, Panic Room), murder investigation (Zodiac), IT (The Social Network) and tough mind tests (The Game, Fight Club). He has made the film in Sweden and captured the atmosphere of Stockholm and a remote town very effectively (and through different seasons). The cast speak with an accented (lightly) European English. The film remains in Larsson territory. The adaptation has been made by Steven Zaillian (Schindler's List, Social Contract). What we get is an involving drama, a search and quest, the solving of mysteries and some comment about Sweden in World War II and after.

Daniel Craig (not much of a smiler) combines a macho attacking attitude with some self-doubt and some vulnerability. Rooney Mara looks the part of Lisbeth and, with the screenplay, makes her the dominant and controlling part of the duo. There is a fiercely sadistic episode in which she is sexually assaulted which brings out a fiercely violent response in her – we are gradually filled in about her harsh childhood and institutionalisation. Christopher Plummer is the patriarch (assisted by Steven Berkoff) who initiates the search. Stellan Skarsgaard is his nephew, managing the family company. Quite a number of British and Scandinavian character actors take smaller parts. Robin Wright plays the editor of Millennium.

Oh yes, there was an original Swedish film, made for television, but successfully released in cinemas.

A pity to feel the need to do a lot of comparison to prove one is better than the other. Both are interesting. This version is well made, stylishly directed and edited (with a pounding score by the Oscar winning team of Trevor Reznor and Atticus Ross), with most striking images and sound in the

opening credits (rather stand alone instead of revealing the film), with fine performances. I wonder if we had seen Rooney Mara before Noomi Rapace (with her intense and disturbing face) whether she would have imposed herself on us as Noomi Rapace did for our image of Lisbeth. Probably. Daniel Craig's Michael is harder than that of Michael Nyqvist – and the question that will come up concerns the difference between Lisbeth's sexual interest in Michael in each film. (Looking back over the review of the original film in 2008 as well as questions devised for discussion, most could apply to this version as well.)

HAPPY FEET TWO

Australia, 2011,

Voices of: Elijah Wood, Ava Acres, Robin Williams, Pink, Richard Carter, Hank Azaria, Anthony LaPaglia, Matt Damon, Brad Pitt,

Directed by George Miller.

This is a cheerful show even if most of the penguins, computer-generated thousands of them, are stranded by a shift in the ice and snow, in need of food, and longing to get to the sea. With lots of little penguins, especially Mumble's tiny son, Erik, there is enough for the littlies and their parents – despite a sequence where the raiding Alpha Skua swoop on the penguins. Not sure at what age tolerance for penguins, especially singing, dancing and stomping penguins, cuts out.

This sequel can't have the novelty of the Oscar-winning original. But, there are enough characters to welcome back, Elijah Wood as Mumble, serious now in caring for Erik (Ava Acres) and anxious about Gloria (Pink – singing some songs – replacing the later Brittanny Murphy. Hugo Weaving and Magda Szubanski have cameo roles as the severe Noah and the loud Miss Viola. And Robin Williams is back in two roles, and courting penguin Carmen (Sofia Vergara).

As always, from *The Simpsons* to *The Smurfs*, Hank Azaria does scene-stealing voices. This time he is the very Scandinavian, Sven the Puffin, pretending to be a penguin that can fly, helping when he can, though puffining out at times. Then there are the two Krill, Will the Krill and Bill the Krill, whose story runs parallel to the main one until the end, who indulge in lots of repartee and wisecracks – one in a krillion. They are voiced by Brad Pitt and Matt Damon who are obviously enjoying themselves.

My favourite was Richard Carter as Brian the giant sea elephant, very Ocker accent and vocabulary and all (with two littlies who are cutely concerned about their daddy). Since the penguins, judging by

their accents, have all migrated from the US, except for Hugo and Magda, Brian offers more than a little local colour and tone. And the stories he is involved in are a bit of excitement instead of us looking so much at the stranded penguins, even though they do sing and dance a lot.

Mumble does a good turn for Brian when he is beached on an ice ledge. Later, there is an appeal to Brian and his company to come to shake the ice (the happy feet aren't able to do it alone) and make a path to safety for the penguins.

There are excerpts from quite a few songs as well as some originals. When Erik sings to plead with Brian to come, he finds words about his hero father to an aria from Puccini. When, Brian and the herd take to the ice to come to the rescue, it is the theme from Rawhide.

Now that director George Miller has finished Happy Feet Two at last, we all hope that he gets back to his next Mad Max project – and we will be even happier.

HUGO

US, 2011,

Asa Butterfield, Ben Kingsley, Chloe Grace Moretz, Jude Law, Sacha Baron Cohen, Emily Mortimer,

Directed by Martin Scorsese. PG.

Fans wondered when they heard that Martin Scorsese was to direct a children's film and in 3D. It didn't seem like the material for the director of Taxi Driver, Mean Streets and The Departed. There is no need to be apprehensive, Scorsese has made one of his best films (and the vivid and sharp 3D photography works very well indeed).

So, the question is, who is Hugo? He is a boy, Hugo Cabret, from the novel, The Invention of Hugo Cabret, by Brian Selznick. And he is played by Asa Butterfield (from The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas). He is surrounded by a fine British cast led by Ben Kingsley. And he teams up with the vivacious Chloe Grace Moretz (Kick Ass, Let Me In).

That is the who of the title. But, the interesting question is the where and when of the film.

The where is Paris and most of the action takes place in the railway station, Gare Montparnasse. Not only do we feel we have lived in the station, we know the regulars well, the vendors, the police, but we spend a great deal of time in the cavernous spaces behind the clocks of the station where Hugo

lives. The film opens with a lengthy running sequence where we experience Hugo in the long corridors and vast rooms in an exciting 3D tour.

The when is the late 1920s, so the period is re-created with costumes and decor, quite sumptuous to look at – and to a stirring score as well.

The time is important because the film is also about the history of cinema, particularly French cinema and the early silent era. Scorsese is a cinema buff par excellence and he takes the opportunity to immerse his audience in the wonders of cinema and animation. Film buffs will really appreciate it. And, because, the central protagonists are children, it offers a wonderful opportunity to learn about cinema in the olden days.

There is a brief cameo by Jude Law as Hugo's father, a man who loved tinkering with machines and novelties. He has rescued a complicated robotic machine and has been attempting to make it work, but a key is missing. After his father's death, he is taken by his uncle (Ray Winstone) to work on the clocks in the station. One of the shops is owned by a crusty old man who accuses Hugo of stealing, setting the war veteran commissioner at the station (who interprets all rules rigidly) in pursuit of Hugo who can always escape behind the clocks and hide. Ben Kingsley is the shop owner and Sacha Baron Cohen the commissioner. There is a fine cameo from the elderly Christopher Lee as a bookseller.

This leads us to the films of Georges Melies, the French pioneer of animation, whose rocket to the moon short is well known (and was recently restored to its full colour (each frame hand painted at the time) which is featured at the end of Hugo). It is assumed that Melies died in World War I, but he did not. His many fantasy films went out of fashion with the hard edge of film reporting from the war, and Melies lost his money and studio and withdrew, rather embittered, to the shop at the station.

There is a warmth in the storytelling as Hugo becomes less defensive, where Melies re-discovers and visualises the story of his past and the wonderful experiences of studio filming with his wife, where the key to the robot is found and it begins to work and offers a message to Hugo from his father.

Because Scorsese has always made films for mature older audiences, he knows how to gear his children's film to entertain and interest adults. Obviously, he hopes that children will identify with Hugo and share the wonder of the technical developments of the period and better appreciate where the films they take for granted came from and the genius of those pioneers like Melies.

MARTHA, MARCY, MAY, MARLENE

US, 2011,

Elizabeth Olsen, Sarah Paulson, Hugh Dancy, John Hawkes, Brady Corbett,

Directed by Sean Durkin. M.

The tongue-twisting alliterative title is an indicator of the identity problems that Martha is having. She was Martha originally. Who has she become?

Many commentators have brought up Charles Manson and his family as a reference for this film. They are probably right. However, writer-director, Sean Durkin, has stated that he was more interested in the story of someone who had escaped from an enclosed group like the Manson family. That is who Martha is – an escapee. We learn this almost immediately as we are led into the commune, isolated, agricultural, dependent on a charismatic leader, and extremely sexist, with the women eating together after the men. And sexist in sexual exploitation as well. Early one morning, Martha runs away. Martha is played with feeling and convincing irritation to her family and to the audience by Elizabeth Olsen.

She has lived in the commune for two years without contact with her family, subservient to Patrick, the scrawny, rather non-descript-looking leader (John Hawkes eerily charming, controlling and ruthless). She rings her sister who comes to get her and Martha begins some kind of rehabilitation. But, the film poses the problem of whether she can ever be truly healed. Is she too emotionally wounded, too mentally unstable.

This is clear as Martha lives with her sister, Lucy (Sarah Paulson) and her upwardly mobile husband (Hugh Dancy) who suffers Martha's presence only out of loyalty to his wife.

Martha is erratic in behaviour, offensive in attitude, wearing her benefactors' patience very thin. But, incidents lead to memories and the film is continually reverting back to the commune and Martha's life there, work, pleasing Patrick, dealing with the other men, with the other women, more work, petty jealousies, sexual expectations from Patrick. Late in the film, there is a chilling episode where the group intrude into a house, terrorise the owner, burglarise and kill without compunction.

Amidst Martha's memories are dreams and possible hallucinations which show the precarious nature of Martha's recovery.

The film does not take us beyond this initial stage. We are left wondering how Martha will cope after two years of oppressive experience. But, the dangers of the sect and the cult, the control of the leader and the damage to the members are dramatised with intensity.

THE MUPPETS

US, 2011,

Jason Segel, Amy Addams, Chris Cooper, Alan Arkin, Jack Black and Kermit, Miss Piggy and the Muppets,

Directed by James Bobin. G.

Usually it is the children who are taken to see a show that is considered suitable for them. With The Muppets, it is the film that children could take their parents (and their grandparents) to see. This is especially true if those adults who are not getting any younger have fond memories of Sesame Street, The Muppet Show and the later Muppet Movies. If they are anything like this reviewer for whom The Muppet Show was a delight, even back in the late 1970s, then this is the movie outing for them.

In 1981 with The Muppets Movie, the song sung by Kermit, The Rainbow Connection, seemed more than a touch corny and sentimental. By 2011, it seems positively nostalgic.

It is hard to know what the younger generation will make of the film. One eight year old girl told her mother the only person she recognised was Selena Gomez (which some parents and grandparents may well respond, 'Who?'). A chance for them to be introduced to the Muppets.

The basic idea is a nice one. Two brothers have been fond of the Muppets on television for years, all the time they were growing up and now into adulthood. We suspend disbelief when we see that one brother, Gary, is tall and human (Jason Segel who co-wrote the screenplay) and the other is short and a Muppet, Walter. When Gary and his fiancée, Mary (Amy Addams) visit LA, they take Walter who discovers that the Muppets studio and theatre are run-down and about to be taken over by an oil tycoon (Chris Cooper as the aptly named Tex Richman). They find Kermit and help him round up the other Muppets, including Miss Piggy who works for Vogue in Paris. And they go back to that old, old story, the putting on of a show.

Needless to say, it is good to see them all back again – some of them could have more screen time. But, the old Muppet Show introduction is there, Statler and Waldorf commenting again. They find Animal doing an anger management course where he could not mention drums – this set him off! Jack Black was on the course too, so they abduct him when the TV network wants a celebrity to host the show. There are the usual jokes, stories and songs – and the shy Walter finds his talent (after a pep talk on the matter from Kermit).

There are some funny lines when Gary and Mary refer to the film that they are in, especially Gary not wanting to intervene because he had just sung a sad song. Then there are quite a few cameo performances, from Alan Arkin as a guide, with Whoopi Goldberg and others, including Selena Gomez, who turn up for the show.

Do Kermit and Miss Piggy rekindle their romance? Of course, they do. And we can re-kindle our delight in the Muppets.

SHERLOCK HOLMES: A GAME OF SHADOWS

UK/US, 2011, 129 minutes. Robert Downey Jr, Jude Law, Noomi Rapace, Stephen Fry, Jared Harris, Rachel McAdams, Kelly Reilly. Directed by Guy Ritchie.

When Guy Ritchie's first Sherlock Holmes film was released in 2009, it seemed as if the screenplay and the new imagining of Holmes and his solving crimes was like a Graphic Novel. Holmes had become something of an action hero and quite a pugilist – bringing something of the 21st century into a 19th century society. If that was true then, it is even truer this time. Perhaps Sherlock had also had a premonition of Indiana Jones!

The first thing to do is include a warning. Purists beware – if the reaction of purists that I saw the film with is any indicator. They did not like this rather rambunctious Holmes – who seems to have studied some martial arts since the first film.

Be that as it may, the two films are what might be called 'rollicking adventures' and Robert Downey makes this kind of Holmes his own. There are the traits that Conan Doyle gave his creation, including his penchant for disguises. He is something of a snob, or considers himself superior – and he is not very considerate of others, including Dr Watson and his wife, Mary Morston. Jude Law has more to do in this one as Dr Watson and Kelly Reilly is not quite so-long suffering as she misses out on her honeymoon in Brighton as Dr Watson goes off to pursue Professor Moriarty with Holmes and save the world from World War I (or, rather, postpone it for twenty years). She gets involved in working for the authorities in London. Come to think of it, Holmes does a little channelling of James Bond, especially towards the end with an international peace conference in a castle on a high peak in the Swiss Alps that would have made Blofeld envious. There is a huge waterfall there as Holmes challenges Moriarty and Conan Doyle fans will know where the film and Holmes and Moriarty are heading.

Robert Downey, who showed twenty years earlier how he could do impeccable English when he portrayed Chaplin, is very Brit here, with wit, disguises, fighting and regrets for Irene Adler (Rachel

McAdams who has a cameo here but featured in the original). There are several times when Guy Ritchie shows some flourishes as there are visual collages of Holmes' mental and detection processes as well as the strategies of his fights with Moriarty, schematic outlines of what could happen and why.

Jared Harris (sounding more and more like his father, Richard, as he grows older) is Moriarty. His story and plots are filled in extensively as are his dastardly plans to get France and Germany at war while he profits by munitions developments and sales. Stephen Fry appears more than before (and is seen more than before) as Mycroft Holmes.

The other member of the adventure is a gypsy whose brother has been taken in by Moriarty. 'Have Dragon Tattoo, will have career.' Noomi Rapace from the Millennium trio has been given an important role as the gypsy and gets plenty to do.

This is a bigger budget film than before and the sets are lavish, the action extended, and plenty of set pieces (and explosions) from London to Paris to Germany to Switzerland.

So, Holmes purists be alert. For everyone else, a visually stylish and busy, action-packed romp.

TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SPY

UK, 2011,

Gary Oldman, Colin Firth, Toby Jones, Tom Hardy, Mark Strong, Ciaran Hinds, John Hurt, Benedict Cumberbatch,

Directed by Tomas Alfredson.

John le Carre has been around for a long time. Older filmgoers may remember his popularity in the 1960s with the almost archetypal, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, as well as *The Deadly Affair* and *The Looking Glass War*. He was the author of grim cold war stories which had been part of his own life and work. In the late 70s and early 80s, he was on television in the celebrated series, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* as well as *Smiley's People*. Fred Schepisi made *The Russia House* in 1990. More recently there have been films of *The Tailor of Panama* and *The Constant Gardener*.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy now gets a cinema treatment, honed down to a two hour running time that Le Carre has given his approval to. We are back in the Cold War, in the tensions between East and West, in the infiltration of intelligence offices, in the memories of Philby, Burgess and Maclean and

their socialist loyalties which led to betrayal of the nation. There is a traitor in this film which makes it a mystery as well as an espionage thriller.

The film has been directed by Swede, Tomas Alfredson, who impressed critics with his vampire film, *Let the Right One In*. One might suppose that spies are akin to vampires, creatures of deception and the dark, draining the life blood of the country. Alfredson certainly takes us into the literal dark and the dark concealing the moles in high places.

Television viewers have remembered Alec Guinness as George Smiley. Gary Oldman now does an effective impersonation of a man who has been around a long time, still grieves over the loss of his wife and of his private life, a serious loner who is set the task by the powers that be (where the mole must be) to ferret out the traitor. Oldman is surrounded by a top cast, the powers that be: Toby Jones, Colin Firth, Ciaran Hinds and David Dencik; his young assistant, Benedict Cumberbatch; the young scapegoat, Tom Hardy; Control, John Hurt.

With the reduced running time, there are various layers of action and meaning to attend to, a film about Intelligence that requires intelligence. The setting is 1973, almost forty years ago, so the settings and the atmosphere are not familiar to audiences who may now be nearing fifty. And it is over two decades since the collapse of Communism. The film is inviting us to go back to a less well-known past.

The screenplay is written as a dramatic jigsaw. An assassination in Budapest, high level meetings, the lead up to Budapest, the discovery of the scapegoat in Istanbul, back to the times when Control was alive and definitely in charge, the setting up the trap for the mole – and some twists along the way.

This is the kind of film that older audiences will be interested in seeing, admiring the writing and the performances, wondering just how much spying and infiltration still goes on and who are the personalities attracted to this kind of life.

TOO BIG TO FAIL

US, 2011,

William Hurt, Billy Crudup, Paul Giamatti, James Woods, Bill Pullman, Topher Grace, Tony Shalhoub, Cynthia Nixon,

Directed by Curtis Hanson.

The Global Financial Crisis.

The Oscar winner for Best Documentary for 2010 was Charles Ferguson's *Inside Job*. It was a powerful, even frightening, look at the state of American financial dealings in the first decade of the 21st century. Full of facts and figures, it was also full of potent interviews with many of the movers and shakers from Wall St to Washington DC (though many others declined to be interviewed). It is difficult to comprehend how these men (mainly men) were able to misread the times, undervalue the advice they were given, presume on their egos to come to the closure of banking institutions in the US, and to depend on government bail-outs. (And, then, many would say, go back to their old practices and bonuses).

Another nominee for 2010 Documentary Oskar was Alex Gibney's *Client #9*, the Rise and Fall of Elliot Spitzer, the story of the successful but flawed governor of New York State who went after the money rogues.

Too Big to Fail is an interesting companion piece to the documentaries. But, this time, the crises is dramatised in a feature film, based on a book by Andrew Sorkin.

Just as the documentaries were criticised for bias (mainly from critics and commentators right of centre), so the feature film, the dramatising of actual characters and events, has also been accused of being inaccurate. As could be said of Michael Moore (who made *Capitalism: A Love Affair* in 2009), if only half what he has in his films is true, then that is frightening enough.

This film takes Hank Paulson, Treasury Secretary, as the focus. It was he who had to handle the crisis, even more demanding as it seemed to be hurtling out of control. Paulson had been CEO of Lehmann Brothers before being nominated by President Bush to the Treasury post (and had made considerable profit from his sale of assets). His handling of the situation and the dramatis personae demanded concentration, skills, using his knowledge of the main players – not without mistakes, including underestimating the British response to merger deals and credit regulation, or even some of the government statutory requirements for bankruptcy as in the case of Lehmann's. This is one of William Hurt's best performances.

The film opens dramatically with James Woods as the head of Lehmann's, arrogant and impatient, failing to estimate properly the nature of the crisis, calling his advisers, trying to do a deal with Koreans which he sabotages with American ill-mannered brusqueness. We get the picture at once. Later, we will see the CEOs of the other major American banks trying to save their companies and themselves, reluctant to make decisions for the good of the country.

We also see the Democrat and Republican Congress stand-offs with the legislation for the government bail-out.

Most of the other characters are Paulson's advisers as well as Paul Giamatti as Chair of the Reserve Bank and Billy Crudup as Timothy Geitner, President of the New York Fed. Edward Asner has some moments as billionaire, Warren Buffet.

The film moves at a great pace, dramatising the desperation of those trying to find a solution – and finding ways to be diplomatic with banking powers that be as well as with politicians.

The film makes us realise that the capitalist system was at the brink – apocalypse in the next few days. Whether the bail-out solution (Democrats objecting) or the government takeover (Republicans crying 'Socialism') was the best answer at the time will be debated. The value of this feature drama, along with the documentaries, is that within a short time of the events, they can be brought to the public's attention through film and television.

Director, Curtis Hanson, is best known for LA Confidential.

WASTE LAND

UK, 2010,

Vik Muniz,

Directed by Lucy Walker

Anyone who has the opportunity to see Waste Land will be very happy that they did. It is a fine documentary, full of human interest, with a heart for people and justice, and a pleasing art lesson as well.

It is the work of Lucy Walker who has made a number of very good documentary films including Blindsight about Erik Weißenmayer and a group of blind climbers and guides on Mount Everest.

The subject of this film is photographer and artist, Vik Muniz, who moved from San Paulo, Brazil, to Brooklyn and achieved great success. He has the idea to go to Rio, to the landfill tip of Jardim Gramacho and make some works of art from the recyclable materials collected by the catadores, the

many men, women and children who pick materials, collect them and sell them to recycling companies. He wanted to do something to help the people – he did not anticipate what would happen: so much good.

Vik Muniz is a genial character – we even visit his old house in Sao Paulo where his father is interviewed and he is filmed with his 93 year old grandmother. But, first of all he had to learn about the landfill, the people, their backgrounds and how they worked. As he gets to know them, chatting, moving around with his associate, Fabio (and all the while Lucy Walker photographs, keeping completely in the background), he picks out half a dozen or more who will be the subject of his art. He poses them like classic paintings, especially photographing Tiao, the founder of the pickers' association and a born leader, like Marat in the bath in the picture by Jaques-Louis David. T

The photos are highly enlarged on the floor of a warehouse and Vik engages his subjects to help in bringing them to life with the recyclables, outlining, giving colour as well as an idiosyncratically modern look. This has a profound effect on each of them, a man who collects books and who can talk about Nietzsche, Tiao who also talks about reading Macchiavelli's The Prince and what it meant to him, Valter who is getting old, Isis who has had a hard life, Suelem a young woman with two children, Magna who has been forced to work in the landfill when her husband lost his job, Irma, an elderly cook who keeps the caradores fed.

Vik and his wife have an important conversation about whether one of the subjects should go to London for the auction of the main painting. Is it too much and deflating when they have to go back to work? Or, is it an opportunity that will mean new choices? It is quite exhilarating for Tiao and the auction is a great success.

There is great joy at the end when they all go to the Museum of Modern Art in Rio and see themselves on the gallery walls. There is even greater joy when Vik gives them their picture and they hang it on the walls of their home.

The film offers a lot of think about it terms of work, poverty, exploitation (at one stage, the money to pay wages is stolen by thieves), human dignity, opportunities and self-esteem. This is confirmed in the final information given about each of them.

And the art is quite striking too. Even better when we watch how it was done.

WE BOUGHT A ZOO

US, 2011,

Matt Damon, Scarlet Johansson, Thomas Haden Church, Colin Ford, Elle Fanning. Directed by Cameron Crowe.

We bought a zoo. As one does!

Well, not exactly. However, Benjamin Mee, an adventurer-writer, recently widowed and with two children, finds that his son is doing badly at school, draws nightmarish pictures and is to be expelled. Benjamin decides to move and finds an old house that he thinks is just right. (His son does not, but his rather precocious little daughter does.) Then the estate agent remarks that the house belongs to a zoo. And that they will own the zoo. Benjamin says yes.

The zoo is run down and closed for business. There is a motley group as staff, devoted and with particular expertise for caring for the animals. They are led by Kelly who has worked there for thirteen years. As we guess, staff and family will do their utmost to have everything ready for inspection and then a summer opening. But...

First of all the son is self-pitying, sits and draws and clashes with this father - though he allows himself to be distracted by Kelly's niece, Lily. They are pre-teens so romance is of the shy, awkward, budding type.

Then there are the adventures with the animals (more and more of whom appear at various moments throughout the film). The tiger is old and some think he should be put down. A crater full of snakes is accidentally opened. The grizzly bear wanders into the town. There is always something. But, what is lacking is money – fortunately, Ben's deceased wife had foreseen situations like this and had made provision. The money is managed by Ben's sardonic banker brother, Duncan. They have a temporary inspection by a prissy official and then work harder for his final approval. There is a nice anti-climax on opening day. The weather had been terrible. Then it looks as if no one is coming, until... Well, that's to find out when you see it.

Obviously a family friendly film about family, grief, clashes, energy and enterprise. And this is all enhanced by a sound cast. The ever genial and reliable Matt Damon is Benjamin. Scarlet Johansson has a better role than she has had recently as Kelly. Colin Ford makes a credible self-pitying son. Elle Fanning is Lily and Thomas Haden Church is Duncan. The film has been directed by former music journalist, Cameron Crowe, who had success with *Almost Famous* and did not have success with *Elizabethtown*. Here he is on safer ground.

The credits tell us that the zoo is functioning well and serves as a model in treatment of animals for other zoos.

WEEKEND

UK, 2011,

Tom Cullen, Chris New,

Directed by Andrew Haigh. R.

A small-budget British drama, a story of a relationship developing and/or breaking over a weekend. The film has won quite a number of overseas awards.

The weekend is that of Russell who is in his mid-20s and works in supervision at a swimming pool. His background is an orphanage when he was a child and he still keeps in touch with a friend from those days and visits his family. Russell, however, lives alone, introspective in many ways. But, on the way home from his friend's house, he goes to a gay bar, eventually returning home with Glen.

Much of the film consists of conversation between Russell and Glen and covers most of the issues that are of concern to gay men as well as to those who want to understand more of the lives of gay men and their search for relationships.

Russell has not succeeded in finding the right person for him. At this stage of his life, despite some casual pickups, he is looking for something deeper and more permanent. Glen, on the other hand, is not. He is ideologically opposed to commitment. He tapes Russell talking about his experiences for one of his art projects. This enables writer-director, Andrew Haigh, to voice different perspectives on love, sexuality, commitment and the issue of civil unions. Glen is about to go to study in the US, so there does not seem to be any prospect of long-term relationships. The film also includes some intimate sequences between the two men, visually and with frank language.

Audiences who identify with Russell or with Glen will find that the characters, exploring their own attitudes, offer opinions for thought. Those who don't identify may be put off by having to listen closely to these men or they may be helped to some kind of better understanding.

YOUNG ADULT

US, 2011,

Charlize Theron, Patrick Wilson, Patton Oswalt,

Directed by Jason Reitman.

Don't be looking for a young adult in this wry comedy drama. Young Adult is a book industry term for the niche market for novels that appeal to young adults. Charlize Theron plays Mavis, an author of a series that has been popular but has run its course. Of course, the more we get to know her, we realise that she has not really grown up and is the equivalent of a young adult. And when she decides to take her life in hand (most unsuccessfully), she makes it the equivalent of the novel that she is trying to finish at the same time.

Mavis is divorced but has idolised her high school boyfriend, Buddy (Patrick Wilson). Impulsively, after she has received an email that he and his wife have had a baby, she goes back home to snare him because she believes he really loves her. As we discover, Matt is a fairly simple soul, in love with his wife and bewildered by Mavis' heavy handed behaviour. It has to blow up – and it does, at a gathering to celebrate the baby, more than a moment of humiliation for Mavis.

When she arrived back at the town where she grew up, she had encountered Matt, a crippled man, at the bar. Eventually, she recognises him as the boy everyone picked on, tagging him as gay. A group of boys have ensured that he is disabled for life. But he works at a diner, has a shed where he makes things, lives with his sister – and has quite some heart to hearts with Mavis. He is played well by Patton Oswalt.

The film is a collaboration between writer, Diablo Cody, and director, Jason Reitman (who were responsible for the well received portrait of teenage love and angst, Juno). Had Juno not faced her life and responsibilities, she might have finished up like Mavis. Diablo Cody writes some sharp lines with touches of ironic humour. Reitman has a flair for this type of comedy, having directed Thank You for Smoking and Up in the Air as well.

This is an American portrait, a picture of a loser who, when completely humiliated and disabused of her fantasies, might make a go of life – but it will be hard going. The film has a strong performance by Charlize Theron.

SIGNIS REVIEWS FEBRUARY 2012

1911

30 MINUTES OR LESS

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TRESPASS
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WC, The

1911

China, 2011
Winston Chao, Joan Chen, Jackie Chan, Bingbing Li.
Directed by Jackie Chan and Li Zhang

For better enjoyment of this historical film, and for better understanding, a reading of some of the background to Chinese history and the role of Sun Yat Sen in toppling the dynasty that had ruled the country for centuries is highly recommended.

While the subtitled version of 1911 has a great deal of information for the audience, it is difficult to keep much of it in mind.

Jackie Chan has co-directed the film and has a significant role but it is subordinate to that of Winston Chao who portrays the wise and dignified revolutionary who challenged the powers that were, pleaded his case to international politicians and bankers, who encouraged rebel in their stands against the government and the military and who finally achieves a new China. Jackie Chan plays his associate, a warrior, a survivor who inspires younger rebels. While there are some martial arts moments, this is a serious Jackie Chan film, made for the centenary of the events of 1911.

The scope of the film is vast at times, especially in battle sequences. However, the tone is very patriotic indeed, the dialogue highlighting the corruption of the dynasty and the integrity and heroism of the rebels, the sacrifice of young men for the country, the sufferings of the women.

To that extent, it all comes across rather conventionally and, if one tries to work out which army is that of the uprising and which the government, it is not always easy, so that the war scenes are just like those of other films. This is the area where Jackie Chan appears.

The non-military scenes are more interesting because of the tension, the initial war losses, the stubborn stances of the dowager empress (Joan Chen), the changing loyalties of her officials, the future of the boy emperor (the subject of Bertolucci's Oscar-winner of 1987, *The Last Emperor*, which also featured Joan Chen). The career and diplomacy of Sun Yat Sen are also interesting, his dealings with foreign powers, asking them not to lend money to the failing dynasty and his persuading them that the future of China is with the rebels – in under forty years, Mao Tse Tung led is revolution.

A film for audiences interested in the period and the characters – but some preparation with historical

background is advised.

30 MINUTES OR LESS

US, 2011

Jesse Eisenberg, Danny McBride

Directed by Ruben Fleischer.

There is no major reason for seeing this film. Actually, there is no minor reason either. The director made the entertaining vampire spoof, *Zombieland*. There is a *Zombieland* of a different ilk. Most of the characters are living dead, each in their own way.

It would be interesting to sit down with the director to ask him why he made the film as he did. He would probably say that it was a lot of fun. Maybe, he was right about the basic plot idea. But, it is the screenplay which causes a lot of the problems. Sometimes, with the amount of crass language found in a film, a comment is made that with the cutting of all the four letter words, the film would be half its running time. This is the case here, four letter alternatives to witty or clever writing. The other question for the director – and he can always pass the responsibility on to the writers – is that why the four main characters have to be so gross about sexuality – and for so much of the time. If a visitor from Mars were to see this film as the first cinema experience and think it was typical of the human race, the alien would have no reason for thinking these were creatures who needed to be saved from invasion! Men would seem to be sexist jobs.

Danny McBride is a comedian who has capitalised on this kind of explicit sexual reference (no innuendo here, just plain smut and beyond) in such films as *Your Highness*. He now plays a character who exhibits no redeeming features at all, completely dislikeable. His dumb friend is little better. McBride portrays a stoner-loafer who resents his father (Fred Ward), a military man who has won millions in a lottery and is frittering it away. His son wants to get it and connives with a pole dancer, who promises to find a hit-man, to kill his father. But, the charge his \$100,000. His brainwave is to pressure a slacker, he and his friends wearing monkey masks without any sense of irony of what this could mean) who works at a pizza place whose boast is that if it is not delivered within 30 minutes, you get the pizza free.

Jesse Eisenberg (so effective as Mark Zuckerberg in *The Social Network*) is abducted, a bomb strapped on him and given a day to rob a bank and deliver the money. He involves his friend, Aziz Asari (and they both have a propensity for language and sex talk at the slightest opportunity) and, in farcical fashion, they get the job done. Also involved is the hired killer (Michael Pena), which complicates the proceedings no end.

Had the writers stayed with the spoofy absurd plot, it may have had its comic moments. However, they didn't and this is what they have ended up with. Time to move on to another film for all concerned.

APOLLO 18

US, 2011,

Warren Christie, Ryan Robbins, Lloyd Owen.

Directed by Gonzalo Lopez-Gallego

Moon expeditions have made for some excellent films, especially Ron Howard's *Apollo 13*. This brief film is not in the same league. It is a modest (though a very long final credits indicates that a great number of people worked on it, especially for the effects).

But, the original moon landing and other space journeys have been fodder for conspiracy theorists. Even back in the 1970s, writers concocted the entertaining Capricorn One where it claimed that the whole thing was faked and filmed on a set. Recently, Duncan Jones' Moon made audiences wondering what was going on up there.

This time, we are in Blair Witch film-making territory, that genre where fiction is disguised as fact. This is a kind of Lunar Paranormal Activity. We are told that there was a secret moon voyage after the US terminated the Apollo series with Apollo 17 in the early 1970s. Then it is claimed that a lot of footage from that time has turned up and this film has been edited from it. It seems there is no limit to the variations on this alleged cinema verite.

So, we are introduced to three genial astronauts, their training and mission. Most of the footage is of them in the shuttle, exploring the moon, making strange discoveries there of wrecked vehicles – and they wonder whether the Russians didn't secretly arrive on the moon. But, there is a dose of Alien and infection, so we now know what really happened - and the secrets of the American government to preserve secrecy and the cover story of the disappearance of the astronauts.

If you like this kind of thing, here it is. If not, it will be a little tedious and repetitious, and making a lot of challenges to the imagination. The special effects artists have spent a lot of time making the footage look as if it is real rather than computer-generated, which means that they are avoiding spectacle and aiming for visual ordinariness. Which may please the science and technology buffs but makes the rest of us look forward to the next high-powered, high budget thriller!

A BETTER LIFE

US, 2011,
Demian Bichir, Jose Julian
Directed by Chris Weitz.

This is the film that was catapulted into world attention when the leading actor, virtually unknown, though an award winner in Mexico, Demian Bichir, received an Oscar nomination for Best Actor, knocking out such potential contenders as Leonardo di Caprio for his portrayal of J. Edgar Hoover. Whether this was correct or not is not important now. What is impressive is the performance of Bichir in what is a small film about Hispanic migrants, legal and illegal, in Los Angeles.

He portrays a simple and good man. From Mexico, he crossed the border many years earlier with his pregnant wife. However, after some years, she wanted more from her life in the US and abandoned her husband and young son. The boy, Luis (Jose Julian), is now fourteen and has been brought up (becoming a typical 21st century American boy, trying to fit in, toying with becoming part of a gang, putting on rebellious and resentful airs) by his hardworking father who is employed spasmodically on gardens. Bichir is an actor who can convey a great deal of interior feeling without words, a lived-in face which at first seems impassive but communicates inner struggles.

When he has the opportunity to buy a truck which will enable him to move to jobs more easily and make some money, he hesitates but eventually, with the help of his sister, buys the truck.

If only... Carlos does the right thing by a man who was kind to him, but this leads to some disasters for him and the dashing of his dreams. It is saddening to watch what happens to this decent man through no real fault of his own.

Stories about illegals in the US have been frequently seen on screen. With its humane touches, this one is quite moving, especially in the last part, empathising with Carlos and his sad fate.

Cinema is a helpful place for audiences to get to know and feel migrant and refugee issues rather than

simply read headlines or listen to political grandstanding where the individual stories are lost in debates (and invective) about policies.

Surprisingly, the director is Chris Weitz who was responsible for both *American Pie* and *About a Boy* (with excursions into *The Golden Compass* and *Twilight: New Moon*).

EVERYTHING MUST GO

US, 2011,
Will Ferrell, Christopher Jordan Wallace, Rebecca Hall, Stephen Root, Michael Pena, Laura Dern,
Directed by Dan Rush.

Unheralded and sent straight to DVD release in Australia. What a pity. And, yet, after seeing it, it is clear that most audiences would find it too serious, something of a downer (though it is not without hope) and not the kind of film they expect or want to see Will Ferrell in. A pity because it is a humane film about actual situations that people find themselves in.

Will Ferrell has shown he can do comedy, sometimes broad, sometimes crass, sometimes hilarious – think Ron Burgundy or Ricky Bobby. But, he did somewhat serious very effectively in *Stranger Than Fiction*. While there are many sardonic remarks, his character here is very serious, a middle-aged man who has lost his wife, job, house and a great deal of his self-respect, an alcoholic who doesn't seem to care and who can't be persuaded to care.

The opening of the film emphasises this as we see him in action (and in inaction). Locked out of his house, he sets up on his lawn with his possessions, and sits and drinks beer. His sponsor, a detective (Michael Pena) gives him three days legal leeway to sell his possessions strewn over his front lawn or be arrested.

But, despite himself and his lack of effort, all is not lost. Best of all he encounters a young boy whose mother is caring for a neighbour down the street and rides around on his bike. They talk, strike up a deal for looking out for the possessions – and then a partnership as Nick decides that the sale will go ahead.

In fact, a lot of the film is about the sale, the people, bargain hunting, what can go and what not, despite the title that everything must go. When most of it has gone, Nick does have a chance to think more positively about the future.

There are effective scenes of interaction with his neighbours, a rather boorish man next door (Stephen Root), a pregnant photographer moving in across the road (Rebecca Hall) and a visit to a high school friend from the past (Laura Dern). The encounters with the two women, especially Nick's unwarranted insulting of the photographer, provide quite moving scenes.

However, it is in the subtlety of his growing friendship with the boy, the boy acting his age but also showing a better adult sense than Nick (and better at conducting the sale). The boy is played by Christopher Jordan Wallace, the son of the late rapper, Biggie Smalls (and played his father as a boy in the biopic, *Notorious*).

A satisfying look at the troubles of an ordinary man, some friendship and solidarity and an encouragement that people can change for the better.

A FEW BEST MEN

Australia, 2011,

Xavier Samuel, Kris Marshall, Kevin Bishop, Olivia Newton John,
Directed by Stephan Elliott.

American films like *The Hangover*, *The Wedding Crashers* and *Bridesmaids* remind us that the public has an appetite for raucous comedies. The British were more restrained with *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, though *Death at a Funeral* was a bit more in your face (and had an American remake).

Actually, *Death at a Funeral* is relevant here as the writer, Dean Craig, turns his attention to a wedding and transfers the multi-mishap plot to a wedding. And the director is Stephan Elliott, famous for *Priscilla* (less so for *Welcome to Woop Woop*).

This is not a film for the fastidious. It is for those who like a yarn that is funny but not afraid to be crude as well.

Xavier Samuel has his chance to be seen in a big hit film rather than in the small-budget stories and horror films that have marked his career. He is joined by two British comedians who have a solid TV reputation, Kris Marshall (playing the crass friend) and Kevin Bishop (playing the put upon friend). David (Samuel) has fallen in love with an Australian girl, daughter of a dill of an ambitious Senator, and comes with his friends for the wedding in the Blue Mountains. The Blue Mountains backgrounds look beautiful.

The action takes place over twenty four hours and the plot consists of whatever could go wrong does go wrong. This involves slapstick of people knocking into each other, drinking on a stag night with video, complications with a merino sheep called Ramsey, a despondent friend who knocks a huge marriage ball off its pedestal which hurtles down onto the wedding party, a fiasco of speeches. Drugs come into it with a dealer (a humorous performance by Steve Le Marquand as a druggie with a heart of mush – and a gun). And, the mother of the bride gets high and berserk. The shock is that she is played by Olivia Newton John as exactly the opposite of what we expect her to be like. There are also political complications, police complications and the marriage being declared a failure before it has begun.

But, all will be well.

Better than expected, it kind of grows on you... But there are several reviewers who want to assure us that it doesn't!

FLYPAPER

US, 2011,
Patrick Dempsey, Ashley Judd, Tim Blake Nelson, Pruitt Taylor Vince, Jeffrey Tambor.
Directed by Rob Minkoff.

This is a heist movie, well two heists, well three in fact – and all at the same time.

Actually, the premiss is rather absurd – and so is the treatment, played for laughs and disbelief. And the flypaper of the title – that is just the money in the bank which attracts thieves like flies to flypaper.

The first group of thieves wants to be the real thing, masks, guns, blasting... The second group of thieves has to be seen and heard to be believed. Tim Blake Nelson and Pruitt Taylor Vince are a couple of good ole boys, dumb as they come, who have idealised bank robbers and plan to set themselves up for the pantheon of robbers. They get in the way, say the stupidest things (with that southern drawl) and behave oddly and badly.

Speaking of behaving oddly, Patrick Dempsey is an eccentric genius who needs his medication

regularly and, during the burglary, doesn't get his pills. This means that he is the one to outwit the robbers as well as solve the mystery of the third attempt, by a mastermind criminal to put in danger the lives of the robbers (he sent them invitations), his security guard (who has done time), his Swiss bank connection and his teller staff (Ashley Judd and Octavia Spencer before we all noticed her in *Help* and she won awards). Jeffrey Tambor is the bank manager.

If that sounds appealing, go for it. If it doesn't (and this review has tried to communicate the feel and moods of the film – and the absurdity of the plot), then stay away. Director Rob Minkoff made *The Lion King* and *Stuart Little*! Advertised as 'from the writers of *The Hangover*' – they must have been on one when they wrote this one.

THE GREY

US, 2011,
Liam Neeson, Dermot Mulroney, Dallas Roberts.
Directed by Joe Carnahan.

What could be worse than sitting through a horror film feeling scared?

The answer is sitting through a very well made film that has a group in a desperate situation that we can identify with and hope never to be in. But, just imagining it and seeing the terrifying experience on the screen means real horror, not make-believe ghosts and vampires. This is what watching *The Grey* is like. Praise to the skills of the film-makers and the performances. But, you may not want to stay.

Many decades ago, this reviewer read a book that has stayed in the imagination all these years. It was *My Antonia* by Willa Cather. The part that was terrifying in the book is where a married couple, travelling through a forest in the dark and the snow, is set upon by a pack of ravenous wolves and ravaged to death. Wolves are not to be danced with. They can be terrifying and their claw and teeth cruelty can be horrifying.

A group of rugged men on an Alaskan oil site crash land in the ice and snow. How can those not killed survive? Will they survive? They have landed in a wolf-infested area, huge wolves who are flesh eaters and pursue humans.

Ordinarily one would comment on the beauty of the Alaskan snowscapes, but we are too busy watching the men, on the lookout for the wolves and feeling the dread of their presence, their howling and the viciousness of their attacks on the men.

On board is Ottway (Liam Neeson), a hunter, a sniper for the company. However, initially we see him in despair because of his ill wife, writing her a letter and then contemplating shooting himself. However, after the crash, he assumes the leadership role and generally the men follow him – the man who doesn't fight when taunted that he is afraid, and he finally admits that he is.

This is one of those 'lost patrol' stories where individuals are picked off one by one. During the attempt to reach an outpost, we get to know the men, some quite well. They also do a fair amount of reflecting on the meaning of what has happened to them and on questions of God. This reaches a climax when Ottway looks at the sky and challenges God to do something now – but the sky does not change and Ottway lets out a desperately angry and abusive outburst against God.

This means that there is some reflection during the film, moving it to a deeper level than just outwitting (or not) the wolves.

Co-written by director Joe Carnahan with the author of the original short story. Carnahan's previous

film (also with Liam Neeson) was the explosion-filled big screen version of The A Team. This film has more substance and requires more fortitude to watch it.

JOURNEY 2: THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

US, 2012

Dwayne Johnson, Michael Caine, Josh Hutcherson, Vanessa Huggins, Luis Guzman.
Directed by Brad Peyton.

Did we see Journey 1? Yes, we did. In fact the first journey was to the centre of the earth (with Brendan Fraser). Young Sean (Josh Hutcherson) had gone with his uncle (Fraser) on a 3D expedition adapted from Jules Verne's novel. Here is Sean again, more devoted than ever to Verne as well as to his scalawag explorer grandfather who sends him a coded message that indicates he has found Verne's Mysterious Island (in fact, this was Verne's sequel to 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea) and wants Sean to come. So, this is the journey 2 the island! It is in the Pacific, off Palau.

The trouble is that Sean now has a stepfather whom he resents ('legal guardian'), Hank, an ex Navy man, played by Dwayne Johnson, tough but also sending his image up (and singing 'It's a Wonderful World'). Hank tries to bond with Sean and off they go. They hire an old helicopter piloted by Luis Guzman doing the funny schtick, Sean insisting because he has seen the teenage daughter, Vanessa Hudgins, no shy violet whose ambition is to go to college.

This is rather old-fashioned film-making and storytelling, not unlike those 1970s adventures, with exotic locations and frightening creatures, like Valley of the Gwangi or People that Time Forgot. It was produced by Walden Studios, that family friendly company who like moral stories like their Bridge to Terabithia or the Narnia films. Nothing to offend any family audience here.

After an attack by giant birds, they are rescued by Grandpa. He is played by Michael Caine in yo-ho-ho frame of mind, all grins and enjoying himself as he comes up to age 80. And, sounding just like Michael Caine has for almost fifty years.

The rest is adventures on the island, some menacing insects, everyone riding through the air on giant bumble bees – and then the discovery that this is really Atlantis and that it is sinking fast. Will they be able to get to the underwater cave to re-start Captain Nemo's Nautilus and escape? You might like to guess!

Filmed in 3D, it has its exciting moments. But, basically, this is a wholesome adventure story, family values and bonding, a cheerful show where there are dangers but not for too long and some ready solutions to the problems that keep cropping up. Undemandingly entertaining for family audiences.

J. EDGAR

US, 2011,
Leonardo di Caprio, Naomi Watts, Armie Hammer, Judi Dench,
directed by Clint Eastwood.

While younger audiences may not be aware of J. Edgar Hoover and his influence on American politics and society in the 20th century, older audiences have strong views, and most of them not favourable. Which means that going into this film (as may also have been the case with watching The Iron Lady and Meryl Streep's performance as Margaret Thatcher), they will be critical.

What Clint Eastwood's film does, with the foundation of Dustin Lance Black's telling screenplay, is

give some credibility to Hoover's character and behaviour and, to that extent, some sympathy for a man who, especially in the latter part of his life and career, did not merit it.

Leonardo di Caprio is an interesting choice for Hoover and he takes the opportunity to offer an interpretation of the younger Hoover but also of Hoover in his 60s and 70s. His makeup is effective (more than for the way Armie Hammer's makeup is photographed for the older Clyde Tolson), as the film continually moves from the younger to the older Hoover dictating his memoirs.

The film does indicate the contribution Hoover made to the establishing and the early years of the FBI. From a staunch anti-anarchist (and anti-Communist) officer in the 1920s, Hoover moved towards a crusade against crime in the 1930s, using his agents (whom he demanded be spick and span at all times), his G-Men² against Alvin Karpis, John Dillinger and many others. He also took a deep interest in the Lindbergh kidnapping case, making sure of pictures and headlines (which Tolson later taunts him with, manufacturing an image while he was not as personally involved as he claimed). The film does not explore the 1940s or the black list and anti-communist attacks of the 1950s apart from referring to Joe McCarthy² as an opportunist. It is the latter part of Hoover's career which is dramatised and his quite malicious surveillance of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. He dies during the Nixon administration where publicly Nixon extols his friendship with Hoover while instantly sending agents to find his private files. To this extent we get quite an overview of his achievement and his failures.

Hoover was quite a rigid character (although prepared to bend the law in later years in his campaigns), righteous as well. However, with his extreme devotion to duty and the protection of the nation, he was immature and undeveloped, especially emotionally. He may not have understood sexuality very well. He did propose to Helen Gandy who declined but never married and stayed his faithful assistant for almost fifty years. Hoover even imagined marrying Dorothy Lamour. However, people knew of his repression and of his devotion to his second in charge at the bureau, Clyde Tolson, who was homosexual.

The screenplay is both reticent and forthright on these issues. It portrays his mother knowing his personality better than he did – and he lived with her for years and took her to social events – and there is a telling sequence where she reminds him of a boy at school who was nicknamed 'Daffy' after 'Daffodil' and she warns him never to be a daffodil. In this context, his grief at her death has a profound effect. He identifies with her, tentatively putting on her necklace and taking out her dress – which gives a more interesting angle on his alleged cross-dressing.

There are many interesting episodes in the film, anarchist bombings in 1919, the Lindbergh case, the capture of gangsters, Hoover's confrontation with Robert Kennedy as Attorney General and the news of JFK's assassination, his anonymous letter to Martin Luther King exposing his behaviour so that he would not accept the Nobel Prize (and Hoover's disbelief when he does).

Dustin Lance Black's screenplay (he also wrote Milk) is a portrait of a man as well as of the American times. Clint Eastwood, making the film when he turned 81, offers a measured look at his subject, offering grounds for the audience being critical as well as acknowledging achievement. And the supporting cast is a strong one. A rather self-effacing Naomi Watts is the devoted Helen Gandy. Armie Hammer is the supportive Clyde Tolson. Judi Dench is a surprise choice for Hoover's mother but, of course, is always impressive.

Interesting, and an opportunity to think about the 20th century US.

KILLER ELITE

US/Australia, 2011,
Jason Statham, Clive Owen, Robert de Niro, Aden Young, Dominic Purcell,

Directed by Gary Mc Kendry

Famed explorer and adventurer, Ranulph Fiennes, wrote a book about British war and espionage activity in Oman, and the role of the SAS. This actioner states that it is based on a true story and is based on Fiennes' book. But, it plays like a variation on *The Expendables*, a lot of action and explosions, a group of macho men and the taking out of opponents by these elite killers - seems more the stuff of video game activity rather than a thoughtful drama.

Well, it is a Jason Statham show with him giving his usual performance (as distinct from doing a variation on his usual performance). After a career as a killer elite for the SAS, he has got out of the business in some disgust at a violent set-up and has retired to, of all places, the Yarra Valley, where he has taken up with a local girl, Yvonne Strahovski.

Wouldn't you know it, he receives a call, an offer he can't refuse because his long-time partner and mentor, Hunter, has been abducted by the sheikh of Oman who is bent on revenge on the SAS assassins who killed his sons (except for the rather selfish, effete young son who can't stand the desert - or his father). Hunter is played with more energy than his age might suggest by Robert de Niro.

Their tough associates in the killing missions and contrived 'accidents' are played by Dominic Purcell and Aden Young, with Ben Mendelsohn along as well as veterans Nick Tate and Bille Brown. Yes, much of it was filmed in Australia (with locations also in Jordan and Morocco) with supporting Australian cast.

Clive Owen plays a retired veteran who is suspicious about the nature and execution of the killings and goes in pursuit, only to face up to violence in Oman and a confrontation with Statham and De Niro.

As was mentioned, it seems more like an *Expendables* variation, big on effects and action, less so on character and performances and the moral issues of this kind of clandestine violent activity.

LIKE CRAZY

Felicity Jones, Anton Yelchin, Alex Kingston, Jennifer Lawrence,
Directed by Drake Doremus.

One of those particularly American titles that can be quite offputting. That should not be a reason for not seeing this film. However, a warning is in order. This is a film about young adults, falling in love, coping with separation, and not coping, leading to reconciliation which the ending leaves open for various interpretations (like that of the reviewer who told me that I was absolutely wrong in how I understood the characters and their behaviour).

One of the film's big advantages is that Felicity Jones (British) and Anton Yelchin (American) play the couple. They are both emerging as talented young performers. She was in *Bridhead Revisited* and was *Chalet Girl*. He has appeared in a wide range of films from *Star Trek* to *The Beaver*, as Mel Gibson's son.

We meet them first, studying in Los Angeles. She is a writer. He designs furniture. They hit it off (like crazy, I suppose, though the real craziness has yet to appear). Then the fatal mistake which parental adults in the audience will wring their hands over. Her visa has a limited time - will she overstay? Despite warnings and her own seeming common sense, she stays. Which, of course, leads to the drama of the rest of the film. How will they maintain their relationship at a distance? He can come to England but, despite appeals, she cannot enter the US after she is turned back.

The distance, and the presence of significant others, means that true love is on, well, let's say it, a

crazy path. Years pass. There are complications, including a wedding in London. She thrives in her job and is promoted. He builds up an important company.

We are left with the question of whether they will stay together after all the years and the experiences which have changed them. Depends, I suppose, on how you view human nature.

MAN ON A LEDGE

US, 2012,
Sam Worthington, Elizabeth Banks, Jamie Bell, Ed Harris, Ed Burns, Bill Sadler, Genesis Rodriguez,
Directed by Asger Leth.

Far-fetched (one hopes) but eminently watchable.

Sam Worthington (rather uncharismatically strong) spends a great deal of the film on a ledge of the Roosevelt Hotel in Manhattan. But, first, we see him in prison, serving a 25 year sentence for stealing a very valuable diamond from building entrepreneur, Ed Harris. He is allowed out for his father's funeral where he clashes with his brother, Jamie Bell – and then escapes. Which leads him on to the ledge.

It soon emerges why he is on the ledge – but that is part of the cleverness of the plot, quite intricate in its way, with more than an effective climax and a pleasing twist at the end. But, probably, best for an audience to find this out for themselves rather than read about the plot development in a review.

Worthington has appeared in Avatar and The Debt. Jamie Bell has been playing a number of character rather than leading roles and is building himself an effective career. Elizabeth Banks usually plays feisty roles. Here she is the expert on talking down would-be suicides, though she is haunted by a recent failure and her suspicions that this case is not 'normal' at all. Ed Burns is her associate on the scene – wary of a woman in the advisory role. Ed Harris plays the millionaire with great gusto, a narcissistic megalomaniac.

There is obviously much more to the robbery of the diamond and we suspect police corruption – and we are right. This means that getting the man down from the ledge (where a crowd has gathered, many urging him to jump) is far more complicated than we might have first imagined. It does involve his brother and his fiancée doing a lot of stunt work.

Right will out at the end and vindications where necessary – and a nice, tongue-in-cheek ending with the bell-hop of the hotel.

Paperback action, but entertaining.

MY WEEK WITH MARILYN

UK, 2011,
Michele Williams, Kenneth Branagh, Eddie Redmayne, Judi Dench, Dominic Cooper, Emma Watson,
directed by Simon Curtis.

For film buffs who remember the 1957 film, The Prince and the Showgirl, a treat. For others, a chance to see something of Marilyn Monroe. This is a behind the scenes story of the making of the film and the difficulties between Marilyn Monroe and Laurence Olivier. What seemed a good idea on paper turned out to be a very hard time for the two stars, and all those involved in the production, a bad mixture of impatience and being intimidated.

It is all seen through the eyes of a young man, Colin Clarke (son of the art historian, Kenneth Clarke), who wanted nothing better than to have a job, any job, in the movies. We seem him entranced by them, especially watching There's No Business Like Show Business and Michelle Williams's effective impersonation of Tropical Heatwave from that film. He pesters producers and is finally given a job by Olivier.

Olivier was fifty at the time and had been a successful stage actor and had made some memorable films. This was to be a film to enhance his popularity. Marilyn Monroe, recently married to playwright Arthur Miller who accompanies her, wants to be taken as a serious actress. She is used to getting her own way – Olivier warns Colin not to be taken in by her little girl lost posturing because she can be quite a manipulator – and has drama coach and adviser, Paula Strasberg with her at all times. Olivier on the other hand gives little credence to the intensity of the Strasberg 'Method' of thinking and feeling one's way into a role. He prefers his cast to act. There is tension on the set – and even more when Marilyn arrives late.

Marilyn relies on Colin more and more and he is both starstruck and in love. Whether this is what actually happened, we will never know but Colin wrote and published a memoir of this week of supporting Marilyn.

The cast is memorable. Michelle Williams is able to impersonate Marilyn but also create a character, a damaged personality, ambitious, wilful, manipulative, naive – but able to be a strong screen presence, something which exasperates and delights Olivier. Kenneth Branagh, who has walked in Olivier's footsteps (especially with a Hamlet and a Henry V), sounds just like him, a mixture of pomposity, irritability and charm. Judi Dench is Dame Sybil Thorndyke, a grand dame who is kind to Marilyn. A whole host of British character actors appear, Dominic Cooper, Derek Jacobi, Toby Jones, Michael Kitchen, Emma Watson (after Harry Potter) and Zoe Wanamaker as Paula Strasberg. And, Eddie Redmayne shows a blend of eagerness and puppy love in his devotion to Marilyn.

Something similar happened in Me and Orson Welles with a young man working on Welle's Mercury Theatre production of Julius Caesar and all its ups and downs and tantrums. The two films make a pleasing show business double.

RETREAT

UK, 2011,

Thandie Newton, Cillian Murphy, Jamie Bell, Jimmy Yuill,
Directed by Carl Tibbets

Probably best not to walk into this one or hire or download it without knowing something about it. It begins one way and develops in quite another, with some twists along the way. It tells the story of a husband and wife with problems, going back to an idyllic island retreat where they once were happy, to find some closeness and love. Then it turns into a contagion action thriller with echoes of the end of the world. Retreat for reflection, then a retreat from the infected world.

The location photography of sea and island are beautiful and, for a while, we are treated to a domestic drama. She is writing a memoir, regretting that her husband did not take the birth (abortion?) of their now dead child seriously, he trying his limited best to rectify the relationship. If an audience began watching the attempts at reconciliation and the activities of two isolated people, they might think it was going to go on and on and become tedious. The couple is played very well by fine actors, Thandie Newton, as a miserable and despondent but finding some inner strength, and Cillian Murphy, who was in a similarly themed 28 Days Later, matching her as a pleasant but less fortitudinal husband.

Then Jamie Bell turns up. Who is he? How did he become so badly injured? Is he truly military?

What is his babble about a world contagion and the need to barricade themselves into the isolated house? Should he be believed? Or is he mad and making the whole thing up?

Husband and wife do not take kindly to this eruption into their lives. They spend the rest of the film, reacting against the intruder, she especially, he more compliant. Doubts begin because there is little activity outside the house. Are they caught as hostages in a potential siege? Jamie Bell has chosen a career of character rather than leading roles and is quite dominating in this one.

Actually, the developments are not quite what might have been anticipated, with some unexpected twists and a downbeat ending. Interesting but not essential.

SHAME

UK, 2011, Michael Fassbender, Carey Mulligan,
Directed by Steve Mc Queen.

Over the years there have been some outstanding films that are psychosexual case studies. Obviously, not everyone will want to see or be exposed to such cases which can be very disturbing, not only because of the behaviour, but because they remind us that these are not merely stories but there are actual people dealing or not dealing with these obsessions, compulsions and addictions. When these films are made with serious intentions, they offer insight through storytelling and character depiction and exploration. This has been the case with such films of the past as *Last Tango in Paris* (now considered something of a classic) or, in more recent times, *Sleeping Beauty*.

The addiction in *Shame* is sexual addiction, sexual promiscuity and self-gratification. There are some explicit moments in *Shame* which ensure that the audience knows what the addiction is and how it affects the central character.

While this is a British production with British director and main actors, it is set in New York City – does this mean that this kind of story is more credible there? While we go into apartments, work offices, restaurants and clubs (and a brief excursion into a sleazy gay area), there is a thematic and visual motif that continues through the whole film and where we leave the protagonist. It is the New York subway, the underground symbolising a sub-conscious as well as conscious journey, where a passenger can get out for a momentary encounter (as he does here) or can stay on the train until he is prepared to arrive at a destination and come up into the light. The final locale of the film is the subway and the question whether the journey is never going to end, will end temporarily, or can truly end.

Michael Fassbender has emerged as a strong star as well as character actor in recent years (from *Inglourious Bastards* to *X-Men First Class* to Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and Carl Jung in *A Dangerous Method*). Here, he gives a performance, no holds barred, enabling the audience to see, understand and partly sympathise with the addict. Carey Mulligan (*An Education*, *Never Let Me Go*, *The Great Gatsby*) also has a self-revealing role as Fassbender's depressive and self-destructive sister.

The screenplay (by director Steve Mc Queen who made the impressive *Hunger*, with Fassbender as Bobby Sands on hunger strike and Abi Morgan who wrote *The Iron Lady*) highlights the ordinary life of a mid-30s executive, especially at work, but also his private life, his use of women, his dependence on on-line pornography.

While the title does make some judgment on the protagonist's behaviour, audiences may well be divided on whether he is redeemable or not, whether the film gives indications as to what his future will be. When he takes a fellow worker to dinner and she is able to get him to open up more personally than he is used to – revealing that his longest relationship had been four months – and his

encounter with her leads to an impotence episode, he is not the same man we saw as the film opens. He also has to deal with his intrusive sister and, to his shock, a suicide attempt. Can he continue to be the same, self-absorbed man?

Shame is certainly a psychosexual case study, but it invites its audience to observe as well as to speculate on experiences which are destructive and experiences which could be therapeutic. The protagonist could go into the void and stay there – or are his experiences cries for help out of the depths?

TRESPASS

US, 2011,
Nicolas Cage, Nicole Kidman, Ben Mendelsohn, Cam Gigandet, Dash Mihok,
Directed by Joel Schumacher.

Thugs invading a home, trying to rob it and keeping the family hostage is not a new idea for a thriller. William Wyler directed a classic of this genre in the 1950s, *The Desperate Hours*, with Humphrey Bogart and Fredric March. It was remade in 1990 with Anthony Hopkins and Mickey Rourke. So, here it is again.

The director is Joel Schumacher, a director the critics love to mock for his highly colourful and emotional films (even his version of *The Phantom of the Opera*). Fans decry his two *Batman* films, *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin*, as spoiling, almost ruining, the franchise. Watching *Trespass*, we realise they may have more than a point.

This time the couple is played by Nicolas Cage and Nicole Kidman, fairly upmarket casting. Cage gets the chance to be more reticent than usual as a bespectacled businessman whose diamonds and cash are the target for the trespass of his home. Nicole Kidman now has a teenage daughter but looks as regal as ever. Australian Ben Mendelsohn, who has not appeared in many Hollywood films which makes us wonder why he chose this one, is the leader of the gang, and he does not miss an opportunity to snarl. Cam Gigandet plays his brother, a more complex character. There is also a teenage daughter who is having problems about going out and parental permission.

The film opens almost over the top, with the establishing of the relationship between the couple, the behaviour of the daughter and the loud and smashing intrusion of the gang. Once you are over the top, where can you go except to hysteria? That is the direction *Trespass* takes, lots of bullying and brutality, lots of shouting, cursing and screams – and the audience wanting to turn the volume down.

However, there are a few surprising twists in the plot, especially concerning the dealings of the businessman and what is in his safe, about one of the thugs and his relationship with the wife, the reaction of the security company, the use of her wits by the daughter.

Trespass means to go on to private property illegally. It also means a sin and an offence. Both are relevant for this melodramatic and over-heightened thriller.

THE VOW

US, 2012,
Channing Tatum, Rachel Mc Adams, Jessica Lange, Sam Neil,
Directed by Michael Sucaskey.

If you are, as they say, ‘a sucker’ for romantic films, then this is definitely your film. And, even if you are not a sucker, you may well be drawn into it. It is about love and fidelity, and a surprising part of

‘the for better or for worse’.

The film opens cheerily, Paige and Leo love each other – and then, almost immediately, there is a car accident and everything changes. Paige suffers severe brain damage and loses her immediate memory. She does not recognise her husband which, while devastating for him, draws out the best in him as he tries to help his wife to regain her memory. Instead, she has regressed to a period when she did not know Leo, was at home with her wealthy, dominating parents, was studying law and was engaged to Jeremy.

While Leo is dismayed by her ‘regression’ to her former self, he tries his best (not always successfully) to help Paige, hoping that, if she does not regain her memory, she will fall in love with him again. Everybody is sympathetic to Paige, while Leo does not receive all the empathy he needs.

The film is announced as based on true events. We are invited to enter into this difficult emotional situation and share Paige’s quest to find her identity and Leo’s hope against hope.

The setting is Chicago and the film makes the most of its atmosphere.

Channing Tatum (who despite his credentials as a model seems in his other films more often a big lug) is convincing as Leo with his love for Paige. We feel deeply sorry for him. Rachel Mc Adams is Paige, always a vivacious screen presence, convinces us in the early sequences of her love for Leo and is equally convincing in her memory loss and how she handles it. Her parents are played by Sam Neill and Jessica Lange.

In days when relationships are so often casual or transient or both, it is an encouragement to see a story of committed love trying to overcome all obstacles.

The ending is not quite what we might have expected.

THE WC

Australia, 2011,
Tim Constantine, Wayne Cooper,
Directed by Kostas Metaxa.

No, not that WC, nor any toilet humour to speak of. This WC is Wayne Cooper, the British-born fashion designer who came to Australia in the 1980s, educated himself and became a power to be reckoned with. Not that you would necessarily think this while watching The WC.

Fairly soon into it, you start thinking that this can’t be for real. And it isn’t. We are in mockumentary territory here – until I read afterwards that writer-director, Kostas Metaxas called it a ‘dramady’. Whether you think it’s funny will depend on your taste and sense of humour and the ridiculous. And what reviewer can predict that!

A confession. I had a vague idea that Wayne Cooper was real but was not sure until I googled him after the film. What he says about himself in a 2001 interview (filmed by Metaxas) seems accurate enough. And it is cut into the action throughout the whole film. The ten years between that interview and Cooper’s appearance in the film as himself (a somewhat fictionalised self) highlight that we can change a lot in ten years.

The plot is rather corny and meant to be. It also has a lot of puns – disguised as alleged sayings of Confucius, and I just remembered one which was a bit toilet-humourish. One I did like, so test yourselves. What is a person who goes back and forth over the ocean without washing? A dirty double-crosser! So, there you are.

The characters. The main one is Stanley Finkelsteinburger from Tasmania who creates an over-qualified CV, gets an appointment and a job in Sydney with Cooper, The WC. Actually, dirty double-crosser fits in with the plot where Stanley, calling himself Sidney London professionally, is pressured to commit fraud on Wayne by some eccentric Chinese (who offers the Confucius sayings). Stanley is to get WC a spot at a London fashion show (all this happens off-screen, presumably for budget reasons) which strains the credibility. And there are a lot of other odd characters with funny names that come up on screen plus Stanley's mother and his old girlfriend.

It's all amiable enough, some smiles and laughs, not demanding at all. But, the director says these are not real people – though they are the equivalent of types you would meet in this fashion and pseudo-fashion world.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS BERLINALE 2012

A MOI SEULE
AUJOURD'HUI
BARBARA
CAPTIVE
CESARE DEVE MORIRE/ CAESAR MUST DIE
CHERRY
CSAK A SZEL/ JUST THE WIND
DICTADO
DOLLHOUSE
DON 2
ENFANT D'EN HAUT, L' / SISTER
EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE
FLOWERS OF WAR
FLYING SWORDS OF DRAGON GATE
GNADE/MERCY
HAYWIRE
IN THE LAND OF BLOOD AND HONEY
JAYNE MANSFIELD'S CAR
KEEP THE LIGHTS ON
LOST IN PARADISE
MER A L'AUBE, La/ CALM AT SEA
METEORA
MY BROTHER THE DEVIL
POSTCARDS FROM THE ZOO
REBELLE/ WAR WITCH
ROYAL AFFAIR, A
SHADOW DANCER
TABU
VIERGE, LES COPTES ET MOI..., La
WAS BLEIBT/ HOME FOR THE WEEKEND
WHITE DEER PLAIN
WILAYA

A MOI SEULE (COMING HOME)

France, 2012,
Directed by Frederic Videau.

In recent years, there have been a number of horrifying stories about child abductions and the Basement imprisonment of the children, principally young girls. This is one of those stories, although the director says it is his own imagination based on these stories.

It doesn't quite begin that way, or we don't realize that this is the situation. A moody worker returns home and lifts part of the floor. A teenage girl emerges stating that he woke her. Then she runs, and continues running, hides in a bus shelter where an old poster indicates that she has been missing for a long time.

She undergoes, somewhat unwillingly, treatment in an institution. She re-connects with her divorced parents, her mother still imagining her the girl whom she lost earlier. This gives rise to flashbacks which show us the interaction and hostilities between captor and prisoner. However, the captor does not take any sexual advantage. Rather, he keeps her as a companion, cooking, caring, testing her eyes for glasses, supervising dictation for homework. At the time of being taken, Gaelle was ten. While Vincent is a monster in taking and holding Gaelle, he does not always act monstrously, which creates a different type of tension between the two.

Gaelle flees the institution, feeling free and knowing that she can start her life again.

This film offers sketches of the characters rather than deep portraits.

Competition

AUJOURD'HUI (TODAY)

France/ Senegal, 2011
Saul Williams
Directed by Alain Gomis.

There is a prologue about death, the sense of death and death coming on. This is a film about death, taking place over one day, the last day of Satche's life.

The setting is Senegal, the director from Senegal, filming in Dakar. The film presupposes Senegalese customs and religious beliefs and practices, the expectations of the death of a chosen one, their finally being with the gods, a sacrifice validated by animal sacrifice.

Satche is played by American musician and poet, Saul Williams.

Satche is a middle-aged man who has studied in America. Now, he wakes one morning, the last day of his life, the chosen one. He is feted in his mother's house, elders, family and guests acclaim him as he wakes and processes through the house. A cow is slaughtered. For the rest of the day, Satche meets friends and acquaintances, reliving the happiness of his past with his friends and with his uncles and the gurus, with the man who will tend his dead body. His friends clash and he offers peace. Others condemn him for what he has not done in his life, branding him a weak and bullied man. He meets a fashionable woman who tempts him with memories of a past rejection. He takes a taxi ride but avoids the public gathering in his honour. He spends the last part of his day with his family, playing with his children while his wife who seems to be too busy to be with him, but who finally sits with him, communing with and loving him.

There are no explicit explanations of why Satche must die. Rather, we have to gauge by the overview

of his life and the comments of friends what his life has meant.

Competition.

BARBARA

Germany, 2012

Nina Hoss,

Directed by Christian Petzold.

Non- German audiences need to know that this film is set in East Germany in 1978 – clues come later but audiences may miss them initially and be puzzled by some plot developments.

Christian Petzold has made some fine German films, a number with leading actress, Nina Hoss. Here she plays a Berlin doctor who has been disciplined and sent to work in a provincial hospital. The local medico is kind, but she is wary, especially when she is frequently subject to humiliating security checks.

She is private but has connections with a West German who is engineering her escape. In the meantime, she becomes attached to some of the patients, especially with a young prisoner and with a would-be suicide. Through a range of coincidences, she has to make a choice about whether she will make her escape to Denmark or not.

The film is really a portrait of a good woman who faces moral choices in a very restrictive society. It is carried by Nina Hoss's performance and strong screen presence.

Competition.

BEL AMI

UK, 2012,

Robert Pattinson, Uma Thurman, Kristin Scott Thomas, Cristina Ricci, Colm Meaney,

Directed by Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod.

The story of a cad. Based on the story by Guy de Maupassant, and filmed in the 1940s with George Sanders in the title role, this is a film set in La Belle Epoque, Paris in the 1890s.

Georges Du Roy comes from a poor and illiterate family and has just spent five years as a soldier in Algeria. We see him looking in from the outside on the wine, women and song culture of the period. He is envious. However, out he goes and encounters, by chance, a fellow soldier who is now a journalist for a prominent Paris newspaper. He offers Georges an opportunity at a meal at his house. He meets the editor but he also meets three wives – and we know that his intentions are not honourable.

Georges is played by Robert Pattinson, which proves a contemporary difficulty, disengaging his character from Twilight's Edward. The other difficulty is that Georges is a callow young man (empty as one of the women will later accuse him). He has a certain charm, a smiling charm, but his self-centred opportunism is not attractive at all. With the help of his benefactor's wife, Madeleine (Uma Thurman), who dictates his first article, he succeeds at the newspaper but his laziness threatens to lose him his position and income.

In the meantime, he has taken up with one of the wives, Collette (Cristina Ricci), bored with her husband and delighted to have an affair, and pay for a love nest, with Georges. He charms her young

daughter who nicknames him Bel Ami, which is taken up by other characters. When Madeleine's husband dies, he determines to marry her and does. Her enthusiasm for news research and reporting and the editor's aim to bring down the government means that Georges is now contributing to the political action in Paris.

But, he is treated as a boy. His revenge is to seduce Virginie (Kristin Scott Thomas), the editor's wife. She becomes besotted by him. He also takes up with Collette again.

When a political situation occurs, which means corruption and exploitation, Madeleine turns against him. In terms of the drama, this is hard to accept as Madeleine is drawn as a strong character with convictions, not likely to enter into easy dalliance or betray her principles.

But Bel Ami is not done yet and the final image is of the smug face of the complete cad who has manipulated his success.

Think in the vein of *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Cheri*.

Screening out of Competition

CAPTIVE

Philippines, 2012

Isabelle Huppert

Directed by Brillante Mendoza.

With his win (unpopular with the audience who booed) as Best Director for *Kinatay* in Cannes 2009, Brillante Mendoza has been able to move from local, 'guerilla' film-making and exhibition to the world stage. In fact, he has had films in competition in Locarno (*Masahista*), *The Foster Child*, *Tirador* (in the Forum at Berlin), *Serbis* and *Kinatay* in Cannes, *Lola* in Venice. With *Captive*, he was in competition in Berlin and had Isabelle Huppert (head of the jury which gave him the award in Cannes) as his star.

Captive is based on actual events in Mindanao in 2001-2002, when a group of local and international men and women were abducted by Abu and held to ransom. The experience of the hostages was gruelling – and Mendoza invites us to share that gruelling experience with a great attention to detail, hand-held camera work which gets in there among the captors and the hostages. Watching the film is often hard going. But, it is all very well-staged, whether in the discomfort of the jungle or in a siege in a provincial hospital. There is diary information, including hearing the news of 9/11, New Year's Day 2002, and the final attack on the terrorists when there were only a few hostages remaining, ransoms having been paid or deaths lessening the number.

The bewilderment is well conveyed, the long voyages and continual treks in the jungle. Some characters are well delineated, others more on the periphery, and that includes captors and hostages. With Isabelle Huppert, immersing herself as always in the role, there is an anchor for international audience. She plays a social worker from France who has worked in the Philippines for five years. Other hostages include some local women, some Chinese women, an American missionary couple. The captors can be vicious, sometimes considerate (including some booby soldiers), eager for the ransom money, rather naive at times. They also take staff from the hospital after the siege. They are presented as devout, if literal in their reading of Quran texts, warriors for Allah.

At this stage, hostage taking in Mindanao was rather elementary. As the film's ending points out, hostage taking has increased rather than been stamped out, and disputes between Muslims and Christians have not been settled.

Mendoza has moved from more intimate stories, often focused on poverty and on sexuality, to a broader Philippine and international canvas and crafted an effective film on 21st century terrorism.

Competition.

CESARE DEVE MORIRE/ CAESAR MUST DIE

Italy, 2012

Directed by Paolo e Vittorio Taviani

The Taviani Brothers have been making films for forty years or more, slices of Italian life, memoirs of World War 2, historical dramas and a look back at the early days of Hollywood and D.W. Griffith in *Good Morning, Babylon*. Now they have gone to the high security prison, Rebibbia, and made a film about a group there which has been experimenting with prisoners and theatre production for some years.

The artistic director, Fabio Cappelli, has collaborated with the Taviani Brothers for the screenplay and appears in his actual role in the auditions and direction sequences.

The play chosen is Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The film opens in colour with the death of Brutus, the curtain call and the acclaim of the audience from outside. It then goes back six months – and into black and white (except for a few select scenes) – to trace the developments in production and performance.

The auditions are quite striking, the prisoners asked to give personal details as if they were at a border crossing, sad to leave their wives, and then, the same information in anger mode against authorities. This gives us an opportunity to see the versatility of the prisoners in performance, as well as to be told of their ages, sentences and reasons for sentence. These men are criminals, some members of the Camorra, drug dealers and murderers. However, as the rehearsals go on, we get to know some of them and admire their acting skills.

Shakespeare's words have been pared down considerably while retaining the core of the play and the sense of the dramatic tension in key characters. Most of the actors are convincing while, sometimes, guards look on, and other prisoners represent the Roman crowds. Sometimes a touch of personal drama intrudes, for instance when Brutus is upset one day because of a visit.

Then, the play's audience arrives again, the play is performed and we take up with the Battle of Philippi, the death of Brutus and the curtain call.

Finally, the key prisoners return to the cells, the doors close and they are really in prison again. The credits indicate that the prisoners portraying Caesar and Cassius (who does not have a lean and hungry look) have both written books on their experiences. Brutus has been pardoned and now works in theatre.

The film is cinematically theatrical, an effective communication of Shakespeare and, of course, a positive activity for the prisoners themselves.

Competition

CHERRY

US, 2012

Ashley Winshaw, Heather Graham, Dev Patel, James Franco, Lili Taylor

Directed by Stephen Elliott.

It depends on your point of view whether you think that this, kind of paperback version, story of Angelina from Los Angeles is a downhill story or an achievement tale.

Model Ashley Winshaw is Angelina, an attractive young woman, whose mother drinks (Lili Taylor), who has a brutal father and a vulnerable younger sister, as well as a platonic friendship with Indian, Andrew (Dev Patel, the Slumdog Millionaire). What will life offer her? Actually, she is not backward in grasping what turns out to be a sleazy life does offer.

She goes somewhat coyly to a photo-session and discovers something of the exhibitionist in herself. Soon, she sneaks off to San Francisco with the ever-devoted Andrew – he will accuse her later, rightly, of treating him like a pet. Before you can say Strip Club, she is a hostess, being advised she ought to be a dancer. But, soon, as Cherry, she auditions for Margaret (Heather Graham) for some lesbian porn clips and is into the business. A complication arises when her mother and sister come for a visit and leave with some cash and disillusionment. Another is her affair with a wealthy former artist who spends his money on drugs (James Franco).

Let's say that she ends up materially successful.

Former sex worker, Stephen Elliott, says he wanted to tell a story about the industry he and fellow writer, Lorelei Lee (probably about as real as Cherry for a name) have known well. They have collected quite a number of reputable actors. But, the treatment is mainly surface with a few moments of angst – though most of the angst comes in the subplot about Margaret and her possessive partner.

There are a few sex scenes as expected though most are not nearly as explicit as one finds in other films.

Panorama

LECTADO/ LECTATION/ CHILDISH GAMES

Spain, 2012

Directed by Antonio Chivariass

A small film by festival standards. The Spanish title does not quite do justice to the themes while the English title does – ultimately revealing a deadly secret in past childish games.

Daniel is in a relationship with Laura, a fellow-teacher, who wants children. Their happy and busy life is interrupted when a childhood friend seeks out X. He is clearly demented, urging Daniel to go to see his young daughter. Daniel wants to get rid of him and recommends a visit to a psychiatrist. When the friend slits his wrists while in the bath with his daughter, Laura suggests that they attend the funeral. She then accepts care of the little girl, Julia, until a relative comes forward. She is completely happy looking after Julia.

It is not the same with Daniel. Rather, Julia keeps reminding him of the younger sister of his dead friend. Flashbacks indicate that the two boys were responsible for the death of this young sister. Daniel's mood darkens. He drinks, feels haunted by the events of the past which are shown in more detail. This leads to quite a melodramatic ending, the results of the vicious outcomes of a guilty conscience.

Character studies with the touch of the ghostly.

Competition

DOLLHOUSE

Ireland, 2011

Directed by Kirsten Sheridan

Just as well the director answered questions after the screening – to give the meaning intended for what was a deeply difficult film to sit through. The director is Kirsten Sheridan (Disco Pigs, August Rush), daughter of director, Jim Sheridan.

After the American experience of August Rush, she wanted to go back to Ireland and make a small budget film in her own way and in her own time. While she has the credit, 'written by..', she pointed out that she had done a basic treatment for producers and relied on the cast (most new to film) to improvise on the (very limited) information she suggested about their characters. They did not know the ending.

Why the film is difficult to watch is that it spends more than an hour looking at a group of five young adults who break into a wealthy family house and proceed to trash it and revel in the mess and the destruction. Not a pretty sight, and upsetting for those who would feel invaded and humiliated by this behaviour.

There are several plot twists, especially at the end with the birth of a baby. The director pointed out that she had no intentions of making a reference to Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus, despite the expletive at that moment. It was only after someone noted that the birth in a tent erected in the house and the boys standing in front of the mother and child that she realised that there must be something from the Irish unconscious).

Tough going but a picture of alienated youth and the loss in Ireland of ties (including the Church) that made for connections and not this kind of irresponsible, drink and drug fuelled, anti-social behaviour.

Panorama

DON 2 THE DON MUST DIE

India, 2011

Shah Rukh Khan, Florian Lukas, Om Puri, Prianka Chopra.

Directed by Farhan Akhtar

Don 2 received quite some prominence at the Berlinale, many wondering what a Bollywood gangster film was doing there. Answer: a good half of the film was made in Berlin, so it was on home ground, so to speak. Berlin looks quite attractive and, at times, spectacular, what with familiar landmarks, impossible car chases on key roads, and lots of explosions and activities and stunts in and outside of banks.

Even if one has not seen the first Don film, there are enough indications and some flashbacks to make sure audiences feel comfortable watching the sequel. This film is quite a show so, if it is not as good as the original, the original must have been quite something!

Watching Don 2, we realise that Bollywood is learning a lot (and borrowing) from the Hong Kong action and gangster conventions, some martial arts fights as well, but learning and borrowing most from the action genres of Hollywood (and wanting to outdo Hollywood at times, and succeeding). Hence a French Riviera opening with European gangsters planning to kill the Asian drug kingpin, Don, followed by a spectacular Malaysian river ride turning into fights and drug dealer machine gun deaths. There are some attractive scenes in KL and Zurich, but then it is on to Berlin, with a

complicated plot for Don to steal the plates used for making the Euro notes.

This means prison scenes (for Don to break out with an old enemy he wants to use in Berlin), suave political soirees, the aforementioned chases and the complex carrying out of Don's plan.

This is all possible because Indian superstar, X Khan (who does fights, song and dance, including the final credits, and ruthless crime) is such a charming rogue (and almost complete narcissist) that, despite ourselves, we rather like him. Which also means that we see very little of his plotting and planning which is always supersmart and we accept it all. (Khan tried something completely different with his portrayal of an autistic man in *My Name is Khan*.)

Of course, it is a business and political story as well as a police investigation with Roma, an old flame from the original, out to capture him and Om Puri as the police chief who wants to arrest Don before retiring.

So, Bollywood trying to better and best Hollywood in the action genre – and succeeding.

L'ENFANT D' EN HAUT/ SISTER

France, 2012,

Lea Seydoux, Kacey Motter Klein, Martin Compston, Gillian Anderson,

Directed by Ursula Meier.

While the English title, *Sister*, focuses on the character, Louise, played by Lea Seydoux, it is only towards the end of the film that we are surprised at its meaning and significance. However, with the focus on 12 year old Simon throughout the whole film, the French title seems more appropriate.

Simon is a precocious 12 year old, played with skill, a blend of duplicity and naivety, by Kacey Motter Klein. He spends his days at the top of the mountains, pilfering skiers' clothes, gloves and helmets, and some food, while downright stealing expensive skis. Some things he gives to his sister, others he sells to the local kids in the valley. He, and they, have no conscience about stealing, no sense of scruple. At first, Simon's activities might rouse some misplaced amusement from the audience, for many it will be irritation at the emphasis on the details of his actions.

But the film grows on the audience as we see Simon and Louise together, he more responsible at home than she, who can't hold a job and seems interested only in boyfriend's their cars and a good time. She depends on Simon for some ready cash as well as some clothes.

The two people that Simon comes into contact with on top are a Scots cook as a restaurant (Martin Compston) who eventually connives in the ski stealing and hiding, and Gillian Anderson a mother who befriends Simon only to be disillusioned by him.

What is going to happen to him? Will he have a different life in any way or simply grow from being a little criminal to an adult one? The film offers some hope in the relationship between Louise and Simon, the need for love on the part of each of them. After a night on the mountain when the tourists and workers have packed up, there is a symbolic last moment as two cable cars pass each other, Louise in one, going up for Simon, and he, after time to think, is coming down to home.

Competition

EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE

US, 2011,

Tom Hanks, Sandra Bullock, Thomas Horn, Viola Davis, Max von Sydow, Jeffrey Wright, Zoe Caldwell.

Directed by Stephen Daldry.

Even a decade or more after September 11th 2001, the images and events are still firmly implanted in many people's memories, some having to process the shock and the grief, especially for friends and relatives whose bodies have never been recovered. It was traumatic for Americans who judged they were under attack. It stepped up the war on terror (though this is not an element in this film). This is the story of one family and a young boy's love and attachment to his father who was killed while at a meeting in one of the twin towers.

There have been a number of films about September 11th, including Paul Greengrass' *United 93* and Oliver Stone's *World Trade Centre*. It has featured as a theme in such popular films as *Remember Me*. This film makes the events very personal.

The title comes from a book that the young boy, Oskar Schell, makes for his mother, a life memory culminating in what he calls the 'worst day'.

Because we know very soon that Oskar's father, Tom, has died in the collapse of the buildings, it is necessary for the actor in that role to make a quick and lasting impact before his death since he will be seen in only the flashbacks. Tom is played by Tom Hanks which is a wise choice for the audience to respond strongly to him. On the other hand, Oskar is so attached to his father that he neglects his mother, even wishing that she had died instead of his father. Again, a strong piece of casting is needed for the mother to make an impact even though she is put in the background until the final part of the film. She is played by Sandra Bullock, another wise piece of casting. She has some very emotionally demanding scenes with Oskar which she plays very well – though the revelation of how she has protected him since his father's death comes as a surprise (some might say that it seems too far-fetched).

But, the film belongs to young Thomas Horn who is in almost every scene. While a lot of his communication with the audience is in constant voiceover, his performance is very strong indeed. He tells a character that he was once tested for Aspergers. It may well be that he is an Aspergers' character, full of exact, detailed information which he rattles off, statistics, scientific information, blunt opinions, phrased very directly. His expression of emotion is very limited, lavished on his father and then his memory of his father.

When he accidentally finds a key with 'Black' written on an envelope, he decides to find the lock that the key will open. His father had encouraged games of wit and intelligence, expeditions which would make Oskar think but also communicate with people, something he dreads. Oskar devises a scheme for visiting every person named Black in the New York phone books. It is an obsession but forms the core of the film, Oskar meeting people and listening to their stories. Another family favourite is his grandmother (Zoe Caldwell). Through her, he discovers an eccentric old man (Max von Sydow) who rents from his grandmother. He is invited to accompany Oskar on his visits – and it is through the old man that Oskar learns about people, life and overcoming his fears.

The supporting cast includes John Goodman the concierge of the apartment block, and Viola Davis and Jeffrey Wright who play a crucial role in discovering where the key belongs – and another father and son issue, this time one of hostility. While Oskar cannot talk with his mother, it is the old man and Jeffrey Wright who enable him to spill forth his story, pouring it out in hurried detail and relief.

Direction is by Stephen Daldry (Billy Elliott, The Hours, The Reader). His four films, including this one have all received Oscar nominations for Best Film. The film is very American in sensibility about family and relationships and some audiences will find it too emotional. And, of course, it has to be forcefully American in sensibility in dealing with respect for the victims and their families of 9/11.

Screening out of Competition

FLOWERS OF WAR

China 2011,
Christian Bale, Ni Ni,
Directed by Zhang Yimou.

The siege and rape of Nanking is still vivid in the Chinese memory. The attack by the Japanese on the Chinese capital, the savagery of the treatment of the citizens, more than 200.000 deaths, in 1937 are alive more than 70 years later. And, there have been a number of films portraying aspects of the experience. John Rabe brings in the German and international connections. Chen Kaige's *Forever Enthralled*, enters through stories of theatre and opera. The most comprehensive, moving and shocking film is *City of Life and Death* (SIGNIS prize in San Sebastian, 2009). Veteran director, Zhang Yimou, has chosen to focus on a small group and their treatment as a symbol of the whole experience.

There are two groups of women in this film. Rather, one is a group of schoolgirls, convent-educated, who seem refuge in the Cathedral. The other is a group of prostitutes who clamour at the gate of the Catholic compound, are reluctantly let in and are looked down on by the girls. A young orphan, George, has been left by the parish priest to protect the girls.

Inside the compound, the prostitutes take over the cellar, while the girls stay in the dormitory above. There are sequences of squabble and antagonism. But, the main war is outside.

Zhang Yimou has been interested in Chinese history for some decades. Initially he went into a more distant past but also made some small films of local stories. Then he went martial arts with such spectacles as *Hero* and *House of a Thousand Daggers*, *Curse of the Golden Flower*. This time, he stages most effective street battles and the work of a Chinese sniper picking off a troop of Japanese soldiers who have entered the Cathedral and brutalised the school girls who have diverted attention away from the prostitutes in the cellar.

But the central character is an American mortician who has been caught in the crossfire on his way to prepare bodies for burial at the Cathedral. He encounters two of the girls and follows them. He is mercenary at heart and wants to be paid for his help, searching the poor boxes, finding altar wine and consuming it (not religiously) and making George desperate. He has no objections to the presence of the prostitutes.

But, like Humphrey Bogart almost sixty years before him in *The Left Hand of God* (also set in China), he disguises himself as a priest and moves to defend the schoolgirls when they are attacked. He is John Miller, but now they call him Fr John. He is played by Christian Bale as a rather extroverted and swaggering opportunist.

Much of the film is watching Fr John grow into his role as priest (not 100% edifying) but showing the ideals of a priest in practice. The other principal characters, besides George, the ever-present and helpful assistant, are the leader of the prostitutes, Mo, and the leader of the schoolgirls, Shu.

The polite Japanese commander who apologises for the attack on the girls (and believes that Fr John is really Fr John) comes to hear the girls sing and books them to perform at a celebration of the taking of Nanking. Fr John refuses but is pressurised – which brings the film to a final climax as to how the schoolgirls will be protected from the less than honourable intentions of the celebrating Japanese. Which brings the film to quite a moving ending. While the background canvas of the film is large, this film itself is more of a miniature, in parts authentically brutal, in parts somewhat romantic, of what was happening around the city under the occupation.

Screening out of Competition

FLYING SWORDS OF DRAGON GATE

China, 2011.

Jet Li, Chen Kun.

Directed by Tsui Hark.

A film beyond review! And, for most audiences, a film beyond easy synopsis.

This means that potential audiences must make their decisions on the technical qualities of the film – they are so strong so that the plot does not really matter.

What matters is the spectacular photography of a Chinese landscape that evokes Chinese history, dynasties, power struggles, warriors, despots. It is not meant to be realistic. This is a fantasy story – especially when a golden palace emerges from desert sands at the end. A pregnant servant flees from the overlord and his scheming mistress. The power behind the throne goes in pursuit with a retinue of soldiers. In the meantime, a legendary hero (Jet Li) has attacked the palace eunuch and brought down his rule. Meanwhile, out in the countryside, another warrior comes to the rescue of the servant. Soon there are more warriors, more battles, heroes versus military. Eventually, all arrive at the Dragon Inn – battles galore. And then the golden palace.

At least, that was an attempt to try to say something about the plot. Obviously, it is a lot more than that.

But, the main thing to say is that the colour photography has been done with 3D, and some of the most vivid 3D you ever hope to see is up there all the time on the screen. And, when it comes to the frequent action sequences, the 3D enhances them beyond expectations. A lot of it is excitingly ‘in your face’. For those who feel they may have got over all the flying that was so amazing for the first time in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, but here it is again, more spectacular and acrobatic than before. And so on...

If that doesn't appeal, then forget it.

If you have a fondness for films of Chinese history (and those directed by Tsui Hark), for political intrigue, for action beyond action, then make sure you see it in the 3D version.

GNADE/ MERCY

Germany, 2012

Jurgen Vogel, Birgit Minichmayr.

Directed by Matthias Glassner

Gnade is ultimately about mercy, about confession and forgiveness, possibilities of grace in ordinary and in troubled lives.

The setting for this story was, originally, Copenhagen, but the director had visited the town of Hammerfest, far north of the Arctic Circle, with its processing plant as well as its total absence of sunlight from mid-November until mid-January. He moves a German family here – so that the marriage could recover some stability, the father working at the plant, the mother at the hospital, their son at school, and their buying a farm to manage.

The centre of the film is a familiar situation. Late at night on her way home from work, the mother hits something with her car. She can't see what it was and drives home. Her husband drives back and cannot find whatever it was. Maria panics and forces her husband to keep the whole event secret. She has a long speech of rationalisation which makes a big challenge to the audience to decide what they would do in similar circumstances, whether they would rationalise or go to the police.

While life continues, including an episode with the son who is mean to a fellow student and does not own up to it, Niels decides he must stop the affair he was having with a co-worker at the plant. Maria finds more support from Niels which changes him and re-kindles their love. This leads them, especially as they meet the mother and father of the dead girl at church and with work, to make a decision about telling the truth to the parents.

The scene where they do go, especially in showing the bewildered reaction of the bereaved parents, wondering what they should do, highlights the possibilities of justice and/or mercy.

HAYWIRE

US, 2011,

Gina Carano, Ewan Mc Gregor, Michael Fassbender, Michael Douglas, Antonio Banderas, Michael Angarano, Bill Paxton, Channing Tatum.

Directed by Steven Soderbergh.

Steven Soderbergh is a director who has been able, for over twenty years, to move easily from arthouse films to popular films. After all, it was he who directed the three Oceans movies. He has also tried out a number of genres. Prior to Haywire, he made the medical and world epidemic drama, Contagion.

He must have been impressed by multi-martial arts champion, Gina Carano. Here she has the opportunity to show her considerable skills in doing her own stuntwork. She plays an employee of a company which carries out covert operations which governments are unwilling to admit to or express any knowledge of. When one of these operations is undermined and the person to be rescued is assassinated, she goes out on her own enquiry. It is complicated because she has several possible bosses who commissioned these covert tasks. They include Ewan Mc Gregor (with an odd haircut!), Michael Douglas and Antonio Banderas. Besides these three, the Channing Tatum as a co-worker and Michael Angarano as a young man whose car she takes, abducting him and telling her story so that he can report her version when questioned.

Actually, the director and cast are much better than the film itself, which is complicated, of course, requires audience attention – but does not stay in the memory.

IN THE LAND OF BLOOD AND HONEY

Bosnia/US, 2011

Zana Marjanovic, Goran Kostic, Rade Srbedzija.

Directed by Angelina Jolie.

While the first half of the 1990s saw the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of apartheid in South Africa, it also saw the vicious wars in the Balkans and the genocide in Rwanda. We have been reminded of all these events, the good and the evil, in many films. This film shows us the years 1992-1995, Serbs and Bosnians, ethnic cleansing, mass murder atrocities and the siege of Sarajevo, the longest since World War II. While we have seen Savior, Welcome to Sarajevo, Grbavica and Storm and other Balkan War films, this film does not shirk the bitterness, the prejudice and the bloodshed, but it also wants to suggest ambivalences through a love story in the savagery of the war. That it cannot end happily in the 1990s is not a surprise.

The biblical image for peace is a land flowing with milk and honey. An image for war is a land flowing with blood and honey (the former abundant, the latter in short supply).

We see cruel round-ups and deportations, women forced into servicing the soldiers, cooking and sewing but also as victims of repeated rape. We see guerilla attacks, sniper shootings in the streets and the massacre at Srbvenicia.

But our principal focus is on a young woman, an artist, Ajla (XX), beautiful, Muslim, who is in love before the war with a Serb policeman. When she is rounded-up with a group of women and interned, she is protected by her policeman (XX) who is now a military leader. The screenplay voices the difficulties, the feelings of guilt, mutual recriminations as well as a deepening love. The military man is pressurized into wariness of the Muslims by his father, a commanding general (RS) who resents his family's past servitude to the Muslims, the cruelty exercised on them during World War II. We understand, while we are horrified, how he can relentlessly pursue ethnic cleansing. His scene with Ajla where she sketches his portrait and he delivers his angrily hostile speech, brings home the horrors of Balkan history, ethnic and religious bigotry.

Of course, there is the Angelina Jolie factor. She has written the screenplay and directed the film, obviously with sensitivity, especially towards the women and their abuse and pain and humiliations. They are, for her, a cause worth making a film about. The screenplay, while highly critical of the Serb attack, shows the complex issues on both sides – and the world observing but not intervening until years had passed. Not many audiences saw Angelina Jolie and Clive Owen in *Beyond Borders* (2003), a film too difficult for the average audience (which, unfortunately, might be the case here) which took up issues in the famine in Ethiopia in 1984, the atrocities in Cambodia and political issues in Chechnya and the work of UN agencies. But that film and this one show that Angelina Jolie is preoccupied, not just with glamour and her career, but also with the social conscience. It would be a pity to overlook this film because of any difficulty with her celebrity status.

Screening out of Competition

JAYNE MANSFIELD'S CAR

US, 2012,
Robert Duvall, John Hurt, Billy Bob Thornton, Kevin Bacon, Frances O' Connor, Ray Stevenson,
Directed by Billy Bob Thornton.

Billy Bob Thornton was a writer and director before his breakthrough acting role and Oscar nomination for *Sling Blade*. He directed *All the Pretty Horses* and *Daddy and Them*, the latter focusing on a family coming together – for better and often for worse. This film follows something of the same formula. The setting is a small town in Alabama in 1969 and draws on stories and memories from Thornton's past.

The title is certainly arresting. The car does make an appearance later in the film, a rather bizarre scene as it is exhibited for curious visitors, and comments made about what actually happened. But the scene is more symbolic even though it is presented quite realistically. It sets a tone to the US of 1969.

It is a period of anti-Vietnam war protest, which does not impress the locals, especially the family patriarch, Jim, who is dismayed that his middle-aged son turned hippy and protestor is the leader of the march. Jim is played as a crusty old man, a quiet curmudgeon by 80 year old Robert Duvall. The protestor son who was a medic in World War II (his father being a medic in World War I) is played by Kevin Bacon, who can combine being in his 50s with looking and acting more youthfully.

At home are two more sons. Billy Bob Thornton is Skip whose life has not amounted to much since he was a pilot in World War II and shot down. He has quite a collection of cars. Other son Jimbo (Robert Patrick) sounds like a chip off the old block in attitudes and behaviour. Jimbo's son is becoming a teenage 1960s rebel, into the music and willing to try out drugs. Then there is a daughter, Donna, with a loud-mouthed, girth-expanding former athlete.

That might seem enough for a film, but there is much more. Jim receives news from England that his wife who walked out on him and her children and married an Englishman has died and wants to be buried at home.

The English, sounding particularly British, and lamenting the heat of Alabama are John Hurt as the husband, Kingsley, with his adult children, Philip (Ron Stevenson) and Camilla (Frances O' Connor).

It actually goes better than expected, but it still occasions personal revelations and nagging problems.

The film is interesting in its way, but more through some very good bits and pieces rather than as a whole. The performances from the veteran cast are impressive and the writing in some set pieces throughout the film are Billy Bob Thornton's writing at its best. Discussions between Duvall and Hurt, especially when Jim wants to know from Kingsley how he met his wife (a funny story concerning the statue of St George in Hyde Park). Two scenes with Thornton and Frances O' Connor also stand out, she invited to do a nude poetry recital (Charge of the Light Brigade) for Skip's sexual satisfaction, and her listening to Skip's quietly moving story of his war experience and being shot down. Kevin Bacon also has two good scenes with Duvall about a letter he wrote his father during the war and received no answer. Late in the film there is an unanticipated answer. And a scene where a drunken Hurt attacks his son for the disgrace of the fall of Singapore and his not being a real soldier because he was held as a POW by the Japanese.

So, there are some flat and somewhat unconvincing spots, but there are plenty of fine spots like those just mentioned.

Competition.

KEEP THE LIGHTS ON

US, 2012,
Thure Lindhardt, Zachary Booth, Julianne Nicholson.
Directed by Ira Sachs.

A New York story that takes place over almost a decade from 1998. Erik (Thure Linhardt) is a Danish film-maker investigating a photographer from the 1940s. he relies on phone sex but begins a relationship with one of his contacts, Paul (Zachary Booth). Both are committed, but Paul is something of a high flyer in the city and has drug and alcohol habits. Though he is persuaded to go into rehab, he is not quite the same again and the relationship has its ups and downs as Erik makes an ultimatum at one of the rehab sessions, is successful in winning a Teddy Award at the Berlinale in 2004 (and this film actually won the award in 2012!), and becomes more desperate about Paul's condition. He is supported by his sister and by Claire who works with him on the film.

With the increasing number of more mainstream films on gay relationships, this film makes an attempt to portray the serious ups and downs of a relationship.

Panorama

JUST THE WIND/ CSAK A SZEL

Hungary, 2012,
Directed by Bence Fliegauf.

A brief film about Hungarian prejudice against gypsies. The film says it is not a documentary about the recent attacks by local Hungarians in which quite a number of gypsies were injured and six were killed. Up to the making of the film, there had been no definite charges laid.

Basically, the film is a story in the quite humdrum lives of a gypsy family who live at the edge of a country town. Mother wakes early and feeds her ageing father. The daughter gets up and prepares for school which she likes. Her younger brother gets up late, skips school and wanders the countryside, going especially to his hidden cache of things he finds.

Mother has different jobs, scything public areas of long grass, doing menial cleaning. She is harassed on the way home. The daughter suffers insinuations from a teacher, but enjoys an afternoon near a lake. So does the son. Eventually, they are at home, go to bed. They hear noises in the night – and the family is attacked violently.

This is very plain, matter-of-fact film-making, almost documentary-like. While it is not exciting, deliberately so, it is a very worthy film, exposing bigotry against the gypsies which can boil up into violence, and asking for some sympathy and understanding for people who are targets of xenophobia.

Competition

LOST IN PARADISE

Vietnam, 2011.
Luong Manh Hai, Linh Son.
Directed by Vu Ngoc Dang.

Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon in all the subtitles for this film) is hardly paradise. But to young men leaving home and venturing into the city for better jobs, better living and more money, it seems, initially, to be paradise. Needless to say, this film will show that it is not.

It has a seedy setting, the world of the prostitutes, male and female, who stand along the roads waiting for customers, mainly on motor bikes, to pick them up. While the prostitutes, on the whole, are portrayed sympathetically, their pimps are not. By the end of the film, a lot of the dialogue has been devoted to thinking through the effects of this kind of life (whether it be his fate as one of the main characters states or choice) and options made against it. A post-script states that the area we see in the film has been cleared and a supermarket built – though this only shifts the locales.

The other feature of the film is that the central characters are gay men, a new theme for Vietnamese films, but a theme familiar from Filipino and Singapore feature films. It is a story of love and its being exploited and corrupted. And, for the most part, it is a love story (with an emotional soundtrack and songs accompanying it), obviously making a case for men to be able to come out and be accepted and not be caught up in the prostitution business.

But, for long stretches of the film, we are treated to a different story altogether (and the two strands never meet). A mentally impaired collector of recyclables, befriends a woman on the streets and is harassed by her pimps. But, he is given a duck egg which he tends, very tenderly, until it hatches and then rears the duckling. We spend a great deal of time with the man and his duck – a nice and compassionate story.

The film is well crafted and photographed with an emotional appeal in its comic story and in its tragic

story.

Panorama

LA MER A L' AUBE/ CALM AT SEA

France/ Germany, 2012.

Leo Paul Salmain, Ulrich Mattes.

Directed by Volker Schlöndorff.

Volker Schlöndorff has made Oscar winning films like *The Tin Drum* as well as smaller films like *The Ninth Day*, the story of a priest in Dachau sent on mission to persuade the archbishop of Luxembourg to support the Third Reich. This is one of his smaller films, based on a story he heard when he was young and was learning French in France after the war.

In 1941, the Nazis with the help of the police of the Vichy regime had rounded up undesirables, suspects, Communists and interned them in local camps. When a prominent SS officer is killed by resistance fighters in the streets of Nantes, Hitler demanded 150 hostages be shot. The local commander was more humane and wanted to avoid such cruelty and explained that this was no way to win the hearts and minds of the people. A French officer working for the high command made some pleas. Local collaborators suggested names for the list.

The film introduces us to a range of undesirables in the camp, some younger men arrested because of their parents, older men who had a strong ideological stance. They are all on the list. While the film shows us some humane details (the 17 year old who flirts with a girl in the women's internment camp), the main focus is on the choice of the hostages, their reactions, their preparation for execution.

The film shows the officer in the camp showing his men how the killing of the hostages is done – which gives the audience a great deal of time to identify with the hostages, observe their responses, empathise and speculate how they would act in similar circumstances.

The film also raises the issue of 150 hostages dying for one SS officer and whether this was sound Resistance strategy. There is also a small sub-plot of a German soldier who collapses rather than shoot. The author Ernst Junger is also a character, asked to write a personal account for the record of what happened. (He is played by Ulrich Mattes, the priest in *The Ninth Day* and Goebbels in *Downfall*).

The film is a German- French co-production, keeping alive the memory of war incidents seventy years earlier.

Panorama.

METEORA

Greece, 2012,

Theo Alexander, Tamila Koulieva.

Directed by Spiros Stathoulopoulos.

Most of us are aware of the monasteries of Mt Athos, those loft retreats on the tops of Greek mountains, centres of Greek Orthodox monasticism. Most of us may not be aware of other monasteries in the plains of Thessaly in northwestern Greece. Again, monasteries built, seemingly impossibly on the tops of rock formations rising from the plains, mountains as well as very high, thinner rocks which point like fingers to the sky (or, which may be forgiveable thought, since this film

explores the carnal desires of a monk and a nun, phallic symbols).

At times *Meteora* is magnificent to look at, the natural beauty and extraordinary formations as well as fascinating glimpses of sky at different times of day. It is also amazing at times to look at as, after the opening credits and their iconic power, the film uses animation to further develop the plot as well as to suggest mythical and symbolic stories and themes. The icons also offer a clue as to how to interpret the action and characters. While they may be easily dismissed as artificial and not deeply developed, it could be argued that we should be looking at them as moving icons, gaze at them, as the protagonists do with the icons in their cells. We gaze at them for meaning rather than mere psychological insights.

As mentioned, this is a story of a monk and a nun and their desires. Easy film material these days in terms of church and sexuality. However, it is all presented here in the context of monastic vows and spirituality, in terms of ascetic practices and physical penance to control temptation (and the consequent suppression of instincts which leads to rigid repression which can shatter at short notice – and does). To this extent, the film is an interesting contribution to reflections on religious celibacy, its possibilities and impossibilities.

The monk (not necessarily ordained) has been in his community on top of his mountain for years. He is devout in prayer and rituals, assisting at liturgy. The nun is a visitor from Russia. The relationship is suggested immediately with an exchange of neck chains. Then the monk uses his mirror reflections to contact the nun. He also prepares a picnic meal of goat (which somebody reminded us is an animal symbol of lust), which they enjoy with wine, talk flirtatiously but raise the theme of despair and freedom – that all sin can be forgiven except despair. The monk physically accosts the nun, but they then go to their cells and pray again.

There follows an explicit sexual scene with the nun in her room. The writer-director could be accused of chauvinist sexism in not presenting the monk who seems more driven than the nun. As expected, their love/lust is consummated. Must they both then leave monastery and convent?

Throughout the film, Psalm 23 is interspersed in its entirety, offering a scriptural comment on the relationship and their stands before God. Icons, liturgy and communion are featured with a background score of arias and chant.

While the animation literally shows a fall as well as the nun's previously unseen hair growing like Rapunzel's to form a bridge between the monk and nun, the most striking is the sequence where the monk goes symbolically into a labyrinth and is lost. At the centre, he finds an icon of Christ crucified. He hammers nails into Jesus' hands and blood not only flows but gushes forth, flooding the labyrinth, panel by panel, the monk floating on the blood until he is out and saved. He and the nun appear as small figures in the ocean of Christ's blood which is poured out in abundance.

To say, as some have said, that this is simply the old story of forbidden love, is to focus on the obvious but not on the abundant visual and musical detail that invites us to contemplate religious love and love of God, desire and celibacy, infidelity in vows, God's fidelity and an abundance of forgiveness for those who do not despair.

One credibility challenge is that the monk looks like a bearded movie star, cast for being handsome rather than for a life in a monastery. The actress playing the nun looks maturely beautiful. And then the press notes tell us that the actor for the monk, Theo Alexander, has been a regular on television's *True Blood* for some years!

Competition

MY BROTHER THE DEVIL

UK, 2012,
Said Taghmoui, James Floyd, Fady Elsayed.
Directed by Sally El Hosaini

Writer-director, Sally el Hosaini, has an Egyptian father and a Welsh mother. She draws on both heritages in this film. Set in London, it features an Egyptian family, long since in England. Father is with London Transport, mother is a home-maker. There are two sons, Rashid (James Floyd) and Mo (Fady Elsayed). Rash is older and has been involved in local gangs and drug deliveries with relations and peers. However, he is wanting to move out. Mo has just finished school and is ripe for being caught up in the same gang work, despite being robbed and then witnessing a murder in the street.

So far, so familiar, although the director gives a lot more attention than in other similar films to characters and atmosphere. Rash boxes, sees a girlfriend. Mo like literature, meets up with a nice Nigerian girl, idealises Rash.

When Rash takes on a job as an assistant photographer to Sayyid (Siad Taghmaghoui), things begin to change – as expected for Mo who sets out on a downhill path, not as expected for Rash who has to come to deeper terms of his identity than he knew about. Mo is even more upset at Rash and his behaviour after he spies on him and then spreads rumours that he is a terrorist.

There is an inevitable violent clash but it is cathartic for Rash and for his relationship with Mo who has to move to greater understanding and tolerance.

Panorama

POSTCARDS FROM THE ZOO

Indonesia, 2012
Directed by Edwin.

Edwin is emerging as a young Indonesian talent fostered by several European and American talent seminars and festivals.

When you use 'Postcards' in your title, it enables you to be as free as you like – or as lazy as you like. If there is a criticism about a sequence or about continuity or about obscurity in the plot, you can always say that it is a postcard and, so, necessarily incomplete, or that it is symbolic.

This is a fair criticism of Edwin and his film. He uses words like 'dream', 'fantasy', 'poetry' and he has more than a point. But, his selection of episodes, their connectedness or lack of connectedness means that the audience has to do a lot of the supplying of meaning. Again, not necessarily a bad thing, but this series of Postcards makes huge leaps, dallies on some images, hurries over others.

It is the story of Lana who was abandoned in a zoo when a little girl. Edwin also inserts encyclopedia like brief entries at times about zoos, relocations and treatment of animals, to make us ponder or to scratch our heads!

Lana loves giraffes, especially the one at the zoo, tall and stately as it is – and the screenplay offers more information about giraffes that most of us never knew. She loves working in the zoo. When she meets a tall, dark and handsome magician dressed as a cowboy, she is drawn to him and, dressed as an Indian girl (of cowboys and Indians origins), participates in his acts. When he literally goes up in flames and disappears (the actor and the audience deserved more clues here), she suddenly becomes Number 33 at a massage parlour where we are treated to some training scenes and some scenes with clients. No wonder she goes back to the zoo and, unable to do it before but now liberated, she is able

to touch her beloved giraffe. So, there you are.

Competition

REBELLE/ WAR WITCH

Canada, 2012

Rachel Mwanza,

Directed by Kim Nguyen.

We have seen stories of children in African countries abducted from their villages and forced to go to war with rebel armies. This is another of those although Komono, the child at the centre of the film, is a girl, taken at 12. In a scene of horror, she is forced to shoot her parents to save them from a death by machete. She is trained in fighting, taken in by the chief and proclaimed his war witch.

The film was made in Congo, Kinshasa, but no country is named in the film. Which means that there is no real political context for the story, simply violent rebels fighting the powers that be. While this means we concentrate on Komono's story, we miss the political edge.

The story becomes more complicated when Komono escapes with Magician one of the main young soldiers. They want to marry and are determined to find a rare white rooster necessary for the ritual. When all seems to be right, soldiers attack again, leaving a pregnant Komono wandering the countryside, wanting to bury her parents before she gives birth. This emphasis on the dead, many here visualised as ghosts, is a feature of the film.

The film aims at an emotional impact and succeeds with the character of Komono. The picture of Congo is of unrest in the poor countryside, but that is context rather than a theme.

Competition

A ROYAL AFFAIR

Denmark, 2012,

Mads Mikkelsen, Alicia Vikander?

Directed by Nikolaj Arcel.

An interesting costume drama where sets and costumes have not been stinted. It certainly looks the part.

The setting is Denmark in the 1760s and 1770s, a valuable story for Danish history and a story not too familiar for other audiences. The opening alerts the audience to the Enlightenment and how it flourished in this century, a return to reason instead of faith (and superstition), a dream of equality and dignity for all, an ideal of freedom for society. The French Revolution was just over a decade away as the film ends.

This is also the story of Princess Caroline Matilda of England, bound to an arranged marriage to Christian VII of Denmark. A young, beautiful and cultured woman, she leaves with high hopes. They are soon dashed. The king is mentally unstable, skittish in public manners and profligate in behaviour.

The film does begin by letting the audience know that Caroline sealed her fate and exile by an affair with Dr Johann Struensee. She is writing to her children to explain what she has done.

Dr Struensee (Mads Mikkelsen, like a passive Jack Palance) is an Enlightenment thinker and writer

(anonymously). Friends suggest he become physician to Christian who is on a year's tour of Europe. The two click (helped by a love of quotations from Shakespeare) and Johann is able to guide the king to better behaviour. He becomes chief adviser, despite hostility from the nobility and the Council, eventually replacing the Council, and pushing through all kinds of enlightened and progressive legislation, from inoculation against smallpox, to the abolition of censorship and capital punishment. For a while, Denmark set a model for the rest of Europe.

Someone quotes how Lancelot's affair with Guinevere destroyed Camelot. It is apt, of course, when Johann and the queen (initially hostile but impressed by his ideas and manner) begin a liaison. A jealous Dowager queen and conservative nobles are able to arrest John and banish the queen. They also restore the kingdom to the status quo.

The film offers enough to reflect on with insights into this experience of royalty and Enlightenment. Character performances are strong. This seems a story of folly and failure, a postscript adds that Caroline's son, Frederick, staged a coup when he was sixteen and began a fifty five year reign that saw the implementation of so many of the Enlightenment ideas.

Competition

SHADOW DANCER

Ireland, 2012

Andrea Riseborough, Clive Owen, Domhnall Gleeson, Aidan Gillen, Gillian Anderson,
Directed by James Marsh.

Andrea Riseborough has already played a young Margaret Thatcher for television, a worker in Made in Dagenham, the infatuated Rose in the remake of Brighton Rock and the Duchess of Windsor in W.E. Here she is the central character and holds the film together, a fine performance.

She plays Collette McVeigh from a militant IRA family in Belfast. As a child, she has been selfishly but unwittingly responsible for a family tragedy, 1973. Twenty years later, with peace talks getting under way, she is a bomb carrier on the London Underground, part of an angry group led by her brothers. However, the British government have been shadowing her – and make her an offer she can't refuse, freedom to be with her son and be a 'tout', informer for the British.

Her minder is played in his often serious fashion by Clive Owen. The British head in Belfast is played by Gillian Anderson (doing seriously what she had to do for comedy in Johnny English Reborn).

Action is quite suspenseful at times in this narrow suburban area of Belfast, Collette's ordinary life and the pressures on her to make a weekly rendezvous, her having to participate in an assassination attempt but escaping, coming under suspicion by a paranoid local boss who thinks she is a tout.

A quiet resolution of the proceedings seems to be emerging when the plot twists, sadly, and the ending is not what we are expecting at all. This is the Troubles in a more modest but deadly 1990s.

TABU

Portugal, 2012.

Directed by Michael Gomes

By the time that the affair portrayed in the second part of this film as highly criminal and sinful, extremely scandalous, the world had moved beyond this kind of condemnation and language, the 1950s and 1960s. This moral stance of the characters is portrayed highly melodramatically and lacks a

fair amount of credibility.

But, the film starts in an entirely different way, making a point about white colonialism in a bizarrely symbolic story of a great white explorer and his train of carriers in Mozambique, haunted by the death of his wife and leaping into a river to confront a crocodile and, probably, fulfil his death wish.

The fact that this (and the whole film) is shot in black and white on a box-formatted screen like the olden days' movies and that there is no dialogue only voiceover makes it look experimental movie-making while, at the same time, with the elevated ('poetic'?) voiceover from the director himself, it seems quite pretentious.

Then the first part of the film, box-format but with dialogue is set in modern day Lisbon, portraying a kind middle-aged woman who becomes involved with a dying woman from the Mozambique white elite and her black friend. The kind lady tracks down an old man, an acquaintance (more than that we learn in the second part) of the dying woman.

In the second part, back we go to Mozambique and the story of the woman, her growing up, hunting skills, marriage and, particularly her affair with a dashing, pencil-moustached Italian. There is another plot element with the Italian's friendship with a former seminarian who creates a band and tours in Africa, moving from the songs of the 1950s to the 1960s ('Be My Baby') and the Twist.

But..., still black and white, back to no heard dialogue (we just see the characters mouthing) and an increasingly ponderous and pretentious voiceover from the director, even to reading their correspondence. So, it's like a silent film in some ways with the voiceover doing most of the narrative and the emoting, the characters merely illustrating what is being said – it could be visual radio.

At one stage, there is mention that the heroine was an adviser on an RKO flop (whose producer killed himself) with a title like 'It doesn't snow on Kilimanjaro anymore'. The unkind thought arose that the RKO film used this kind of plot and dialogue... With acknowledgement to the experiments with technique but the laden language of the voiceover was far too much for the general triteness of the plot and characters before our eyes.

Competition

LA VIERGE, LES COPTES, ET MOI...

France, 2012,
Directed by Namir Abdel Meseeh.

Quite a crowd-pleasing documentary.

The director engages his audience by showing his quest to get his film made – and by featuring his mother, a strong-minded and mouthed lady to say the least, whom he has in tow throughout the film. Come to think of it, she really has him in tow.

The family is Coptic having moved from Egypt to France in the early 1970s. Though he is not a believer, he has become fascinated by reports of apparitions of Mar

Spectacle time with The Avengers and Battleship. Some interesting more serious films, Café de Flore, Footnote, The Lady, Rebellion.

By this stage, we know enough about Tom to wonder about his life, his mental condition, his imaginary world, so that we can make sense of the final option that he makes after making sure his daughter (who seems to have temporarily disappeared) is safe. And, the question of who is this woman in the fifth still remains something of an enigma.

In the post-awards period, there are some films for older audiences including Carnage, The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, Headhunters, Tyrannosaur and the film on Jung and Freud, A Dangerous Method.

SIGNIS REVIEWS MARCH 2012

50/50

ANY QUESTIONS FOR BEN

ARTIST, The

BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL for the elderly and the beautiful, The

BUCK

CARNAGE

CHRONICLE

CONTRABAND

DANGEROUS METHOD, A

DEVIL INSIDE, The

GONE

HEADHUNTERS

JOHN CARTER

ONE FOR THE MONEY

PROJECT X

SAFE HOUSE

THIS MEANS WAR

TYRANNOSAUR

50/50

US, 2011,

Joseph Gordon Leavitt, Seth Rogen, Anna Kendrick, Bryce Dallas Howard,

Directed by Jonathan Levine.

The makers and marketers had a lot of trouble finding just the right title for this film – and for audience acceptability. It is 50% (perhaps a bit more) about terminal illness and 50% (perhaps a little less raucous comedy). Working titles included ‘Live with it’ and ‘I’m living with cancer’. The trouble may be that those who want the raucous comedy (with the promise of Seth Rogen sex dialogue blurted out in his usual way) may find the illness theme too much of a downer, while those who are interested in the illness and treatment may find the other aspects too raunchy for their taste.

So, what they came up with for the title is 50/50 which does cover all bases. The statistic is that given to Adam (Joseph Gordon Levitt in a quite moving performance, mostly quietly and accepting of his situation) of whether the treatment for his cancer will be successful or not. The audience lives with that statistic throughout the film.

Adam is 27, fairly ordinary, a television program maker, who has an overwhelming mother (Anjelica Huston) and a father who is suffering from Alzheimer’s (Serge Houde). He is living with a seemingly attractive young woman, Rachel (Bryce Dallas Howard). His best friend is Kyle (Seth Rogen whose dialogue and delivery remind us of his character and performance in such films as Knocked Up).

A lot of the film is not just about Adam coping with the diagnosis and the chemotherapy but about how his relatives and friends deal with it, some well and some not.

He is assigned a therapist, a 24 year old who is researching her thesis. This makes for some very awkward scenes as the polite and common-sensed Adam works with Katherine (Anna Kendrick) and her theoretical approach and some of her gaffes.

50/50 has a lot of things going for it, especially a young person facing up to the possibility of dying without having lived a great deal of life. The behavior of mother, best friend, girlfriend and doctors means a range of reactions which ring true – but also challenge us as to how we react in this kind of situation (worried about ourselves and feelings before the state of mind of the person diagnosed).

Director, Jonathan Levine, has been unpredictable in his choice of projects, from the horror story, All the Boys Love Mandy Lane, to the odyssey of a young man in 1990s New York City, The Wackness.

We may not always approve of how Adam and his friend, Kyle, try to cope with Adam's illness, but we will realise that coping with terminal illness is not something one does according to a worked-out plan.

ANY QUESTIONS FOR BEN?

Australia, 2012,

Josh Lawson, Rachael Taylor, Daniel Henshall, Felicity Ward, Christian Clark.

Directed by Rob Sitch.

The title comes from a session at a school where past students come back to address present students about their life and work. Alex (a vivacious Rachael Taylor) captures their attention with her explanation of her aid work in Yemen and other countries. Ben (Josh Lawson) talks about product campaigns. The students want to ask her questions. When the headmaster (a typically enjoyable cameo from director Rob Sitch) asks 'Any Questions for Ben', hands go down, there is not a one.

Of course, the main concern of the title is whether Ben has any questions for himself. At the opening, he sees himself as living the good life – even the better life. He has an apartment, a solid job, a flow of girl friends, the possibilities of being out and around socially whenever he wants. By the end of the film, especially when he botches his relationship with Alex, the questions arise, especially echoing that for Alfie back in the 1960s, 'What's it all about?'.

Ben is 27, turning 28. The film is geared towards that audience who, one hopes, will identify with Ben by the end. Because it has been written by the team who brought us The Castle, The Dish and many entertaining television programs, it is a perspective of 40 somethings who have been through all

of this. Which makes it that bit more interesting, eventually, for those who are beyond 27 (or can't remember it).

Ben is fairly casual with ex-girlfriends (and we meet a few) and stupidly casual with Alex. He has a best mate, Andy (Christian Clark) who shares his flat but who has little conception of what Ben is talking about when he begins to question. But, he does have a best friend, Nick (Daniel Henshall who won so many awards for a completely opposite character, the serial killer, John Bunting, in *Snowtown*), a lawyer, but rather a simple soul who has values in his happy life. His future wife is played with sense and humour by Felicity Ward.

So, in a way, we meander through Ben's life with him, his fickleness, his visits to his parents, his being advised, sometimes badly, by friend, Sam (Lachy Hulme), at his work, wanting to change jobs, wanting to move, unable to contact Alex...

There is some humour, of course, a mixture of interesting and less interesting episodes, some impatience with Ben, which means that, despite its good intentions, it is rather a hit or miss slice of life.

THE ARTIST

France, 2011,

Jean Dujardin, Berenice Bejo, John Goodman, Penelope Ann Miller,

Directed by Michel Hazanavicius.

The surprise winner of the 2011 Oscar for Best Film as well as for Best Director, Score and the Best Actor, Jean Dujardin. And winner of a host of other awards around the world.

The appeal? A film in black and white? Silent for words (except at the end) but not for sounds? A nostalgic memoir of the years in Hollywood for the transition from silent films to sound? A genial, if sometime despairing hero, a charming and bright leading lady? Success and failure? All of the above – and many more.

Actually, the basic plot is not original. It is a variation on *A Star is Born*, where the actor's career diminishes while his younger partner's career takes off and flourishes.

There is a great deal of enjoyment in the opening far-fetched 20s adventure on screen in one of those old picture palaces. Then the applause and the ego of the actor at the expense of the actress and the despair of the director. And all done, silently, in that theatrical miming style of performance.

Jean Dujardin shines on the screen, even when he is being egotistical, when he is desperately filming another old-fashioned silent adventure, when he is caught up with the ingénue, Peppy Miller, and arguing with his wife, his director, even his loyal chauffeur. But, he is always genial with Uggie, the dog, who is also a scene stealer.

Berenice Bejo (who is the director's wife) shines on screen in every appearance, in her chance photo for Variety and her audition, her films (in the Clara Bow vein of the times), her singing and dancing. She also shines in her devotion to George Valentin and her care for him in his despair.

So, arresting characters, a chance to look back at Hollywood of old and Hollywood in transition, the age-old stories of flops and successes – and, with zest at the end, of new beginnings.

THE BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL for the elderly and beautiful

UK, 2012,

Judi Dench, Bill Nighy, Maggie Smith, Tom Wilkinson, Penelope Walton, Ronald Pickup, Celia Imrie, Dev Patel, Diana Hardcastle.

Directed by John Madden.

If you don't enjoy this pleasing story of elderly British in Jaipur, responding to India, you are probably a stone – or, maybe, young!

First of all, this is an excellent cast, British character actors at their best. And they are well served by an amusing, often witty, script by Ol Parker who has adapted a novel by Deborah Moggach, *These Foolish Things*. And, apart from the opening which introduces the main characters in a less than attractive Britain, the rest of the film was shot in India, colourful and full of verve.

We find seven people who are having difficulties in England and in need of some kind of move. For most of them it is going away from home, job or, even, family. One has need for an immediate hip replacement operation. They all come across a brochure advertising the hotel of the title – the

brainwave of a young man (gifted with enthusiastic dreaming but not with managerial skills): just as so many industries outsource to India, why not the care for the elderly?

Anyway, off goes this motley group, only to find it (you've guessed it), exotic and best are the last words you would use to describe the hotel. But, a saying is repeated, the optimistic 'Everything will be all right at the end. So, if it is not all right, it is not yet the end'!

As the visitors begin to adapt to Jaipur, so do we (though there is one resister in the group). One does tours and delights in India, two are after partners and have roving eyes, one gets a job tutoring at a Call Centre, one is searching for a long lost friend. This provides quite some emotional and entertaining action. But, all the central characters get at least one opportunity for some heavy emoting.

Judi Dench is at her quietly charming best. Maggie Smith (who needs the hip surgery) is prejudiced and unashamed at her xenophobia, effectively delivering some bigoted lines in dominating form. Bill Nighy and Penelope Wilton are a couple, he discovering a new world, she resisting it. Celia Imre and Ronald Pickup are the two who are on the lookout for someone else in their lives. The Slumdog Millionaire himself, Dev Patel, is credibly enthusiastic as the proprietor of the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (who has to cope with a dominant mother who disapproves of his love for a modern young woman who works at the call centre).

While the film is basically light entertainment, there is still enough depth in the dialogue and characterization to raise some more serious thoughts and feelings about ageing, care for the elderly – and taking advantage of opportunities in later years.

BUCK

US, 2011,

Buck Brannaman.

Directed by Cindy Meehl.

This is a most amiable documentary, all the more surprising because of the early hard life of its central character, Buck Brannaman. Buck is a horse trainer, one of the inspirations for *The Horse Whisperer*, and a consultant for that film.

Easygoing would be another word to describe the experience of watching Buck in action and learning about his story. First-time director, Cindy Meehl, obviously became an enthusiast as she went around

after Buck to what he calls his 'clinics'. These are sessions with a variety of clients (mostly in states like Montana, Wyoming or Texas) who want to learn how to handle their horses better and more humanely. This is what Buck is very good at. It is fascinating to see him communicate quietly with the horses, give them some leeway with the reins, touch them gently with cloths so that they are not afraid.

Actually, Buck makes comparisons with the development of children in his comments on how the horses react and overcome their apprehensions and fears.

Which is important for Buck. He and his brother, Smokie, travelled the west at rodeos and other events when they were young children, doing rope tricks. They worked with their father who was a hard taskmaster and used to beat them physically. When their mother died, they were taken into foster care and Buck has good memories of Mr Shirley and is in touch with Mrs Shirley (who tells a joke during the final credits – which hosts a gallery of photos). There is not much mention of Smokie and what happened to him after he grew up, something we wonder about.

Friends and clients are warm in their telling of their experience with Buck. Particularly genial is Robert Redford who recounts his experiences with Buck in the filming of *The Horse Whisperer*, with Buck talking amusingly about the stunt horses who couldn't do their stunts whereas his untrained horse, with his guiding, finished a delicate scene with Scarlett Johansson in 20 minutes.

We see Buck's family, though he is on his travels around the west for most of the year, his wife accompanying him sometimes, his daughter doing her training with her father.

This is a very pleasing and hopeful portrait of a genial man.

CARNAGE

France/Poland, 2011

Jodie Foster, Kate Winslett, Christoph Waltz, John C. Reilly.

Directed by Roman Polanski.

Carnage is used to describe mayhem and consequent bloodshed. How could it apply to a very brief feature film (79 minutes), set in one room with four characters, two sets of parents who have come to

discuss a school incident where one eleven year old has struck another on the face, destroying two teeth, in a kid's argument?

But, it does.

The title of Yasmina Reza's play was *God of Carnage*. One of the participants refers to God in this way, a pessimistic view of human nature and the consequences of disputes.

The film is directed by Roman Polanski who is nearing eighty. But, there is a visual energy in the film despite the confinement to the apartment (with moves to several rooms and the outside corridor) and the film's reliance on words with its theatrical background. With a play, we can watch the whole stage and the ensemble or we can pick and choose which character we want to focus on and give full attention. With a film, the director does this for us. Some audiences may be unwilling, feeling they are being dictated to or manipulated. Others will go with the director's and editor's flow, looking and listening when there are close-ups or reaction shots, or a view of the group.

This is what happens here. It means that some dismiss the film as too stagey, too wordy, too confined. Others prefer to listen and follow the director's intentions.

Visits can be ominous. Films like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* helped audiences to listen to what was said, a flow of invective, note body language and gauge how conversation can descend into argument, into altercation, into hostility, into parties ganging up against the others, into self-revelation and alarming self-discovery.

This is what happens to the two New York couples who meet to come to terms with the behaviour of their sons.

Jodie Foster, cultured, politically correct, protective, and John C. Reilly, rough but amiable, conciliating, are Penelope and Michael, the parents of the victim. Kate Winslett, social, concerned, up-market, and Christoph Waltz, smart lawyer, detached from the events, unwilling to be present, are Nancy and Alan, the parents of the aggressive boy. As they talk, return to the room instead of leaving, discuss, let bias rise, some intolerance, hostility (and not just between the two groups but, eventually, between husbands and wives) and some desperation.

The four actors are particularly good, sustaining the good manners, then succumbing to aggressive criticism. The talk is punctured and moved to action by two surprising moments. One is a sudden scene of vomiting which alters the dynamic of the relationships. The second is the tossing of a mobile

phone into a vase of flowers. Most audiences will applaud this action since Alan has spent almost as much time on his phone discussing litigation as he has in giving attention to the behavior of his son (probably more).

Yasmina Reza, who also wrote the witty and word-conscious play, *Art*, has more than a way with words (translated here from the French), and has many an insight into relationships and behavior.

If you like *Carnage*, it would probably repay a second viewing and, especially, a second opportunity to listen to the interplay of ideas, emotions and words and to study the body language.

CHRONICLE

US, 2011,

Dane de Haan, Alex Russell, Michael B. Jordan, Michael Kelly.

Directed by Josh Trank

Chronicle sounds a fairly straightforward title – though the film runs for only 84 minutes, rather a short time for a chronicle.

This is another hand-held camera story, allegedly using footage taken by Andrew (Dane de Haan), the central character, with his new camera. In the latter part of the film, other alleged footage from surveillance cameras and other sources is edited in. So, we are in the *Blair Witch* tradition, though the story takes us in quite a different direction.

All seems rather domestic at first: Andrew's room, his alcoholic father, his ailing mother, school where he is put down all the time, a party where he irritates people by filming. His main friend is his cousin Matthew (Alex Russell) who tries to put the brakes on all the filming, hoping Andrew will get a life. He does, but the most hoped-for.

Matthew is joined by class president, Steve (Michael B. Jordan) as they explore a mysterious hole in the ground and ask Andrew to film. Something in the hole exercises a strange power and they become telekinetic as well as finding they can soar into the air.

Strong change of pace at this juncture.

What first seems something jokey and a bit of horseplay becomes something dangerous, fatal for one of the group. And Andrew seems to be taken over by the power, becoming extremely vindictive, cruel to friends and his many foes, ultimately becoming, not a superhero, but a supervillain. He could have become a Spiderman type for good but turns into the Green Goblin and the other evil characters from the Spiderman films.

The film becomes rather spectacular by the end as Andrew wreaks his revenge as well being destructive just because he can. He rationalizes his attitudes with theories of evolution and survival of the fittest, rather Nietzschean (though Schopenhauer and Plato are quoted), an evil super-man beyond morality.

Chronicle was filmed in South Africa with quite some interesting special effects – South Africa did a very good job with District 9 and its effects some years ago.

Younger audiences will identify with the characters and the situations and then be challenged by Andrew's behaviour. This one has proven popular and may be on its way to cult movie status.

CONTRABAND

US, 2012,

Mark Wahlberg, Kate Beckinsale, Ben Foster, Giovanni Ribisi, David O'Hara, Diego Luna, J.K. Simmons.

Directed by Baltasar Kormakur.

Gritty is one of the words that a reviewer might grope for while watching Contraband. The story is gritty. The characters are gritty – and not easy to sympathise with. Most of them have had difficult lives, and where we catch up with them life is certainly not any easier.

The setting is New Orleans, especially the waterfront (and without the tourist glamour). Much of the action is at sea. There is a visit to Panama City (which looks quite up-to-date).

Most of the characters are involved in contraband, one way or another. A young man gets himself and his friend into trouble by dropping smuggled drugs into the sea when they are pursued by the authorities. Their dealer (Giovanni Ribisi at his most repellent) not only wants compensation, he uses

the incident to force the older brother of the rash young man to resume what he used to do before he married and had a family. This is not only dangerous in terms of contraband and detection, but there are, of course, shady characters, violent characters, whose actions are unpredictable except for their nastiness. Gritty.

The story and the action, the threats and the violence, are all up to expectations. The film is a re-make of an Icelandic film of 2008, Reykjavik-Rotterdam, and it is directed by award-winning Icelandic director and actor, Baltasar Kormakur (Jar City, A Little Trip to Heaven) who took the lead in Reykjavik-Rotterdam. Perhaps that is why it seems tougher (and grittier) than the US equivalent.

Mark Wahlberg can do this kind of role without effort. Kate Beckinsale is his wife (and becomes victimized more than we might have anticipated). Working class people for whom life can always be a struggle (except when you have an ending like the one here with who gets away with what!). Lurking in a sinister way is Ben Foster who seems to be making a career of playing really unpleasant villains (The Mechanic, 3:10 to Yuma). J.K. Simmons is the captain of the ship carrying not only drugs but counterfeit cash from Panama as well.

It is all done very efficiently, but it is a dark kind of action show.

A DANGEROUS METHOD

UK/ Canada, 2011,

Michael Fassbender, Keira Knightly, Viggo Mortensen, Vincent Cassel,

Directed by David Cronenberg.

A Dangerous Method by John Kerr was the title of a book about the therapy methods employed by Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, focusing on the processes of psychoanalysis, the client talking and the therapist listening. The book was used as a basis for a play by Christopher Hampton which he called The Talking Cure.

Christopher Hampton (whose plays and films include Dangerous Liaisons, The Secret Agent, Imagining Argentina, Cheri) has written the screenplay for this film based on his play. It has been directed by David Cronenberg who, for more than thirty years, has made a wide range of films, from horror science-fiction to psychological dramas like Spider, A History of Violence and Eastern Promises.

The film has been promoted as dramatizing birth of psychoanalysis or the break between Freud and Jung. This is certainly the case, but there is much more. In fact, the attention is principally on Jung, his ideas, his work and his personal life. While Freud is present, he is seen in conjunction with his friendship for Jung and then their parting of ways. The screenplay reminds us of the differences between them, Jung from Switzerland, Freud from Austria, Jung wealthy, Freud poorer and with a large family, Jung Protestant, Freud Jewish.

It is important to realise that while the action of *A Dangerous Method* takes place over a ten year period to 1914, Freud was not to die until 1939, exiled from Austria to London. Jung did not die until 1961. Freud still had a great deal to achieve, but Jung's main life work took place after the action of the film ends.

The other important characters in the film are Jung's long-suffering and pardoning wife, Emma (Sarah Gadon), as well as Jung's key patient, Sabina Spielrein, whom he treated, with whom he had an affair, who contributed to 'freeing' him from his rather strict, even repressed, persona. Another character is introduced, an eccentric psychological study who advocated a freedom from a morals-bound world, Otto Gross, played by Vincent Cassel.

One thing that should be said, is that the film looks very handsome indeed, recreating the elegant European settings pre-World War I and capitalizing on the scenic beauty of Switzerland.

What does the film have to offer on Freud and on Jung?

As played by Michael Fassbender (rather the opposite of his powerful performance as the sex addict in *Shame*), Jung is a dignified man, proper in dress and manner, fascinated by the human psyche and the 'talking cure' for his patients. He is married and beginning a family, more devoted to his wife than loving her. At this stage of his career, it is the psychoanalysis and its possibilities that interest him and so draw him to Freud, correspondence and, eventually, a visit to Vienna and a 13 hour conversation with the master. Freud respects Jung, seeing him as a kind of surrogate son or nephew.

The complication for Jung's life is his work with the Russian, Sabina Spielrein. She is played with some force by Keira Knightly, especially in the early therapy scenes where her traumas take physical hold of her, strain, jutting chin, rigidity, and she eventually admits to masochistic feelings derived from her father's beating her and humiliating her as a child. Nevertheless, she wants to study psychology and become a therapist (which, historically, she did, practising in Russia for almost thirty years before a round-up of Jews and Nazi execution early in World War II).

The further complication for Jung is Sabine's transference of affections and Jung's succumbing to her seduction and being transformed by her, worrying about professional ethics, about his wife and her pregnancies, deceiving Freud as to the truth of his relationship.

As played by Viggo Mortensen, Freud is the elder statesman of psychoanalysis, rather sure in his professional activities, his reputation and his ideas. He has a touch of the pompous. Which makes his break with Jung a matter of principle before emotion.

Students of psychology are familiar with Freud's emphasis on more rigorous scientific methods in his approach to patients, his theories about the sexual origins of human behavior and sexuality in psychological understanding and healing, his excluding of religion and other 'mystical' aspects of the psyche from psychology. This is dramatised in several discussion sequences in the film and in the final correspondence. Jung is wary of the pan-sexual approach to personality. He also trusts in 'the mystical' and dreams which led him to pursue his work on archetypes.

Audiences not familiar with Freud and Jung except from hearsay may find the film rather difficult as they have to listen to conversations and watch therapy sessions. On the other hand, experts may find themselves arguing with the film's treatment of particular events or particular issues and psychological niceties. However, the film is not a text book, nor a treatise, but a dramatization of a significant period (rather than their whole life's work) in Freud's life and formative years in the life and career of Jung.

It is not often that a mentally stimulating film like this comes along, and it is to be welcomed.

[In 1962, John Huston directed Montgomery Clift in Freud (which was sub-titled, A Secret Passion). An amusing – and more than amusing – flight of fancy had Freud treating Sherlock Holmes and Holmes learning something about detection from psychology in Nicholas Meyer's The Seven Per Cent Solution (1976). The relationship between Jung and Sabina Spielrein was dramatized in The Soul Keeper (2002), with Iain Glenn as Jung and Emilia Fox as Sabina.]

THE DEVIL INSIDE

US, 2012,

Fernanda Andrade, Simon Quarterman, Evan Helmuth.

Directed by William Brent Bell.

It is almost forty years since the release of *The Exorcist*. Movie-makers and audiences have had an almost non-stop fascination with diabolic possession films and exorcisms. Fascination with 'the dark side'? An indulgence in superstition? Morbid curiosity? Of course, those of a more sceptical frame of mind have an in-built resistance and can dismiss these films as harking back to medieval beliefs or treat the films as horror films and sit back in their seats with dismissive judgmental sensibilities.

Then there are those who are believers, who may have experienced possession and exorcism remotely, on television or in films, and wonder whether there is something in these bizarre stories and seemingly secret rituals.

In recent years, the Catholic Church has established a course in Rome for exorcists and those interested in these experiences of the devil. The course featured in the 2011 film with Anthony Hopkins, *The Rite*, and also features in this film.

The Devil Inside might be seen as a commercial rip-off of such films as *The Rite* – and it probably is. However, quite some thought has been given to the screenplay and its plausibility and checking out a lot of Catholic details. Critics will say that too little thought has been given to the screenplay – and with some justification concerning the ending since the film just stops (surprised laughter at the session I attended) with a more than melodramatic moment. Perhaps, the makers had run out of ideas and/or budget.

Again, the makers use the now tradition of *The Blair Witch Project*, disguising fiction as fact. They also do quite a bit of hand-held camera work to pretend that it is all authentic footage (often with dates and times indicated as in the *Paranormal Activity* series). It opens with a video of a crime scene walk through by detectives with commentary introducing the deaths of two priests and a nun during an exorcism of a housewife. After being declared criminally insane by the Connecticut courts, she was transferred to a Roman institution for the criminally insane. That was in 1989.

Now, in 2009, her daughter, Isabella, wants to understand what happens and decides to make a documentary. For the first part of the film, it continues in a documentary style, a film that you might see on television.

Isabella sits in on the course in Rome, which gives the film a chance to offer some thoughts on possession and raise questions about true possession and mental states. In the class are an American doctor become priest and an English priest whose uncle was an exorcist. They use technological equipment for their exorcisms and reveal that they are doing their work without church approval (with some comments in the vein of hierarchy cover-ups and bureaucratic mind-sets).

They take Isabella and her cameraman to an actual exorcism – echoes of *The Exorcist* with contortions, hurlings and prayer in English and Latin. Isabella agrees to a similar exorcism for her mother who has recognised her but is hostile – and has been officially declared mad rather than possessed.

By this time, the sceptic audience is probably in full scorn mode. The believers are wondering whether this can really happen. Those who have been following it sympathetically are hoping that the exorcism will be a success but their moviegoing experience is probably warning them that this is the stage where you surrender belief and just go with the ever-increasing melodramatic and violent flow. It actually does become more melodramatic than expected – and then that stop and the final credits.

It's only a small-budget, 83 minute possession thriller so better not to make a mountain out of a mole hill. (In 2010, there was a Protestant/ Evangelical variation on this theme, *The Last Exorcism*). There is an initial disclaimer that the Vatican did not give any official approval of the film or help in its making!

GONE

US, 2012,

Amanda Seyfried, Dan Sunjata, Wes Bentley, Michael Pare.

Directed by Heitor Dhalia.

Gone is an abduction story. Amanda Seyfried plays Jill, trying to recover after being abducted two years earlier and escaping from her captor. However, she lives in dread that he will try to take her again.

She is not wrong. But, he takes her sister instead and then lures Jill back to the deep hole in the forest outside Portland, Oregon, where he had imprisoned her before. Though she has been on suicide watch and having therapy, she takes control of events when she discovers her sister missing. The police dismiss her claims because of her medical and mental history.

Most of the action takes place over the one day, with Jill's discovery and then her quite skilful detection work to track down the criminal – the police could take lessons from her! It all builds up to a climax, of course, with Jill confronting her captor.

It's a film that would have more impact on its female audience, especially younger women who would identify with Jill, both in her suffering the abduction and in her taking control of her life and the case.

HEADHUNTERS (HODEJEGERNE)

Norway, 2009,

Aksel Hennie, Nicolaj Coster-Waldau.

Directed by Morten Tyldum.

Headhunters is a novel by Jo Nesbo whose crime stories are beginning to be more prominent on bookshop shelves. This film might encourage this interest.

With its Norwegian settings, business and fraud plot, many audiences will be thinking of Stig Larsson and his Millennium series. However, the storytelling here is more direct, leaving the complications and twists until the end. In fact, the screenplay is exemplary in taking the audience step by step along the plot, each episode ending with a surprise or a thread that needs development – which does follow. This provides continued interest and curiosity and for some surprises.

During the credits, the central character, Roger Brown (Aksel Hennie), explains (and the film shows) the steps needed for an art thief to go into a house and substitute a fake work of art for the real thing (and then sell it on the black market). This is the introduction to Roger, who comments on his short stature and his statuesque blonde wife, his good fortune (built on the profits from stealing) and his job as a headhunter, interviewing prospective executives for companies.

When a Danish businessman, Clas Greve (Nicolaj Coster-Waldau) comes from Holland and a prestigious company there to visit his wife's gallery, Roger interviews him for his job. Greve claims to have a lost Rubens in his apartment. When Roger searches the apartment, he finds his wife's mobile phone and subsequently rejects Greve's application for the job.

The tone changes when the arrangements for selling the painting are upset. Some murders ensue and Roger is found under suspicion and attempting to escape the police. Of course, Greve is behind the pursuit and we learn why. After that, it is cat and mouse – and an ending which we may not have anticipated.

A caution for sensitive audiences. There is a vivid sequence in an outhouse when Roger tries to elude his pursuer. It may be too realistic for some, even though it is a strong point in the plot. There is also a car accident with some graphic close-ups of injured bodies.

But, on the whole, *John Carter* is well-plotted, written and acted, a satisfying thriller of its kind.

JOHN CARTER

US, 2012,

Taylor Kitsch, Lynn Collins, Ciaran Hinds, Dominic West, Mark Strong, James Purefoy;

Voices of Willem Dafoe, Thomas Haden Church, Samantha Morton.

Directed by Andrew Stanton.

Andrew Stanton won Oscars for his animation classics, *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*. He won't be up for many awards for *John Carter*.

The film has good intentions and an even bigger budget and is in 3D. However, while one would like it to be better, it is rather cumbersome in its storytelling. A pity, because many audiences will enjoy it, but could have enjoyed it more.

It is very much in the *Star Wars* tradition with its alien planet, its strange special effects characters and creatures, an action hero, and a lively princess, plenty of flying machines and battles.

The film is based on Edgar Rice Burroughs' story, *A Princess on Mars*, one of many stories he wrote (while not writing his *Tarzan* stories) about imaginary life on Mars. It opens in the *Star Wars*' vein with futuristic-looking cities, space ship style planes for wars between rival cities, and the introduction of a power-hungry ruler (Dominic West) and the Therns, the elusive rulers of the universe, malicious beings who control power, set up rulers and then watch how populations clash and destroy themselves and their planets. Mark Strong (who seems to be in every other film) is the dignified but deadly chief Thern.

Then we are in New York City, 1881, rainy and dingy, while John Carter eludes a pursuer. Soon we are at his country estate with his nephew, Edgar Rice Burroughs, discovering his uncle is dead and reading a manuscript he bequeathed him. This manuscript sends Edgar and us back to 1868 and the American west where former confederate cavalryman, John Carter, is not popular with northerners as

he searches for gold. Escaping from Apaches, he finds a cave, a dying man and a medallion by which, when a formula is spoken, he is whisked to Mars.

The adventures on Mars involve his discovery by a community of creatures, The Tharks, his meeting the princess and helping her escape to home where she is to be married off to the power hungry ruler to save her city. Before she can be saved, John Carter has to endure a fight with giant white apes in the arena, defeat the usurping leader and rouse the Tharks to rescue the princess and her city.

So, plenty of adventure, plenty of effects and stunts, a solid British supporting cast, including Ciaran Hinds and James Purefoy and Willem Dafoe, Thomas Haden Church and Samantha Morton voicing the Thark characters. Taylor Kitsch, looking a bit Heath Ledgerish (though not moving towards Oscar nominations) is the American hero who comes in and, with some help, still shows how American heroes can come in and save the day, even on Mars.

ONE FOR THE MONEY

US, 2012,

Katherine Heigl, Jason O'Mara, Dan Sunjata, Debbie Reynolds,

Directed by Julie Anne Robinson.

Stephanie Plum is the central character in a series of popular novels by Janet Evanovich. She is sometimes slow, sometimes fast and, as in this film, brings in her man.

At the opening, Stephanie's voiceover tells us of her failures, marriage, keeping a job... but her grandmother, a sprightly, almost-80 Debbie Reynolds still acting with the same verve and cheeky lines, gets her a job at her cousin's bail-bond firm. Her first target is a former boyfriend of whom she has bad memories, as has he of her because she broke his leg in a car accident.

It's a mixture of crime solving and romantic comedy, the ups and downs of both.

Katherine Heigl is a strong screen presence – and is not as persuasive as slow Stephanie as smart Stephanie – and carries the film. Jason O'Mara is the policeman who is accused of murder and has skipped bail. Stephanie tracks him down and heads for the happy ending we are sure is going to happen.

Light lite!

PROJECT X

US, 2012,

Thomas Mann, Oliver Cooper,

Directed by Nima Nourizadeh.

Depressing viewing.

Other words that come to mind are: irresponsible, stupid, would-be lascivious (and sometimes succeeding), too frequent four-letter inanities...

For those who have not walked out, there is some interest towards the end, though it is also far-fetched, when a drug-fuelled dealer (whose garden gnome (full of extasy tablets) has been stolen by the teenagers who were organizing a party for a 17th birthday when the parents were away) arrives with a flame-thrower and destroys homes in a Pasadena street with SWAT, police and media all covering the mayhem.

However, any good will towards the film and its pseudo-documentary style in covering the party is lost when some slight apologies are mouthed but the film glorifies the mischief-makers as great guys, especially amongst their school friends – and the father even pleased that his previously-considered loser son had this in him. Final captions are cynical – this kind of film having no sense of irony.

And a thought. These are the future adults of America who will be part of occupying and peace-keeping forces. Many from other cultures must be scratching their heads in puzzlement as they watch this kind of thing.

SAFE HOUSE

US, 2012,

Denzel Washington, Ryan Reynolds, Vera Farmiga, Sam Shepard, Brendan Gleeson,

Directed by Danial Espinosa.

National secret agencies, rogue operatives, surveillance and secrets – popular ingredients for espionage thrillers. *Safe House* takes up a story of the interior workings of agencies and dealing with agents who have betrayed their country, selling top level information.

The setting is South Africa and the film takes advantage of Cape Town locations as well as of the countryside. The rogue agent in question is Tobin Frost, played with his customary charm, intelligence and shrewdness by Denzel Washington. When he is taken by mercenaries, he escapes to the US consulate where he is transferred to a safe house with Ryan Reynolds as his keeper and where he is interrogated. However, the safe house is attacked and both men go on the run.

There are a number of scenes in Langley as supervising authorities try to control the flow of events. They are played by Sam Shepard, Vera Farmiga and Brendan Gleeson. It is interesting to watch how the US manages matters in a distant country and the means of surveillance and communication.

Most of the film involves chases, Frost escaping into a crowded sports arena, the pursuit by mercenaries and a final confrontation and the revelation of the villain (not too hard to spot).

It works quite well, offers both interest and excitement, with Denzel Washington and Ryan Reynolds playing well off each other.

THIS MEANS WAR

US, 2012,

Reese Witherspoon, Chris Pine, Top Hardy, Til Schweiger,

Directed by McG.

Despite the bellicose title, this seems to be a perfect date film!

It starts with action, villains, explosions, derring-do agents in a Hong Kong setting. The men who like this kind of stuff reeled in.

The two young agents are played by Chris Pine and Tom Hardy, initially charming, even over-smooth but soon revealed as he-men. The women who are attracted to the stars and this kind of image reeled in.

But, back home in LA, the romantic comedy style sets in. Chris Pine is a bachelor on the loose. Tom Hardy is separated and has a young son. We are then introduced to Reese Witherspoon, a wiz on testing the efficiency of products, whose wise-cracking, sounding-permissive-but-happily-married friend (Chelsea Handler) has posted her on a dating web-site. The next complications lead to her meeting Hardy, then meeting Pine, and liking them both. When they discover what has happened, 'this means war'!

This is a romantic comedy with the surveillance and technological intervention means of a covert agency at their disposal to spy on each other and sabotage dates. But, of course, the villain comes to LA to get them which, of course, leads to chases (with an unwitting Reese Witherspoon along for the rides) and all kinds of heroics and explosions. She has to choose – and if you are alert to the formula, it is clear on paper, if not convincingly, which hero she will choose.

Happy endings all round – and those who have seen it on a date movie outing acknowledging that it worked for them!

TYRANNOSAUR

UK, 2011,

Peter Mullan, Olivia Coleman, Eddie Marsan,

Directed by Paddy Considine.

Written and directed by actor Paddy Considine, this is a most impressive piece of film-making. However, it is tough watching. It is a portrait of two damaged people, depicted with emotional and psychological intensity.

Peter Mullan is a fine serious actor (My Name is Joe, Neds). Here, as Joseph, a lonely widower in Leeds, he is the embodiment of rage, taking it out on his dog, on young Pakistanis, on friends. Many a time in the film, Paddy Considine simply focuses the camera on him as he sits, not speaking, yet communicating volumes. But, he is capable of some tender moments and apologies. He is concerned for the little boy across the street who plays by himself while his mother and her boyfriend ignore him. He goes to the bedside of his dying friend. Yet, the rage can surface. He can feel himself provoked and lashes out physically and verbally with a vicious and cutting tongue.

After being bashed at home by the Pakistani youths, he takes refuge in an op shop, hiding behind a rack of clothes. The volunteer on duty is Hannah who is only momentarily taken aback but talks to Joseph and prays for him. Hannah seems a cheery soul but she too becomes a target for Joseph's vitriol against God and against her and what he sees as her social status. Hannah is played most movingly by Olivia Coleman (Carol Thatcher in *The Iron Lady*) who creates a complex and memorable character, a woman battered by her husband and by life.

Eddie Marsan plays Hannah's erratic husband, charming on the outside, cruel, jealous and vindictive on the inside.

As the film progresses, we learn more about each of the characters, that there is far more to them than the immediate, desperate impression. There is always an appeal for compassion for Hannah – but a surprise (but, perhaps, not unsurprising) turn of events in her life. Joseph, despite the recurring rage, has many redeeming features below the surface.

If you would like to see a finely written and performed but challenging picture of human nature, not without some hope, then *Tyrannosaur* can be recommended. (Perhaps the title with its mix of tyrant and dinosaur is a bit too clever, especially as introduced in the film in connection with Joseph's late wife.)

SIGNIS REVIEWS APRIL 2012

21 JUMP STREET

AMOUR DE JOURNESSE, UN/ GOODBYE, FIRST LOVE

DEEP BLUE SEA, The

DR SEUSS' THE LORAX

GHOST RIDER

HOTEL LUX

HUNGER GAMES, The

KID WITH A BIKE

LE HAVRE

MIRROR, MIRROR

NEIGES DU KILIMANJARO, Les

THE PIRATES, BAND OF MISFITS

RAID, The

RUM DIARY, The

SALMON FISHING IN THE YEMEN

SORCERER AND THE WHITE SNAKE, The

SOURCE, The

TOMBOY

WAY, The

WELL-DIGGER'S DAUGHTER, The

WISH YOU WERE HERE

WOMAN IN BLACK, The

WRATH OF THE TITANS, The

21 JUMP STREET

US, 2012,

Jonah Hill, Channing Tatum. Dave Franco

Directed by Phil Lord, Chris Miller

Basically, for a younger demographic.

This is the popular television series (with Johnny Depp who does an entertaining cameo this time) from the later 1980s. Almost a quarter of century later, Jonah Hill and fellow writers, have taken the core plot and more than updated it. Yes, there are the two cops (ineffectual rookies, Channing Tatum, the heartthrob from school now struggling with studies and even remembering his Miranda warnings properly, and Jonah Hill the ultra-gawky nerd with brains but finding the police training a physical challenge, are no on the first assignment, patrolling a quiet park on bicycles.

When their attempted arrest of some bikies flops, they are assigned to a special squad housed in the Church of the Aroma of Christ, a former Korean church with a Korean Jesus crucifix. It is presided over by a continually angry and swearing Ice Cube. Talking of swearing, there is much more here than on the TV series and a preoccupation with raucous comedy and frequent phallic jokes. The rookies are assigned to undercover work to find dealers and makers of a new drug (which they first watch on a You Tube clip).

Yes, they are too old for school, but, after getting their fake names mixed up, they go to the wrong courses, Jonah to sport as well as a performance of Peter Pan, Channing to science. The comedy is that each adapts to his opposite. And it is all mixed up with the pleasant dealer who gets them in on the act, with a girl who finds Jonah attractive, the fellow nerds with whom Channing feels more and more at home, with a leering sports coach, and with the bikies – which leads to shoot-outs and traffic jammed chases and explosions.

Younger audiences will find it funny, and the two do play well off each other. Older audiences may find it a bit too much to spend so much time in this school and might feel that a little of our heroes goes a fairly long way.

AMOUR DU JEUNESSE/ GOODBYE FIRST LOVE

France, 2011,

Lola Creton, Sebastian Urzendowski,

Directed by Mia Hansen Love.

Writer-director Mia Hansen Love was not yet thirty when she made this film, after success with her earlier films, especially, *The Father of My Children*. In interviews, she has remarked that her films have autobiographical elements, this one in particular.

This is the story of Camille, a fatalistic romantic even as a school girl. She is in a relationship with a photographer, whose name is, rather unexpectedly, Sullivan, and declares her undying love. He however, wants some time away, to go to South American with friends and be himself. He still loves Camille but not that much. She, on the other hand, pines for him.

Eventually, she has to do something with her life. She studies and, as the years pass and Sullivan does not return, she becomes an architect, quite a creative architect, and attracts the attention of her (married) Norwegian professor. It is rather a long time rebound, but for some years, they have a relationship.

One day, she encounters Sullivan's mother in a bus and finds that he has returned some years earlier and is living in Marseilles.

The main question of the last part of the film when Sullivan and Camille resume their relationship (and Camille shows she is adept at concealment and deception) is whether this new phase can last or this is the bitter-sweet conclusion.

The film is very French in that concentrated focus on serious characters and intense emotions. Lola Creton has to age from fifteen to her late twenties. It was a surprise to find that, though she looked older earlier in the film, she was only eighteen at the time of production. German Sebastian Urzendowski is the dark handsome Sullivan who is really out of his depth in dealing with Camille. Magne Havard Brekke is the rather egotistical professor.

The success of the film's impact will depend on whether we can identify with Camille, her passions and her sadness, or whether she just seems obsessed and sad, and we wish she would grow out of it. But, this is how so many French dramas deal with such emotional stories.

THE DEEP BLUE SEA

UK, 2011,

Rachel Weisz, Tom Hiddleston, Simon Russell Beale, Barbara Jefford.

Directed by Terence Davies.

Highly, very highly, stylised.

That can serve as a review description – but also as a warning to audiences who like their dramas straightforward, even realistic, rather than one presented as consciously contrived for dramatic effect. The latter is what Terence Davies has done in his comparatively few films, made over more than two decades. His semi-autobiographical films, *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* (something of a masterpiece of British wartime mood insight) and the more straightforward, *The Long Day Closes*, had a distinctive measured pace, a selection of events that revealed characters but always in a context that blended the real with the lights and shadows of house interiors. And then there was the musical score, sometimes classic, often popular, even with scenes of community singing in the local pub.

He drew on these characteristics for his adaptations of novels, *The Neon Bible* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*.

He put himself into his documentary on Liverpool for its year as European city of culture, *Of Times and Places*. His commentary during that film as well as in media interviews show him as rather held-in, prissy-mannered, often cutting in his remarks.

All these influences are discernible in his adaptation of Terence Rattigan's 1952 play about marriage, formality, desire for passion and memories of the war, *The Deep Blue Sea*, filmed in 1954 with Vivien Leigh and Kenneth More.

While the principal action takes place over one day, beginning with Hester Collier's suicide attempt in the morning and her being left alone in the evening, the early part of the film enables us to go into Hester's memories and how she came to this state of mind. And, during the day, there are further flashbacks which complete her story.

The film opens in the London street (about 1950), cranes up to Hester standing at the window and then moves inside. It ends with Hester again at the window, then the camera outside and tracking in reverse to a darkening evening and dwelling on some suburban ruins from the Blitz. Ruins at the end? Or, a shot of ruins knowing the London could rebuild and begin a new life?

Who is Hester Collyer? With Rattigan-Davies' dialogue and Rachel Weisz's powerful performance, we learn that she is a minister's daughter who has married Sir William, now a prominent judge, but who realises that she has a passionate nature and does not find passion in her marriage. (Her mother in law, played by veteran actress, Barbara Jefford in an excellent cameo of a self-centred, son-coddling, fastidious woman, warns her against passion which makes things so ugly.)

Hester is swept off her feet (and heart) by a World War II pilot, loving him intensely even when he can't quite manage the same emotions. He is played (with echoes of Dirk Bogarde, John Gregson, Kenneth More and all those military chappies) by Tom Hiddleston, an actor of wide range (Loki in *Thor*, the sympathetic officer with the horse in *War Horse*, as F.Scott Fitzgerald in *Midnight in Paris*). The flashbacks show the feelings in their relationship. The day of the film's action shows its limitations.

Unexpected, however, is the kindness shown by Sir William (award-winning West End theatre actor, Simon Russell Beale).

The pace of the film is very measured (unbearably slow, one reviewer regretted), attention to the framing of every shot, drawing on the atmosphere of the times, using Samuel Barber's Violin Concerto to Eddie Fisher and 'Any Time', and giving a thoughtful and feeling audience time enough to contemplate and to dwell on what they are watching.

In its elegant and often refined film-making, *The Deep Blue Sea* offers insight into the feelings of characters who are often very different from ourselves, who struggle with their lives and passions, often knowing they are doing wrong and hurting others but who cannot help themselves.

DR SEUSS' THE LORAX/ THE LORAX

US, 2012, 86 minutes, Colour.

Voices of Danny de Vito, Zac Efron, Ed Helms, Taylor Swift,

Directed by Chris Renaud, Kyle Balda.

This one is for younger, much younger audiences, so parents might have to bear up.

The Lorax, so he tells us at the opening, is the guardian of the forest and the trees (he is voiced by Danny de Vito). He recites a few of Dr Seuss' rhyming lines to introduce the story. But, then, with some acknowledgements to the author's writing style and the illustrations, it is straight on with a (very) American looking and sounding screenplay (with lots of 'cool' jargon that Dr Seuss, who died in 1991) may not have heard of or wanted to hear).

Young Ted (Zac Efron) is infatuated with Audrey (Taylor Swift). They live in a town that is completely plastic and know no better, except that Audrey is aware of trees. Ted is determined to find one for her, helped by his old gran (Betty White) who remembers them well. He escapes from the town – the inhabitants live in a cocooned community, Thneedville, like that in *The Truman Show* and have no desire or curiosity to go out. Ted finds The Once-ler (Ed Helms) in his grim tower. The Once-ler tells his sad story of confronting the Lorax and the animals and chopping down a tree to make an odd kind of twistable pullover, a Thneed – which then becomes the rage, and which means all the trees are destroyed and the Lorax and the animals leave.

In the meantime, Mr O'Hare (Rob Riggle, the maniacal coach villain of *21 Jump Street*), a less than pint-sized entrepreneur megalomaniac, has decided to sell fresh air in bottles to the gullible population. This leads, of course, to a confrontation with Mr O'Hare and his huge bodyguards, to a car and bike chase and to the planting of one seed so that trees might grow again,

So, a little parable on the environment, responsibility and conservation, consumerism and exploitation and everyone doing their bit for a better society. It is geared for junior primary audiences – and, since it has made over \$200,000,000 at the US box office, it must be reaching its mark. But, it is (very) American.

GHOST RIDER: SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE

US, 2012,

Nicolas Cage, Violante Placido, Idris Elba, Ciaran Hinds, Johnny Whitworth, Christopher Lambert,

Directed by Neveldine/ Taylor

For those who recognise the names of Neveldine and Taylor, they will know what to expect. Yes, it does have some resemblances to the much better written, acted and intriguing original Ghost Rider (2007 – and made in Melbourne). Nicolas Cage reprises his role (though a stunt double spends a lot of time riding Ghost Rider's bike, his head a flaming skull, and his wreaking vengeance on mercenary pursuers led by Johnny Whitworth). I am not sure that Cage's heart is in it sometimes.

But, back to Neveldine and Taylor. Their films so far are action extravaganzas, lots of flair, very showy, not too worried about characterisation, credibility or even themes and issues. It's just go for broke. They came into our awareness with the two Crank films with Jason Statham no holds barred. Another film was the Gerard Butler computer game flashy actioner, Gamer. As we watch their films and are carried along with the energy (or exhausted by it!), the pace of the editing and the almost non-stop action, we might think that they storyboard everything, that they plan each sequence and frame, wanting them to be full and busy. So, its cinema flair for a fair bit of dramatic nonsense.

Ciaran Hinds is a devil who has made a pact with John Blaze (Cage) with the result that Blaze is possessed by the demon to wreak vengeance on whomsoever. Blaze would like to be exorcised (and, at one stage, he is), but demons are hard to shake and it is just as well the ghost rider returns otherwise the end might have been a bit of a fizz.

Oh, the plot.

The devil has impregnated a woman as part of her deal with him. There are some prophecies (spoken by whom is not explained), but the apocalypse seems to be upon the world and the devil wants his son so that he can possess him – and rule the world, of course. Blaze rescues mother and son but they keep being caught...

One fascinating aspect of this screenplay is the religious dimension, not facets of faith, but the use of religious symbols. We have monasteries of friars (Christopher Lambert is the abbot of one of them) who are alert to the prophecy. We have an itinerant priest/warrior (Idris Elba) who does the exorcism for Blaze after his confession and bringing out of his bag bread which he calls the Lamb of God and proceeds to break it and give it to Blaze in communion. I wonder what the graphic novel fans make of this. It does mean that they ought to have some knowledge of the Christian and Gospel traditions.

Just to see these scenes is not a reason to see Ghost Rider. It is really for the comics aficionados and the admirers of the extravagances of Neveldine/Taylor.

HOTEL LUX

Germany, 2011

Michael Bully Herbig, Jurgen Vogel, Thekla Reuten,

Directed by Leander Haussmann

Hotel Lux is a euphemism for the rather dingy hotel in Moscow 1939. The film opens with a voiceover of the central character, a cabaret comedian from Berlin, Hans (Michael Bully Herbig) perched on the Red Star shining from the hotel roof. That is certainly different. So are the flashbacks when we see him and his Communist friend, Meyer (Jurgen Vogel) performing their act, a send-up of both Hitler and Stalin. Well, perhaps it is not so different insofar as many in the audience will think Mel Brooks and The Producers. I think Mel Brooks would be quite a fan of this film – especially since it veers into the territory charted by Jack Benny during World War II in To Be or Not to Be, mocking Hitler and the Nazis, a film that Mel Brooks and his wife, Anne Bancroft, remade in the 1980s.

As the film goes on and Hans grows a moustache, he could easily pass for a young Mel Brooks.

It is 1933 and, we remember from Cabaret, the night clubs in Berlin catered to a wide range of clients (including the Nationalist Socialist police) and it was still possible to imitate Hitler, his look, his voice and his mannerisms quite freely. That we are familiar with. It is the satire on Stalin that is new – and tellingly effective. Meyer is Hitler, Hans is Stalin.

It couldn't last too long as ideology tightens in Germany and some anti-Semitic routines are introduced. Meyer is a Communist with his friend, , and they go underground. Hans survives until

1938 when the friendly dresser at the club gets him a fake passport. He is on his way to Hollywood. Well, not exactly. He has to escape in a hurry and finds himself in Moscow where he is mistaken for Hitler's personal astrologer whose passport he has.

We don't see much satire on Stalin on our screens, so this film is welcome. Hans becomes Stalin's adviser (meeting in the toilet with the tap running for security) and finds himself with many privileges, though the KGB want to expose him. Meyer turns up again as does and Hans is in love with her.

How will they manage? How did Hans find himself stranded on the Red Star? That is part of the enjoyment of this comic excursion back into a very serious past.

THE HUNGER GAMES

US, 2012,

Jennifer Lawrence, Josh Hutcherson, Donald Sutherland, Woody Harrelson, Elizabeth Banks, Stanley Tucci,

Directed by Gary Ross.

Experts (young, especially, and old) have offered reassurances that this film is a good adaptation of the first novel in her trilogy by Suzanne Collins. Given a box-office take of over 150 million dollars in five days in the US, the film is also critic-proof.

Nevertheless, all reviewers have added their two penneth worth.

Not knowing much about the novels or film except some of the hype, I was not necessarily looking forward with eager anticipation. After all, a film for young audiences about a group of youngsters involved in deadly games (literally) with only one survivor, didn't sound the best.

However... it turns out to be an interesting and enjoyable film even for some oldies!

The popular description is still accurate but it reminds us that we shouldn't listen too much to 'what' a film is about but ask 'how' it is dramatised.

This is a futuristic film, a dystopian society, a phrase that is getting more and more use as we see futuristic films, apocalyptic films where populations are kept under tyrannical control or the world is going to end. This film offers an ironic image of contemporary society. 74 years earlier uprisings were put down and, as punishment (and for authority's control), each year a boy and a girl from the 12 districts are chosen by a lottery ('a reaping') as 'tribute' to be first feted (and sumptuously fed), then displayed in procession and interview on television for a population that relishes its privilege in bizarre clothes and make-up but mindlessly applauds the razzamatazz of the Hunger Games show. Of course, the Games are a deadly manifestation of Reality TV, though the organisers can intervene against the games for and against the contestants – which they do by advanced technology, even to creating virtual monsters.

So, Suzanne Collins has created a strange world that can draw in a young audience.

The film has a lot to show about society control. While the President, like Big Brother, is watching, so is the whole population, the frivolously cruel spectators watching futuristic gladiatorial combat to the death as well as the poorer inhabitants of West Virginia-like mining communities where the heroine comes from.

The dialogue is well-written and does not rely on sloppy or lazy writing. And, Jennifer Lawrence (already an Oscar nominee in her teens for *Winter's Bone*) is Katniss Everdene, a strong and intelligent heroine, resourceful, thoughtful and the opposite of some of the vicious and murderous contestants. Josh Hutcherson is effective as the partner from Katniss' district. Gary Ross, who collaborated with the author and other writers for the screenplay, has directed the film effectively. His other films include *Pleasantville* (with its parody and irony on television worlds is linked thematically with *The Hunger Games*) and the more straightforward racing film, *Seabiscuit*.

The supporting cast is very interesting with Elizabeth Banks (donning the bizarre costumes) as the chaperone and Woody Harrelson as a sympathetic trainer/publicist. A blue-buffed hairdo distinguishes Stanley Tucci as the play-to-the-audience-jovial TV compere. Wes Bentley as the organiser of the games looks darkly satanic with devilishly trimmed beard. Donald Sutherland is the president, quietly and murderously controlling.

While this film can be seen as a stand-alone story, Donald Sutherland turns to go up a staircase at the end – obviously there must be more.

THE KID WITH A BIKE/ LE GAMIN AU VELO

Belgium, 2011,

Thomas Doret, Cecile de France, Jeremie Renier

Directed by Jean Pierre and Luc Dardennes.

For insight into people and into their social contexts, audiences have found the films of the Dardennes Brothers from Liege movingly and expertly made. The brothers have twice won the Palme d'Or in Cannes (for Rosetta in 1998 and for The Child in 2005). They won the Special Jury Prize for this one.

This is a brief film, running under 90 minutes, more like a short story but no less effective for that. It opens instantly with a disturbed young boy resisting the efforts of a counsellor as he rings and rings his father's phone number – which has been disconnected. Then he runs. Cyril (Thomas Doret in a completely convincing performance, his first and so far only screen appearance) has been left at a school a month earlier and his father has disappeared. He has also sold his son's bike.

When Cyril eludes teachers to go to his father's last address, he takes refuge in a doctor's waiting room, clinging to a woman so that he won't be dragged away. This begins a new relationship which could save Cyril from himself and his disappointment with his father. The woman, Samantha, is played by that fine actress, Cecile de France.

Audiences will have formed strong opinions about Cyril and his irascible, brat-like behaviour and attitudes which are hard to take. Whether they will immediately identify with Samantha and her kindness and patience or will take a longer time to come to terms with the disturbed boy gives the film quite some emotional tension.

The impact is in the small detail: Samantha offering to take Cyril for weekends, his initial surly manner and conduct, her efforts to track down his father (Jeremie Renier, who was the irresponsible father in The Child), her taking Cyril to a fun fair with her boyfriend. Cyril is desperate for loving attention and falls in with a local gang which leads to some disastrous behaviour. Despite all this, Samantha continues to help Cyril.

Just before the end, when we might think and hope that all will be well, there are some violent moments – then Cyril riding his bike towards his future with some confidence. Not a neat ending, but hopeful for a finely made and thoughtful film.

LE HAVRE

Finland/ France, 2011

Andre Wilms, Jean-Pierre Darroussin, Kati Outinen, Blondin Miguel.

Directed by Aki Kaurismaki

While the advertising title is *Le Havre*, emphasising the port city of Normandy, the title in other countries includes the word 'miracle': *Miracle in Le Havre* for Denmark and Italy, *Le Havre Port of Hope* for Mexico. But, more of that later.

The best-known of Finnish directors, Aki Kaurismaki, has tended to make films which are both very serious and, often, very funny. He made a version of *La Boheme* in the 90s as well as his cult classic about a touring band with oddball hairdos, *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*. More recently, he has filmed rather darker stories set in Helsinki, *Man without a Past* and *Light in the Dusk*. Now he has gone to France, still serious, but with a light and humorous surface, that is very engaging.

Andre Wilms is entertainingly deadpan and kindly as Marcel Marx who makes a precarious living shining shoes at Le Havre station and around the town - if he can get customers. The film opens with him cleaning a pair of shoes for an Italian man who is almost immediately shot off screen with Marcel telling his Vietnamese partner that fortunately the man had had time to pay. We get to know Marcel very well.

Marcel's wife is loving and dutiful but ill and he takes her to hospital. In the meantime, he chats with local storeowners and at the local bar (with its sympathetic owner and a kind of odd chorus of bearded and tattooed patrons). When a young African escapes from a truck full of illegal immigrants and meets Marcel, Marcel takes him under his wing and hides him (except when he takes him out shoe-shining). A local busybody (veteran Jean-Pierre Leaud) reports him to the police. The world-weary inspector (the excellent Jean-Pierre Darroussin) pursues the case, confronts Marcel, and is instrumental in helping Marcel.

Kaurismaki also indulges his love for music by including a local concert and a song by a veteran singer, Little Bob.

Marcel is a kind man and has put himself out to help the African boy. When he goes to visit his wife in hospital, there is a wonderful surprise – and she uses the word 'miracle'. A tree blossoms, a sign that goodness is rewarded. So, a fine blend of serious contemporary themes, what used to be called 'Capraesque' hopefulness, and some funny sardonic moments and characters. (Winner of the SIGNIS Europe award for 2011.)

MIRROR, MIRROR

US, 2012,

Julia Roberts, Lily Collins, Armie Hammer, Nathan Lane,

Directed by Tarsem Singh.

‘Mirror, mirror’ is one of those phrases that most people can say, ‘The Queen in Snow White’. Here she is played with wry humour by Julia Roberts who seems to be enjoying herself. Whether she is the best choice for the role is another question, but here she is.

Because we all know Snow White from Disney’s first animated feature film in 1937, we have ideas of what Snow White, the Prince, the Queen and, of course, the seven dwarfs are like. Can they be portrayed by live actors. Here is the opportunity to judge.

While Julia Roberts and her sardonic remarks and vanity cruelty are central to the first part of this film, attention goes to Snow White and the dwarfs in the second part. Snow White is Lily Collins, a strong character who is attracted to the Prince (Armie Hammer) who is presented as handsome but a bit of a foolhardy hero (especially when the Queen puts him under a spell and he becomes her pet puppy). The Dwarfs have chips on their shoulders because they have been shunned by the townspeople. Their new career is waylaying coaches and stealing. While Snow White puts an end to this, they teach her some fighting and duelling tactics which come in handy when they attack the prince for the third time.

Nathan Lane is also at court as the Queen’s fawning lackey. He plays it like a Nathan Lane self-deprecating but surviving performance.

Director Tarsem Singh, with his Indian background, is not averse to flamboyant action, lavish sets and colour, and a spectacular array of costumes.

There is no major reason for seeing Mirror, Mirror, except to while away some time pleasantly enough or to see what the 21st century can make of a Grimm’s Fairy Tale.

LES NEIGES DU KILIMANDJARO/ THE SNOWS OF KILIMANJARO

France/2011

Jean-Pierre Darroussin, Ariane Ascaride, Gerard Meylan.

Directed by Robert Guediguian.

A film about goodness, not an easy accomplishment.

Audiences can identify with the central couple in this film and get a lift from what they think and feel – and do – after a challenge to their way of life. And, it has nothing to do with Ernest Hemingway. Mt Kilimanjaro serves as an ideal goal, somewhere exotic but seemingly unattainable. It is also in the title of a popular French song which is sung in the film.

Writer-director, Robert Guediguian has been making fine films for a quarter of a century or more, usually working with his wife, Ariane Ascaride, and friends. It is the same this time. He lives in Marseilles and usually sets his stories there – although he did make a film about Francois Mitterand as well as a film about the French Resistance, *The Army of Crime*.

We are once again on the Marseilles' waterfront. Workers are being laid off. Michel (Jean-Pierre Darroussin) is an official but has decided to put his name in the hat for the lottery for retrenchment, against the advice of his close friend, Raoul (Gerard Meylan). He pulls his name out and goes into retirement – which, after a busy life, he doesn't find easy. However, he is supported by his wife of almost thirty years, Marie-Claire (Ariane Ascaride) who works in care for the homebound. Their married children and grandchildren visit for meals and are concerned.

At a joyous party for their thirtieth anniversary, with some of the retrenched men as guests, they are given a gift of money and a ticket for Kilimanjaro.

It does not end there. Playing cards one night with Raoul and his wife, who is Marie-Claire's sister, the house is invaded by two burglars who steal their money and the ticket and bind and hurt them. By chance, later, Michel sees a clue which leads him to one of the thieves.

What follows has an enormous effect on Michel and Marie-Claire. The thief is one of the retrenched men, young, with a chip on his shoulder, highly critical of the older generation, the way they managed union matters, their being stuck in the ways of the past. The young man has two little brothers – and their mother couldn't care less and is away working on a liner.

The goodness in the film is in how the couple deal with their anger, the fierce attitude of, Raoul, the sullenness of the young man and his tirades. The goodness concerns the two young brothers and the decision by Michel and by Marie-Claire, separately, to come to the support of the boys (despite the hostile response of their own son and daughter who want attention for their children).

The audience is immersed in the life of this part of Marseilles. The performances are fine. And the picture of kindness in human nature is positive and hopeful.

THE PIRATES, BAND OF MISFITS

UK, 2012,

Voices of Hugh Grant, Martin Freeman, David Tennant, Imelda Staunton,

Directed by Peter Lord.

This is a bit of a guilty pleasure for adults, but so are most of the films from Bristol's Aardman Studios, makers of those delightful and funny animation films, Creature Comforts and the Wallace and Grommit shorts and The Curse of the Were Rabbit. They also made Chicken Run some years ago.

Here they are with a daffy pirate story which is so full of anachronisms, that littlies might not even notice, that it makes for an imagination bending adventure. It is 1837 and Queen Victoria has just ascended the throne – and declared her hatred of pirates. In the meantime, over in Blood Island, the often charmingly incompetent Captain Pirate, his loyal Number Two and his small but motley crew are encouraging him to enter the competition again for Pirate of the Year. He has been part of it for twenty years, has never won, and is the butt of the more successful, treasure laden pirates.

Off they go to prove themselves but encounter a ghost ship, kids on a geography excursion, naturists – no one with any gold. Another failure with booty is The Beagle with a small-sized Charles Darwin who saves himself from walking the plank – well, no, he is pushed off but rescued – when he realises that Captain Pirate's parrot is actually a dodo, not extinct. Between many jigs and many reels, off they go to London for the Royal Society competition, which the dodo wins. Darwin, kept out of the celebrations, connives with Queen Victoria who desperately wants the dodo, not for her pet zoo, as she claims, but for the revelation of something much more dastardly. Queen Victoria is the villain of the film.

The final adventure (after the Pirate King strips Captain Pirate of being Pirate of the Year at a kind of 19th century Oscar ceremony) involves Pirate Captain, Darwin, his Manzee (who communicates by holding up cards) and the crew coming to the rescue in a final combat with Victoria.

There are plenty of aside jokes if you are attentive, lots of anachronisms as mentioned and playing around with dates, and a gallery of amusing ads and signs throughout which are all shown during the final credits. The line I liked was, 'Nothing is impossible until you really think about it!'.

The voices are excellent, Hugh Grant at his Hugh Grantish best as Captain Pirate. Martin Freeman is the loyal Number Two. David Tennant is Darwin. Imelda Staunton lets rip as Queen Victoria.

The animation is detailed and lively (and there is a 3D release of the film). There is enough for younger audiences to enjoy and the jokes and references will amuse adults.

Fortunately, we are told at the end that the characters do not relate to any real persons – any reference is purely coincidental. But, if you feel the earth rumble beneath your feet, it is not an earthquake, not a sign of tsunami. It is Queen Victoria turning, no, rapidly revolving, in her grave!

THE RAID

Indonesia, 2011,

Iko Uwais, Joe Taslim,

Directed by Gareth Evans.

One of the most macho films you could see. I am not sure that many female audiences would want to sit through this action film.

While the director is Welsh, and the title is in English, it is very much an Indonesian film. In fact, a reviewer remarked that it was probably true to life in its portrayal of gangsters in Jakarta and the attempt of a police squad to take down a gang. Checking with an Indonesian priest whether this might be the case, he thought that it was.

Whether the film is accurate or not, it is a literal bone-crunching, sword-slashing, gun-toting, dead and mutilated cadaver-filled actioner. There are quite a number of martial arts fights (stretching credibility most of the time if you asked whether any human being could take all these cuts and blows – and people question *The Passion of the Christ*! – and then get up, one after extreme torture, and launch into the fights again). There are many more shoot-out fights.

The Raid is a correct title for the film. A small squad sets out to get into a building to flush out a ruthless gangster and his main advisers, let alone the seemingly endless supply of henchmen. But, they have been betrayed. Police corruption is a pervading theme. The police are continually picked off – at one stage we see a heap of dead police – but our hero and his assistant plus a seemingly cowardly and older officer survive beyond all expectations let alone probabilities.

We see the hero at the outset at home combining tight physical exercise with contemplation of the Quran. He is obviously sympathetic and remains so, heroic beyond possible endurance. And, then we find that the policy adviser and keeper of accounts for the gangster is his brother. That brings some complications in fights and loyalties before the end.

Just in case anyone wondered whether there was any female presence in the film: the hero's wife is pregnant and that motivates him to survive; a man who occupies an apartment in the gangster building has a sick wife who is afraid, especially when her husband hides her from his pursuers. But, that is it.

Of course, it should be said, that the technical expertise in the film-making, the editing and the choreography of the fights is top-notch. Favourable reviews (and *The Raid* has been called the action movie of the year, and rights for an American version have been paid for) talk about the craft rather than the visual and thematic brutality of the narrative.

PS. Just found a sample blog on the Internet Movie Database from adhipar in Indonesia: "This film is best seen with your group of friends who enjoy hardcore and bloody fights, so you can cheer, scream, yell, sigh together and talk about it (and probably count how many ways to die/kill people in this film) on the way home.'

THE RUM DIARY

US, 2012,

Johnny Depp, Aaron Eckhart, Michael Rispoli, Giovanni Ribisi, Amber Heard, Richard Jenkins.

Directed by Bruce Robinson.

In 1998, Johnny Depp played the journalist, Hunter S. Thompson, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Thompson began his journalistic career in the 1960s, investigative journalism that pulled no punches. It got the nickname, Gonzo journalism. Thompson also lived a fairly reckless life, not without a significant amount of drugs. He shot himself in 2005.

The Rum Diary was a Thompson novel about a young writer in Puerto Rico in 1960, trying to establish himself, despite a capacity for hard drinking, his rum diary. Without quite realising it, he allows himself to be swayed by a wheeler-dealer to write articles favourable to a tourist development on the site of an American arms-testing base. He also becomes infatuated with the smooth-talking but ruthless agent's girl-friend. The entanglement does him no good, except to test his integrity. At the same time, his newspaper is collapsing, the editor doing a run, the staff on strike.

This is the core of *The Rum Diary*, a thinly disguised autobiographical novel by Thompson.

It offers an opportunity to see Johnny Depp doing some serious acting, forgetting his outings as Captain Jack Sparrow, Willy Wonka and The Mad Hatter which are definitely a matter of taste.

Aaron Eckhart has no trouble in being the wheeler dealer, a smoothly nasty piece of work. Richard Jenkins is the harassed editor and Giovanni Ribisi is eccentricity personified as a drug-addled fellow journalist. Some of the scenes are stolen by Michael Rispoli as the newspaper's photographer who gets caught up in all these adventures (and the rum).

The film was written and directed by Bruce Robinson who was one of the up and coming film-makers of the 1980s, especially with his ironic comedy, *Withnail and I*. However, Robinson then embarked on his own rum and drugs diary and it has taken two decades for him to move back into film-making.

The film suddenly stops and tells us that this was the beginning of a Gonzo journalistic life. We know the sequel already.

SALMON FISHING IN THE YEMEN

UK, 2011,

Ewan McGregor, Emily Blunt, Kristin Scott Thomas, Amr Waked.

Directed by Lasse Halstrom.

Incongruous might be one word to react to the title of this entertaining film for older audiences. Just the right thing for a bus excursion to the local cinema.

But, it is also much more than that. Billed as a comedy, it is in the vein of old-style British comedy, not American, with an emphasis on character, dialogue and wit and an enjoyment of poking fun at authorities, government machinations and pomposity. But, it also has an underlying theme of respect for humanity, for differences and for mutual collaboration rather than mere opportunism.

Not only does the title seem incongruous, but the idea contained in it might seem ludicrous. And, that is what the central character thinks when he is approached about working on it. He is Alfred Jones, a scientist and civil servant, not blessed with a sense of humour, single-mindedly devoted to his area of fish and fishing, an amateur when it comes to emotions and feelings. He is played by Ewan McGregor with just the right touches of niceness and the ability to irritate.

A Yemeni sheik (Egyptian actor Amr Waked in a sympathetic performance) wants to import salmon into the Yemen, not just for his own pleasure (he is a devoted fly fisherman with a castle in Scotland as well) but for the possible development of agriculture and industry in his country. He is referred to as a visionary and has set up a dam and the means for salmon spawning. He is offering 50 million pounds to the UK for his scheme. (Do Yemeni sheiks have so much money?). His investment advisor is a sensible young Englishwoman, Harriet (plus a double-barrelled surname) played by Emily Blunt.

Alfred and Harriet are something of an odd couple, she convinced that the project is worthwhile and patient with and tolerant of Alfred's rejection of the plan.

But, of course, you know that they are going to pursue the project and that we are going to be caught up in their growing enthusiasm, charmed by the Sheikh and his pointing out to the scientist who holds no brief for faith just how much we do act on faith in our lives), that we will be interested in the trips to the Yemen (Morocco locations standing in as usual), and that we hope it will be a success.

It does not all proceed as hoped for. There are fundamentalist terrorists who see the Sheikh as destroying traditions. There are bureaucratic difficulties and a revolt of British salmon fishers who refuse to let the objects of their sport migrate beyond their shores. And there is the British government. Which is where Kristin Scott Thomas comes in. She is the Prime Minister's press officer, a wheeler-dealer with a capacity for spin that real spin doctors might envy. She has a way with words and invective as well as seizing every moment and exploiting it that would not be out of place in the series and film, *In the Loop*. She has done variations on this performance many times but is given so many good lines that she often steals the show – even in talking to her young children.

There is a romantic sub-plot. Harriet is in a relationship with a soldier sent to Afghanistan. Alfred takes his wife, who is a respected consultant, for granted without realising it. Again, this does not quite proceed as audiences might think, so there are elements of surprise towards the end.

The film looks good and has been directed by Swedish Lasse Halstrom who has had a twenty year career in Hollywood with such films as *Cider House Rules*, *Chocolat* and *The Shipping News*.

THE SORCERER AND THE WHITE SNAKE

China, 2011,

Jet Li, Shengyi Huang, Raymond Lam.

Directed by Siu-Tung Ching

Western audiences are familiar with their fairy tales, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and the tales from Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm. However, they are not familiar with Oriental fairy tales with their quite different characters and symbols, different ways of narratives, different types of myths – and from the Buddhist traditions.

The Sorcerer and the White Snake provide an opportunity to begin to remedy this lack.

The first thing to say is that the film is very beautiful to look at. The magical locations have an aura about them. They are both real and stylised, drawing on ordinary Chinese life as well as on the religious overtones.

Jet Li is at the centre of the tale, a guru with an apprentice (somewhat ineffectual who is turned into a demon). Demons are the targets of the guru, to destroy them. They take human form as well as animal forms (sometimes akin to those in Disney films). His first confrontation with a demon sets the tone of the film. He sweeps the demon into a shell-like container and moves to discover more demons.

In the meantime, a nice but poor young man who wants to be a doctor goes with friends to the mountains to find herbs. He is confronted by a beautiful woman and falls off a crag into a lake where she rescues him and kisses him – and disappears. We know, but he does not, that she is one of two sister demons, the Green Snake (who prefers making mischief but will soon be attracted by the transformed apprentice) and the White Snake. The mysterious woman is the White Snake.

She has fallen in love (and so has the young man), so she assumes human form, knocks him off his boat and rescues/kisses him again. She takes him to visit her family (the demons all pretending to be her loving family with a few slip-ups) and they are married.

At this stage we might think the fairy tale is over and they live happily ever after. Not in this world.

When a plague breaks out, the young man puts his ingenuity into finding a remedy. His loving wife breathes her energy into his medicines and people are healed. No happy ending here either.

The guru arrives and confronts the White Snake, aiming to destroy her. When she disappears, the young man travels to find a tree that will give a potion to reclaim her. Unfortunately, he lets loose

more demons (vixens in human and vulpine form) – and the ending is far more complicated than we had hoped for.

A pleasing, magical and beautiful Chinese fairy tale.

LA SOURCE DES FEMMES (THE SOURCE)

France, 2011,

Leila Bekhti, Hiam Abbas, Saleh Bakhri,

Directed by Radu Mihaileanu.

Director Radu Mihaileanu has a Romanian Jewish background and lives in Paris. He has been interested for many years in a variety of cultures and religious backgrounds for his films. He has made a drama about Jews in Central Europe (Train of Life), about the Falashas in Ethiopia and their being considered Jewish and their being taken to Israel (Live and Become). His most recent film was the entertaining story of an orchestra from Russia playing in Paris which was also a tongue in cheek lampoon of Communism.

This time he is in north Africa, in Morocco, in a Muslim village, the dialogue spoken in Arabic.

While there is a very serious underlying theme about the place of women in traditional Muslim society – that they are not mere chattels at their husbands' disposal – there is also a basic comedy theme, one exploited by Aristophanes millennia ago: to achieve change, women go on strike, withholding sexual relationships with their husbands.

At the centre is Leila, considered an outsider in a very self-contained village, because she came from somewhere else, though she is married to the local teacher. The government has failed to bring water directly into the village. The women have to walk into the hills to a pipe source and carry the water. This would be unthinkable for men to do. When tensions come to a head, Leila and the women go on strike. The men are baffled and angry – and seek the advice of the Imam. The women maintain their stances.

A complication arises when a journalist who had previously wanted to marry Leila arrives to study ants (and analogies are made between the insects' behaviour and the villagers'). It creates tension in Leila's own marriage but, eventually, an article is published and, suddenly, the government can't do enough to help. And the women go into the city to sing and dance their theme and their protest and are welcomed.

The film is rather heavy-handed at times in making its points. But, it does remind us of the power of the modern media in mirroring society as well as being a catalyst for social change.

TOMBOY

France, 2011,

Zoe Heran, Malonn Levana, Jeanne Disson.

Directed by Celine Sciamma.

At first glance, Laure (Zoe Heran) looks like a boy with her haircut, tee shirt and shorts. Actually, Laure likes to act like a boy and when she, her little (very feminine) sister and their parents move to a new home, Laure tells the children, mainly boys who are playing soccer, that her name is Mikael.

She should have known better and that it would all catch up with her. But she is only ten.

Mikael is accepted by the group. She plays well at soccer. And she gets the adoring gaze from the only other girl in the group, Lisa. For a while all goes well with her deception, though there is a crisis when the boys go off to pee and she goes into the woods. She even is able to persuade the little sister to be in on the pretence.

At one level, this is playful and charming. But, there is always the lurking fear, what happens when she is found out, how will she handle it. And what about the boys? And Lisa? And her parents?

Matters do come to a head when she has a fight with one of the boys whose mother comes for an apology.

The sequences where her mother makes Laure wear a dress and go to the boy's home has its moments of delicacy and poignancy. The same with the hurt and disappointed Lisa.

Celine Sciamma, who directed another film about girls' identity, *Water Lilies*, has created a memorable small film, which, with the completely believable performance from Zoe Heran, does communicate the feelings of a child who wants to be something other than what she is.

WISH YOU WERE HERE

Australia, 2012,

Joel Edgerton, Felicity Price, Teresa Palmer, Anthony Starr,

Directed by Kieran Darcy-Smith

If you decided to go to see this drama because of the title, the trailer and the suggestion that this is a tale about four people living the high tourist's life in Cambodia with something sinister happening, you would be only partly right. Most of the action takes place in Sydney and is the story of an ordinary family whose lives are disrupted by the events in Cambodia.

The early scenes of the film show Western tourists enjoying the high life in Cambodian resorts, not without indulging in alcohol and drugs. Dave (Joel Edgerton) is seen wandering the fields, bewildered. Then he and his wife, Alice (Felicity Price) are back home with their two children in their home which overlooks the cliffs and beaches of Sydney. They have two children and Alice is pregnant. Here sister, Steph (Teresa Palmer) then arrives back after trying to find her boyfriend, Jeremy (Anthony Starr) who has disappeared. They have gone to the authorities without result.

As the film unfolds, we see Dave having panic attacks, confessing an infidelity to his wife, trying to cope with her emotional reaction, trying to deal with Steph. The flashbacks to what actually happened in Cambodia, Dave's erratic behaviour, the ugliness of his being exploited by local gangsters and Jeremy's intervention, are gradually revealed. Alice has her own moment of erratic behaviour as she drives away after confronting her sister.

Moments of truth come for both Dave and Alice. For him, going to the authorities and telling the truth. For her, the birth of her baby and whether she can forgive Dave. By the end, we are quite a way from the beaches and the dives of Cambodia and firmly settled in suburban Sydney.

Audiences will be able to identify with Dave and Alice, if not in the holiday, very much in the troubles in a marriage and how they might be resolved. The screenplay was written by the director, Kieran Darcy-Smith, in collaboration with his wife, Felicity Price, who plays Alice.

THE WELL-DIGGER'S DAUGHTER/ LA FILLE DU PUISATIER

France, 2011,

Daniel Auteuil, Astrid Berges-Frisbey, Kad Merad, Jean-Pierre Darroussin,

Directed by Daniel Auteuil

Were we to mention Jean de Florette and Manon des Sources, many audiences, especially those who were charmed and fascinated by the films of the 1980s, would be on the alert. These two stories were written by the prolific Marcel Pagnol. In fact, there have been several versions of a number of Pagnol's stories, including some written and directed by Pagnol himself. There have also been some American versions of his trilogy of life in the south of France, Marius, Fanny and Cesar.

The Well-digger's Daughter takes us into the same area of France, Provence, as Jean de Florette. The girl of the title (Astrid Berges-Frisbey) turns eighteen as the film opens. She cares for her younger brothers and sisters and takes lunch to her well-digging father and his friend. The same day, she encounters a young aviator, son of the local store owner, who carries her across the river and back. When her father's friend, who would like to marry the daughter, offers to take her to an air show where the young man features, she goes. An exemplary young woman, this decision leads her to some deceptions and the fate of so many young girls in stories like this.

Attention then turns to the father, his dismay at what his daughter has done, his anger at the parents of the young man, his wanting her away from the family. But, as might be guessed, when he eventually sees the baby, he is won over and wants the baby to bear his name.

It is the time of World War I and both the young man and the father's friend go to war. There are also complications – whether the young man knew what had happened, whether he was shot down behind enemy lines, whether his parents would come to terms with the situation.

Pagnol's stories are often about very good people (think Jean de Florette himself). There are some villains (think of the uncle and nephew in Jean de Florette and Manon). But, basically, Pagnol believes in the goodness of human nature, in forgiveness and reconciliation and that love is a foundation of life and happiness.

That villainous nephew in Jean and Manon was played by Daniel Auteuil. Since then, Auteuil has become one of France's great actors. And, now, he has adapted the Pagnol story, directed his first film and plays the well-digger, a fine achievement. In fact, he is planning a trilogy of films on Pagnol's Marius, Fanny and Cesar. Pagnol has found a devoted and skilled interpreter.

Filmed in beautiful settings and re-creating the period, this is well worth seeing.

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

UK, 2012,

Daniel Radcliffe, Ciaran Hinds, Janet McTeer,

Directed by James Watkins.

The novel by Joanna Hill on which this film is based was a popular ghost story. A stage version opened in London in the early 1990s and was still running over twenty years later, so there were some expectations for this screen version.

On the one hand, it capitalises on a lot of familiar scary devices that jolt the audiences out of their seats. On the other, it is a rather sombre story, a character study and a tale of cruelty and vengeance. Put this all together in a very handsomely mounted period design and you have an entertaining ghost story.

Another major drawcard, especially for younger audiences (although this film comes ten years after the first Harry Potter film) is that it stars Daniel Radcliffe as Arthur Kipps. He performs his role well, the somewhat reserved young lawyer, still grieving his wife's death, caring for his four year old son. Of course, that stretches credibility more than a little because Radcliffe was only 21 when he made this film. Nonetheless, his performance is quite effective.

An old mansion on a spit of land, separated from the mainland at high tide, is to be sold and the estate of the owner settled. It doesn't seem a demanding job, so Arthur Kipps is sent to this gloomy, remote village and house. The villagers want him gone, but he does receive a welcome from the wealthy Mr Daily (Ciaran Hinds). It's during the first night that things go bump and he becomes aware of the eerie presence of a woman in black.

As the film unfolds we learn more about the woman and her dead son, her exile from the village – and the deaths of children (including the Daily's son, with his mother (Janet McTeer) driven mad with grief). And, while Arthur is in the village, there are more deaths. The ghost is merciless.

A film like this depends not just on scares (it is better in not relying on scary bits) but on the sustaining of an atmosphere where the audience is caught up in fear and apprehension. To this extent, *The Woman in Black* is a success in maintaining concern and gloom. It builds up to a ghostly climax and finale.

WRATH OF THE TITANS

US, 2012,

Sam Worthington, Rosamund Pike, Liam Neeson, Ralph Fiennes, Bill Nighy, Edgar Ramirez,

Directed by Jonathan Liebesman.

Like olden days matinees, this is adventure material without too much worry about making a classic! And they haven't.

The 2009 Clash of the Titans was not favourably reviewed because it was this same type of matinee movie (and the rather less effective 3D processing was done in post-production). It will be the same here although the 3D is much better – and it is being shown on Imax screens as well which gives it a quite spectacular presentation.

This is quoting a friend/reviewer after the preview. Someone was talking to him about the plot. He was surprised at this development because he thought the plot was simply, 'Hey, there's another monster...'. Actually, there is some basic plot surrounding the fights with the monsters. Perseus, who had defeated the Kracken in the first film, has now settled into life in a fishing village to bring up his son. He has renounced his divine origin and opted for the human part of him – perhaps that is why Sam Worthington's accent this time is even more pronouncedly Australian, contrasting with the fine elocution of Liam Neeson as Zeus and, especially, the almost Shakespearean delivery of Ralph Fiennes as Hades. Perhaps this is the best moment to mention that Bill Nighy, mugging to more than his heart's content as Hephaestus, has an accent from Yorkshire or somewhere up there. Edgar Ramirez as the villain, Ares, is from Venezuela and has a Hispanic touch to his accent. Rosamund Pike as Andromeda seems to come from London.

But, then, with its popular audience, who is listening to accents!

This is the twilight of the gods (they are declining in their powers and immortality and people don't pray any more) – they seem to be an unworthy lot, especially Ares (Mars), Zeus' son who is jealous of his half brother, Perseus (who does get to ride Pegasus into the air, twice). But this is special effects Gotterdamerung, especially Perseus' fight with the Titan, Cronos, renewed by energy drained from Zeus and appearing in gigantic flames.

So, plenty (plenty) of fights and action, often impressive sets, a poly-accented cast, with some comedy thanks to Bill Nighy's antics and Toby Kebbel as Poseidon's son Agenor who seems to be channelling Russell Brand.

Box office success will rely on word of mouth rather than reviews.

SIGNIS STATEMENT: THE WAY

March 31st 2012

While *The Way* had early release in the United States and in the United Kingdom in 2011, it has taken some time to find release in a number of other countries.

The film has the advantage of being the work of members of Martin Sheen's family – which is for some commentators a disadvantage. On the one hand, there is Martin Sheen's active Catholicism and social justice concerns (even to arrests). The Catholic emphasis meant that a number of critics declared that the film was Catholic propaganda. And they did not approve of that. That point needs further consideration.

On the other, there is the headline behaviour of his son, Charlie, something which more than blew up at the time of the British release of *The Way*. Which gave Martin Sheen an opportunity to talk about support and forgiveness and not giving up hope. He was with his oldest son, Emilio Estevez, who was not without his own problems in the past, but who has moved on. Emilio has written and directed *The Way* and makes a cameo appearance.

The Way is El Camino, the pilgrim journey from the Pyrenees across northern Spain to the shrine city of Santiago di Compostella and the tomb of the apostle, St James. This is a film of pilgrimage.

Pilgrimages are an important part of all major religions. Catholics have flocked to Rome, to Lourdes, Fatima and to less well-known shrines. Muslims make the Haj to Mecca. Hindu festivals abound. Buddhists from all around the world make their way to Tibet and to various Asian centres. The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is a destination for Jews worldwide.

El Camino finds its place amongst all these pilgrimages.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reminds us that not all the pilgrims are saints, some not particularly devout, with lives that are marked by vanity, violence and bawdiness. Not all pilgrimages are just prayers and piety under the guidance of a clerical chaplain. Many pilgrimages are individual or in groups, for penitence or for renewed conversion experiences.

It is the same in this film. Audiences expecting the equivalent of a documentary that emphasises the sacred are mistaken. This is a feature film for a wide audience. It is Catholic in background and culture but does not limit itself to the audience to Christians or to the converted. The focus is on a small cross-section of 'ordinary people' as well as inn-keepers, police, and strangers in the street. Two priests do make small appearances, one explaining some aspects of the pilgrimage, the other on the way himself, old and rather infirm but with words of wisdom.

For those who have walked el Camino, the film uses a great deal of location photography, the mountains, the open countryside, the villages, the towns and cities that they have experienced. A pleasing reminder. For those who wonder whether they should make the pilgrimage, they can see for themselves where they would walk and what it might be like. They would also see what the pilgrims do, how the walk affects them, the range of people they meet.

While the film has a running time of over two hours, the group is quite small, focusing particularly on four people.

Martin Sheen plays Tom, a middle-class, comfortable American, who has not seen eye to eye with his son, Daniel (played by Emilio Estevez). He cannot understand why his son would want to go to Spain and walk. The dialogue between them raises questions about what life is really for and about. When, very early in the film, news comes that Daniel has died at the beginning of his pilgrimage, his father decides to go to Spain. He further decides to go on pilgrimage himself and to scatter Daniel's ashes at significant spots along the way.

For older audiences, Tom is a character to identify with, even when they disapprove of some of his attitudes and behaviour towards others. He comes to realise his life so far has been only a stage of his own pilgrimage and now he has the opportunity to re-assess it and change, continually reflecting on his son's approach to life (with some imaginary sequences where Daniel appears during his father's walk). It is also the three people that keep crossing paths with him until he eventually joins with them that are catalysts for his re-examination of his life.

Yorick Van Wageningen plays a heavy-set Dutchman who says that his motivation is to lose weight for his wife's sake and to be ready to celebrate a family wedding. Nothing particularly religious about his reasons for being in Spain. Debora Kara Unger is a Canadian woman, rather intense and private, who smokes heavily but declares that she will give up when she reaches Compostella. A personal ascetical motive rather than religious. The group is joined by a boisterous Irish author, played by James Nesbitt, who is suffering from writer's block but hopes, in a neo-Chaucerian way, that he will be inspired by the pilgrim stories.

As can be seen, the pilgrims do not express themselves very much in explicitly religious terms or in Christian or Catholic terms. While the Catholic and religious perspectives underlie the journey for Tom and the two priest cameos do make some themes explicit, the film is geared towards a wider audience as a thoughtful entertainment rather than propaganda – but, obviously, Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez have a high regard for El Camino and what making such a pilgrimage can achieve within a person.

Emilio Estevez offers a film of wide appeal, more for adults than younger audiences, which is meant to be in both religious and humanistic terms, ‘inspirational’.

Spectacle time with The Avengers and Battleship. Some interesting more serious films, Café de Flore, Footnote, The Lady, Rebellion.

SIGNIS REVIEWS MAY 2012

ACT OF VALOR

AVENGERS, The

BATTLESHIP

CAFÉ DE FLORE

FOOTNOTE

IRVINE WELSH’S ECSTASY

KING OF DEVIL’S ISLAND, The/ KONGEN AV BASTOY

LADY, The

LUCKY ONE, The

REBELLION/ L’ORDRE ET LA MORALE

ROMANTICS ANONYMOUS

SAFE

SPUD

THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

WOMAN IN THE 5TH

ACT OF VALOR

US, 2012,

Directed by Mike McCoy, Scott Waugh,

The promotion for this film highlights the fact that several actual Navy SEALs take the central roles. While their acting is no great shakes, they bring an authenticity to the many action sequences throughout the film. It does not disguise the fact that it is a piece of cinema propaganda for the SEALs and their patriotic spirit and acts of valor for the United States – and may well attract quite a number of recruits. But, as with any program that takes a ‘hawkish’ stance and presents it with quite some gung ho relish, there are the perpetual questions about military methods and actions.

The film offers some moments of training but takes much of that for granted. It also focuses on the SEALs in action after receiving intelligence about their mission, though the film does not show the workings of the intelligence agencies and how they come by their intel.

We are introduced to the group and learn a little about their backgrounds and their families. One of the SEALs is married and his wife is expecting. Another does a voiceover, talking to the child about the character of his father, so we know there is going to be death and sadness.

The film opens with an act of terrorist barbarity in the bombing of some children and the American ambassador at a school in Manila. This sets the plot in motion for a war against drugs and against terror. The action sequences, signaled by an on-screen map with technical location details, take place in Costa Rica, Ukraine, off the African Coast and in Mexico.

Needless to say, seeing the SEALs in action, has many exciting moments, especially a raid in Costa Rica against drug dealers to rescue an abducted agent. The main villain is a Ukrainian who is providing a childhood friend from Chechnya with a sophisticated, undetectable vest filled with ceramic pellets which will explode like shrapnel and intended for a group of suicide bombers in the principal American cities. The climax of the film is the search and destroy mission in Mexico for the leader and his suicide squad.

As always in this kind of story, we realise that the villains are unscrupulous, have many violent means at their disposal and that there are forces out there who are protecting us, involved in dangers on our behalf as we sit in the cinema and watch this kind of action drama.

THE AVENGERS

US, 2012,

Robert Downey Jr, Chris Evans, Mark Ruffalo, Chris Hemsworth, Tom Hiddleston, Scarlet Johansson, Samuel L. Jackson, Jeremy Renner, Gwynneth Paltrow.

Directed by Joss Whedon.

How many superheroes does it take to save the world, especially from invaders from other planets who plan global control and have the Tesseract, a source of unlimited energy, at their disposal? Such is the question posed by this new Marvel Comics extravaganza (3D and all).

With all respect to the particular powers of each of the superheroes gathered as the Avengers Team, they cannot save the world by themselves.

When Loki (that meddlesome god, Thor's brother, here reappearing in the form of Tom Hiddleston who often steals the show with his smug presumption and mischievous repartee) arrives on earth to achieve his mission, S.H.I.E.L.D, under the leadership of Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) decides to call in the help. This means that Tony Stark and Pepper Potts (Robert Downey and Gwynneth Paltrow) have to make different plans. Bruce Banner (keeping his Hulk anger under control in the form of Mark Ruffalo) has to come in from charity work in India at the behest of Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson has a lot more to do in this one than in Iron Man 2). Now we know why Captain America (Chris Evans) has been frozen until this moment - for a new mission. And, since, Thor is Loki's brother, the god himself turns up speaking, as one reviewer cleverly put it, like a Shakespearian Druid.

This takes up the first part of the film, audiences enjoying the opportunity to see their old heroes again. Robert Downey steals the show with his self-confident, boastful and amusing one-liners, especially taunting the rather stolid Captain America and the fighting-for-control Dr Banner. Meantime, Loki is enjoying himself at the expense of all.

The second part is the attack and the defence. Not all going well at first, especially for Hulk and Thor who find themselves hurtled into almost oblivion. But... After an attack on Manhattan (plenty of destruction) and the ruling council (very hawkish) sending a nuclear warhead to destroy the invaders, there is only split second timing for Iron Man to intercept and destroy the bomb and for Natasha Romanoff and scientist Erik Selvig (Skellan Skarsgaard recovered after he and agent Barton, Jeremy Renner, have been transformed into allies by Loki) to close the portal and destroy the aliens.

The closing credits include some indications of the future (but, the ever eager to rush to the exit at any sign of a credit audience will have missed them).

The fans are acclaiming Joss Whedon as the master of this kind of Marvel movie adventure.

BATTLESHIP

US, 2012,

Taylor Kitsch, Alexander Skarsgaard, Liam Neeson.

Directed by Peter Berg.

Something like a cross between Pearl Harbour and The Transformers series. Which means that director, Michael Bay, might be a bit envious of this action and boom (many booms) spectacle that is set in Hawaii and has Aliens and Alien space vehicles that transform at will. Actually, the Hasbro company is responsible for Transformers and its merchandise as well as for the board game Battleship and the new merchandise.

It all starts off very Americanly, scenes in a bar, a stupid attempt at heroism for a beautiful blonde who wants a take away burrito. Then we have a soccer game in which our hero gets kicked in the mouth and loses a penalty goal, Japan beating the US as they gather for naval exercises in Pearl Harbour. Another brawl and the hero losing his opportunity to ask the blonde's father for her hand. And he is the admiral.

There is also information given about signals and satellites, attempting communication with Planet G which seems to have similar atmosphere to earth's. There is a geeky scientist there who controls the communication.

Before you can say USS Missouri (which also features in this film), there is not only communication from Planet G, but huge vehicles land in the Pacific interrupting the naval games, but one lands on Hong Kong – quite a spectacular demolition of the city. Soon Honolulu gets something of the same treatment, especially by giant rotating, knife wielding fireballs.

When the aliens have almost a 99% upper hand, we are wondering who is going to save the world and how. Needless to say, it is our hero, Alex Hopper, played by Taylor Kitsch, more amenable here than

as John Carter on Mars. His main assistant is singer, Rihanna, in her first acting role, one of the boys, as it is said. We hear, ‘What the hell is that?’ many times and the dialogue tends to be variations on this.

Putting aside the 70 years memories of Pearl Harbour, and the Japanese bombings of the US navy, a Japanese expert works with Alex to bomb the aliens. By chance, one of the officers puts on an alien helmet and remembers that it is like exposing his pet lizard to the sun – yes, the aliens cannot see in the sun. In the meantime, the blonde who works on physical therapy with injured veterans, is on the mountain where the transmitters are. So, bomb the alien craft, blind the aliens and destroy the transmitting dishes. (With interventions from the Pentagon.)

And, of all things, the USS Missouri (analogue not digital) is put into service for the bombardment with the veterans who had gathered for the memorial going into action. In the final credits they are described as ‘old salts’.

Much of the film is literally explosive. It is also far-fetched – we hope. But, at the beginning and the end there are moments of gravity, because Liam Neeson is the Admiral. The world survives, medals are awarded and Alex has the opportunity to ask for the admiral’s daughter’s hand.

[There is a minute or two after the credits which is set in Scotland – a tantalizing episode in case there is Battleship II. But, I was the only person in the cinema who saw it.]

CAFÉ DE FLORE

Canada, 2011,

Vanessa Paradis, Kevin Parent,

Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée.

This is a film to surrender to if you can rather than detach yourself from and analyse the plots. Because there are plots, two of them. If you are alert to music, clothes and fashions as well as makes of cars, you will soon realise that one of the stories takes place in Paris in the late 1960s. The other story is contemporary. Set in Canada. We are introduced to the central character in each story with an extensive explanation which sets a tone for our feelings and response.

This would be all right if each story were self-contained. But, they are not. The film, edited by its director, Jean-Marc Vallee, moves constantly between one and the other (and the stories move around in time as well). Are there connections?

The discarded wife in Canada looks like the mother in the Paris story. The song *Café de Flore* recurs, as do other songs in each story, the songs becoming something like themes for particular characters. They also evoke memories of past experiences. The Canadian daughter uses music to goad her father about his breaking up his marriage.

Towards the end, the ex-wife consults a medium and there is discussion about soul-mates in life and love, as well as possible links with (reincarnation?) soul-mates living in other times and places. These are evocative suggestions rather than logical arguments – and may be hard to accept by those who would prefer some clear reasoning rather than mystical intimations.

Kevin Parent is Antoine, turning forty. We are told he exudes happiness. But, he is in therapy, is leaving his devoted wife and daughters, wants to marry a pretty young woman, half his age, who is in love with him. Depending on how much we identify with the ex-wife and her pain, Antoine becomes less and less sympathetic. This is familiar material, worth dramatising nonetheless.

But, it will be the Paris story which commands our attention and feelings. Jacqueline (a fine Vanessa Paradis) gives birth to a Downs baby and her husband abandons them – he says he doesn't want to spend his life as a missionary. The film traces Jacqueline's devotion to her son, Laurent. She has a moment in Church when she realises that Laurent is the mission and meaning of her life. At seven, he is enrolled in a school for 'ordinary' children, managing generally but not quite. Jacqueline could not do more for him, lavishing her love. Laurent deeply loves his mother. When he becomes attached to another Downs child, Vero, literally holding on to her, it is a challenge to Jacqueline who realises but refuses to face the fact that she eventually has to let him go. The child actor is wonderful and this story, though sad, is often exhilarating.

The mystical suggestion is that Laurent and Antoine are soul-mates. Not sure that many would want to spend time reflecting on this. So, staying with the stories themselves and their unfolding dramas, there is a great deal to interest and to enjoy.

THE FOOTNOTE

Israel, 2011,

Shlomo Bar-Aba, Lior Ashkenaze,

Directed by Joseph Cedar.

‘Erudition’ is the word. Audience delight in erudition is needed to enjoy this film. It is definitely a pre-requisite. An interest in Jewish erudition and exploration of Talmudic texts would not go amiss either.

This means that the film has a limited audience. Those who would like to see a film about scholars and researchers should see it. Those interested in fine film-making no matter what the topic should also see it. It made such an impression at home that it was Israel’s entry for the 2011 Oscar for Best Foreign Language film and reached the final five.

Writer-director, Joseph Cedar, who had made the arresting film about the Israeli army and its fort in Lebanon during the end of the conflict with Lebanon in the 1990s, Beaufort, has based his screenplay on an incident in his own life: a wrong message about who had been awarded a significant prize.

This film opens with an award ceremony and a speech but the camera stays for a long time fixed on the face of the father of the recipient, plenty of time for us to wonder who he is and why he is not responding happily to the speech of his son. Cedar then uses some artificial devices to inform us: five bits of data, listed, about the father and his life and career, five about the son. The father is an old-style scholar, meticulously scientific in his examination and cataloguing of documents and archeological finds. He despises what passes for contemporary scholarship, especially his son’s, who works more intuitively and explores themes rather than details of texts.

Then the crisis. The father has been nominated for sixteen years for the Israel Prize but has never won. He now receives a message to say that the prize is finally his. But, we realise, there has been a communications mistake and that the prize was really for the son. The son knows this. What is he to do? Claim the prize and further alienate his critical father? Or, remain silent and make a sacrifice for his father?

A highlight of the film is the dramatic cross-cutting from scenes of the son writing the official citation while his father is being interviewed by a young journalist and becomes uninhibited in his criticisms and condemnations of his son’s kind of scholarship.

At one stage, the son’s wife refers to her father-in-law as ‘autistic’. This makes a lot of sense of the character and Shlomo Bar-Aba’s performance as the unemotional, not empathetic, father whose career

has been controlled by strict criteria of scholarship, who can be alarmed by sudden and strident noise and flashing lights.

And the ending? It is one of those which leaves the action just when you are hoping for a clear plot line and indications for the future. It is over to us to reflect on what we might do, whether father or son, and speculate on what will happen. Fine film-making, but specialist.

IRVINE WELSH'S ECSTASY

Canada, 2011,

Adam Sinclair, Kristin Kreuk, Stephen McHattie, Billy Boyd.

Directed by Rob Heydon.

Irvine Welsh is famous for his books, especially about the world of drugs. *Trainspotting* became a cult film by Danny Boyle which was followed by Paul McGuigan's *The Acid House*. A film version of Welsh's novel *Filth* was set to follow *Ecstasy*. With *Ecstasy*, as the title immediately suggests, he is back in the drug world.

While this is a Canadian production, the exteriors were filmed in Edinburgh where the story is set. With so much of the filming done on the streets of the city, those who know the city will find it very familiar, giving the film an authentic feel. Interiors were filmed in Canada with some Canadian cast.

However, the central role is taken by Scot Adam Sinclair. He plays 28 year old Lloyd Buist, no job, man about town, especially at the clubs where he loves to dance, involved at times as a drug courier, with trips to Amsterdam, spending drug-high time with his close friends. No future, only the present.

For the first half hour, we are immersed in the club world, the music, the noise, the sex, the drugs. We begin to feel that if this is all the ecstasy world can offer, it would be better to leave. The appeal would be only to clubbers who wanted to see images of themselves on screen.

However, with some relief for us, a few human feelings are eventually introduced. Lloyd loves his old father (an interesting performance from Stephen McHattie) who is still grieving his wife's death, drinking and diagnosed with cancer. Lloyd is not without some redemptive values. However, even though he becomes attracted to a visiting Canadian woman (Kristin Kreuk) and is offered the possibility to change, he can't do it. He is in debt to the deputy to the Edinburgh drug boss, a merciless brute with thug henchmen, who is not above bashing Lloyd's girlfriend. Lloyd is forced to go on another trip to Amsterdam, buys some extra drugs to sell and pay off his debts. He swallows

the bags – and they burst on the flight back home. He still gets through passport control as he is disguised as a priest.

The trouble for Lloyd is that he lacks vision, the possibilities for an alternate life. His girlfriend finally gives up on him.

One of Lloyd's friends, Woodsy, is played by Billy Boyd as an obsessed ecstasy-taker, an ecstasy-devourer, an apostle for the drugs, who is taken off to hospital and rehabilitation. He clashes with a priest which gives him the chance to sound off against God and to declare that the drugs are the means of salvation.

While watching the clubbing can be wearying, the film moves to something of a moralising end, especially with the death and funeral of Lloyd's father. Whether it would convert characters like Woodsy, it is difficult to say – though there is Woodsy sitting in the front row at the funeral. With Irvine Welsh's name as part of the title, it is definitely an immersion in an Irvine Welsh world.

KING OF DEVIL'S ISLAND/ KONGEN AV BASTOY

Norway, 2010,

Stellan Skarsgaard, Benjamin Helstad, Kristoffer Joner,

Directed by Marius Holst

The physical, mental and sexual abuse of minors has become a key issue in many societies. Films have reflected this concern. The trend is developing in cultures beyond English-speaking countries where it has been a justice issue for more than a decade.

This film is based on a true story. Its setting is an institution for wayward boys in Norway, 1915, the island of Borstoy off the Norwegian coast.

Erling is 17 and is transported with a younger boy to the island. They are read the rules, given uniforms and told that they would be referred to always as C19 and C5. Another boy, who has been at Borstoy for six years (from the age of 11) for stealing from the Church poor box, is C1 and is about to be released. These are the central characters amongst a large group of inmates.

The institution is presided over by Stellan Skarsgaard who, in another life, might have been a benign administrator, but who imposes the rules despite their cruelty and, when a crisis arises because of

sexual abuse, covers up for the sake of the common good – an argument that was used in all kinds of organisations.

The look of the film is bleak, often wintry, dark and blue-grey in tone. There is little relief for the boys or for the staff.

The plot is more or less as expected, hardships and humiliations, a suicide, escape attempts, a revolt by the boys, attacks on the staff. In the context, they often feel quite desperate. There is a pervading metaphor for the central characters. Erling has worked as a harpoonist on a whaling ship and tells the story of a wounded whale that survives a day with three harpoons in its multi-scarred body. He is the wounded whale – and he develops the story to embrace his perspective on C1, the staff and the governor of the institute.

Little relief while watching the film. The cast is persuasive. The wrongs appalling. This is the kind of film that becomes part of learning from history as well as a challenge to conscience and alertness to these problems in our own day.

THE LADY

France/UK,

Michelle Yeoh, David Thewliss,

Directed by Luc Besson.

I am glad that I saw this film and can say that I was moved by it. It is a tribute to Aung San Suu Kyi, one of the most significant public figures of the late twentieth century, early 21st century, a strong woman and political leader.

Some audiences have expressed disappointment because they wanted more political background and analysis. But this is to misunderstand the intentions of the film-makers. It is not a documentary, which is a better vehicle for elaborating the political history of Burma and analyzing the role of Aung San Suu Kyi and her leadership. Nor is the film a biography, although we learn the general outline of her life and her relationship with her husband and children. Rather, the film is a cinema portrait. Any portrait does not offer the whole picture. Rather, a portrait is a selection of the subject's features, an interpretation of the person, their life and work. Every portrait is only partial.

Another objection to the film is that of high-minded critics who declare that French director, Luc Besson, who once made critic-worthy films in the 1980s and 1990s has been responsible in more recent times for many commercial action shows, like The Transporter series with Jason Statham, has no business making the film. They think that he is not worthy to make a film about such an important world figure!

That said, *The Lady* is a more emotional film portrait of its subject. Michelle Yeoh looks like Aung San Suu Kui and presents her as a woman of dignity and gravitas. It is there in the way she speaks, moves, the small detail of breeding and courtesy, her ability to be at ease with all those she comes in contact with. We see the public demeanour (especially in the re-creation of the famous episode where she confronts the armed soldiers and walks through their ranks – a scene reproduced more spectacularly but no less movingly in John Boorman's *Beyond Rangoon*). We see the private woman in her role as wife and mother.

The film opens with the assassination of her father and the family moving to England. Her father's political significance is an important aspect for people approaching her in 1988 (just over forty years after his death) to form an opposition political party and lead it.

However, the structure of the film focuses on Michael Aris, the Oxford University lecturer she married, and on her two sons, opening in 1998. David Thewliss brings a strength to Michael Aris's love and loyalty. We learn almost immediately that Michael Aris has been diagnosed with cancer. He has not seen his wife for three years. The film then goes back to 1988 and Aung San Suu kui's decision to go back to Rangoon to be with her dying mother. She has not left since. Most people know of her campaigning during the election at the end of the 80s, the generals disregard of the results, her being placed under house arrest and spending the better part of twenty years in that situation. In the meantime, there were some visits from her family, but Michael was refused a visa in his dying years and he and his wife made an agreement that for the good of Burma, she should stay and not put herself in the position of being unable to return. Her years of house internment were compounded by the personal sacrifice in the love for her husband.

He, meanwhile, put her name forward for the Nobel Peace Prize which she was awarded in 1991.

Oxford contrasts with Burma (the makers using Thai locations for the film), but the film has a strong sense of local colour and a feel for the people and Burmese history. It can be said that the Generals do not come out well, somewhat caricatured, even superstitious as they cling to power and keep surveillance tight on Aung Sang Suu Kyi. But, maybe, that is what this kind of isolated power bunch is like.

The film was completed before the election results of 2011 and the emergence of The Lady on the Burmese and world scene again.

THE LUCKY ONE,

US, 2012,

Zac Efron, Taylor Schilling, Blythe Danner,

Directed by Scott Hicks.

For over twenty years, audiences have enjoyed the emotional and romantic film versions of novels by Nicholas Sparks. They range from Message in a Bottle to The Last Song, a star vehicle for Miley Cyrus. The most popular has been The Notebook. The recent Dear John had a war theme. So does The Lucky One.

Opening in Iraq with an ambush and deaths, the film sets a contemporary tone. Logan (Zac Efron) survives, especially when he notices a photo in the rubble and picks it up, just missing being killed by an explosive device. He is nervous during convalescence with his sister and her children and decides to identify the lighthouse in the photo – which takes him to Louisiana.

All might have been simple had he been able to explain why he had come. The woman in the photo, Beth (a sympathetic Taylor Schilling) thinks he is odd but her feisty mother (Blythe Danner) hires Logan to work in their business of walking and caring for dogs (something of a treat for dog-loving audiences). Beth is divorced from the local policeman, son of the local mayor, who has spent his life trying to match his father's expectations, and not succeeding. She also has a son.

As expected, Logan bonds with the son, works hard with the dogs, lives a quiet and reflective life, falls in love with Beth and is threatened by the husband. As expected, there has to be something of a crisis when Beth learns the truth about Logan. This is more melodramatic than anticipated.

As with Sparks' other stories, there is a special communication that is at the core of the story whether it be a message in a bottle, a notebook, letters to Dear John, a song or, in this case, the original photo and another which leads to some kind of reconciliation and peace.

Zac Efron is very nice and gets audience sympathy and the hope that there will be a happy ending, which, of course, is the natural outcome of this kind of wide-audience-friendly film.

REBELLION/ L'ORDRE ET LA MORALE

France, 2011,

Mathieu Kassovitz, Iabe Lapakis, Philippe Torreton, Sylvie Testud,

Directed by Mathieu Kassovitz.

A film of more than passing interest for audiences in this part of the world. The setting is an uprising in New Caledonia in 1988, and the harsh putting down of the action (not a rebellion) by the French military, at the time of the presidential elections, the choice between Francois Mitterand and Jacques Chirac.

The title Rebellion is more of a commercial choice than an indication of what takes place. Later in the film, a French minister visiting Noumea talks about authorities having to take drastic action, at the expense of lives, to keep order and morality. Ethical spin. The French title has more depth.

Actor Mathieu Kassovitz wrote the screenplay, adapting a work of fiction based on fact by the character he plays, Philippe Legorjus, from GIGN, the National Gendarmerie Intervention Group, who had military and commando training but who also worked as a mediator in hostage situations. At little notice, he and his team are ordered to the island of Ouvea in New Caledonia because of a group of locals attacking a police station and killing four gendarmes. They have also taken hostages to a cave, which they also do to Legorjus and a group of his men.

What might have been a small action to rescue the hostages or which might have been a more straightforward negotiation for their release becomes a big operation with military, helicopters, a flamethrower – and the deaths of the leader and many of the men. We see the efforts of Legorjus in searching for the first hostages, dealing with the military and the local police and finding himself something of a pawn in the hands of the general and officers in Noumea and then of the politicking of the candidates for the presidency (using an excerpt of a TV debate between the two contenders and their attitudes towards terrorism). He is left ‘hung out to dry’ and then commanded to obey military orders whether he agreed with them or not.

These aspects of the film make sobering viewing, the remoteness of policy and action decision-makers from the actual events and the people involved. ‘It is better for some men to die for the sake of the country.’ [Distractions arise during the film as we think of the last decade in Afghanistan and behaviour of US military as well as the international discussions about the war and NATO and other presence.]

It requires some attention to follow the details of the group that had made the initial attack and their earnest anti-colonialism and demands for autonomy and freedom, but it is made clear what they mean as we watch the French in action, even though New Caledonia is part of France (with a referendum on this scheduled for 2014). Ethnic and racial bigotry are also evident. At the same time, the 'official' movement for independence distances itself from this uprising – but the leader, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, was assassinated a year later (and his memory is now well preserved in the museum in Noumea). We see sympathetic locals trying to mediate as well as a French magistrate who works with Legorjus.

The final part of the film shows us the attack on the cave, immersing the audience in the experience of crawling through the jungle and being under fire. Ultimately, Legorjus is both disillusioned by what has happened and the thwarting of his efforts, agitated by the deaths (especially shootings after the capture of the locals), yet still having to stand by his military oaths of obedience and loyalty.

ROMANTICS ANONYMOUS/ LES EMOTIFS ANONYMES

Benoit Poelvoorde, Isabelle Carre,

Directed by Jean-Pierre Amaris.

The French title is a better and more accurate, especially when we see Angelique (Isabelle Carre) attending a variation on AA where the participants discuss their highly feeling lives and behaviour.

Angelique is publicly awkward but wants a job at a chocolate factory managed (not too well, they are almost bankrupt) by Jean-Rene (Benoit Poelvoorde). He is more awkward than she and attends sessions with a therapist. The therapist tells him to take someone to dinner (that is a real disaster but Angelique blames herself), then to touch someone, which has some surprising results.

In the meantime, we learn more about Angelique and her extraordinary talent for making perfect chocolates. The factory could make a comeback.

This is a very brief film, quite delightful in its way, with pleasant performances from the two leads as they try to deal with their gawkiness and gaffes, discover their love for each other. It is a fairy tale with touches of realism or a realistic story with touches of fantasy, with the light Gallic touch.

SAFE

US, 2012,

Jason Statham, Catherine Chan, Chris Sarandon,

Directed by Boaz Yakin.

It's a Jason Statham film. That is enough for film fans to know whether they want to see *Safe* or not. Statham, formerly a champion British Olympic diver, has made a name for himself for more than a decade as an action hero. Acting is not his forte but he is certainly a screen presence. He is strong (very strong in *Safe* with multi-martial arts), not exactly silent but pretty laconic, somewhat stolid in his approach to life but invigorated by what he sees as injustice and is not inhibited by scruples about a vigilante approach to life and death – generally, death – for the crooked and the corrupt.

And that is what happens here. Actually, there are two initial premises which are interesting though quite disturbing for an action thriller. On the one hand, there is a little Chinese girl who is ultra-gifted in memory and maths. She is taken to the US to be a human computer for a powerful Triad group. They are in conflict for power and money with a brutal Russian gang. And a crack squad of New York's not so finest are in on the deals. When the Russians abduct the little girl (Catherine Chan is quite effective in the role), she is rescued by Statham.

The Statham sub-plot has tensions in it. In a fixed multi-martial arts fight that he wins instead of losing, the Russians lose money, kill his wife and leave him alive, threatening to kill anyone he gets close to. On the edge, he contemplates killing himself until he notices the little girl hiding on a subway platform. And.... off they go.

The Chinese want Mei back with the important numbers she has memorized for them. The Russians want her. The police want her. This leads to some massive shootouts in Manhattan. The body count is more than excessive, making the action more cartoonish than realistic and so runs the danger of seeming ridiculous.

But, that's the Jason Statham action genre. This one is fast-paced, introduces a couple of feeling elements (and a tear or two in Statham's eyes) and is designed to please the fans – which it will.

SPUD

South Africa, 2011,

John Cleese, Troye Sivan,

Directed by Donovan Marsh.

Durban, 1990. Life in South Africa is about to change radically. As shown during this film, F.W. de Klerk, makes his speech in parliament and announces the release of Nelson Mandela.

This is the background to this story of a year of a young boy in boarding school. While the film does not focus so much on the politics, the situation comes to the fore in racist remarks, expressions of fears of the blacks and securing homes with barbed wire and in the place of black African boys in the school.

The film is based on a popular book by John van der Ruit. More bloggers than not are of the opinion that it is quite faithful to the book and its spirit.

The school itself is a mixture of rules and discipline yet a spirit of freedom (and getting away with what you can) on the part of the students. There is the public school look about it, but not quite as controlled as in 'the good old days'.

John Milton's parents (or, at least his father and his grandmother) are oddball, even noticeably eccentric. John thinks it might be better to be at boarding school than at home. He is small for his age. His voice has not broken, and he is not yet at the changes of puberty (which leads to the uncomplimentary nickname given him after his being seen in the showers, 'Spud'). His initial way of thinking is to be one of the boys, to follow the attitudes and behaviour of his peers. We are introduced to the eight in his dormitory with all their characteristics: the bully, the head boy, the cricketer, the boy who brings in sex magazines, the small, rather intellectual boy that they pick on, Gecko. Speaking of the sex magazines, the first part of the film shares the adolescent boys' preoccupation with and curiosity about sex.

The teachers are not always prominent, though we see the headmaster and a teacher who has had (allegedly) a mauling accident with a lion and gives sixers for the boys sneaking out for night swimming. But, the main teacher we meet is Mr Edery, 'The Guv', played by John Cleese. His first class on books is vintage Cleese, sarcastic, bombastic barbs. That is what we expected from him. However, as the film progresses, a more human side emerges, first comic, then quite tragic, something which Cleese communicates very well.

As the four terms go by, we follow John's experiences (hopeless at sport), the reading that The Guv urges (Waiting for Godot, Catch 22, The Lord of the Rings) and its effect on John, misbehaving with the peers, and his infatuation with Debbie, his parent's neighbour's daughter. She becomes his ideal, his fantasy. But, when he auditions for the school play, Oliver Twist, he also becomes infatuated with his leading lady, Amanda.

As the year goes by, John matures a little, is influenced by the wise suggestions of The Guv (while tackling The Guv on his red wine problem), experiences the friendship of Gecko and the sadness of his illness, moves to becoming a little more independent, has to face the situation with Debbie and Amanda, and is acclaimed by everyone for his performance as Oliver.

This is all to the credit of Troye Sivan, South African born, now living in Perth. He brings John to credible as well as interesting and often engaging life. A fine performance (including some singing as well).

Spud takes its place among the school stories like Dead Poets Society or The Emperor's Club.

THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

Italy/Ireland, 2011,

Sean Penn, Frances McDormand, Harry Dean Stanton, Eve Hewson,

Directed by Paolo Sorrentino.

Were there to be a competition for a list of most peculiar films, This Must be the Place would certainly find a place there. It is at times bizarre, comic, serious, deadly serious, enigmatic and never predictable. It also offers what must be Sean Penn's most idiosyncratic performance.

If a reviewer simply said that the film is about an ageing, faded rock star who still dresses with make-up as in his heyday who goes to the United States from Dublin where he lives to find his family and then travels across America, with a touch of the Forrest Gump, on a mission of avenging his father and his concentration camp experiences, you would have a sketch synopsis – but a synopsis which does little value to the content and style of communication of the film.

And, if someone told you that they hated the film, you would not be surprised.

However, if you stay with the film and Sean Penn's performance, then you will probably surrender, at least in part, to its strange story, its even more strange character, and the number of themes and issues that it raises. You may also surrender to the visual style, communicating the different parts of the States visited as well as the range of music, from quiet piano to rock and roll, but, especially to the songs of Talking Heads and more songs by David Byrne (who appears and sings the title song) and new songs by Byrne and Will Oldham.

Surprisingly, the Ecumenical Jury in Cannes 2011 awarded its prize to this film even though previous winning directors were represented (the Dardenne Brothers with *The Kid with a Bike* and Ari Kaurismäki with *Le Havre*, as well as *The Tree of Life*).

Sean Penn is Cheyenne, a pop star of twenty years earlier who lives in retirement in Dublin with his feisty wife of 35 years, played by Frances McDormand. The point is made that Cheyenne has not really grown up. He has a tinny, rather whining voice, a hesitant manner even though he is particularly direct and honest in what he has to say. He seems to survive with some friends in Ireland and the good management of his wife. He is also friends with a mother whose son has disappeared and who sits at the window waiting for him.

Cheyenne, with his Gothic look, hairstyle and make-up, decides to go to his family in New York where his father, estranged for thirty years, has died. He learns about his father's time in the concentration camp and a guard who had humiliated him whom he has tried to track down all his life. Cheyenne decides to go searching, a road trip (with a businessman's precious car which has a somewhat fiery end) which takes him to see an old teacher in Michigan, a single mother with a chubby son (who also sings the title song) and changes their lives with his kindness. He also meets a man in Utah (Harry Dean Stanton) who reveals that it was he who took out the patent for suitcases with wheels in 1988. (Having long thought that whoever this person was, he deserved a Nobel Prize for such an energy saving invention, I was in admiration of this scene which, like many in the film, is not essential to the plot but adds atmosphere and feeling.)

The moral moment is when he confronts the guard, now an old man, and hears about his father's experience. What is he to do with the man?

The film is poetic, lots of symbolism and visual detail, that elicits all kinds of sense responses and emotions. It also offers much to reflect on, the pop music industry and history and the perils of celebrity, let alone broader issues of the United States in the 21st century and, still, the deep memories of the Holocaust.

This must be the place, especially in the lyrics of the song (which is played and sung in many versions throughout the film) is home.

The writer-director is Italian, Paolo Sorrentino, who has been a favourite of the art house and festival circuits, especially in Cannes. His creation of Cheyenne reminds us that he has created quite grotesque characters in his two previous films, *L'Amico di Famiglia* (*The Family Friend*) where the central character is a completely unsympathetic and ugly mean tailor and money lender, and *Il Divo*,

his portrait of once esteemed but mysteriously repellent Italian politician, Giulio Andreotti. Cheyenne is just as strange but much more likeable.

WOMAN IN THE FIFTH (LA FEMME DANS LE VIEME)

Ethan Hawke, Kristin Scott Thomas,

Directed by Pawel Pawelowski.

A reviewer-friend, after seeing this psychological drama, asked me to let him know what I thought of the ending of the film and what it meant. So, this request made me pay more attention all the way through, a conscious effort, more than usual. Just as well, because I was able to pick up some clues, visual and verbal, that occurred throughout the film. While I wouldn't guarantee that I could write a detailed synopsis, I think the basic meaning was clear enough – until I heard some of the local reviewers puzzling over what happened.

If that sounds intriguing, this is your film. It has a brief running time and is directed by Polish, Pawel Pawelowski, who made two interesting small-budget features in England in the last ten years, *The Last Resort* and *My Summer of Love*.

The Fifth is one of the arrondissements of Paris where the film is set (based on a novel by American, Douglas Kennedy). We travel to several of these arrondissements. First to where US literature professor and novelist, Tom (Ethan Hawke), goes to find his estranged wife and his daughter, who promptly warns him off and calls the police. We don't quite know the reasons for the hostility but his wife tells their daughter that her father has been in prison. Next, he travels by bus into a seedier neighbourhood, multi-ethnic as well, and finds that his suitcase and money have been stolen while he was asleep. Later, he goes more up-market to a literary party where he encounters Margit (the ever tantalisingly interesting Kristin Scott Thomas) and then to her apartment in the 5th.

In the meantime, he is offered a surveillance job by the owner of the dingy hotel where he is allowed to stay. Shady dealings here and some threats but we don't quite know what. Tom also has a boorish neighbor – and his criticisms of him lead Tom to the police station.

If this sounds intriguing, then this is your film.

By this stage, we know enough about Tom to wonder about his life, his mental condition, his imaginary world, so that we can make sense of the final option that he makes after making sure his

daughter (who seems to have temporarily disappeared) is safe. And, the question of who is this woman in the fifth still remains something of an enigma.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS JUNE 2012

BEL AMI

CARELESS LOVE

DARK SHADOWS

DECLARATION OF WAR

DELICATESSE, La/ DELICACY

DICTATOR, The

DUEL, The

ELENA

EMPIRE OF SILVER

FIVE-YEAR ENGAGEMENT, The

FRIENDS WITH KIDS

GAME CHANGE

GET THE GRINGO

IRON SKY

MARGARET

MEN IN BLACK 3

ONCE UPON A TIME IN ANATOLIA

PROMETHEUS

ROYAL AFFAIR, A

TRISHNA

W./E.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE EXPECTING

BEL AMI

UK, 2012,

Robert Pattinson, Uma Thurman, Kristin Scott Thomas, Cristina Ricci, Colm Meaney,

Directed by Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod.

The story of a cad. Based on the story by Guy de Maupassant, and filmed in the 1940s with George Sanders in the title role, this is a film set in La Belle Epoque, Paris in the 1890s.

Georges Du Roy comes from a poor and illiterate family and has just spent five years as a soldier in Algeria. We see him looking in from the outside on the wine, women and song culture of the period. He is envious. However, out he goes and encounters, by chance, a fellow soldier who is now a journalist for a prominent Paris newspaper. He offers Georges an opportunity at a meal at his house. He meets the editor but he also meets three wives – and we know that his intentions are not honourable.

Georges is played by Robert Pattinson, which proves a contemporary difficulty, disengaging his character from Twilight's Edward. The other difficulty is that Georges is a callow young man (empty as one of the women will later accuse him). He has a certain charm, a smiling charm, but his self-centred opportunism is not attractive at all. With the help of his benefactor's wife, Madeleine (Uma Thurman), who dictates his first article, he succeeds at the newspaper but his laziness threatens to lose him his position and income.

In the meantime, he has taken up with one of the wives, Collette (Cristina Ricci), bored with her husband and delighted to have an affair, and pay for a love nest, with Georges. He charms her young daughter who nicknames him Bel Ami, which is taken up by other characters. When Madeleine's husband dies, he determines to marry her and does. Her enthusiasm for news research and reporting and the editor's aim to bring down the government means that Georges is now contributing to the political action in Paris.

But, he is treated as a boy. His revenge is to seduce Virginie (Kristin Scott Thomas), the editor's wife. She becomes besotted by him. He also takes up with Collette again.

When a political situation occurs, which means corruption and exploitation, Madeleine turns against him. In terms of the drama, this is hard to accept as Madeleine is drawn as a strong character with convictions, not likely to enter into easy dalliance or betray her principles.

But Bel Ami is not done yet and the final image is of the smug face of the complete cad who has manipulated his success.

Think in the vein of *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Cheri*.

CARELESS LOVE

Australia, 2012,

Nammi Le, Peter O'Brien, Andrew Hazzard, Ivy Mak, David Field,

Directed by John Duigan.

Writer-director, John Duigan, has not made a film in Australia since *Sirens* in 1994. Prior to that, he had made several significant films and television series (*Winter of Our Dreams*, *Far East*, *The Year My Voice Broke*, *Flirting*, *Vietnam*). He also made *Romero* and the film about Catholic war photographer, Damien Parer, *Fragments of War*. He has shown a great interest in different Australian stories as well as an interest in Australia's relationship with Asia. He has also shown a great interest in ideas, sometimes philosophical, sometimes religious. He has brought them together in *Careless Love* – or, perhaps, not always together, sometimes story simply juxtaposed with idea sequences.

Careless Love is a film about prostitution (as well as other themes). Which raises questions about the meaning of the title and what love really is. There have been several Australian films about prostitution. In 2007, *The Jammed* explored human trafficking with Asian connections to Australia. The issues were those of justice, humanity and rights. In 2011, *Sleeping Beauty* was a psychosexual drama focusing on a student paying her way through university by working as a prostitute. The issues were predominantly psychological. The central character of *Careless Love* is a student, working as an escort to get money for her parents so that they will not lose their home. The emphasis is far less on the psychological – in fact, the audience has to give a lot of thought to characters, their motivations and behaviour, their psychology. Rather, the focus here is social and sociological. The student herself is involved in Social Studies. Her lecturer, played by John Duigan himself, appears throughout the film, teaching, raising questions about religion, fundamentalist beliefs and brainwashing, about morality, relationships and prostitution. Dramatically, these university scenes sit

alongside the narrative, leaving the audience to make the connections until the final thesis is presented by the student after all her experiences.

The student is Linh, who came with her boat people parents from Vietnam when she and her brother were little. Some of this parallels the experiences of the star, Nammi Le. Nammi Le is a compelling presence on screen, the audience gazing at her. However, part of this mesmerising is her passivity, especially with her clients. She has no personal scruples about her choice to be an escort. She is partly fastidious in her choices of jobs. She is devoted to her parents even as she deceives them.

She and her friend, Mint (Ivy Mak in a vigorous performance) are driven each night by a friendly Dion (David Field). We are taken to several of the clients, young and old, local and Japanese. The film is rather reticent until later in the film in showing nudity and sexual activity. She meets an American, Peter Obrien as a former Blackwater agent in Iraq, who befriends her and serves as a sounding board for her as she gradually reveals herself to him. This leads to some melodrama as well as a visit from his wife and son from Baltimore – and a final humane touch.

Linh compartmentalises her life, boarding with friends, then moving in with a law student who works in the local bar. She visits her parents as well as the bank managers. She is very efficient in money management.

The American warns her that she is in danger of being found out. When she is, it leads to exposure, humiliation, tension in relationships (and some ugly behaviour on the part of associates as well as the exploitative media). But, Linh is a strong character and is not afraid of other people's opinions.

Most of the sequences are fairly brief. And, there are many characters and episodes. Which means that the film is working on several levels and audiences have to be responding swiftly, dealing emotionally and intellectually with the drama. But, it is all unified by Linh's story.

DARK SHADOWS

US, 2012,

Johnny Depp, Michelle Pfeiffer, Helena Bonham Carter, Eva Green

Directed by Tim Burton.

Some audiences will find this comedy/parody a hoot, Tim Burton style. On the one hand, it has no uplifting moral values to explore. On the other, it is an entertaining and often clever spoof. (The

danger is that some audiences will either take it too seriously or not seriously enough, expecting Johnny Depp to be Jack Sparrowish again.)

For audiences who remember the 1987 *Beetlejuice*, one of Tim Burton's earliest films, the Collins family, living in a dilapidated 18th century Maine mansion, won't seem too surprising in their eccentricities. Burton has filmed a lot of fantasies since then. This time, he is clearly intending to enjoy himself and provide another opportunity to work with Johnny Depp (their eighth collaboration in twenty two years). He has been intrigued by the 1970s' television series (1225 30-minute episodes from 1966-1971), created by Dan Curtis, *Dark Shadows*, and decided to give it a big screen treatment, big cast, big design, big effects. But, it is still Gothic horror soap opera.

The film opens in 1760 on a dingy Liverpool dock with the Collins family setting out to settle in Maine. Barnabas, the little boy, is given a baleful eye by the servant, Angelique, and her mother. The Collins family prosper in Maine with a fishing company, a town, Collinsport, and a huge baroque mansion. But, the adult Barnabas rejects Angelique again, is smitten by Josette who, under one of Angelique's spells, throws herself from a cliff into the raging sea. What is Barnabas to do but to follow her – but that is not enough for Angelique who curses the Collins family, transforms Barnabas into a vampire, then binds him, puts him in a coffin, bolted and buried. And, that's just the beginning!

When builders on a site strike the coffin, Barnabas is freed (vampirising the workmen since he is so thirsty!). Finding the ancestral home, he settles in only to find the curse has reduced the family to penury and that Angelique, who has had a prosperous 200 years, is behind everything. It is 1972.

Johnny Depp is at his best as Barnabas Collins. He is pasty-faced, black-rimmed eyes, 18th century vesture, prim British accent and a flow of ornate 18th century prose. Depp is completely and consistently serious, perfect in timing, which makes his performance all the more effectively amusing. And getting used to cars (dragons) big M signs (Mephistopheles?), coping with television and Carpenter's songs, reading *Love Story*... a deal of amusing details. The plot? Well, Angelique goes to work again to destroy the Collins family success and to win back Barnabas (in what must be one of the funniest, edited sex scene collages in films).

The cast is interesting. Michelle Pfeiffer is now the matriarch with a rebellious and sullen teenager, Chloe Grace Moretz (*Hugo*, *Let Me in*). There is the weird cousin Willie (Jackie Earle Haley), the callow brother-in-law (Jonny Lee Miller), the orphaned child, David (Gulliver McGrath) and the resident psychiatrist, Julia Hoffman (Burton giving his wife Helena Bonham Carter yet another mad character to play). Angelique is played by Eva Green. And Christopher Lee gets a welcome scene.

It all ends somewhat apocalyptically, in the American vein.

If Gothic horror soap-opera does not appeal, forget it. But, if witty, sometimes absurd, spoofs do appeal, you may very well like it.

DECLARATION OF WAR

France, 2011

Valerie Donzelli, Jeremie Elkaim

Directed by Valerie Donzelli.

No, not a film about military action nor politics. In fact, there is more love than war in this French drama about a couple and the illness of their baby son. It is based on the experiences of the leading actors with Valerie Donzelli directing.

They don't believe it, but when they meet and their eyes attract across a crowded room (well, nightclub), they discover that their names are Romeo and Juliette. Their romance and love is quickly sketched in. Then their baby boy, Adam, is born. All seems idyllic.

Even when Adam cries incessantly and Romeo is finding this hard to take, Juliette is still hopeful that all will be well. However, they take the child to a consultancy and, step by step, examining the boy's condition and lopsided facial features, they discover that he has a brain tumour.

Most of the film is about the love, care and exasperation as the couple try to do what is best for the boy, seeking out surgeons, hospital care, finding that their son is treated well but that they are not always kept in the loop. Juliette is highly emotional and breaks into recovery rooms. Romeo is more guarded, trying to respect protocols. This actually takes its toll on the couple, pushing them apart even as they try the best for their son.

Anyone who has experienced good hospital care and information about cases will watch the film with appreciation. Anyone who has been frustrated at brusque treatment by doctors, nurses or receptionists and lack of personalized communication will find that they watch the film with some renewed frustration.

Donzelli and Elkaim are more than credible, reenacting some of their own experiences. Their son, Gabriel Elkaim, is Adam at eight years old. They are surrounded by a gallery of characters, especially the couple's parents and various doctors and hospital staff. At times there is some Gallic sentiment

which some audiences will find too sweet (though it tempers our concern about Adam and how he is faring). At times, the film touches the rawness of the experience – as when the couple stay in a temporary hospital room and give each other strength in saying out loud what they actually fear.

The film is an emotional exploration of some very basic and deep human experiences and values. French nominee for the 2011 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. It won a SIGNIS (World Catholic Association for Communication) Commendation at the 2012 Hong Kong Film Festival.

LA DELICATESSE/ DELICACY

France, 2011,

Audrey Tautou, Francois Damien,

Directed by David and Stephane Foenkinos.

If you are fond of French romantic comedies and dramas, especially with that Gallic je-ne-sais-pas-quoi, you should enjoy La Delicatesse. It is the story of a loving romance and marriage which is broken by the tragic death of the husband in an accident, then the story of a lonely and grieving widow, then an unlikely romance where a lot of people become victims of their prejudices, unfavourably judging people by their appearance. Nothing particularly new, but that does not matter, because it is all nicely done.

It is a star vehicle for Audrey Tautou who entered moviegoers' consciousness with her performance as Amelie of Montmartre in 2001. Since then she has appeared in a number of romantic films but also the World War I drama, A Very Long Engagement. She was also the co-star of The Da Vinci Code. Her role in La Delicatesse as Nathalie shows what she does best. Because she has that gamin, pixie face and slender build, she seems the embodiment of delicacy.

The early scenes of the film are full of the delight of romance and a happy marriage. After the shock of the death, she seems numbed and survives by her constant work. Friends, of course, urge her to make a new life. Her married boss makes advances.

Whether this happens only in French films –perhaps - she impetuously kisses one of her work team, a Swede who has lived in France for 15 years. He is, judging by appearances, quite an unprepossessing man. However, his rhapsody after being kissed, walking up a hill with all the girls looking at him to the tune of T Rex's Get it On, is cut short when Nathalie declares she cannot remember kissing him and is all apologies. Francois Damien as Markus is immensely likeable.

What follows is a genial growing in friendship despite the snide comments of her boss and even of her friends.

The ending is sweet, a touch of fantasy as Markus acknowledges Nathalie's love for her husband and his own love for her. Happy ever after.

THE DICTATOR

US, 2012,

Sacha Baron Cohen, Ben Kingsley, Anna Faris,

Directed by Larry Charles.

It would be an interesting project to study the body language of audiences watching *The Dictator* (or *Ali G in da House*, or *Borat* or *Bruno*, Sacha Baron Cohen's previous spoofs). This reviewer, watching *The Dictator* would have been seen to wince, laugh, smile, gasp, blush and look around (well, not for this one since there was only one other person at 2.00 on a Friday afternoon in a large cinema, which didn't make for an atmosphere of loud guffaws).

How does one review *The Dictator*? It is easy to say that fastidious audiences need not go. On the other hand, those who are fastidious but enjoy some political and social satire can go and both wince and laugh. Those who enjoy the broadest of humour (and Sacha Baron Cohen, his writers and director, Larry Charles, do seem to be trying in each film to see what they can get away with) should have no difficulty with *The Dictator*. There are plenty of politically incorrect jokes and some of the most blatant of racist and sexist lines which make one gasp – but which, in fact, do make us confront where we really stand on some issues, and what bias might be lurking below the surface. And, as expected from the past, there are few bodily functions that do not make an appearance (including some farcical shenanigans during a childbirth sequence).

So, that deals with recommendations or not.

The Dictator is a blend of Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Ahmadinejad with some nods towards Syria. He rules over a North African nation, Waadeya, which is building nuclear weapons (he can hardly keep a straight face when he is denying this in a public speech). He is a despot. Anyone who disagrees with him is sent off to instant execution. He has a loyal second-in-charge, so he thinks, who is played straight by Ben Kingsley. However, when a coup fails, a double is sought out – a dill of a shepherd (also played by Baron Cohen) to be a puppet of the usurper.

But, most of the action takes place in New York where they all go to visit the UN to explain the nuclear situation. When the dictator is ousted from his hotel and has to find his way on the New York

streets and, joining in a protest against his tyranny, he is mistaken for a rebel by an enthusiastically naïve young woman who owns a green store and is to cater for the UN meeting (Anna Faris).

Plenty of complications as he goes to work at the shop, meets some old associates, plans to infiltrate the UN meeting to stop his rival signing a democracy document which will lead to oil deals. Actually, this gives rise to quite some parody of American attitudes, especially when he makes a speech listing the dangers of democracy (controlled press, wire tapping and a whole range of things that already exist).

The other thing is the verbal humour. The jokes might almost be missed as they pass swiftly by. In Waadeya a favourite film is *You've Got Mail Bomb*. The dictator describes his spiritual journey like an *Eat Pray Love* experience. Plenty of cultural references for jokes, from George Clooney to those blue creatures in *Avatar*.

In *Borat* and *Bruno*, Sacha Baron Cohen infiltrated groups and met individuals as his alter egos, setting them up for some outrageous falls. *The Dictator* is scripted. So, the safe review is 'for Sacha Baron Cohen fans only'.

THE DUEL

US, 2101,

Andrew Scott, Fiona Glascott, Tobias Menzies,

Directed by Dover Koshashvili.

The film is also advertised as Anton Chekhov's *The Duel*. It is based on a Chekhov novella and takes us into Chekhov land, the Russian Caucasus of the 19th century. The beautiful photography, however, offers the landscapes and waterscapes of Croatia, standing in. And, the film is certainly beautiful to look at, capturing the look of a small lakeside town, the elegance of the décor and costumes of the period.

There is a duel and it comes late in the film, not so much a shooting duel, though shots are fired, but a jolting experience, moral and emotional, for the two protagonists. It also provides a jolt for audience sympathies and a questioning of our understanding of the two men involved.

One is a government official who increasingly resents his 'exile' to this remote town where he finds no culture. Not that he is particularly cultured himself. He has a mistress who has opted to leave her husband for this life where she is not welcomed by most people and lives a self-indulgent life,

unhappy with her husband's lack of attention. He drinks, plays cards with cronies, does little work and wanders around in self-pity. He is played convincingly by Andrew Scott (distractingly resembling actor Mark Ruffalo).

The other protagonist is a self-confident scientist who researches and is about to sail for Africa. He despises the government official and is not loth to express his opinions and condemnations. He seems to relish the prospect of the duel even if shots are to be fired only into the air.

The film has an average running time, so there is time to respond to the characters and their behaviour and their dilemmas, without spending a lot of time contemplating them (as would happen in a Russian version of the story). There is a great deal of detail: visiting a hat shop, the card games, a rendezvous with the police captain, summer swimming in the lake, a buffet meal, kitchen activities, a doctor's visit...

The government official is not a likeable man, wanting to escape back to Moscow, not having the resources to do this, angry with his mistress, feeling that she is clinging to him. But, being forced into the duel and standing exposed to possible death, has a powerful influence on him. The scientist, with whom we have to agree in his criticisms, also undergoes an experience as he stands with his loaded gun, the potential to kill a man. The duel undermines his certainties.

Fiona Glascott is the beautiful and fickle mistress. Tobias Menzies is the scientist. The director, now from Israel, was born in the republic of Georgia.

ELENA

Russia, 2011,

Nadezhda Markina, Andrei Smirnov, Aleksey Rozin.

Directed by Andrei Zvyagintsev.

Enthusiasts for Russian films will remember the impact of *The Return*, winner of many awards, Golden Lion in Venice 2003, SIGNIS award, the story of a father and his two sons. Director, Andrei Zvyagintsev, went on to make *The Banishment*, a powerful film of relationships and family. He has now gone to a modern Russian city and offered a portrait of a woman who seems to be a person of integrity who is transformed into a suburban moral monster while thinking that she is doing the right thing by her family. Love can also be evil.

The film uses the contemplative Russian style of film-making, right from the very long single shot at the opening with only a movement of birds and gradual light glowing within a house, a scene that marks the end of the film as well. We are interested in what is going on, then surprised at the moral turn of events, then left to ponder what has happened, especially to Elena.

Elena has retired from nursing and has married her older companion. They live in some comfort. We are made aware of this in the minute detail of Elena's waking, dressing, her make-up, breakfast and waking her husband in his room. An issue is raised. Her son, a lazy, unemployed married man, needs money. Elena's husband, Vladimir, is unwilling to give anything. He also has an estranged daughter from his first marriage.

We are given a close-up of Elena's family after she travels across the city to a run-down suburb with three nuclear chimneys dominating the area. She is devoted to them, playing with the baby, friends with her daughter-in-law, who seems a decent woman, tolerant of the selfish and churlish grandson who prefers playing video games, though his father is after money to pay for his education so that he will not have to join the military. Later in the film, we see the son go out with a gang, bashing other young men. The audience is not invited to have any sympathy with him.

The core of the film concerns Vladimir's death, his will, the bequests to his daughter and cutting out his wife. Elena takes matters into her own hands with his death, the will, the money in his safe – and all for her family. They finally move from their dingy home to the comfort of Vladimir's house.

In 19th century novels, Russian authors like Dostoevsky explored crime and punishment, some of the banality of evil and its consequences. Elena is a film about crime and no punishment, a critique, an indictment of the loss of moral integrity in the aftermath of the Communist era, which does not bode well for the future of Russian society.

EMPIRE OF SILVER

China, 2010,

Aaron Kwok, Tielen Zhang, Jennifer Tilly.

Directed by Christina Yao

There are so many films from China in recent years which take us back into more recent history – after such a spate of films about the military history of China in the various kingdoms in previous millennia.

Empire of Silver goes back only a century or more (as have films about the centenary of the downfall of the empire in 1911). It opens in the provinces with a voiceover narrative from a descendant of the protagonists who reminisces from the 20th century vantage point and elaborates what he sees as the final achievement of his family, a family of bankers.

As with the other films, the audience will feel that they have been immersed in this Chinese world, the action, the colour, the dangers, the costumes, the disparity between the poor and the rich.

Western audiences not familiar with the events will need to pay attention since the film often moves rapidly, passing sometimes over a year or more at a time. We have to try to work out who is who in the family, especially when the narrative goes into flashback. That having been said, it is clear that this is the story of a banking patriarch at the end of the 19th century, the status of banking at the time – and the Boxer rebellion. The patriarch's oldest son is a kindly deaf mute who tries to feed the hungry. The second son is a harsh and brutal dominator. The third son is a dilettante, not esteemed by his father. The fourth son is more hopeful but when his new wife is abducted, he collapses mentally. The branch managers in Beijing and Shanghai are much better administrators.

Along with this plotline, there is a romantic plot, the third son in love with a young woman who has become another wife for his father. These lines run parallel for a while but eventually come together when the third son is sent to Mongolia (magnificent photography of the Gobi desert, of the mountains and a rather electrifying encounter with ravenous wolves, even though they are clearly animatronic). He returns for the funeral of the wife and accepts the commission from his father to manage the bank, especially in the hiding and hoarding of silver until the crisis is over.

The third son thus comes into his own, setting up a banking system for the poor, managing the banks well – and over some decades until after World War II.

The overall effect is impressive but the development seems patchy at times, many sequences (like that with the wolves) standing out while others play more conventionally.

(Western audiences are part of the target audience. Jeremy Thomas (who produced the Oscar-winning *The Last Emperor*) produced this and a number of films in China, including *13 Assassins*. This one has a featured role for Jennifer Tilly.)

THE FIVE YEAR ENGAGEMENT

US, 2012,

Jason Segel, Emily Blunt, Chris Pratt, Jacki Weaver

Directed by Nicholas Stoller

A romantic comedy, with older protagonists, and with a longer time to sort out issues of love and commitment!

The film has been produced by Jud Apatow, whose produced and/or directed films, run to a certain pattern. This one is no exception. There are usually some men and women behaving badly plotlines at first; then all seems lost, bad errors of judgment and conduct; then there is some recovery and acknowledgement of mistakes; then a firm emphasis on love and commitment. The Jud Apatow Syndrome.

It is hard not to like cook, Tom (Jason Segel) and his fiancée, Violet (Emily Blunt). He is a good chef. She is studying psychology. Then she gets an offer of a university position in Michigan (from San Francisco) and off they go, she to fulfilment of life hopes, he to being unable to get a chef's job (and being laughed at for giving up everything for snowy Michigan). Then she gets an offer of a continued position. Is marriage really a no go?

In the background are Violet's sister, Susan, who becomes involved with Tom's best friend, Alex. And they settle down, against all expectations, to marriage and a family. There are also the respective parents (one of whom is Jacki Weaver as Violet's British mother, disappointed in marriage, sometimes blunt and indiscreet) and grandparents who hope to see the couple married before they die – several of them don't!

Academic life for Violet is helped along by Winton (Rhys Ifans), the professor, and his oddball team of assistants, thinking up tests and experiments to measure and promote their careers. Sandwich-making life for Tom is not always easy but there is an outlet in hunting deer with another homebound husband. And then some jealousy.

Where will it end? As if we didn't know. But, as always, the point is not what happens, but how did they get there.

This is a mild comedy, smiles rather than laughs – though there are some of those – some crass jokes, as always, and some pleasant romantic scenes.

FRIENDS WITH KIDS

US, 2012,

Adam Scott, Jennifer Westfeldt, Maya Rudolph, Chris O'Dowd, Jon Hamm.

Directed by Jennifer Westfeldt.

Five year engagements, what to expect when you're expecting, friends with kids... what are the questions Hollywood is raising for 2012? The target audience seems to be those in their 30s who are faced with issues of commitment, relationships, marriage, pregnancy, family, rearing of children. What are the rest of us to think as we look on? And question ourselves?

The screenplay was written by Jennifer Westfeldt who takes on the central role of Julie, in her later 30s by the end of the film who has had a long relationship which ended badly. She is on the lookout for love (not quite believing that she could be really loved) and, as she sees her friends with kids, is powerfully aware of the ticking of the biological clock. Should she simply get pregnant? By whom? Since high school, her best friend has been Jason, but he is not attracted to her in terms of a permanent relationship. In his 30s, he is stuck in his adolescent desires and sexual urges – and, as for children...

The friends with kids include a married couple with several. Maya Rudolph as Leslie spends a lot of time being frantic, especially when visitors are coming to dinner. Alex, Chris O'Dowd, doesn't seem fazed at all. Then there are Missy, Kristin Wiig, and Ben, Jon Hamm, who have a baby. You can tell that this latter couple is drifting steadily towards the rocks. Julie does pal up with Mr Perfect, Edward Burns, who is charmingly sensitive and has grown up children. Jason, on the other hand, is swept off his feet by a young actress, Megan Fox, who loathes the idea of commitment – and children.

The film traces the interactions of these characters over the years, including Julie's pregnancy (yes, it is Jason, but solely as a kind of contract for shared responsibility for their son and freedom for seeking other partners). Maybe the ending is too much what we might have expected (dramatically speaking that is), but while we have dramas in real life, a moral ending is what most people hope for. Which means that, ultimately, this film for 30-somethings wants to make a strong affirmation about children and parenting with love and selflessness.

GAME CHANGE

US, 2012,

Julianne Moore, Woody Harrelson, Ed Harris, Sarah Paulson, Peter MacNicol.

Directed by Jay Roach.

Game Change is one of those films made by Home Box Office for television screening in the US with possible theatrical release around the world. Other films like this are You Don't Know Jack (Al Pacino as Dr Jack Kevorkian) and Too Big To Fail (about the financial crash of 2008). In Australia, they are first screened on pay television channels.

Another of these films was *Recount*, a drama about the dispute in Florida, 2000, which determined that George W. Bush would be president rather than Al Gore. That film was directed by Jay Roach who directs this story of the Republican nomination campaign in 2008, focusing on Sarah Palin. (Jay Roach is better known for comedies, the Austin Powers satires and the Meet the Fockers films.)

It is amazing how quickly current American political stories are treated in feature films (think Oliver Stone's *W* and the story of the two Presidents Bush or *Fair Game*, the outing of Valerie Plame as a CIA operative by the Bush Administration after her husband questioned Iraq's buying uranium from Africa and the claims about weapons of mass destruction).

Only very young audiences will not have memories of John McCain's introduction of the governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin, as his running-mate in 2008. It seemed a good idea at the moment, but the moment was comparatively short, as revelations about the governor's actions and the law concerning her husband emerged and, much more importantly, her ignorance about the world and contemporary politics. While she drew quite a following and boosted donations for the campaign, she was not credible as a possible President and President Obama was elected.

This film is based on part of a book by reporters on the politics of 2008, "Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime" by Mark Halperin with [John Heilemann](#).

At the centre of the film is Julianne Moore, so convincing in look, manner, speech as Sarah Palin – but, the film, while showing her limitations and presumptions, does humanise her in many ways. She is more vulnerable than she thinks. Her folksiness has some initial charm but cannot last and she feels isolated from her family, gets moody with her advisers, wants to be loyal to McCain (who keeps his distance from her, meeting her rarely during the campaign). One begins to feel sorry for her as she, still willingly, is trapped in circumstances beyond her. There is a sequence, with some pathos as well as having a dig, where we see Sarah Palin watching Tina Fey's send-up of her on Saturday Night Live. But, with the vulnerability, Sarah Palin is still quite tough as well.

The other focus of the film is not McCain himself (well played, with a swearing mouth) by Ed Harris who emerges as intensely ambitious, often dismayed by Sarah Palin, but shocked at the rabble-roused hostility and slander on Barack Obama. Rather, we stay with Steve Schmidt, with a fine performance by Woody Harrelson. He is reluctant to join the campaign but is persuaded by McCain. He goes along with the plan for nominating Sarah Palin, realises eventually that she can perform effectively by acting with prepared answers but soon regrets the political choice doomed to fail and has to control her despite her growing hostility towards him and her firing her speechwriter. The film is certainly interesting in presenting the characters and their behaviour, but there is great interest in spending two hours being taken into the machinations, power struggles and manoeuvres behind the scenes.

An interesting release for 2012, a presidential election year.

GET THE GRINGO

US, 2012,

Mel Gibson, Kevin Hernandez, Dolores Heredia, Peter Stormare,

Directed by Adrian Grunberg.

Originally titled, How I Spent My Summer Vacation, this would have been completely misleading for those who thought this might be a nice holiday story. Get the Gringo gets to the core of the film at once.

Since his real-life troubles, Mel Gibson has not appeared in many films, only Edge of Darkness and The Beaver (which reminded audience how persuasive an actor Gibson could be). Get the Gringo is familiar Gibson material. He is a tough action loner who has a way with quips and a touch of sentiment despite his criminal behaviour and his proneness to add to body counts.

At first, we are immersed in one of the most squalid Mexican prisons that you could ever hope never to visit let alone be interned in. Gibson is The Driver who is captured on the US-Mexican border after robbing a drug czar from San Diego. Police on both sides of the fence are corrupt. So what hope does The Driver have? Well, he has his wits as well as quite some criminal skills and he does survive the brutality and ugliness of the prison which is set up as a town within its walls with women and children living there. The Driver befriends a tough little type – who has a different story. His rare blood type means that his liver is precious for a transplant for the ruthless overseer of the prison. There are a range of despicable characters and exploiters.

It moves back to more familiar Gibson material when The Driver does a deal and gets out of prison to get rid of the drug czar. At this moment, it seemed that he might really be a cop in deep cover – especially when he sets up quite a con, very smart, to entrap the criminal chief. He is not. But, at that moment, the police decide to raid the prison, the overseer demands his transplant, and Mel, of course, comes to the rescue.

It's tough, brutal-linguaged entertainment for those who like this kind of thing. So, that was how he spent his summer vacation.

IRON SKY

Finland, Germany, Australia, 2012

Julia Dietze, Goetz Otto, Christopher Kirby, Stephanie Paul, Peta Sergeant, Udo Keir,

Directed by Timo Vuorensola.

If you are a fan of B-Budget (and B-mentality) science fiction movies and cherish some of those corny images from the past, the absurd stories, the (very) limited sets and special effects, then this is the film for you. If not, you might get stuck in the intentionally (and often successful) ridiculous situations and dialogue, perhaps inclined to take it more seriously than should be and dismiss it. To that extent, *Iron Sky* is quite a specialised film with a target audience.

Of course, it is absurd, but this reviewer found some of it quite funny, generally keeping a smile on my face.

Nazis on the dark side of the moon! They went there in 1945, escaping from Hitler's downfall to begin the Fourth Reich. Unfortunately, their technology (especially over-large computers and a deadly space ship called *Gotterdamerung*) belongs to the 1940s – though the screenplay then gives them some flying saucer space ships which let them get to earth in next to no time, no accommodation to gravity or space suits needed: it is that kind of film.

The year is 2018 and a US election year (which, of course, it isn't) and a Sarah Palin look-and-sound-alike (Stephanie Paul obviously relishing her lines and her bellicose strategies) is campaigning for re-election. A moon trip (with an African American model used in her advertising on board) is part of her PR. But, then, the model, Jim Washington (Christopher Kirby), discovers and is captured by the Nazis. The current Fuhrer (Udo Keir) is ailing and a giant Aryan (Goetz Otto) is ready to take over and produce perfect offspring with teacher, Renate (Julie Dietze). The Fuhrer-in-waiting goes to Earth to prepare the invasion, Renate stowing away and Jim having been transformed into white by the Nazi 'albiniser'.

The hijinks in the US are amusing, especially with the power-behind-the-throne (Peta Sergeant) clearly modeling herself on the arch-villains of the past, dressed in black and performing in more than melodramatic manner, especially when she goes off in the attack space ship, the USS George W. Bush.

Actually, the sets and special effects are pretty good. We would have been satisfied with lesser.

The performances are what is required for this kind of spoof. There is quite a deal of amusing dialogue, generally at the expense of US politics – the president’s campaign slogan is ‘Yes, she can’. But the satire is generally attacking the Right (even a version of The Star Spangled Banner) which means that it won’t be on the Tea Party’s shortlist for a movie night. (Nor for Neo-Nazi socials.)

It seems German audiences have been able to laugh at the parody. The whole film is Finnish in conception (avenging the war? – and much of it made in Queensland and with Australian finance.

A 90 minutes indulgence – entertainingly so for fans.

MARGARET

US, 2011,

Anna Paquin, J. Smith-Cameron, Mark Ruffalo, Matt Damon, Jean Reno, Matthew Broderick.

Directed by Kenneth Lonergan.

If Matt Damon and Matthew Broderick look younger than you would have expected as you watch Margaret, the reason is that Margaret was filmed in 2005 but not released until 2011, caught in problems of studio disapproval and re-editing, finally with the help of Martin Scorsese, to a running time of 150 minutes.

Anna Paquin is the central character, Lisa Cohen. So, who is Margaret? Late in the film, English teacher, Matthew Broderick, reads the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, To Margaret Grieving. For much of this film, Lisa is grieving, not just about herself, though she has her moments of self-pity, but about the death of a woman killed in a bus accident and questioning her own behaviour in contributing to the accident as well as to what she says to the police during the investigation.

Anna Paquin is convincing as an assertive and opinionated teenager (sometimes bigoted) whose father has left and lives in California (and really doesn’t want her to come to live with him). She lives with her actress mother (J. Cameron-Smith, who in real life is the wife of writer-director, Kenneth Lonergan, in a persuasive performance) in New York. She has friends but can be acerbic. She is permissive, sexually speaking, even casual. She is seductive towards a teacher played by Matt Damon.

But, it is the aftermath of the accident where the drama intensifies. It involves meetings with the bus driver, Mark Ruffalo, negotiations for insurance claims with greedy relatives of the dead woman, and discussions with a lawyer about how to deal with criminal charges.

While the film is long – seems a bit long for its subject and characters – it is well written and acted, providing insights into contemporary American life as well as raising issues for reflection.

MEN IN BLACK 3

US, 2012,

Will Smith, Tommy Lee Jones, Josh Brolin, Emma Thompson,

Directed by Barry Sonnenfeld.

The placing of an earth protecting shield on the Apollo, 1969, moments before blast off, Andy Warhol as a government undercover agent, Mick Jagger an alien come to earth to impregnate earth women? National Enquirer headlines? No, just some of the plot elements in Men in Black 3!

Not being a fan of the first two films, I approached this one with caution, and was pleasantly surprised. Whether the ardent fans will be pleased is difficult to work out until we see box office results. It is actually fifteen years since the original film and ten years since the second. A decade between the sequel and this threequel, a long time in movie franchise land. However, here it is.

Once again Will Smith is the genial agent J, just as energetic as ever. Once again Tommy Lee Jones is Agent K, just as laconic as ever. But this time there is more than one Agent K. J has to go back to 1969 to alter history – and finds K's younger self, played expertly by Josh Brolin doing a Tommy Lee Jones impersonation. And there is Agent O, played by Emma Thompson with a wry sense of humour even when she goes into squealing, squirming mode delivering a sympathy message to her staff in Venusian! (Agent O is present back in 1969 in the form of Alice Eve, but this is troubling casting as it is impossible to imagine Alice Eve growing older to be Emma Thompson.)

And there is an arch-villain, Boris the Animal, imprisoned in a lunar security prison for forty years but now breaking out and altering history. Hence the time travel. New Zealand's Jermaine Clement (from the Flight of the Conchords and his impressive turn in Gentleman Broncos), tall, resonant voice and a really bad set of iron teeth, obviously relishes this role.

And, for the fans, there are still a whole range of aliens on earth who break out of their disguises with sometimes sinister, sometimes comic, effects.

The film is mainly Will Smith's as he is the one to go back in time, to try to capture Boris the Animal, to save Ks' life. So, plenty of action and humour. And, there is a very nice alien, Griff, who has the power to visualize many possibilities at once, especially the grimmer ones. He holds a key to the solution – and has the last word. He is played with some sweetness by Michael Stuhlborg.

Critics were asked not to tell their audiences about the final 'revelation'. And this review won't. Suffice to say, I am glad I did not know what it was and was all the more pleased with it.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN ANATOLIA

Turkey, 2011,

Directed by Nuri Bilge Ceylan.

Ceylan is probably Turkey's best-known director today. He has featured with most of his films at the Cannes Festival and has won the director's prize there for *Three Monkeys*. He also won the Grand Jury Prize for *Distant* and in 2011 for the present film. However, he is known in the art film world rather than at the multiplexes and his films and their style are an acquired taste.

His films often have quite a long running time – and are quite unhurried, often with a lingering gaze at characters in close-up or at landscapes. The audience has plenty of time to contemplate, reflect and be immersed in the world that Ceylan invites them into.

This film runs for two and a half hours. The action takes place over one night and a morning – so plenty of time to offer detail. And the film does. It is detail about the search for the body of a murdered man – the police, soldiers, a doctor and the local prosecutor accompany the alleged killer to different sites in the rather barren mountains of Anatolia. There is a prologue with three men drinking and talking, then the credits, then a long shot of three cars, lights on, travelling the mountain road, then arriving at the first site. When we see the accused, we realise that it is a seemingly jovial friend that he has killed.

After some futile visits to possible burial places, the group spend the night in a village. Again, we have a long time to contemplate the mayor, his daughter, and what life, hospitality and cooking, are like in this remote town. There is an interesting discussion about the need for funding for a morgue –

many emigrants to Europe have left their families behind and want to return at their deaths, often in a very hot summer. He makes a point.

When the body is recovered, there is quite a lot more detail, not just the forensic detail, but the problems in transferring the body since the group has neglected to bring a body bag. Later, there are sequences in the autopsy room.

There are enigmatic interludes, especially with the prosecutor asking the doctor's opinion about the death of the wife of a friend (obviously telling his own story) as well as the relationship of the accused with the son of the dead man who is identified by his wife.

Films like this can alienate an impatient audience. They can fascinate those who surrender themselves.

PROMETHEUS

US, 2012,

Noomi Rapace, Michael Fassbender, Charlize Theron, Guy Pearce, Idris Elba.

Directed by Ridley Scott.

'Hugely anticipated', as they say. Here is Ridley Scott, after thirty three years, returning to Alien territory (and not forgetting androids thirty years since with Blade Runner). He has also absorbed something of the quest of Stanley Kubrick in 2001: a Space Odyssey.

The film looks quite magnificent at times, though very dark and foreboding. While there is some earth light at the beginning (a dig on the Isle of Skye in 2089), the action is inside the space ship Prometheus (who defied the Titans for power for humans) or on the desert and rocky locations on a distant planet or inside the caves which are brittle with machines – and mysteries.

On the narrative level, the plot is basic: a 2093 mission is sent from earth to find the planet suggested by cave drawings that literally point to space where scientists can explore whether these aliens created humans, comparing DNA samples; work on the planet paid for by a rich, aged company owner (a made-up Guy Pearce); the interactions of the commander, an icy Charlize Theron, and the rather relaxed captain, Idris Elba. The key characters for the drama are the scientist, Noomi Rapace (familiar to many from the Millennium films) and an android who has something of a robotic manner and demeanour but is also charming, Michael Fassbender. Needless to say, the exploration does not go well, especially for the scientist who discovers that she is pregnant with an alien. (Plenty of

suggestions about that creature emerging from John Hurt so long ago.) There is a final crisis, some heroism, explosions – and the possibility for a sequel.

But, the plot has many strange holes and improbabilities, notably that of the pregnancy and how the scientist deals with it (and recovers so instantly to go into heroic action).

But, Ridley Scott seems to be on the same kind of quest as the astronauts in 2001. Kubrick's Everyman character was called Dave. This time the android is called David. The Prometheus expedition does attempt to go beyond the infinite. But, there is no benign monolith here which could suggest the transcendent, even the divine. The creators here are malevolent. They destroy as well as create – so who is responsible for humanity (especially if they lack humane qualities)? The scientist chooses to believe in the transcendent – has a cross around her neck, a gift from her father, and refers to 2094 as the year of Our Lord, 2094. And she finally decides to go in search of the creators.

We humans don't have all the answers, the film suggests, but, despite cruelty and death, we must go on searching.

A ROYAL AFFAIR

Denmark, 2012,
Mads Mikkelsen, Alicia Vikander,
Directed by Nikolaj Arcel.

An interesting costume drama where sets and costumes have not been stinted. It certainly looks the part.

The setting is Denmark in the 1760s and 1770s, a valuable story for Danish history and a story not too familiar for other audiences. The opening alerts the audience to the Enlightenment and how it flourished in this century, a return to reason instead of faith (and superstition), a dream of equality and dignity for all, an ideal of freedom for society. The French Revolution was just over a decade away as the film ends.

This is also the story of Princess Caroline Matilda of England, bound to an arranged marriage to Christian VII of Denmark. A young, beautiful and cultured woman, she leaves with high hopes. They are soon dashed. The king is mentally unstable, skittish in public manners and profligate in behaviour. Mikkel Boe Folsgaard won the Best Actor award in the 2012 Berlin Film Festival for his arrestingly alarming performance.

The film does begin by letting the audience know that Caroline sealed her fate and exile by an affair

with Dr Johann Struensee. She is writing to her children to explain what she has done.

Dr Struensee (Mads Mikkelsen, like a passive Jack Palance) is an Enlightenment thinker and writer (anonymously). Friends suggest he become physician to Christian who is on a year's tour of Europe. The two click (helped by a love of quotations from Shakespeare) and Johann is able to guide the king to better behaviour. He becomes chief adviser, despite hostility from the nobility and the Council, eventually replacing the Council, and pushing through all kinds of enlightened and progressive legislation, from inoculation against smallpox, to the abolition of censorship and capital punishment. For a while, Denmark set a model for the rest of Europe.

Someone quotes how Lancelot's affair with Guinevere destroyed Camelot. It is apt, of course, when Johann and the queen (initially hostile but impressed by his ideas and manner) begin a liaison. A jealous Dowager queen and conservative nobles are able to arrest John and banish the queen. They also restore the kingdom to the status quo.

The film offers enough to reflect on with insights into this experience of royalty and Enlightenment. Character performances are strong. This seems a story of folly and failure, a postscript adds that Caroline's son, Frederick, staged a coup when he was sixteen and began a fifty five year reign that saw the implementation of so many of the Enlightenment ideas.

SILENT SOULS/OVSYENKI

Russia, 2010,

Igor Segeev, Yuliya Aug, Yuriy Tsurilo

Directed by Aleksei Fedorchenko

A film for festival audiences, a prize winner, including a SIGNIS award in Venice 2010.

This is a mood film, running for under 80 minutes. It has elements of Russian melancholy as a loner storyteller travels with his factory boss to perform the funeral rites for the boss's dead wife.

The loner narrates a story, explaining himself, his mother, his depressed and alcoholic poet father. At the market, he is persuaded to buy two buntings in a cage (the meaning of the Russian title). There are flashbacks to his family, treatment by his father and the father's funeral, as the two men travel along the roads of northern Russia. The landscapes are grey and bleak, the towns rather drab and industrial, the countryside, forests and lakes, are cold and wintry.

But, the story is also that of the boss and his love for his young wife (also shown in flashback) and his traditional chatter during the journey where he opens up about his feelings.

Because the Russians from this part of the vast country are close to Finnish tribes of the past, they have idiosyncratic beliefs and traditions. This is true of the rites for the wife: buying sturdy poles for building a platform where the body (which we have seen prepared, washed and clothed in meditative detail) is brought out of the car, where it has been wrapped in a blanket, then solemnly burned, the ashes collected and scattered in the waters.

The buntings cause an unexpected ending to the film (though the narrator had alerted us to it), leaving the audience with their reflections and their melancholy.

SWERVE

Australia, 2011,

Jason Clarke, Emma Boothe, David Lyons, Travis McMahon, Vince Colossimo.

Directed by Craig Lahiff.

Swerve is the movie equivalent of a paperback thriller that you can read quickly, turn the pages, enjoy the moment and the puzzles – and then forget.

It certainly looks good with its desert and small mining town settings out the back of Broken Hill and the north of South Australia. It is also well-paced and edited, especially the rather numerous swerves as vehicles avoid accidents (or not) or careen almost out of control. That's how the film opens.

Into potential trouble comes a stranger who gives a stranded woman a lift. Big mistake, and disastrous consequences. He is a pleasant man (David Lyons), meets the local police chief (Jason Clarke) who turns out to be the husband of the woman from the lift. They seem to be wealthy, have a nice house (which is going to reappear when the killings start), but she was running away.

So, we have echoes of *Wake in Fright* as we meet the various types around the town, some good (Ray Billings and Chris Haywood who do not survive all that long), some jealous (Vince Colossimo) and some really bad. This is especially true of the drug dealer (with corrupt cop themes as well) who offed the courier who swerved in the desert as the film began.

Then the pursuit starts, involving an abandoned silver mine as well as a rush to catch the Indian Pacific from Broken Hill – and, a throwback to old westerns, a train pursuit and the villain on the train

roof. In the meantime, our hero has got himself tangled with the wife, a femme fatale, as well as her brutal husband, a corpse in the mine shaft and a possible murder charge.

Beware hitch-hikers.

It all moves rapidly but then you think about the plot-holes, especially concerning the literal hole at the mine and how to get down and, especially, how to get out.

Director, Craig Lahiff, has made *Heaven's Burning* with Russell Crowe and the film about the Max Stuart case in the 1950s, *Bland and White*.

TRISHNA

UK, 2012,

Freida Pinto, Riz Ahmed,

Directed by Michael Winterbottom.

Trishna is *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* transferred and adapted to the 21st century and to changing contemporary Indian culture.

Writer-director, Michael Winterbottom, one of the most consistently busy British directors with a film, feature or documentary, or a television film/series, every year since 1989, has a love for the novels of Thomas Hardy. He filmed *Jude* in the mid-90s as the period piece that it was. He adapted *The Mayor of Casterbridge* with *The Claim* in 2000, using a mining setting in America. Now, he has modernised Hardy.

Perhaps a good way to describe the drama and its impact is 'slow-burn'. This is rarely an overtly passionate treatment of *Tess*. While there is an intensity within her, it bursts out only at the end. Her patron and lover, Jay, seems a decent enough type. While he does descend into a sexual obsession with Trishna, sometimes possessive, sometimes callous, Riz Ahmed seems just too nice or pleasant a type to be as bad as the screenplay suggests.

However, the turning point in the relationship between Trishna and Jay is a low-key scene but very effective. She confides trustingly in him, never expecting his hesitation, his criticising her, with a sense that their love can never be the same again.

One reason why Hardy's story translates well to India is the continuing class separation, The gap (which might be lessening materially with growing Indian prosperity) in what each class is supposed to think and how they are to act, especially in an unmarried relationship, is powerful enough to produce deception, cover-up and humiliation in exposure. Jay is well-to-do, his father owning many

hotels. Trishna comes from a Rajasthan village, very traditional in outlook. The propriety of attitudes contrasts with the more easy-going, accepting or permissive, attitudes of people in Mumbai.

Where the film is striking is in its portrayal of India. The visual detail of Rajasthan contrasting with the verve and colour of Mumbai, vista after vista, colour after colour, image after image, makes for constant amazement. The audience is immersed in India, poor village life, service in tourist hotels, wealthy apartments in Mumbai with ocean views, the details of the streets and ordinary life. But, the Mumbai episodes also focus on Indian cinema, Indian television and advertising. Trishna goes to dance classes, is on set for Bollywood musical numbers, is faced with a different and modern world that she is not used to. Her love for Jay carries her along but is tested by his mistrust, his possessing her, his taking her away from this gaudy but exhilarating world.

Put Hardy characters and themes together with Winterbottom's portrait of changing India (more effective than a travel film) and the result is a lighter version of Hardy (except the end). Probably, the most intense love story we witness is that of Michael Winterbottom for India.

W./E.

US, 2011

Andrea Riseborough, Abbie Cornish, James D'Arcy, Oscar Isaac.

Directed by Madonna.

The fact that W./E. was given very little cinema release raises the question about hostility - to Madonna who co-wrote and directed the film and/or to Wallis Simpson, the Duchess of Windsor. Never liked much in Britain, especially at the time of the abdication of Edward VIII, Wallis Simpson received short shrift in *The King's Speech*. However, this is an attempt to look at her more favourably, which succeeds in part in giving a more human face to the Duchess and giving the audience something of a look behind the scenes at the Duke of Windsor.

However, it is not a biography. Rather, it is a portrait, as seen by the writers through a character they have created in a parallel story, set in New York City in 1998, at the time of Sotheby's auction of the Duchess' memorabilia. She died in 1986, the Duke in 1972 (and they are buried together in Windsor Castle, where she was not welcome during her life).

Abbie Cornish plays a wealthy socialite with a well-respected doctor husband who is, however, unfaithful to her and physically brutal. Her mother had called her Wallis after the Duchess and the 1990s Wallis becomes more obsessed with her namesake, spending much time at the Sotheby's pre-auction exhibition and moping around the city. She is befriended by a Russian security guard (Oscar Isaac) and persuaded to buy a pair of the Duchess' gloves - for \$10,000. Her being presented as one of the spoilt and idle rich with this kind of glove money does not quite endear her to ordinary audiences for whom this extravagance would be a dream.

The more interesting part of the film is the portrait of Wallis Simpson which is intercut with the New York story (1990s Wallis dreaming or fantasizing about meeting the Duchess, who actually takes a dim view of Wallis, snapping at her to get a life).

There is a difficulty (unnecessary?) in the flashbacks insofar as they are not in chronological order and run the danger of confusion for those not familiar with the dates and places. However, it is Andrea Riseborough's excellently nuanced performance that makes the film worth seeing. Andrea Riseborough in recent films has played the mousy Rose in Brighton Rock and an IRA killer in Shadow Dancer. She can immerse herself in a role, roles that are quite diverse. James McAvoy is, as an American commentator refers to him after the abdication, Mr David Windsor. He is sympathetic but the film indicates that he was prone to some profligacy in his relationships and the high life. As in The King's Speech, George V (James Fox) and Queen Mary (Judy Parfitt) comes across as cold and imperious. Laurence Fox (James Fox's son) is the stammering Bertie. This time the Queen Mother too comes across as moralistically hostile to Wallis.

Wallis' first husband was a brute (we see scenes in the 1920s in Shanghai), whereas Ernest Simpson, her second husband, is a gentleman who loves his wife. It is she who turns to the Prince of Wales, basking in his friendship, and who gives up her husband. The political atmosphere of the abdication is portrayed well and the abdication speech itself (very well-written) is moving. Then it dawns on Wallis that she has lost her freedom and will forever be yoked to her husband and suffer hostility and humiliations. There is, in recompense, a scene in 1972 where the Duke is dying and asks his wife to dance for him. They had been together for almost forty years. Wallis, in 1998, has a sequence where she goes to Paris to ask Mohamad Al-Fayad, who owns the Duchess' private letter collection, if she can read them. What is Madonna suggesting about Diana and Dodi Al-ayad and the Windsors?

So, the film is not without interest, especially in the scenes of the past, and an opportunity to think again about the abdication and what brought it about and the consequences. The New York story has some poignant moments but is far less interesting than the past.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE EXPECTING

US, 2011,

Cameron Diaz, Jennifer Lopez, Elizabeth Banks, Anna Kendrick, Brooklyn Decker.

Directed by Kirk Jones.

Some films need specialist backgrounds for review, some expertise in a particular area. For this one, out go all the men, except for those who need to have some empathy for their pregnant wives or partners, or to learn to be empathetic. Then out go the men who have had no first-hand experience with pregnant women. Then there are the rest. This review is coming from one of the rest. With as much empathy as possible.

As from the tone of the title, it is clear that this is a mixture of humour and self-help. It seems very frothy at times, even flippant. But, anyone in need of serious advice would not be asking it of this film. It would be a false expectation. They would be seeking out experts and reading serious material. So, this light touch film is a chance for women who have experienced or are experiencing pregnancy to respond emotionally to the on-screen stories, compare their own pregnancies and have a laugh or a weep.

Actually, it is some of the more 'weeping' sequences that stay in the mind, especially a miscarriage, the grief of the mother, her attitude towards the father of the baby (they are not married) and the behaviour of the father.

There is also an adoption story, featuring Jennifer Lopez and Rodrigo Santoro, the question of eagerness and readiness, tensions, the interviews by the agency and, in this case, couples going to Ethiopia under the auspices of the agency to participate in a religious ritual with national and cultural overtones, to receive their babies.

There is comedy with Elizabeth Banks as a breast-feeding expert with a business who collapses in mid-address to a conference, throwing all her sweetness and light sentiments out the window, and beyond. There is comedy with Cameron Diaz as a fitness expert with her own TV show and audiences following her pregnancy.

There is also the story of an older man with a trophy wife, Denis Quaid and Brooklyn Decker. She is pregnant with twins, keeps fit, is more common-sensed than we might have thought and comes through the pregnancy with calm and delight.

There is also an assortment of fathers, especially a group who walk their babies in prams in the park.

At times, it seems like comedy soufflé, all colourful, smart rom-com dialogue, almost cliché situations. But, thinking about it afterwards, there seems to have been more than met the eye.

SIGNIS REVIEWS JULY 2012

AMAZING SPIDER MAN, The

BRAVE

CABIN IN THE WOODS

COMME UN CHEF/ THE CHEF

I AM ELEVEN

ICE AGE 4

INNKEEPERS, The

MARLEY

POLISSE

ROCK OF AGES

SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN

TAKE THIS WALTZ

TED

THAT'S MY BOY

THREE STOOGES, The

WHERE DO WE GO NOW?

THE AMAZING SPIDERMAN

US, 2012,

Andrew Garfield, Emma Stone, Rhys Ifans, Denis Leary, Martin Sheen, Sally Field.

Directed by Marc Webb.

Lots of pre-publicity for this 're-booting' of the Spiderman franchise. Tobey Maguire did his dash in three Spiderman movies between 2002 and 2007, all very successful. So, the question does arise, why a new round of Spiderman films so soon? One of the answers is that this version gives more background to Peter Parker and his family than the previous films. It is likened to Batman Begins, giving new life to Christopher Nolan's trilogy of Dark Knight blockbusters. But, Peter Parker's origins are far less dramatic and spectacular.

We see Peter as a little boy when his parents suddenly disappear after entrusting him to his uncle and aunt (Martin Sheen and Sally Field). Then we find him as a student in his final year at High School, a rather diffident young man, of kindly disposition, looking a bit of a nerd – but he defends students from bullies and wins the sympathy of Gwen Stacey, popular at school (Emma Stone). So

far, so ordinary enough, with Andrew Garfield creating a new image of Peter Parker which we are able to accept pretty soon.

Peter is a wiz at science as was his father whose satchel and papers he finds. He also tracks down his father's science partner (Rhys Ifans – who used to be a Notting Hill lout but has become a serious actor, as with his Earl of Oxford in Anonymous). Visiting the high tech lab of spiders for cross species experiments, he is bitten by a spider – and we know what happens. His turning into Spiderman is presented more realistically as he studies spider bites on line, develops a strong cable... But, his discovery of his superhuman strength is played for some welcome broad comedy.

Once Peter gets into action as Spiderman and designing and making his costume, the film flattens out a bit, not that there is not a lot of action. But, the film does show how his first motivations are selfish (as he is warned by Uncle Ben) and an enjoyment of his powers. Then he starts helping people – and the police chief (Denis Leary, sardonic as usual) brands him a vigilante. A bit awkward since the police chief is Gwen's father.

In the meantime, the scientist, pressured by commercial interests, begins experiments on himself and he transforms into a giant lizard. Some this is a bit corny, even silly, the scientist turning into Dr Jekyll and Mr Godzilla. The latter part of the film is the monster vs Spiderman. Peter gets wounded a bit and has to deal with some diminishing powers and rely on Gwen and her father.

The film ends as expected but with an intra-credits setting up of a sequel.

Because it is not so surprising as the earlier films, it is not quite a standout entertainment, but it should satisfy its many audiences.

BRAVE

US, 2012,

Voices of: Kelly McDonald, Emma Thompson, Billy Connolly.

Directed by Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman.

Brave is the Pixar Studio's annual animated movie. In the last ten years, they have won many Oscars for Best Animated Film (Finding Nemo, Ratatouille, Up, Wall-E, Toy Story 3) and have delighted

audiences all around the world. This one starts very well, plateaus out, but offers an entertaining story of family troubles and warrior activity.

And, the central character is female, Merida, the daughter of the King and Queen of the united kingdom of Scottish clans. She is a redhead and has a certain fiery and tomboyish disposition which manifests itself in rebelling against her genteel mother's attempts to teach her manners and regal graciousness, as well as riding vigorously around the countryside and showing Olympic-standard skills in archery.

The film opens in taking us way back into old Scot history and burly and rugged Fergus assuming command of the kingdoms (even as a malevolent bear chomps off one of his legs). As Merida grows up, the question of suitors for her hand arises. She wants none of it, chooses archery for the contest and decides to enter (and conquer) so that she can win her own hand.

But, her rebellious nature wreaks havoc when she follows blue willow-the-wisps to a witch's cottage and causes the casting of a spell which turns her mother, Elinor, into a bear. Action follows with Fergus eager to pursue any bear. Mother and daughter have to survive in the woods and mother learns more about her daughter and daughter realises that she has been too selfish.

So, lots of action and quite a deal of comedy – the suitors and their fathers are a comically odd-looking and sounding lot. And, despite Elinor's control, Fergus is a touch barbarian at heart.

And, the voices... Kelly MacDonald is assertive as Merida. Emma Thompson is dignified but firm as Elinor and Billy Connolly has a vigorous old time as Fergus.

Enough for parents to enjoy as they watch Brave with their children – especially their daughters who might well latch on to Merida as a role model.

THE CABIN IN THE WOODS

US, 2011,

Kristen Connolly, Chris Hemsworth, Fran, Richard Jenkins, Bradley Whitford, Sigourney Weaver.

Directed by Drew Goddard.

Once again, a group of college students go into the woods for an isolated holiday. This time, however, they are of slightly better calibre than the usual – though that may not be saying much. However, it is a very short-lived (literally) holiday. And they discover that, despite the remoteness, they are not alone.

One of the characters spends most of his time smoking pot and being quite stoned – though this becomes an important part of the plot. Speaking of plot, the writers (Drew Goddard who wrote *Cloverfield* and icon of *Serenity* and *Avengers* fans, Joss Whedon) must have been really indulging in pot or stronger to have concocted such an engagingly preposterous story, let alone the basis for their playing with horror conventions, visualizing monsters and offering an apocalyptic ending that defies belief.

Actually, many audiences may well be asking themselves as the film progresses whether what the clues are indicating could really be happening. On the one hand, the trials and tribulations of the students, their conjuring up evil spirits and becoming their victims, creates plenty of atmosphere and some shocks. On the other, we are initially introduced to two wisecracking members of a laboratory experimental program (Richard Jenkins and Bradley Whitford). When we see what they are up to – which includes elaborate surveillance equipment and programming people's lives and behaviour – we probably hesitate in thinking: are they really involved in some kind of satanic rituals. Spoiler: they are.

Having created such a bizarre scenario and having got rid of some of the students, it is time to bring the two strands together, the two remnant students who have gone through more than most of us could bear, and the callow and callous staff of the laboratory who seem to be living in a parallel world. Can the evil spirits, and the incarnated archetypes of primeval superstition and religion be appeased? Is there enough sacrificial blood for them? Will they just simply get rid of everything and everyone? By bringing in Sigourney Weaver as the Director of the lab, the film-makers offer a skerrick of credibility.

And, if that sounds interesting, then this is your film.

COMME UN CHEF/ THE CHEF

France, 2012,

Jean Reno, Michael Youn,

Directed by Daniel Cohen.

Why is it that so many words in English that we use for cooking and eating are actually French words: cuisine, restaurants, cafes, gourmet, soufflé...? Well, one reason is that no one has really thought there could be British cuisine (though fish and chips can make a claim). Comme un chef is a vivid – and amusing – reminder of the supremacy of the French in the art of food and dining.

This is a lighthearted, odd couple comedy. Jean Reno, who has appeared in many a comedy, but who is usually the straight man in the duo, as he is here as Alexandre, a master chef for fifteen years, whose career is on the rocks (he is suffering from menu-block) and is threatened by a money man who is interested in molecular cooking. (I must Google that and see if it actually exists.)

The other member of the odd couple is Michael Youn as Jacky, a young cook who lives and breathes cooking. He knows all the details of Alexandre's menus, their ingredients as well as the dates and places of their introduction. By chance, he becomes Alexandre's assistant, challenging him but also saving his reputation and restaurant.

Actually, this is a very genial film, a nice film, a feelgood and (vicariously, a taste-good) film, so the conflicts are for comic effect and not long-lasting. The two become good friends and Alexandre helps Jacky when his pregnant partner gets exasperated with Jacky who has been fired from too many jobs.

Food has delighted many audiences, seriously in such films as Babette's Feast (Babette went from her restaurant in Paris to Jutland), comically in such films as Ratatouille (French setting, of course). For some the food is mouth watering (though, as with French dining, the portions could be larger!). For others, the cooking and recipes can be fascinating.

Whether you are a foodie or not, this is a pleasant light entertainment.

'I did Google and thought I should share Wikipedia's comments for those, like me, who did not know: **Molecular gastronomy** is a subdiscipline of [food science](#) that seeks to investigate, explain and make practical use of the [physical](#) and [chemical](#) transformations of ingredients that occur while [cooking](#), as well as the social, artistic and technical components of culinary and gastronomic phenomena in general.^[4] Molecular gastronomy is a modern style of cooking, which is practiced by both scientists and food professionals in many professional kitchens and labs and takes advantage of many technical innovations from the scientific disciplines.

The term "molecular gastronomy" was coined in 1992 by late [Oxford](#) physicist [Nicholas Kurti](#) and the [French INRA](#) chemist [Hervé This](#).^[5] Some chefs associated with the term choose to reject its use,^[6] preferring other terms such as "culinary physics" and "experimental cuisine".' (Who said the movies are not educational!)

I AM ELEVEN

Australia, 2011,

Directed by Genevieve Bailey.

A documentary about and featuring children, and, as guessed by the title, they are eleven. This is the age that the writer-director says was her favourite age, still an age of childhood (where many say they would love to stay) but an age on the verge of serious transition into adolescence. She tells us she wanted to make a documentary and children seemed the best subject. However, she did not confine herself to Australian children. Rather, she went to countries all over the world, fifteen in all, where she wanted to visit. She filmed many, many interviews, but has edited her material down to just over 90 minutes. More can be found on the film's website.

The best-known documentaries on children's development have tended to focus on a sample group – and to follow up after a number of years, then more follow-up. The most famous of these is Michael Apted's beginning with Seven-up in the early 1960s, meeting the subjects after seven years, then another seven. By 2012, the series had arrived at 56-up, the participants still willing (varying over the years) and providing a portrait of British children through adolescence, adulthood into middle age.

Gillian Armstrong made a similar series with some girls from Adelaide, beginning in the 1980s with Smokes and Lollies. There were four films in the series.

Since this is Genevieve Bailey's first film, we don't know whether she will travel around the world to find the children again. She has made a second visit because, at the end of the film, the boys and girls are interviewed, some at 12 and some older – and reflecting on how they felt at eleven.

The selection is of boys and girls. There are some leading questions and issues raised which means, of course, we have the comparison of what children in India say compared with some children in England. There are some from Thailand, France, Czech Republic, the US.

Sometimes they sound ingenuous, at other times, more thoughtful and experienced than one would have anticipated. There is usually a huge spontaneity about their reactions both wry (the boy in London) or serious (the ecology preoccupied by in France). On the other hand, one girl has an ambition to make chocolates, and Indian girl speaks in self-giving mode wanting to be a doctor.

The editing makes for entertaining watching, the blend of close-up responses and interviews along with some detail of background life in a particular country, village life in India, with elephants in Thailand.

Obviously not a definitive work on eleven year olds but one that immerses the audience in their world, a reminded of the joys as well as the earnestness of being eleven – with life about to unfold before them.

ICE AGE 4: CONTINENTAL DRIFT

US, 2012,

Voices of: Ray Romano, John Leguizamo, Denis Leary, Peter Dinklage, Jennifer Lopez.

Directed by Steve Martino, Mike Thurmeier.

It's a decade since we were first introduced to the everlasting nut-seeking Scrat (or even before because we got to like him – feel sorry for him – in several promos and trailers). Ice Age was released in 2002. The second film (and a game) in 2006. The third in 2009. Then a television short in 2011. And, here we are again. Ice Age has become part of family movie culture and of cinema animation.

And, Scrat is at it again. But, glad to say, he has more screen time than before. He gets to reappear throughout the film. And, at the end. His nut-avarice seems to be the cause of Atlantis sinking beneath the Atlantic Ocean, a piece of the mythology that we never realized before!

However, we are also soon introduced to a motley collection of prehistoric animals who have become friends – to littlies and oldies alike. They get to do some typical action so we are back in familiar territory with familiar characters. And the voices that we are know are back again (with shots of the voice talent to be seen in the final credits). Ray Romano is the ever-sturdy mammoth

leader, Manny. Diego the sabre-toothed tiger is Denis Leary. John Leguizamo and Sid the Sloth are as ditsy as ever. And, there are some new voices. Peter Dinklage is most welcome as the ape pirate chief, Captain Gutt, Jennifer Lopez as a female sabre-toothed tiger in his crew, Wanda Sykes as Sid's potty grandmother. Even Patrick Stewart turns up at the end as Arisratle, showing Scrat around Atlantis. There are lots of American and British talent as the animals and the pirates.

The story is a variation on what we have seen before. But, that doesn't matter much because the formula was a good one. There are the usual dangers of the Ice Age, glaciers splitting, mountains crumbling – though we are shown just how Australia and Africa were the result of all these rumblings. And, then a trek.

When Manny, Diego, Sid and Granny are separated from the rest of the herd, adrift on an iceberg, Manny is determined to find his wife and daughter (with whom he has been having teenage problems about going out and getting home late) and lead his little band home. The menace this time is the pirate gang, a scraggly lot except for a very fat seal, but enough to cause lots of mayhem and set up battles and escapes. Formula, but very agreeable.

And the formula seems to work for young audiences as well as older audiences. To think that the young audience which enjoyed Ice Age is now entering the teens! I hope they enjoy this one and don't look down on the little brothers and sisters who will be laughing and excited.

THE INNKEEPERS

US, 2011,

Sara Paxton, Pat Healey, Kelly McGillis.

Directed by Ti West.

An old hotel in the 19th century style. About to close. A few strange guests. Two staff members who are investigating the alleged haunting of the hotel.

This is a ghost story which operates on the slow burn principle and techniques, building up atmosphere, popping in a few scares for us to jump, and an ending and explanation (or lack of) that is a bit of a flame flickering and being extinguished.

Sara Paxton and Pat Healey are Claire and Luke, caretaking the hotel and experimenting with discovering who the ghost is – and taping mysterious sounds and piano notes. How serious they are is hard to tell, especially when Claire has a session with an ageing actress (a welcome Kelly McGillis) who has discovered she has healing and psychic powers. Claire may not be taking her too seriously.

She should have. An old man comes to the hotel for the final night, wanting a room that he stayed in for his honeymoon, long ago. He looks more than old, really ancient. And something dreadful happens in his room. Sara becomes more alarmed, a touch hysterical and goes down (why??) into the dark basement. She sees things. She sees people. But, is this real, are there ghosts, or is it all happening in Sara's imagination?

Quite a lot of things going for *The Innkeepers*, but it relies more on its atmosphere than jolts and shocks.

MARLEY

UK, 2011,

Directed by Kevin Macdonald

One of the points of interest for potential audiences for *Marley* is that it was directed by Kevin Macdonald. While Macdonald directed the Oscar-winning *The Last King of Scotland*, he is better known for his powerful documentaries. He won an Oscar for his film of the massacre at the Munich Olympic Games in 1972, *One Day in September*. Well worth seeing are such films as *Touching the Void* about climbers in the Andes and his portrait of French Nazi, Klaus Barbie, and how he survived in South America after his condemnation after World War II, *My Enemy's Enemy*.

Macdonald has taken Bob Marley as his subject. His film runs almost two and a half hours and incorporates many, very many, of Marley's songs and performances – a friend said he counted 72 in the final credits.

The initial appeal will be to fans of Marley and of his encouraging the popularity of Reggae well beyond the shores of his native Jamaica, a popularity that has lasted well after his death in 1981 at the age of 36.

No problem in commending the film for its musical content.

However, there is far more to respond to in Marley. Other themes are worth following through.

Bob Marley was born in Jamaica in 1945. His mother was West Indian. His father was British, a bureaucrat and an adventurer who played little influence in his son's life. But, it meant that Marley was sometimes seen and commented on in the light of his lighter heritage. Marley grew up in comparative poverty with his mother in a country village but moved into Kingston in his teen years where he began to learn music and to perform. But, this was a period of unrest in Jamaica and the movement towards independence. Marley's popularity meant an involvement in the political unrest and violence in the streets and thug shootings that marred life in Jamaica during the 1970s. He was invited to perform in 1978 in Kingston but became a victim of a shooting and the questioning of whether he should be performing. Perform he did and was able to bring the then two leaders of the country on stage and join their hands.

But, it was Marley's appearance that drew attention to him and his Reggae rhythms. Growing deadlocks, he embraced and promoted Rastafarianism, a religious view of the world that centred on Jesus coming to earth after 2000 years, and coming in the form of the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie (who did visit Jamaica to a rapturous welcome). There is quite an amount of explanation of Rasta behaviour (including the smoking of a great deal of marijuana) and beliefs.

The film is also a significant contribution to music history, tracing the West Indian African traditions (opening with a reminder of the slave castles in Ghana from which the slaves went to the Americas), the calypso rhythms, the counterpoint rhythms of Reggae, the early recordings by Marley and his band, the interest overseas, concerts in the UK and, eventually, in Europe and the United States. For Marley, the lyrics were also important, poetic but also reflective, with an emphasis on religious values and peace.

The film serves, of course, as a detailed biography, portrait and study of Marley. Interview clips are abundant – and welcome. Testimonies and explanations come from his teachers, his children, his wife (though Marley's Rasta beliefs and personality did not confine him to one wife, his having eleven children from seven different partners), his colleagues in his band (they predominate and are very helpful in appreciating Marley and his achievements), his producers. Marley himself appears constantly throughout the film but since he is long dead and the interviewees are looking back at the past, his personality comes through clips chosen by the film-makers rather than directly.

Marley was tenacious and was unstinting in his playing to his audiences. This becomes a sad experience for him and friends as his cancer is diagnosed, attempts to deal with the cancer in Germany alleviate only for a while, and he dies at the age of 36.

Kevin Macdonald has added another telling documentary to his CV and most audiences will find a great deal to interest and entertain whether they are approaching via biography, politics or, as most will, via the music.

POLISSE

France, 2011,

Karen Viard, Joey Starr, Marina Fois, Maiwenn, Frederic Pierrot.

Directed by Maiwenn.

The police, *polisse*, of the title of this very interesting French drama, are the Child Protection Unit of Paris. The film is definitely interesting but it is also definitely grim. And, not just with the crimes and cases that this squad has to deal with, but with the toll that this work takes on the individuals (and the group).

It has the air of authenticity about it, with the streets of Paris, the police precincts, homes, schools and malls, because director and co-writer, Maiwenn, spent a lot of time with the actual personnel for experience and research. Maiwenn herself plays a professional photographer who is hired to photograph the individuals at work but also aspects of the victims and the perpetrators, a reminder that she has done her preparation work and knows what she is presenting on screen.

While the film begins and ends in sounds of children's joy, it shows us a range of cases, some glimpsed, some explored in more detail, where children are abused and hurt, often within a home context. To make this point, the opening story is disturbing as the interviewers try to coax a description out of a very little girl about her father's inappropriate behaviour. It tests how we respond to such cases, how we feel for the little girl, wondering how such questions can be best put and answered.

The members of the squad have to do a great deal of interviewing, and in rooms that are not always conducive to privacy or to the comfort of the person being questioned. In the opening sequence, the little girl is being spoken to by one person while another sits, visibly, at a desk behind the first one, indicating directions for the interview. These sequences make us wonder what training the squad members have undergone, how personalized and how (as we see more of their own lives and struggles) this has an effect on their work.

There are runaways, infants, a girl who led another into a basement to be gang raped, a shy boy victim to his sports coach, a well-to-do home where the mother (subsequently interviewed and embarrassed by particularly invasive – but perhaps necessary – questions about her intimate life with her husband and how that might throw light on what her husband has done to his daughter. (This man boasts of his friends in high places and of how he won't go to jail.) And several other cases.

We also get to know several of the members of the unit very well as individuals, while others remain part of the group, identifiable by their faces, but not central as some of the others. There are close friendships and confidants which emotions can turn into enmities. There is a man angry at home who takes it out on the accused but who begins an affair with the photographer. There is a sequence where the unit spends the night searching for a drug addicted mother who has abducted her child. Another of a stake-out in a mall – which goes wrong and leads to a hostage and gunfire situation.

It's really a docudrama, plenty of the equivalent of documentary material on how the Unit operates, plenty of drama, especially of the lives of the unit members – including a dramatic and disturbing shock just before the end.

Winner of the Jury Prize at Cannes, 2011.

ROCK OF AGES

US, 2012

Julianne Hough, Diego Boneto, Tom Cruise, Adam Baldwin, Russell Brand, Catherine Zeta-Jones,

Directed by Adam Shankman.

Do you remember the 80s? Perhaps the wrong question for potential audiences of Rock of Ages. They may have not been born then or were very young. This reviewer remembers the 80s but not the 80s on display here. We live in our own worlds and, of course, we have our own music tastes – though I do remember a couple of songs heard (and seen) here.

The scene is Los Angeles. The particular scene is a club on Sunset Boulevard. Inside, it has lots of rooms for yelling and rocking devotees – and some backstage rooms which lend themselves to the

kind of activity that anti-rock campaigners complain about. Across the street is an area for gathering and, here, for protests, led by some devout women who want to clean up the strip. Speaking of strip, there is also a 'gentlemen's club' venue for some of the action, plenty of poles and plenty of 'dancers'.

But, I do remember that in 1984, Footloose was released, a story of a strong-minded pastor (John Lithgow) who wanted to ban rock and roll from his town – but Kevin Bacon arrived to convert people to the music and the dance. Rock of Ages has its eye on Footloose and its issues (and has a reference in the credits – and the star of Rock of Ages, Julianne Hough, starred in the 2011 Footloose remake). Of course, the protesters tend to be Christian narrow minded citizens (and some of them live double standards, the more the protest, the more the hypocrisy).

Rock of Ages tends to be loud, sweaty and gyrating – which makes the experience, for audiences who have not been transported back to the 80s, something of an endurance. Otherwise, you might want to get up and dance in the aisles because the songs come fairly frequently and are imaginatively sung by many of the cast with intercutting editing. And all the cast, a number of whom you have not heard sing before, belt out the numbers. This is particularly true of Tom Cruise, all tattooed, long-haired, shirt off (and sweaty), as the ageing rock star, Jacey Staxx. But, at 49, Cruise (who showed his athleticism in his previous Mission Impossible movie) is certainly vigorous and rocks the songs out himself. Even Alec Baldwin as the manager of the club and Russell Brand as his assistant, and more than friend, get into the action. And even Paul Giamatti as a cynical promoter. Catherine Zeta Jones has sung to Oscar effect in Chicago. Here she is the leader of the protestors (with, of course, a guilty secret).

However, this is one of those old (very old) tales of the ingénue who leaves Oklahoma to be a singer in LA and falls in love with the barman in the club who also wants to sing. Actually, both Julianne Hough and Diego Beneto, do quite a lot of singing, but their love, misunderstandings, reconciliation, run along the expected lines. Despite poking fun at Boy Bands who did become popular in the 90s, music taste has meant that what has lasted is the Rock and Roll of Ages.

SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN

UK, 2012,

Kristen Stewart, Charlize Theron, Chris Hemsworth,

Directed by Rupert Sanders.

This tale does begin with 'Once upon a time...' then takes us back into a medieval village and castle and the story of Snow White, her evil stepmother, Prince William and a huntsman.

No expense has been spared in this production. Settings are quite spectacular, from the formidable castle and its vast interiors, the wave-crashing sea and the beach expanses, a deadly forest and the beauty of a fairyland. The director, Rupert Sanders, has had a career in commercials so knows how to make the most of a sequence of only a few seconds as well as keep the narrative moving – which serves the momentum of this tale very well. Some scenes, like a lavish crowd coronation scene, last for a very short time and we are on to the next.

This film takes the fairy tale very seriously – not a light satire like *Mirror, Mirror*, with Julia Roberts. Charlize Theron obviously relishes her role as the hugely egocentric queen who quickly gets rid of her husband, wages war on the people and imprisons the child, Snow White. She has a most elaborate wardrobe as she walks the castle, using her younger brother as her sinister executor of her will and her drive to power and to eternal youth (often sucking the life out of young woman, at other times bathing in milk).

When Snow White escapes from the castle, she sends her brother in pursuit and employs a grieving widower, a woodsman, to hunt down the princess. This leads them into a deadly forest, an encounter with a giant troll, finding a village of women where the men have all gone to fight – and to an encounter with eight dwarves.

Kristen Stewart is Snow White, not unlike her Bella in the *Twilight* films. Chris Hemsworth is a sturdy huntsman, something like a down-to-earth Thor. And a lot of veteran British actors have been altered by computergraphics to be the dwarves – Bob Hoskins, Ian McShane amongst others.

There are lots of battle sequences, especially a climactic confrontation and an attack on the castle where Snow White turns into something like a Joan of Arc. And, of course, the confrontation with the queen.

Costumes are lavish. The musical score aspires to the epic. And, all in all, it works pretty well as an action entertainment.

TAKE THIS WALTZ

Canada, 2011,

Michelle Williams, Seth Rogen, Luke Kirby,

Directed by Sarah Polley.

Take This Waltz is really a psychological and emotional portrait of a 28 year old woman who has been married for five years, Margot. She is played intensely, with both sadness and joy, by Michelle Williams who has been emerging as a strong actress in a variety of films from Meek's Cutoff to her turn as Marilyn Monroe in My Week With Marilyn.

Margot is married to Lou, an expert cook who is trying out recipes for chicken. Seth Rogen plays Lou as a genial man who loves Margot and is happy to say 'I love you'. However, the audience senses, as she does, that there is something incomplete in her relationship with her husband. When she meets Daniel (Luke Kirby) at a theme park and then on a plane, she is immediately attracted to him but does not quite know what this attraction is or what it means. While she is attracted to Daniel, she is distracted from Lou.

She seeks out opportunities to talk with Daniel, watch him, since he lives across the street. Daniel is cautious and does not want to do anything improper. However, at a café one afternoon, they have a conversation where a great deal of erotic behaviour is described and relished. Is this where the breakdown of her marriage is consummated or has it been a longer, slower process. On the occasion of their fifth wedding anniversary, Margot and Lou are given a rickshaw ride by Daniel. Their conversation at the meal means that Lou does not grasp what is happening to Margot and to their marriage. When he does realise what is happening, he lets her go – with great regret.

Daniel has moved away, but Margot follows him. The climax of their relationship is offered in a stylized way, to the lyrics and melody of Take This Waltz and a succession of erotic tableaux.

After the excitement comes the ordinariness. Margot gets the opportunity to see Lou again when he calls her to come when his alcoholic sister, Geraldine (Sarah Silverman) has a relapse. Geraldine, however, gets the opportunity to voice her reactions and those of the family to Margot's behaviour.

We are left with Margot quietly cooking in her kitchen. Sarah Polley has a career as an actress but she also wrote Away from Her, a fine story of an ageing woman with Alzheimer's Disease. Once again, she has a portrait of a woman, a much younger woman who forgets her life with her husband, away from him.

TED

US, 2012,

Mark Wahlberg, Mila Kunis, Seth MacFarlane, Narrator: Patrick Stewart,

Directed by Seth McFarlane.

Yes, this is the comedy where a teddy bear, a little boy's toy, comes alive after his owner wishes he could. It would be interesting to read the pitch that the producers offered to the money backers – would they have believed that you could make a money-making movie with this premiss? And would they have believed that Ted would grow up along with John, the little boy? And that Ted would be accepted by everyone, become something of a media celebrity and appear on the Johnny Carson show?

Somebody believed it could be a success because here it is – and will be a box-office success. Writer-director (and voice of Ted), Seth McFarlane has had the courage of his convictions and gone full steam ahead.

It begins to make us laugh right from the start, with Patrick Stewart doing a sonorous voiceover, intoning the story and then landing us with some deadpan jokes – which he does throughout the film.

But, when Ted grows up, he must imagine he is Seth Rogen or some of those characters in stoner comedies like Pineapple Express. He takes easily to drugs. He has a four letter mouth. And he has a fairly sleazy attitude towards sex. This is played for laughs, making many audiences (including this reviewer) laugh despite themselves. It's in the vein of Sacha Baron Cohen jokes – you don't at first believe you have heard what you heard, and then you realise some satirical points are being made.

The writing, allowing for the crass, is often clever and carries the comedy. We are amused by Ted even though we might not necessarily like living with him. The film also works because of Mark Wahlberg's performance. He is the grown-up (well not quite grown-up) John. His acting with the bear is completely convincing. He plays it straight and it works. So does Mila Kunis as John's girlfriend who wants John to become more adult and make a decision about love and friendship.

There are quite a number of funny references to movies and actors, from ET to James Franco (who has appeared several times as a stoner). The main references and clips are from the 1980 Buck Rogers – and Sam Jones, the star, turns up at a party and in an offbeat cameo at the end.

Ted starts as cuddly, develops into a slacker, then, of course, tries to do some right things for John. Funny how such a premiss as a live bear alive and well in New York City actually works.

THAT'S MY BOY

US, 2012,

Adam Sandler, Andy Sandberg, Leighton Meester.

Directed by Steve Anders.

That's My Boy is not going to make any converts to Adam Sandler comedies. In fact, it might well alienate some audiences and satisfy only his die-hard fans. This is a pity since Sandler, even as his frequent child-man persona, can be very funny.

This one is overall ugly. And, over all, not particularly funny unless you want to go again into the grossly raucous jokes that have been a staple of many films, each trying to outdo the other in what they can get away with. This one is incessantly crass, frequently gross. Sacha Baron Cohen can get away with a lot because he has many satiric points to make. Ted and The Hangover can get away with a lot because there is some wit in there among the gross and the dross. That's My Boy is more in the tradition of The Hangover II (the less than funny one).

It begins with a theme that is risky these days for broad comedy: a teacher seducing a (very much more than willing) teenage student at school. While she does go to prison, he is hailed at an assembly of students and staff as a local hero. At a time when society is trying to deal with sexual molestation and abuse, this opening is dubious in tone to say the least. Along the way, there are a lot of sexual shenanigans amongst most of the characters and some leering from most of the rest, including a promiscuous grandmother and a brother and sister.

The teacher is played by Eva Amurri and, in the present, by her mother Susan Sarandon – though that doesn't really offer any more respectability to the film. James Caan as a pugnacious Irish priest definitely doesn't contribute any respectability.

The schoolboy grows up into Adam Sandler whose moral fibre is pretty tenuous, though he is meant to have a soft heart underneath all the four (and beyond) letter bravado and drunken, slaving posturing (and more) that seems to be the be-all and end-all of his life. Since the school teacher was pregnant when she went to jail, the boy, Donnie, has to bring up his son. The son (Andy Samberg) has, reasonably, run off from his father and is now a successful financier about to get married. The action takes place over a few days, enough for father to come to exploit his son for money so that he won't go to jail for not paying back taxes, enough for son to loathe his father, enough for all the wedding guests to think that Donnie is just the man. And, of course, son will be helped to drink, vomit and behave sexually as his father does, and, of course again, to get to like his father and be proud of him.

There are radio and TV shows which, seriously or comically, ask panelists to choose films which they would show to alien visitors to explain human life. If the aliens were able to sit through *That's My Boy*, they would discover some lowest common denominators.

THE THREE STOOGES

US, 2012,

Sean Hayes, Will Sasso, Chris Diamantopoulos, Jane Lynch, Larry David.

Directed by Peter and Bobby Farrelley.

Sophisticated, it ain't.

Knockabout comedy is a good phrase to describe any Three Stooges comedy – knocks, hits, bangs, tweaks, jabs, pokes, bops, plugs, dongs, biffs and boffs, socks, clunks, and general in-your-face (well, their faces and of any unlucky bystanders) physical mayhem. And it is slapstick – emphasis on the slap. In fact, this film could serve as a visual compendium of slapstick.

The film is not a biography of the men who became the screen's Three Stooges in the 1930s and continued to be popular with their short films until the 1950s – and then a new lease of life on television. That was done in the 2000 film, also called *The Three Stooges* (and filmed in Sydney). Rather, this is a fictional story with the three stooges as the main characters. It is divided into 3 short films, interlinked for the story and presented as films starring the Three Stooges.

This means that Sean Hayes (from *Will and Grace*) is Larry and impersonates the character and style of the original Larry. Chris Diamantopolous does the same for Moe and Will Sasso for Curley (the one

with no hair). They look the part of the originals and go through the well-known routines (as well as the punning that Curley is prone to). What we get is a Three Stooges' experience. Three boys do the impersonations at age 10, and they are very good at it too.

The plot is an old one. Orphanage is on the brink of bankruptcy (owing to the mishaps of the boys – who missed out on being adopted when they were ten). Shades of the Blues Brothers. Almost a million dollars is needed and the boys promise they will find it. The orphanage is run by Sisters of Mercy (fictional rather than real) with Jane Lynch taking time off from Glee (and much more benign here) as Mother Superior. Jennifer Hudson is one of the nuns and gets an opportunity to sing. The main nun, a caricature (well, mostly) of the severe and cranky sisters of the past, Sister Mary Mengele, is played by Curb Your Enthusiasm's Larry David who seems to relish his roaring at the kids, while being the butt of bangs, clunks, dongs etc.

There is a sub-plot with the boys hired to kill an allegedly unkind husband. Well, everything goes wrong, of course, with the wrong victim run over by a bus (but, surviving, after all it is a PG movie). The plot lines link up with an adoption story from the boys' past and it all ends happily with some sentimental moments about the orphanage, a sick little girl and a bereft little boy.

Obviously, it is for Three Stooges fans, of which the Farelley Brothers who wrote and directed the film (and made films like Dumb and Dumber) must take the head of the queue as number one fans, making their 2012 film just like those of the past. They also come on screen at the end to warn kids not to imitate the pranks (after all, the hammers etc on screen were rubber and relied on sound effects for their impact).

One satisfied viewer said that watching it sent him back to being a ten year old. So, there you are.

WHERE DO WE GO NOW?

2011, Lebanon,

Directed by Nadine Labaka

This is the question raised at the end of the film as the people of a Lebanese village, part Muslim, part Catholic, attend the funeral of one of the young people who has been killed in sectarian crossfire. They have clashed themselves but, in an attempt for peace, they join for the funeral, going into the local cemetery with the clear demarcation path between Muslim and Catholic plots. The men carrying the coffin look at the dividing line, swivel around and ask, Where do we go now?

The question pervades the film. Long traditions of clash have been partly put aside as the priest and the Imam get on well and everyone joins in celebrations and shop locally (though this is a great place for arguments as is the newly set up TV, the only one in the village where people come to sit in the open air and watch – and then squabble, and then fight. Lebanese recent history has shown a grim civil war but also attempts at peace. Is peace possible? Is it even possible to ask, 'Give peace a chance'.

So, a film that combines the serious with a lot of humour (and some moments of romantic fantasy). The film was written and directed by Nadine Labaki who also has a leading role as the proprietor of a local café. The sensibility of the film is distinctly female. While the women can argue with the best of them, they are wives and mothers, caregivers rather than warriors. How will they try to promote peace amongst the pugnacious men?

Actually, some of the solutions are a fake miracle, a statue of Mary weeping blood while the mayor's mother pretends to have visions and messages from Mary, wanting peace. She overdoes it by making some of Mary's criticisms rather personal! They bring in some belly dancers from a nightclub. They also have some creative culinary experiments that make peace more of a pleasantly high experience. And, there is a rather drastic interfaith solution.

Audiences will find the film quite diverting at times while they will also feel the highly emotional antagonisms as well as a longing for peace.

This review is being written at the time that government and rebels in Syria are at something of a stalemate in any give or take in resolving the uprising. Looking at this film will see something of why Lebanon's neighbours have taken a long time to move towards peace.

SIGNIS REVIEWS AUGUST 2012

ABRAHAM LINCOLN VAMPIRE HUNTER

AND IF WE ALL LIVED TOGETHER

BEAUTY

BERNIE

CAMPAIGN, The

COSMOPOLIS

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HYSTERIA

HIT AND RUN

IN DARKNESS

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KING IS DEAD!, The

MAGIC MIKE

NOT SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN

SAPPHIRES, The

STEP UP: MIAMI HEAT

YOU INSTEAD

ABRAHAM LINCOLN VAMPIRE HUNTER

US, 2012

Benjamin Walker, Dominic Cooper, Anthony Mackie, Mary Elizabeth Winstead,

Directed by Timur Bekmambatov

Well, the title is certainly provocative. It may mean that serious moviegoers (and historians and history aficionados) may be crossing it off their list of must-see films. That would leave only the action and graphic novel fans (which could, of course, include some historians) and the curious. This review comes from a curious historian.

If someone is going to make a film with this title and with this imagination, it might as well be done like this. I am not sure whether I should be writing this – but I enjoyed it, especially the playing with history (somewhat like Anonymous with Shakespeare's plays and the Duke of Oxford) which in no

way undermines the reputation of Lincoln. For those concerned about Lincoln and history, Steven Spielberg's forthcoming portrait with Daniel Day Lewis will set the record straight.

So, what is happening here? Graphic novelist, Z, has adapted his story for the screen. And the director is the flamboyant Timur Bekmambetov (the Russian films *Day...* and the American actioner, *Wanted*). Supported by designers, costumers and seemingly legions of special effects experts, he offers a colourful film, playing with vampire myths and inserting them into Lincoln's life as well as the waging of the Civil War.

Apparently, when Lincoln was a boy, a savage plantation owner (Marton Cokas) is confronted by Lincoln's father when his wife is attacked and killed. The boy had been defending his black friend, William. Lincoln is bent on revenge until he meets a vampire hunter, Henry (Dominic Cooper), is instructed in confronting evil as well as in fight and weaponry techniques plus a philosophy of ridding the world of evil instead of being Abe works in a store, is dragged to meet Mary Todd whom he eventually marries.

He begins to study law, is persuaded to become political, especially after he meet William (Anthony Mackie) again and, especially when he is tricked into travelling to New Orleans to a vampire coven to rescue the abducted William and becomes aware of slavery first hand. The coven is presided over by the arch villain, Adam (Rufus Sewell). Lincoln becomes the advocate of freedom for slaves, especially when he is elected to the congress and, of course, when he becomes president.

At these stages, the vampire hunting becomes less, the social, political and freedom issues come to the fore (which could make the action fans who may not be on the history wavelength rather fidgety).

The author works the vampires into the Civil War scenarios. Adam wants to win the war so that American will become a free vampire country. But... with some twists and inventiveness and a huge set piece on a train with a vampire attack as well as a bridge set alight (quite spectacularly) and the train on the verge of plunging off the bridge.

Obviously, as Abe speaks the Gettysburg address, he has more in mind here than freedom from slavery – a realization of what might have been.

While Benjamin Walker (looking like a younger Liam Neeson) and the cast play it straight, the vampire cast, especially Rufus Sewell, have tongues in cheek. This invites us to take it all seriously

even when we know it is all made up and far-fetched. It could set precedents for heroics of other presidents. 'Teddy Roosevelt in Cuba, Voodoo Pursuit'?

AND IF WE ALL LIVED TOGETHER/ Et si on vivait tous ensemble

France, 2011

Guy Bedos, Daniel Bruhl, Geraldine Chaplin, Jane Fonda, Claude Rich, Pierre Richard.

Directed by Stephane Robelin.

Daniel Bruhl plays Dirk, a young PhD student who wants to come to Australia to do ethnological studies of the aborigines. His girlfriend does not want to travel, so he agrees with former university lecturer, Jeanne, to study elderly Europeans, especially in France. So, he becomes the stand-in for the writer-director who wants to offer a portrait of five people in their 70s who begin to find it difficult to live at home or independently (health, dementia, mobility...) and decide that they will move into one couple's home and live together. They think it is far better than a home for the elderly (which don't look too good in this film either).

A good part of the interest in the film is in its cast, all of whom have had long and successful careers. The three French actors were in their 70s when the film was made and have been in films for decades. Claude Rich has had many a dramatic role as has Guy Bedos. The surprise for non-French audiences is to see that famous comic and farceur of the 1970s and 80s, Pierre Richard (The Tall Blond Man with the one Red Shoe and other comedies) who has worked continually but is here seen in a more serious role (with one or two comic lapses, especially for Dirk's video of them all). The two women are better known worldwide since Geraldine Chaplin appeared in Doctor Zhivago and Jane Fonda is, well Jane Fonda, now looking very poised and dignified (Barbarella was a long time ago) and showing the benefits of aerobics into the mid-70s.

So, the group is quite an active, articulate group. Claude Rich is an old roué photographer with a still roving eye, sometimes unsympathetically lewd. And he has a past (as well as a son who irritates him with his concern, especially when he becomes ill and dependent). Guy Bedos is a social protester and has been for decades. Geraldine Chaplin is his wife (only 66 when she made this film). It is their house which becomes the centre for the five. Jane Fonda is Jeanne, the former university professor who has a terminal illness which she does not communicate to her loving husband (Pierre Richard) who begins to show signs of dementia.

The film offers a lot to think about in terms of getting old, dependent, and many unwilling to face these realities. There is pathos in the lives of the five, especially concerning illness and bewilderment as senility sets in. The five are not exemplary in their lives which makes them more ordinary despite the high profile cast. The film will probably challenge a lot more thoughts and emotions from the generation of sons and daughters who are facing the prospects of care for their ageing parents.

Some of it is amusing, some sad. And Dirk, when he is with the old people, is a strong part of the group but his personal story and the facile solution to his relationships, is much less interesting. But, there is also something about the film that makes it less impressive than it might have been, especially when one thinks of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. It is not quite compelling as it might have been, despite the performances. So, there is more room for another film on this important topic.

BEAUTY

2011, South Africa

Deon Lotz, Charlie Keegan

Directed by Oliver Hermanus

...is in the eye of the beholder. Quite subjective. This is very much the case in this very serious, at times grim, portrait of Francois (Deon Lotz), a middle-aged Afrikaaner, a mill manager in Blomfontein, married with two adult daughters, whose life begins to unravel, especially as regards his sexuality.

The film opens with quite a long sequence of the wedding dinner of one of his daughters. The crowd greets the young marrieds, mingles – as do we. However, we can see that Francois is preoccupied, gazing at the twenty-something son of an old friend. The close-ups and the long gazes of Francois indicates that much more is going on. This is one of the visual styles of the film, the audience gazing and contemplating Francois as he gazes at and contemplates Christian (Charlie Keegan).

There are also some scenes of Francois, ordinary life, especially at home with his wife, taking each other for granted, tensions, a lot of humdrum. We see him at the mill, getting cash from the bank, talking with a friend who has left his wife and is disapproved of by Francois' wife.

Then we go on a longish drive with Francois and find him gathering with a group of middle-aged men who meet for secret sexual gratification. This makes Francois' obsession with Christian more understandable, especially when he goes to his doctor because he is irritated with everything and fears he will lose control of himself.

He invents a reason for visiting Cape Town, goes to Christian's parents house but then tracks down Christian who is with Francois' daughter. Francois' behaviour becomes more erratic: a visit to a club, being propositioned, being sick. His plan is clear. Audiences will be horrified by Francois' attitudes and his behaviour, especially in a graphic sexual encounter. The film tends to be visually reticent except for the two scenes, the latter of which is particularly grueling.

Advertising for the film mentions envy and jealousy, but thinking of the seven deadly sins, we can see this as a portrait of a proud Afrikaaner whose peers are still racist and think the country is going to the dogs (in contrast to the newer generation who mix easily with other races). He covets Christian and is envious of his and his way of life. He is also an angry man though he experiences that spiritual sloth that saps energy and willpower – and, of course, his motivation is lust.

Some have complained that the film does not 'explore' its themes, especially at the end. While it does not make its points verbally explicit, the whole film has explored in some depth Francois himself and leaves enough visuals for audiences to sort out for themselves what they have felt and thought.

BERNIE

US, 2011,

Jack Black, Shirley MacLaine, Matthew McConaughey.

Directed by Richard Linklater.

Adult audiences should find Bernie an interesting and entertaining film.

However, it is best to go into it knowing as little of the plot as possible. There are several very well portrayed character developments.

The film is both comic and serious, the work of director, Richard Linklater, who has had a successful career in independent and smaller-budget films. Matthew McConaughey worked with him in one of his earliest films, the slacker comedy, *Dazed and Confused*. Jack Black worked with him in one of his most popular films, *School of Rock*. Linklater also made the romantic-conversation films, *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*.

It doesn't hurt to know beforehand that this is one of Jack Black's best performances. He throws himself into the part without the manic energy that we usually associate with him. He is Bernie personified, even to his stance, his way of walking, his mannerisms. He is a funeral attendant, a fussy but kind man, a little prissy with some dismissing him as a sissy. But, his concern for clients – and for everyone – means that he is very popular in the small Texas town where he lives.

Linklater has based his film on a true story. He also uses the device of having the townspeople give to-camera interviews and testimonies about Bernie. Some of these are very funny, with quite some criticism of Texas, its traditions and attitudes, a mixture of the sardonic and the affectionate. We welcome the testimonies and enjoy Bernie seeing Bernie show how true they are.

The other main character in the film is Mrs Nugent, the widow of a wealthy self-made banker who is gruffness and meanness personified, Mrs Nugent that is. Shirley MacLaine can do mean disdain and imperiousness with no trouble at all. At almost 78, she is portraying an 80 year old woman. In the photo of the actual Mrs Nugent at the end of the film, she looks far kinder than Shirley MacLaine does. Bernie treats her well and she takes a shine to him. The actual Bernie seems a very nice man too.

The other main character is the sheriff, played by Matthew McConaughey as a good ole Texas boy, someone who dislikes Bernie and casts aspersions on him.

That is probably as much as a review should say, an indication of themes, of treatment, of characters, of tone – and leave the plot itself to please and surprise.

THE CAMPAIGN

US, 2012

Will Ferrell, Zach Galifiniakis, Jason Sudeikis, John Lithgow, Dan Aykroyd,

Directed by Jay Roach.

2012, US election year and incessant, minder-controlled, media-driven, down and dirty campaigning. So, why not a topical comedy, hit and miss variety, funny and serious, a cross between the humour of skits on Saturday Night Live and the humour of movies like The Hangover?

Director Jay Roach is best known for the Austin Power spoofs as well as the Meet The Fockers series. But, in recent years, he has directed two significant HBO films on American politics, *Recount* (on the Bush-Gore confusion in Florida, 2000) and *Game Change*, a forceful look at the choice of Sarah Palin as John Mc Cain's running partner and the campaign of 2008. He is obviously on the wavelength. This is a spoof, parody (with some serious criticisms, especially of billionaire manipulators of trade and industry and unlimited profits). There was a similar kind of film with Kevin Costner,

This is a Will Ferrell comedy. Ferrell never minds appearing as a fool or a slob, or both. He gets the chance here, as a North Carolina congressman, nominating for his district unopposed. He is a sleaze. Two brothers with more money than patriotism, John Lithgow and Dan Aykroyd relishing their roles, decide that they need a stooge to buy up land, sell it to China and then build local sweatshops to avoid transport. They choose the dumbest candidate, Marty Huggins, played by Zach Galifiniakis. Galifiniakis can be very funny or obnoxiously unfunny. This time he is very good. His is a role that might have starred Jack Black, and it looks as though Galifiniakis has seen Black's excellent performance in *Bernie* and taken over some of the mannerisms and body language.

The campaign is rough as Brady wants to win at all costs (and produces foul TV ads and behaves accordingly). However, his manager, Jason Sudeikis (who can be crass as in *Horrible Bosses* but is decency in this one) can't support him. Meanwhile, sinister Dermot Mulroney controls Marty, making him play the dirty game. But, of course, Marty, we know, will rebel, and there will be an honorable ending (even more than anticipated).

Yes, a lot of the film is quite vulgar. But, a lot of it is very funny (especially a Chinese housekeeper whose boss wants her to speak like an old Southern mammy to remember the past, and who has the final word, in Latino accent). There is a guest appearance by the dog from *The Artist*, one of many throwaway funny bits – with a literal punchline. Political bias? The Republican candidate is nicer than the Democrat! Funny while forgettable.

COSMOPOLIS

Canada, 2012

Robert Pattinson, Paul Giamatti, Juliette Binoche, Samantha Morton.

Directed by David Cronenberg.

It requires an initial commitment to stay to watch *Cosmopolis*, otherwise audiences might be making for the exit quick smart. The commitment is to David Cronenberg and his career and a film of talk and ideas rather than images and action.

Cronenberg has adapted a novel by Don de Lillo. The screenplay is wordy, often poetically wordy, often philosophically or existentially wordy. It often plays more like radio than cinema.

Cosmopolis is a big American city, a financial centre, a city the American president is visiting, a city of protest (which is where the main action sequences are found), a city of enterprise as well as resentment and violence.

For a great deal of the film, the existential tycoon hero is seated in his stretch limousine where underlings communicate with him, where he has a liaison (with Juliette Binoche), where he drives to have a haircut (in fact, only half) and then to answer a mysterious call from a man who wants to shoot him.

Some of the success of the film (or not) depends on response to Robert Pattinson in the central role. In the *Twilight* series, Pattinson is more of a passive presence and this is the case here. An enigma. He does initiate communication but his manner is more passive than active. Perhaps he is ultimately more of a victim than a hero, but when he comes alive in the final twenty minutes, dramatically playing off Paul Giamatti who makes a powerful impression as the disturbed and disgruntled gunman, he is more impressive.

While there are the action sequences, reminiscent of so many political protests, the action is more a succession of episodes where the mysterious millionaire who manipulates markets and currencies receives a succession of characters from bodyguard to chauffeur, from financial whizkids to women friends (though he does get out of the limousine to go to a diner with a woman friend).

The screenplay has a lot to say about our world, corporations, power and manipulation as well as existential topics of identity and meaning. One can read de Lillo and pause and reflect. *Cosmopolis* doesn't always afford that kind of space which means leaving the cinema more puzzled than satisfied.

THE DARK KNIGHT RISES

US, 2012

Christian Bale, Anne Hathaway, Marion Cotillard, Tom Hardy, Gary Oldman, Michael Caine,

Directed by Christopher Nolan

When Christopher Nolan re-visioned the Batman franchise in 2005 with *Batman Begins*, the reviews were very favourable. The film offered the story of Bruce Wayne and the loss of his parents, his early training in combat as well as conscience. It also offered a bleak story of Gotham City and the law's failure to control powers of crime and evil. A sequel was the order of the day.

It came in the form of *The Dark Knight* in 2008. In many ways, Bruce Wayne moved from centre stage, quieter, more reclusive and a Batman who was prepared to be despised by the people he had saved. And, it offered the confrontation between the larger and louder than life villain, The Joker, in a quite alarming (and Oscar-winning) performance by Heath Ledger. It also offered the corruption of law enforcer, Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart).

Needless to say, audiences wanted more. Christopher Nolan has obliged, writing with his brother, Jonathan, with what is tagged as the conclusion of his trilogy. Not that the end of this film does not leave the way for someone else to start another trilogy with both Batman and Robin.

This film does not have the sometimes overwhelming impact of *The Dark Knight* – no Joker. However, at two and three quarter hours, it is a more substantial film. And, though reluctant at first, Bruce Wayne and Batman are back at centre stage, with a much more complex and engaging performance from Christian Bale. Michael Caine is also back as Alfred – but there are some emotional complications as well as Alfred is conscious of his role in serving and saving Bruce and Bruce feels the call to go back into action for Gotham City.

Other members of the cast are back, especially Gary Oldman as the police chief and Morgan Freeman as the engineer and inventor, Lucius Fox.

But, there is also a new villain, Bane, a giant, physical, overbearing presence who is developing a thug army in the sewers of Gotham City. He is masked (like a Hannibal Lecter) and is played by Tom

Hardy (in the vein of his performance in Bronson). He has several fights with Wayne/Batman which are very visceral.

However, there are two leading ladies who play very well as contrasting with each other right to the end of the film. Anne Hathaway is not named as Catwoman but that is her expertise, a jewellery thief who is in the pay of Bane. Marion Cotillard is the philanthropist who wants to develop the projects at Wayne industries.

There is a very good performance from Joseph Gordon Leavitt as a young rookie who has grown up in an orphanage (run by a sympathetic priest, no suggestions of any impropriety). He has some quite powerful scenes, simply talking, but cutting to the core, quite movingly, of the issues of order, law, heroics, and what society needs.

As with the previous films, they can be considered in the light of current politics, this time the global financial meltdown, illegal deals in bringing down companies, a challenge to Wall St (Occupy Wall Street) as well as a kind of French Revolutionary revolt. There are challenges to ideas of master criminals and ruthlessness, even in using nuclear weapons, to the role of the police (and the consequences of their absence), to double standards and cover-ups. Finally, the film focuses on Bruce Wayne's dedication to helping people and modestly vanishing from public acclaim. And there is a twist at the end that most of us will not see coming.

As with the previous film, Nolan has filmed some sequences (many more this time) in Imax format, vistas of the city as well as many of the considerable action pieces. To be seen on an Imax screen if possible.

While characters and action are from DC Comics, Nolan's films are not simply Graphic Novels on screen. He has set a high standard in writing, characterisation, themes for thought. Nor is he a slouch at action. He has brought his trilogy to a satisfying conclusion.

THE DOOR

Hungary, 2011,

Helen Mirren, Martina Geddek,

Directed by Istvan Szabo

It would be great to be able to recommend this film more eagerly than I can. Not that audiences won't enjoy it or find it interesting, especially the performances. But, it is a Hungarian production (based on a celebrated Hungarian novel), directed by one of Hungary's outstanding directors, so admired for his films like *Mephisto*, *Colonel Redl* and *Sunshine*, but it has been made in English. Whatever happened between the original screenplay writing in Hungarian and the English translation, it is often quite studied, artificial or unreal, and much of it is delivered as if the film were being dubbed (which, probably, some of the performances have been).

So, that is the major problem.

The other problem is the development of the characters and their motivations and behaviour. The Door is not a particularly long film, but might have benefited by the inclusion of some more sequences that would have illuminated the characters.

That being said, what is that we actually have?

This is a story of the 1960s-1970s, people living under strict Communist rule, with memories of World War II (and anti-Semitic behaviour of the times). And the door itself? It is the door to a dwelling where an older woman lives by herself, not letting anyone in, with neighbours suspicious of what she might have taken from a Jewish exiled family during the war. In point of fact, they are both wrong and right.

The woman, Emerenc, is a servant, a dedicated, hardworking servant whose washing, cleaning, cooking, are valued by her employers – though she is something of an inverted snob, committed to working class values, and discriminating as to whom she will work for – 'I don't work just for anyone, you know'.

She does accept the approach of a former teacher, Magda, who wants time to write a novel. She and her husband appreciate Emerenc's work and meals but finds that she will enter their home at will, quite commanding in her manner, while always referring to the husband as 'the master'.

The two women develop a strong friendship, bewildering much of the time to Magda, a relationship that Emerenc would never define as friendship. Here is the strength of the film, the relationship between the two women, especially when the husband is hospitalized. However, there are times of

crisis, anger and apologies. Gradually, Emerenc does reveal so much of her story to Magda, even allowing her to come into her house.

Emerenc, sweeping snow from the footpaths constantly and diligently becomes ill. This precipitates a crisis for Emerenc and how Magda will deal with it, especially as she wins a government award for her novel, goes to a reception to receive the prize and praises Emerenc on national television (much to Emerenc's disgust).

There are other emotional sub-plots, especially when Emerenc waits for a visit from someone from her past – and is angry when this does not eventuate. Magda also visits the town where Emerenc came from, learning more about her servant.

The key advertising point for *The Door* is that it stars Helen Mirren. Mirren can be Queen Elizabeth, giving an Oscar-winning performance as the Queen. Mirren can be a hard-headed, more tender-hearted than she communicates hard working rather drab looking servant. She embodies her roles and she makes Emerenc one of those strangely unforgettable characters. Martina Gedek, prominent in many German films like *The Lives of Others*, also gives a strong performance but also serves as a sounding board for Helen Mirren.

Allowing for the limitations for the sometimes stolid dialogue, stolidly delivered (but not by the two women), *The Door* is still an arresting cinema experience.

HIT AND RUN

US, 2012

Dax Shepard, Kristin Bell, Bradley Cooper, Tom Arnold,

Directed by Dax Shepard.

Something in this one for most 30s audiences. The action fans may wonder during the early scenes just what they had agreed to come and see because it is quiet, slow and, mainly, conversation between the central couple, with touches of psychology and philosophy. That means the non or less-action audiences will have something to listen to and think about. Action fans should not worry but relax, listen and think. There will be plenty of car chases later, excitingly filmed and edited.

This means that Hit and Run is not your usual crime thriller nor your average romantic comedy, though it is a romance and thriller.

The dialogue is frequently quite smart (though self-indulgent with dollops of swearing) with talk about love and relationships, about truth and lies. And it has some entertaining plot twists, a gradual revelation about the hero which we might not initially anticipate.

Charlie Bronson (whose real name is Yul) we soon discover, is in a witness protection program in the countryside (his choice of name – but taken from the British movie biography of criminal, Bronson, with Tom Hardy, - it is that kind of dialogue). His officer is an accident-prone Tom Arnold. Annie (Kristen Bell) has left a former partner, whose jealousy complicates the proceedings no end. His brother is a gay policeman (which leads to conversations about glib labeling, stereotyping, homophobia as well as racism). She now has the opportunity to move to LA and take up a university post and organize a course on her specialty, conflict resolution. (Some comedy about conflict resolution as well.)

Charlie offers to drive her to LA and the film turns into a road movie, a pursuit movie, a car chase movie. Bradley Cooper enjoys being sinister as the unsympathetic pursuer. Part of the enjoyment is discovering more and more detail as to why the chase is on. And some cameo stars turn up including Jason Bateman, Beau Bridges as Yul's dad and Sean Hayes as a lecturer.

Smart plotting, smart dialogue are probably good ways of characterizing Hit and Run. Since Dax Shepard wrote, co-directed and stars, a lot of the smartness is obviously his.

HYSTERIA

UK, 2012,

Hugh Dancy, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Jonathan Pryce, Rupert Everett

Directed by Tanya Wexler

Basically, this is a Victorian romp, with consideration both to the Dickensian realities of medicine and hospital treatment in the 1880s (a lot of attention to period detail, costumes, décor, settings, both lavish and squalid) as well as a sense of naughtiness in showing the unwitting discovery of the vibrator.

One of the problems of watching the film these days (maybe this is more of a problem for men than for women, many of whom have found *Hysteria* quite a feminist entertainment) is that doctors behaving in the way that these doctors do in their treatment of women's 'hysteria' would now land them in the courts and, possibly, in jail.

But, in its serious vein, it reminds audiences of how dominant men were in medical practice up to that period and into the 20th century. And it shows that men had their own presuppositions about women's issues, emotions, psychology and health issues. Anything that 'upset' them was, until not all that long ago simply, simplistically, labeled 'hysteria'. It was, at least with the doctor's shown here, to be treated physiologically (while they underestimated, or did not understand, the sexual intimacy). Jonathan Pryce is very good as the opinionated doctor who has a very successful practice with a large clientele who come for his treatment and leave more than satisfied.

Hugh Dancy is also very good as the sincere and earnest doctor who talks germs with uncomprehending medical authorities and advocates, to their disdain, washing of hands. No wonder, he loses all his positions. But, treating hysteria, he is a success.

Two things happen to him. It is expected that he will court the intellectually enterprising daughter of his employer (Felicity Jones) while being highly suspect of the other daughter, the feminist (Maggie Gyllenhall, British accent and all) who puts her theories into practice in working in poor houses and campaigning for rites. Not hard to work out what will eventuate here (including an interesting court case).

Yes, the film is about the discovery of the vibrator (and the final credits show images of developments for the next hundred and more years), the young doctor working with his inventor friend (Rupert Everett) and realising the effect of an electric feather duster.

The screenplay is often witty, often incisive, critical of past medical practices, an amusing issue-raiser.

Having said that, *Hysteria* has many funny moments.

IN DARKNESS

Poland, 2011,

Robert Wieckiiewicz, Benno Furmann

Directed by Agnieszka Holland.

Poland's nominee for Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, 2011.

We are taken back to the city of Lvov, at the end of 1942, beginning of 1943, a severe winter. Lvov is occupied by German forces. Jews are being rounded up or fleeing. This is material from many a similar story. However, director Agnieszka Holland, returning to her Polish roots (both Jewish and Catholic) and drawing on a book about these events and the memoirs of one of the children, has made quite a distinctive and powerful drama. In some ways, it is reminiscent of the story of Anne Frank and her family and friends, trapped for safety in an attic. Where this family and group are trapped is far more difficult, even grotesque, than the Frank story.

At first, we are introduced to two sewer officials who are seen robbing the homes of Jews who have fled. No righteousness here. The central character, Leopold Socha (Poldek) (Robert Wieckiiewicz, seeming at first like an anonymous, ordinary man who could have a supporting role) has a wife and sick daughter in their impoverished home. Poldek is also beholden to a local policeman who is determined to find and root out Jews. Then Poldek discovers a group of Jews who have been digging through their floor to the sewers. What will he do? Report them? Or capitalize on their predicament? He chooses the latter, taking money after bargaining with them, supplying them with food and necessities as they conceal themselves, literally, in darkness.

This is a long film (almost two and a half hours) and immerses the audience for a long time in the squalor, the stench, the cramped spaces, the darkness, as day after day the small group, supports each other, squabbles, hangs on to life to survive.

It is something of a relief when the audience is able to get out of the sewers and see Poldek in his daily rounds, the fear of his partner, being upbraided by his wife who is suspicious of the Jews. There is a disaster when a German guard is killed by Poldek and Mundek, one of the Jews who is able to come out of the sewers. The Germans exact a terrible toll on Lvov, hanging many locals. This affects Poldek who has become attached in some ways to the hideaways. And it is compounded as the film proceeds: the birth of a baby in the sewers and his and his wife's willingness to take the child in – but there is no easy solution to this crisis. He helps Mundek to go into the concentration camp to find some of those interned there. And, after his daughter's first communion Mass and the

thunderous storm which floods the sewers, threatening the lives of the Jews, venturing in to lead them to safety.

Eventually, the Russians drive the Germans from Lvov.

At the end, there is a tribute to Poldek and his wife, their being acknowledged as Righteous Persons because of their sheltering the Jews. It is a sombre reminder that many of the Righteous helpers, like Oscar Schindler, were not as noble as they became – that involvement with suffering people drew on their better selves and enabled them to be heroic.

This is a holocaust and help story for a 21st century reminder of suffering and kindness.

JACKPOT

Norway, 2011,

Kyrre Hellum, Henrik Mestad.

Directed by Magnus Martens.

A Jo Nesbo story. Sweden and Norway have been producing authors who have achieved world popularity, Stieg Larsson and the Millennium novels, Henning Menkel, with Wallander, and Norway's Jo Nesbo. The film version of his Headhunters screened recently.

Jackpot is based on a short story and runs for under 90 minutes. It is really a black comedy, ultimately very ironic. Movie buffs may pick up very quickly that Nesbo may have seen and drawn on a very popular American crime thriller of the 1990s.

After a shootout in a sex shop/ strip joint, a survivor is taken into custody and interrogated by the local police. He explains how he came to be there which leads into a long story (full of flashbacks) of how he worked at a factory with former criminals three of whom entered the football pools and won. He had signed for and bought the ticket. The story becomes more and more far-fetched, though all the claims are verified. There are murders, body chopping, corpses rolling from carpets on the top of cars, a body in a solarium...

This is all presented with a deeply sardonic humour and the anticipation of whatever could happen next. Which, eventually, leads back to the shootout. Needless to say, there are some more plot twists, but you might be able to work it out (and the screenplay does suggest clues).

The film versions of the Scandinavian authors tend to be very serious and intense. This film offers the lighter (if not brighter) side of crime.

THE KING IS DEAD!

Australia, 2011,

Dan Wyllie, Bojana Novakovic, Gary Waddell, Luke Ford,

Directed by Rolf de Heer.

Neighbours have been a significant part of Australian movie and television consciousness, and not just at Ramsay St for so many decades. Neighbours, both cheerful and annoying, have popped up regularly, part of the Australian suburban landscape.

Rolf de Heer, celebrated writer and director for several decades now (Bad Boy Bubby, The Quiet Room, Tracker, Ten Canoes), must have experienced some traumatic neighbours – or has been able to imagine what might happen if you had very loud and violent neighbours. Here they are.

It all opens nice and quietly during the opening credits, the camera tracking along the street in a leafy Adelaide suburb picking out the details of the houses from numbers 35 to 41. One house is now for sale. The agent shows various groups in and out. Next door a chef is cooking plenty of garlic and wafting it over the fence. He wants only garlic-favouring newcomers. And he gets them, Max, a science teacher, and Therese, a tax accountant. They move in, make friends, allow the little girl next door to come in when she wishes. All very nice.

But, on the other side. A job turns up, radio blaring with a four-letter (and more) rap song which he mimes and tries to memorise. But, he doesn't live there. It is King who lives next door. He seems ultra-high most of the time and handles drug deals with his friends whom Max and Therese nickname Shrek and Escobar. Therese – at first - thinks they seem 'interesting' and can't believe she is witnessing drug deals. In the meantime, the couple is doing up the house and working hard in the garden.

But... at night. Yells, screams and shouts, loud music, fights. And the police cant' do anything, 95% of crimes are not solved..., regrets...

So far, so familiar for all of us (with varying degrees of identification with Therese and Max).

It is what happens then that turns the comedy blacker and more serious. Max and Therese think up all kinds of schemes to get the police to intervene, starting with graffiti on the fence proclaiming scum dealers live there. They don't work.

The last part of the film is dark farce when the couple's foolproof scheme goes so wrong in the middle of the night. It is a dastardly time for poor old King - whom we have come to like in an odd kind of way. Gary Waddell gives a wonderfully deadpan performance as King, sometimes to laugh at, sometimes to laugh with.

Audiences who have been enjoying the ordinariness and the satire so far may balk at the torrent of language when a drug gang of Maori migrants turn up and throw their weight around. There are a couple of bashings as well. Of course, it is far-fetched..., isn't it?

When all returns to calm and the only thing is for Max and Therese to move – they have tried the other suggestion made by police and crims alike to minimal avail: use ear-plugs. The film ends with a pleasantly neat joke.

Rolf de Heer has never been predictable. In fact, he has chronicled a great deal of Australian life, from aboriginal history to contemporary suburbia – this time with a smile, often grim.

MAGIC MIKE

US, 2012,

Channing Tatum, Alex Pettyfer, Matthew McConaughey,

Directed by Steven Soderbergh

Actually, magic is not the word that leaps to mind while watching this story of male strippers at a small club in Tampa, Florida, which is said to have been based on some events in the real life of the star, Channing Tatum. His gymnastic gyrations during some of his acts would support the claim.

However, unless you are an inveterate clubber (probably under thirty, or, maybe forty, by the look at some of the matrons who flock to the club), Magic Mike might seem more than a little tedious.

Of course, there are the acts which pepper the film throughout, tongue-in-cheek contrivances for shirts-off, pants-off performances and some lewd interactions with the clientele. Other than that, it is a more conventional story of a young man, turning thirty, who is tops at his game (well, at least in Tampa), works on construction sites and has an ambition and a skill in making furniture. Channing Tatum is quite convincing in his performance both on stage and in the more personal and humane sequences.

He finds a protégé (Alex Pettyfer who has not always been impressive up to now in films like *I am Number Four* and *Beastly*) who laps up the bright light life, seeing it as absolute freedom, meaning self-indulgence in drink, drugs and sex. Will he come to his senses? In the meantime, there are half a dozen other strippers whose lives we don't really see much of and the boss, played with exuberant relish by Matthew McConaughey, who opens the film with his hedonistic philosophy of life and gets a lot of the lines explaining how the club works on the fans.

One of the drawbacks of the film is the picturing of the responses of the fans, squealing and screaming over and over again.

There is something of a moral anchor in the character of the young protégé's sister, played by Cody Horn. She tries to look after her brother and casts a cold, rather judgmental eye over the performances and the responses. You know she is going to end up with our hero but that she will try to challenge him for the better.

Director Steven Soderbergh can make arthouse films, from *Sex, Lies and Videotape* to his two part, *Che*. He can also do commercial films like the *Oceans* trilogy and his recent martial arts thriller, *Haywire*. He can also do satisfying entertainments like the conman story, *The Informant*, or the health thriller, *Contagion*. *Magic Mike* is, maybe, another experiment or, now for something completely different.

A mixture of the earnest and the romantic with the lewd and the sleazy.

NOT SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN

Australia, 2012

Ryan Kwanten, Sarah Snook, Ryan Corr, Bojana Novakovic,

Directed by Peter Templeman,

Not a classification piece of advice – though it would serve as that as well. No, Jonah, an easygoing, party-hosting, rather hedonistic 35 year old, discovers that he has testicular cancer and the operation will make him unable to father children. So, both in his lifestyle and in his physical condition, he is not suitable for children.

But he does suddenly discover that he really would love to have children. But, to his surprise and dismay, his sperm are not suitable for donating and freezing. He then meets (auditions for) a number of women who could carry his child, especially raising the question with a lesbian couple – but they decide against the proposition. Could there be an opportunity with his former girlfriend (Bojana Novakovic) from whom he is having a six month separation? He is being helped with contacts by his flatmate, Stevie (played with verve by Sarah Snook, whom, many note, looks and acts like American star, Emma Stone) who thinks she has no maternal instinct at all.

Just how wrong we can be when we are self-selfish-focused and not alert to our deeper longings?

So, that's the story, Jonah becoming more desperate as time is running out (which is aggravated by his devotion to his sister's children). What happens? Not a miracle, but a rather more down-to-earth realistic ending.

True Blood star, Ryan Kwanten, plays Jonah in an ingenuously earnest way. His appearances in Australian films, Griff the Invisible and Red Hill indicate he has more versatility than he can show in True Blood.

The film offers a light touch preoccupation with deeper values about life and, especially, about being able to create and love children.

THE SAPPHIRES

Australia, 2012

Deborah Mailman, Jessica Mauboy, Chris O'Dowd, Miranda Tapsell, Shari Sebbens,

Directed by Wayne Blair.

Quite a crowd pleaser – and deservedly so.

Who were the Sapphires? They were a group of Australian singers who went to Vietnam in the late 1960s to entertain the troops. They have not loomed large in the Australian memory. Why? Was it because the Sapphires were an aboriginal group and their tour of Vietnam took place just after the 1967 referendum on the aboriginal vote?

The film is an adaptation of a musical play written by Tony Briggs whose mother and aunt were members of The Sapphires. It has been directed with feeling by actor, Wayne Blair. It is not intended as a documentary account of what happened. Rather, it is an entertainment, an often-thoughtful entertainment, developing story lines from the original experiences.

It is a delight to see pictures of the women at the end of the film and learn of their more than forty years of service to the aboriginal communities, especially in Redfern.

On an aboriginal mission in country Victoria, some girls enter a competition in the local town, much to the prejudice of the hotel proprietor and many of the people attending the talent quest. The girls don't win. And some bigoted, even vicious comments are aimed at them.

Meanwhile out on the mission, two young women are part of the group, (Gail, the ever-impressive Deborah Mailman, and Cynthia, Miranda Tapsell) performing to the delight of parents and the community – and a younger sister, Julie who sings best (Jessica Mauboy) who is determined to be part of it (and wangles getting into town). The breakthrough comes with the lackadaisical compere at the competition, Dave (Chris O'Dowd). He becomes alert to the talent and offers to be the girls' manager. Not easy because, Gail, the older sister, has a highly developed sense of responsibility. She clashes vigorously with Dave but is persuaded that they should go to Melbourne for an audition.

While the film offers many images of aboriginal life and status in the late 1960s, it also introduces the theme of the stolen generation when the girls need a cousin who lives in Melbourne, passing as

white to her subconsciously racist friends, Kay (Shari Stebbens). Gail has issues with Kay which will surface when they are on tour.

To their delight and glee, the girls impress at the audition and they and their manager are en route to Saigon.

Audiences are familiar with the visuals of the Vietnam war from classics like *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*, grim pictures of jungle battles, snipers in unfamiliar terrains, the Viet Cong. *Apocalypse Now* and, especially Bette Midler's singing of *In My Life* in *For the Boys*, have stories of the entertainers. While the same elements are present here, convincingly portrayed, life in Saigon, the American presence, the touches of sleaze, but it is the range of songs, the situations where the concerts are held, the appreciation of the American soldiers which give verve and energy to the film.

The interesting thing is how the girls respond. Cynthia is out for a good time, boys, drink, even drugs. Julie, who has a little boy at home, is more cautious, but reacts against Gail's supervision, but gets the opportunity to impress entrepreneurs. Kay is attracted to a soldier but conscious of her mixed race background. In the meantime, Dave and Gail fight, are caught up in dangerous situations, including a bombardment – but, of course, they are really attracted to each other, despite Dave's often drinking, gambling and missing bookings.

There is use of some footage from the period, a recreation of the sense of the war in Australia at the time, protest and support. But, it is the characters and the amazing tour that they would not have anticipated as well as the range of songs of the time (and Jessica Mauboy's performances with the others' backup), that makes the film both lightly and seriously enjoyable.

STEP UP: MIAMI HEAT (STEP UP 4)

US, 2012

Kathryn McCormick, Ryan Guzman, Misha Gabriel Hamilton, Peter Gallagher.

Directed by Scott Speer.

There was a spate of dancing films a couple of years ago, stories of groups, generally from poorer areas of big cities, going in for competitions, especially in the streets. There were rivalries, clashes,

rehearsals and big finales. Just when it seemed they had quietened down, along comes Step Up, Miami Heat. In fact, it's the fourth in the series.

While the dancers might come from an older and poorer part of the city, this is no slum show. The production numbers are big budget, lots of dancers, costumes, art design, IT backup with a finale that would rival the opening of the 2012 Olympic games (with infinitely less rehearsal time and finance for a lavish show that seems to come from nowhere – or has been forgotten by the script writers). Actually, there are no rehearsal scenes at all except a few minutes for the last show. We don't see any real preparations. Everything seems to happen overnight, everything ready on time, the dancers not putting a foot wrong. It's impossibly happy. There is an explanation of who's who in the group, which is called The Mob – but where they get money from is a mystery, especially since the mastermind of The Mob works as a hotel waiter and is sacked from his job. Nevertheless, the show must go on – and it does.

There's romance. The main dancer, Sean (Ryan Guzman) also a waiter, meets a girl (Kathryn McCormick), dances with her, falls in love. She turns out to be the daughter of the millionaire who wants to tear down this section of Miami to build hotels, shops etc (Peter Gallagher). The Mob does performances in public places, films them and posts them on YouTube (the film is an extended promotion of YouTube) to win a contest for most hits. With the development threatening, they move to protest dancing. They are a sensation with TV show commentators (actual ones, and well-known) all extolling them.

Do they stop the building? Is there reconciliation? Do hero and heroine have a happy ending? Is there some money for everyone at the end? Sorry, that might have spoilt the surprise!!

A lively and colourful show, exuberant and acrobatic and gymnastic performances, sweetness and light. Nobody is really a villain.

YOU INSTEAD

UK, 2011

Luke Treadaway, Natalia Teno.

Directed by David Mackenzie.

While not suggesting anyone should not see *You Instead*, I would make a caution: anyone over thirty should give a second thought. Anyone over this, a caution, unless you have happy memories of going to music festivals (especially if it rained and offered plenty of mud) or are a die-hard rock and roll fan.

This is what *You Instead* is about – an immersion in a Scots music festival, T in the Garden, in Kinross Shire. It was filmed there over five days. The plot concerns two days. And, even though the film runs only 80 minutes, it seems longer.

Adam and his partner, Tyko (Matthew Baynton), have arrived at the festival to sing *You Instead*. Morello is there with her girl group. They bicker a little and, when they are urged to pray in a group by an event officer, he handcuffs them. They spend most of the rest of the film handcuffed. This is no *Defiant Ones*!

Adam (Luke Treadaway, who composed *You Instead*) is somewhat taciturn, skinny and not always as interesting as all that. Morello (Natalia Teno), on the other hand, is far more vivacious. They quarrel, they taunt each other, they tangle. Their respective girlfriend and boyfriend make rash judgments and go off on their own. You could probably write the rest of the screenplay yourself, handing over to the cast opportunities for improvisation, which they take, not always persuasively.

It's all a bit surface characterisation, a fair amount of superficiality and promiscuity (from their girlfriend, boyfriend, the singing partner and the manager). Of course, it has a feelgood ending when Adam gets the crowd (who yell, jump, pump the air and sing as they always do at festivals, all in individual conformism) to call for Morello to join him on stage. And, that's it.

SIGNIS REVIEWS SEPTEMBER 2012

BARRYMORE

BEING VENICE

BOURNE LEGACY, The

BULLY

EXPENDABLES 2, The

HOPE SPRINGS

KATH AND KIMDERELLA

MADAGASCAR 3: EUROPE'S MOST WANTED

MONSIEUR LAZHAR

MOONRISE KINGDOM

TOTAL RECALL
YOUR SISTER'S SISTER

BARRYMORE

Canada, 2012
Christopher Plummer
Directed by Erik Canuel

In 1997, Christopher Plummer had one of his best successes on Broadway, winning the Tony Award for his one-man show, Barrymore. It was based on the life of actor, John Barrymore, who made an impact on the American and British stage early in the 20th century, also made an impact on the screen, but then declined into alcoholism and hammy performances. He tried a comeback in 1942 just before he died.

Christopher Plummer bears something of a physical resemblance to Barrymore.

In 2010, a group of producers persuaded Plummer to reprise his role in Toronto and decided to film the performance live. This film is the result. It gave Plummer and the writer,, an opportunity to revisit the play, consider new emphases, keep the humour (a lot of word-play and jokes, brisk and sometimes brittle one-liners) but emphathise the pathos. Director, , contributed to the writing as well as envisioning how best the play could be put on the screen.

It is opened up a little with Barrymore arriving at the theatre, entering, preparing in his dressing room. During the performance, some devices are used to broaden the feel: a backdrop of Florence for the recounting of some anecdotes, a screen for some scenes from Hamlet... The editing is fluid. While we see the size of the theatre and the stage and, sometimes, the audience, this is a close-up performance which contrasts with watching the acting from the stalls or balcony.

Plummer's performance is impeccable, mastery of timing, Shakespearian and pseudo-Shakesperian rhetoric and the descent into slang and vulgarity and a switch to singing the popular songs of the period. His Barrymore is vain (though not entirely self-deceiving), a man who relished his magic moments of success, appreciating these opportunities in life, but a man who can always be wittily cynical, at his own expense as well as of others (including his wives).

It is not entirely a one-man play. There is Frank the prompter, off-stage, desperately trying to get Barrymore to get back to his rehearsal of Richard III, curb his digressions, respond to his anecdotes, an admiration for the actor who frequently taunts him.

By the end of the play, we have been taken through Barrymore's life, his eccentric and addled actor-father, Maurice Barrymore, his fond grandmother, his brother Lionel, with Plummer doing wonderful impersonations of his sister, Ethel, as well.

We have an impression of the American theatre, of Hollywood, and of a man of great talent who used it well, who exploited it and then who squandered it.

But, ultimately, the admiration is for Christopher Plummer and his memorable performance.

BEING VENICE

AUSTRALIA, 2012

Alice Mc Connell, Gary Mc Donald, Simon Stone,

Directed by Miro Bambrugh

No, not that Venice. While the Sydney settings, the National Park and the harbor are attractive, they cannot substitute for that Venice. Especially since most of the action takes place around inner city Stanmore.

Venice is a young woman, a poet, whose life seems to be rather morose. She makes notes of phrases for her poems, especially showing a fascination with insects. Caught without a ticket on a train, she notes that the police office has 'miserabilist décor'. That's probably the word for this film and for Venice herself, despite a hopeful, if not happy, ending.

We gradually learn about Venice's miserabilist childhood which means that she doesn't relate all that well, turns men off, and the film has her wandering around being miserable, even finishing up in hospital for a while. Venice is played with convincing misery by Alice Mc Connell.

The other key character in the film is Venice's father, Arthur, a teacher who lives in New Zealand but who has come to Sydney for a seminar. He is played by Gary Mc Donald (and his teeth which are quite prominent many times). Arthur has an oddly posh-sounding accent at first. He is pedantic, often acidic in his comments. He stays with Venice.

Gradually, father and daughter do talk and some understanding does eventuate.

This is a film that will appeal only to a specialist audience who are interested in offbeat or odd characters and how they navigate through life.

THE BOURNE LEGACY

US, 2012,

Jeremy Renner, Rachel Weisz, Edward Norton.

Directed by Tony Gilroy.

Dramatically striking when spy chief, Edward Norton, declaims it, that the actions of his organization

were 'morally indefensible, absolutely necessary', this phrase is a key quotation for appreciating what is happening in the Bourne films and so many other espionage stories. The final credits do remind us that the characters bear no resemblance to any person living or dead. But... While this all seems far-fetched, but...

Probably handy to do a bit of revision of the original trilogy if you have the time before seeing this one. It makes a number of references to previous operations with Jason Bourne, his alleged rogue behaviour, his minders (with glimpses of Albert Finney, Joan Allen, David Strathairn). There are several photos of Matt Damon's Bourne.

However, this is the story of Aaron Cross, a specially trained operative and genetically modified agent. We see him on a survival exercise in Alaska, tough stuff. But, the chiefs are wanting to eliminate these agents and any trace of the doctors and labs for these modifications. But, like Jason Bourne, Aaron has quite a capacity for eluding death attempts (including some fascinating drone sequences), for taking on other identities and for going under the radar to escape detection. When there is a massacre in the lab, the surviving doctor, Rachel Weisz, goes on the run with Aaron whom she knew from chemical examinations.

The screenplay, by Tony Gilroy who wrote the previous Bourne films, requires a lot of attention to try to piece together what is going on, especially with the hard-bitten authorities. But it all comes together. And, for those who thought the film might have lacked action (except for Aaron surviving mountains, wolves and drones), the last half of the film has action a-plenty. The massacre in the lab is quite riveting. The attack on the doctor's house is exciting. But, using the streets, buildings and roofs of Metro Manila, the long chase, on foot, by car, on motorbike should satisfy the fans. After all, that is what the movies, editing, musical score and pace, can do.

Jeremy Renner is quite effective as Aaron though he does not have the ironic smirks and tongue-in-cheek of Matt Damon. Rachel Weisz keeps up the pace as well. There are some interesting supporting roles, especially from Stacy Keach as the head of the CIA.

The final credit says that the film has been inspired by the books of Robert Ludlum. This one, with its worldwide conspiracies, rogue authorities and spies on the run, is certainly Ludlum-esque.

BULLY

US, 2011,
Directed by Lee Hirsch.

Bullying is one of the harshest realities close to parents and families as they try to communicate with their bullied child. And, one of the severest consequences of bullying is child and teenage suicide.

The makers of this documentary, allied with several organisations to deal with bullying have combined for this film, given worldwide release by the usually more commercially-minded, The

Weinstein Company.

Parents could find the film quite harrowing. However, the director, Lee Hirsch, has opted for a more straightforward exploration and avoided sensationalism. It is an important film for teachers and education authorities to watch. Also local police who have to deal with complaints and investigate.

While there is physical bullying in the stories told, there is far more emotional and psychological bullying. Many adults can dismiss such behaviour as boys will be boys or, that's part of growing up. One authority states plainly that it is only physical violence that has any sway with him. He has no sympathy let alone empathy with a child who claims mental bullying. The film offers many situations where adults dismiss bullying.

Lee Hirsch focuses on four stories and then brings in a fifth after the first hour of the film. The states where his stories come from are Iowa, Oklahoma, Georgia and Mississippi.

The first story, that of Tyler Long, offers a thread for the film, especially as his parents want his voice to continue to be heard and have been campaigning on behalf of underage suicides. We see interviews with Tyler Long's father and mother and a selection of home movies, building up the case of bullying pressure until Tyler hanged himself at age 17. The fifth story is also one of a suicide but this time the boy was eleven when he killed himself. His parents, who tell us that they are ordinary people, nobodies, but they too have been campaigning on behalf of bullied children.

Three other stories are interwoven, a quite lengthy story of Alex, something of a loner, though from a large family, who looks awkward (he was born prematurely after 26 weeks and was expected to live only 24 hours). His personality comes across well (as well as his parents and sister). He is from Sioux City, Iowa. The school commission of the city welcomed the film-makers, illustrating some details of day-by-day life in the school and the response of the Assistant Principal.

There is the story of Kelby, a fifteen year old who has realised that she is gay and has been penalised, ridiculed and shunned by students. Her family, in a small Oklahoma, bible-belt town, have experienced being shunned by long-time friends. Kelby's father speaks of the ugliness he has experienced from the town because of Kelby. We are reminded of how vicious adults and children can be as they fling the epithet, 'fag' around to those who don't seem to meet expectations of how children should be.

The other story of a girl is an Afro-American story from Mississippi where a young teenage girl, so pressured by cruelty, brandishes her mother's gun in the school bus and is overpowered, arrested and liable to 45 charges of kidnap and threat of bodily harm. We see the effect of this episode on her mother.

There is nothing particularly new in Bully. That is not important. The film serves as a reminder of the realities of bullying and a challenge to society of how they will deal with it, especially for the sake of the children – so that the bullying will not be so bad that the child finds there is nothing else but to kill themselves.

THE EXPENDABLES 2

US, 2012,

Sylvester Stallone, Jason Statham, Bruce Willis, Jean- Claude Van Damme.

Directed by Simon West

The two Expendable movies have a niche audience – macho, action-oriented fans, many of whom have developed a computer-games sensibility, kill or be killed. For those who want first hand testimonies from these fans, check out the blogging for the film on the Internet Movie Database (over 200 already). And, The Expendables 3 has been announced!

So, what is there to say except that it achieves what it sets out to do – the question is whether that was worthwhile in the first place. Early in the piece, Bruce Willis' character refers to the Expendable squad as 'psychotic muts'. He later joins them of course in their major skill – mowing down adversaries instantly, in great numbers, and with great satisfaction.

It is all pretty much over-the-top and pretty brutal – cancel that: ugly brutal.

As with the first film, there is a prologue to introduce the group, Stallone (looking his mid-60s age) as leader, Jason Statham as his best-friend lieutenant, Terry Crews, Randy Couture and, looking older and more haggard as well, Dolph Lundgren. The action is in Nepal – which doesn't leave alive a great number of the militia which has kidnapped a Chinese businessman. And Jet Li is there for a minute or two – as is Arnold Schwarzenegger, who says he will be back and is. (Being Governor has not really honed the Terminator's acting skills; he is still into clunky recitation of lines which works best when he is being deadpan funny).

The rest of the action is in an ugly remote area of Bulgaria where they are pursuing arch-villain (Jean-Claude Van Damme rather enjoying himself as nonchalantly sinister) who is digging up some tons of buried plutonium from Cold War days. Oh, when they are in dire straits, who should turn up (with a fanfare from the Good, the Bad and the Ugly theme) but Chuck Norris (looking better than his age)!

There is an improbably gung-ho climax in a local airport.

Avoiding the accusation that this is all too macho, a female computer expert who is handy with guns as well (Nan Yu) becomes a key member of the group. One performer who comes off fairly well is Liam Hemsworth as a young warrior who brings a bit of emotion into the film (and into Stallone himself).

Watching the mayhem become repetitive, one's mind wanders to the implausibility of so much of the plot. One way of understanding what is going on (how do they move from being stranded into flying in their plane? how do they get from here to there in their truck without explanation?) is that it is like a comic strip: key scenes sketched in and you have to use your imagination to supply the links.

Corny conclusion: if you are making a list of must-see movies, this one is expendable.

HOPE SPRINGS

US, 2012

Meryl Streep, Tommy Lee Jones, Steve Carell,

Directed by David Frankel

Talent, age, experience. All very impressively present in this light and serious comedy about marriage and marriage counseling.

Both Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones, in their 60s, are so at home in front of the camera that their performances seem effortless – but, it is obvious that they have given a great deal of thought to each scene, even to body language with small details.

Hope springs eternal, of course. The title refers to Great | Hope Springs, a small town in Maine.

In the meantime, in Omaha, Kay and Arthur are a 31 years married couple with two children. Their lives roll out every day in the same, the very same way. They love each other but have separate rooms. Is that all there is? Kay doesn't think so and really can't understand Arthur's unwillingness to touch, his rather going to work, coming home to his meal and falling asleep before golf programs on TV. She looks for some books to help and discovers Dr (Steve Carell whose performance, except for the final credits, consists of sitting, listening empathetically and suggesting action steps). She watches his on-line promotion and books tickets to his office in Maine.

Most of the film is how Kay and Arthur deal with the sessions – he, of course, off side right from the start. Kay discovers that she is very traditional, even narrowly unaware, in her understanding of marriage and sex. The film also shows the ups and downs of the relationship after each session, the tension in finding a way to touch each other, let alone some relational behaviour that they are not used to (especially a farcical scene in a cinema). The two stars are at their best and their comic timing is impeccable. Tommy Lee Jones is amazingly good in making Arthur, his lack of awareness of how his wife feels, completely credible.

The screenplay makes the two a couple who are decent and good people who need the counseling to rediscover their love – especially going back to their meeting, their falling in love and the possibilities that were there as they married.

Afterwards? Back to 'normal'? A fresh beginning? Of course. But the interest and the delight is in watching how it all work out. And the makers are shrewd. They keep plot development going all the way through the credits, keeping us there, a very happy family celebration and love renewal.

The film is strongly in favour of love, of fidelity, of marriage commitment, of not opting out of getting help but actively seeking it. Just as Kay tried to persuade Arthur to go to see Dr for couple counseling, many women may well be insisting that their husbands come with them to see Hope

Springs. Yes.

KATH AND KIMDERELLA

Australia, 2012.

Jane Turney, Gina Riley, Glenn Robbins, Magda Szubanski, Peter Rowsthorn, Rob Sitch.

Directed by Ted Emery.

'Kath and Kim' (first screened on TV ten years ago) is an acquired taste. Australian audiences by and large embraced this mother and daughter whose suburban lives, attitudes and prejudices, parody so many of us, accent, vocabulary, fashions (and non-fashions) and all. A tribute to creators and performers, Jane Riley and Gina Riley (who made their TV marks two decades ago with the hilarious series, *Fast Forward* and *Full Frontal*). And, of course, there is Magda Szubanski as large, sporty and frustrated in romance, Sharon, victim number one of Kim's barbs (though poor hen-pecked husband, Brett, gets it all the time as well).

This feature film answers one question I have had for a while: is Kim in her extraordinary self-centredness (and, as *Age* reviewer, Philippa Hawker, noted, her 'iron whim') the successor to Edna Everage? Then, suddenly, towards the end of the film, I could scarcely believe it, Kath does a magic trick with her wand (after all she had done a TAFE Wica course) and who should Kim turn into but Dame Edna? So, there you are!

The advantage of the 30 minute episode is that the makers can give quick vignettes of the main characters, Kath and Kim, with respective husbands, Glenn Robbins as the genial Kel, so positive in outlook as is Kath, and Peter Rowsthorne as the browbeaten, Brett. There could be guests like Shane Warne or Eric Bana or even Kylie Minogue doing a variation on Kim as the grown-up version of daughter, Ebony. There can be a plot, but that is not the point. Satire, spoof and comedy are the point.

Well, the feature film has a plot. It is, of course, preposterous – it would be strange if it weren't. It is a fairy tale (much more by the end than we might have thought). After some Fountain Lakes sequences (with the strangulated pronunciation of shop attendants, Prue and Trude, who also turn up in Italy, reminding us of the versatility of Jane Turner and Gina Riley), the film moves to a small kingdom (Spanish-oriented) on the beautiful Amalfi coast, where the bankrupt king (a pleasure to see Rob Sitch) is on the lookout for a rich wife. He assumes Kath fills the bill. In the meantime, the crown prince who wears a Phantom of the Opera mask, sees 'Princess' on Kim's t-shirt and makes the worst assumptions. Oh, Sharon has tagged along and has set her cap for the majordomo, a superciliously entertaining performance from Richard E. Grant.

Variations on a lot of ingredients from old stories (especially *Jane Eyre*) and from European royal intrigue movies.

It's not as hilarious as hoped for. I wish Kim had been sharper and more viciously outspoken than

she is. There is a bonus with Marg Downey reprising her smooth, emotionless and unctuous voice as Marion, the counselor.

But it is better to have a Kath and Kim movie than not having it.

MADAGASCAR 3: EUROPE'S MOST WANTED

US, 2012,

Voices of: Ben Stiller, Chris Rock, David Schwimmer, Jada Pinkett Smith, Martin Short, Frances Mc Dormand.

Directed by Eric Darnell, Tom Mc Grath, Conrad Vernon.

It's seven years already since Alex, Marty, Melman and Gloria left their New York Zoo home and were transported to Africa. In the sequel, they were still having African adventures. This time, they decide to leave Africa and make for home, setting out first for Monte Carlo where the villainous and scheming penguins have flown their plane with no intention of coming back to rescue the stranded group. The familiar voices are back: Ben Stiller, Chris Rock, David Schwimmer, Jada Pinkett Smith along with Sacha Baron Cohen as the mischievous King Julien.

The writers must have more than a soft spot for Europe. We spend a lot of time in Monte Carlo, not only at the Casino, which they leave the worse for wear, but the whole city as they flee, penguins and monkeys along with them, from the relentless and ruthless pursuer of animals, Mademoiselle Dubois voiced by Frances Mc Dormand with determined relish. After the mayhem in Monaco, they arrive in Rome, having bought a run-down circus so that they could escape in their train. Disaster – though the film spends some pleasing time in Rome for those who have visited the city. The marquee is set up in the Coliseum (which the pragmatic penguins decide ought to be torn down for something new and efficient). Julien visits the Vatican and kisses the Pope's hand – and swallows the papal ring which he tries to pawn.

What are stranded animals to do? They decide that the show must go on, so they spend time in the Alps inventing new acts, getting a Russian tiger who has lost his mojo, Vitaly (Bryan Cranston), to rediscover his courage, helping out the maestro sea-lion, Stefano (Martin Short), Alex falling for Gia (Jessica Chastain). This is mainly where there are some funny parts, especially Marty being shot out of a canon and fulfilling his dream of flying. There is quite some amusing use of music and songs from Pomp and Circumstance, Non je ne regretted rien (from Mlle Dubois) and Born Free.

It's on to London where they want to impress an impresario who could take them back to New York and home at the Zoo. It won't spoil things to say they do get back to NYC, but they realise they have discovered life in the world and their cages are too confining for them. Scarcely have they had time to realise this than there is Mlle Dubois in a final face to face confrontation.

It's all rather bright and breezy, which is how it should be.

MONSIEUR LAZHAR

Canada, 2011,

Fellig, Sophie Nelisse, Emilien Neron.

Directed by Phillipe Falardeau.

This is a very fine and moving film, one to seek out. It was Canada's entry for the 2011 Oscar for Best Foreign Language film (beaten by the also wonderful Iranian film, *A Separation*). It also won two awards from SIGNIS, the World Catholic Association for Communication, in Hong Kong and in Washington DC.

The opening shot is an overhead view of primary school children playing in a snow-covered Montreal playground. The film stays principally within the school and, at these times of debate about education (teachers' hours and pay, classroom teaching and staff meetings and corrections, strict regulations about touching children and about discipline, all of which are part of this film), it is both perennial and topical.

The first segment, well orchestrated as it introduces us to two of the main children (who give extraordinarily convincing performances, especially in highly emotional sequences) leads to the discovery that their teacher has hanged herself in the classroom. The children's responses (and those of teachers and parents) and the need for grief and counseling remain a constant theme, the screenplay offering the many-sided, sometimes contradictory, facets of dealing with such a tragedy.

But Monsieur Lazhar, of the title, has not yet entered the film. Reading of the death, he comes to offer the school principal his services as relief teacher. He is from Algeria, a political refugee, whose wife and daughter have been killed in a deliberately political apartment fire. In fact, this part of the narrative raises another topical issue, that of asylum seekers. There are some stirring sequences where M. Lazhar has to justify himself to migration authorities who take a devil's advocate position, seemingly inured to thinking or feeling about what life's experience and tragedies have been for the refugees trying to explain what has happened in their lives.

However, most of the film is set in the classroom and the school corridors, yards and principal's office. M. Lazhar has some old-fashioned methods but, gradually, the children warm to him, trust him, especially as he teaches them creative writing along with their grammar, and tries to deal with the grief at the death of their teacher. We do see him outside the school, alone at home, a visit to a colleague, the migration interrogation.

60 year old Algerian actor, Mohamed Fellag, simply billed as Fellag, is totally convincing as M. Lazhar, winning over the audience as he does the children and staff. He has suffered. He has survived in Canada. He is trying to gain citizenship. He emulates his teacher wife as he deals over the school year with the students.

As mentioned already, the children are also convincing, Simon the angry little boy, Alice the intelligent and creative little girl, Marie-Frederique the poised and bossy girl, Victor the large Chilean boy who is picked on, little Boris who suffers from migraines (and a bad, sugary diet), M with

an Arabic background. You believe the teachers as well, the sports master and the janitor (the only other men on the staff), the principal trying to do her best but with pressures from parents and the education department.

Director Philippe Falardeau makes every scene effective with an attention to visual or acting detail which makes the audience feel that they are vividly present to the school. There is also a restrained piano score.

Monsieur Lazhar is going immediately on to my list of favourite films.

MOONRISE KINGDOM

US, 2012,

Bill Murray, Frances Mc Dormand, Edward Norton, Tilda Swinton, Jared Gilman, Kara Hayward.

Directed by Wes Anderson.

Moviegoers will know that any film from Wes Anderson can be described as 'quirky' (at least). Moonrise Kingdom has plenty of quirks.

Basically it is a fable and, with a title like this, it is something of a fairytale. You sense that from the artificial opening during the credits, the camera panning from room to room, upstairs and downstairs, of what looks like a doll's house. In fact, it is a house that belongs to two lawyers, the curmudgeonly Bill Murray and the flighty Frances Mc Dormand. In the meantime, there is a scout troop on exercises, with an earnest but unimaginative scoutmaster, Edward Norton. At home is the 12 year old daughter, Kaya Hayward, who wants to run away. In the troop, is a young lad, Jared Gilman, who doesn't want to be scouting. They do run away together.

In the meantime, there is a colourfully dressed narrator, Bob Balaban, who emphasises the stylized nature of the storytelling. While Bruce Willis plays it for ordinary realism, Tilda Swinton is in the spirit of the playfulness and the satire as the Social Services official.

They have a series of adventures, survival moments. In pursuit is the local captain, Bruce Willis with the rest of the adults helping and hindering.

In theory, there is room for entertainment even if the whole thing is a mixture of the realistic, the artificial, the emotional and the twee.

One of the problems is that the two children are not as engaging as all that (especially compared with other screen children – the Harry Potter series comes to mind since Kara Hayward looks something like Emma Watson). Which means that, unless an audience is engaged (and many have been), we are observing what happens rather than wanting to support the children in their venture for freedom.

Moonrise Kingdom has been described as a comedy. Perhaps. Rather, this is a wry fable, with some

laughs, but with a more challenging intention of helping us to look at a children's world.

TOTAL RECALL

US, 2012,

Colin Farrell, Kate Beckinsale, Jessica Biel.

Directed by Len Wiseman.

A remake of the 1990 science-fiction film with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sharon Stone, directed by Paul Verhoeven. Time has enhanced the memory of the original and, with the huge outburst against this new version, it has acquired pedestal-classic status. This raises a perennial question: should movies be remade? More often than not, they don't measure up to the original (or memories of the experience of the original which may not have been seen for some time). But, sometimes they do.

This review is happy to go out on a critical limb and praise Total Recall, 2012. In 1990, the about-to-be governor of California was basically a bodybuilt action star with a heavy accent and delivery. Sharon Stone was just another actress – Basic Instinct came after this. Maybe, audiences read back their later iconic status into the film. It was directed by Dutchman Paul Verhoeven who had made Robocop and was to direct Basic Instinct.

The point. Colin Farrell is an actor, handsome but ordinary-looking. This means that this version is meant to offer a hero who is bewildered, manipulated, tormented by nightmares, laboring in a humdrum factory job, seeking his true identity and prepared to go to the company, Rekall, to be injected with new memories. Audiences can identify with Farrell. His wife is played by Kate Beckinsale who turns into a relentless pursuer of her husband, a fighter bent on vengeance. And, whatever her limitations, Beckinsale can act more persuasively than Sharon Stone could in 1990. Perhaps modern audiences compare them as unfavourably ordinary compared with the larger than life protagonists of the original.

There is Jessica Biel as the mysterious rebel from The Colony. This time, there are two habitable parts of earth after chemical warfare in the 21st century, the United Federation of Britain and The Colony (as the map shows it: Australia) rather than Mars in the original. Bryan Cranston is the ruler of the Federation with malign intent on the Colony. Bill Nighy appears briefly (with an American accent) as Matthias, leader of the Revolution.

One of the most striking features of this Total Recall, and one reason for seeing the film, is the production design. The futuristic sets, intricate with great detail and huge in scope, are outstanding. The dark colony, very much like a crowded Chinese waterfront, reminds us of the design of Blade Runner. The Federation is much more London-like. But, it means that whatever is happening in the action, there is always something to look at, amazing sets.

We Can Remember it for you Wholesale is the Philip K. Dick short story on which the film is based. It ties in with the identity themes and control from his Blade Runner and Paycheck.

Maybe Paul Verhoeven and the original script had more tongue-in-cheek than this version which plays everything quite straightforwardly. As a straightforward version, with an effective lead who has to transform from meek worker to double agent and huge heroics, always good to look at, this Total Recall is gripping in its action and in its questions (though laziness in the screenplay often substitutes quick expletives for genuine emotions of fear and frustration).

YOUR SISTER'S SISTER

US, 2011,

Emily Blunt, Rosemarie de Witt, Mark Duplass.

Directed by Lynne Shelton.

This review will try to be fair since it did not appeal to the reviewer at all.

It is certainly crafted with some care. The credit to Lynne Shelton is 'written and directed by'. However, the three stars and actor, Mark Birbiglia, who makes the opening speech, are credited as 'creative consultants'.

This means that she gave them situation information and they improvised. When Mike Leigh has done this with his casts, he hones what they have improvised into a finely wrought script. Here, the improvisation is filmed as such (edited later, of course). Which means that a lot of it (most of it) is like a home movie, actors interrupting or talking over each other – not helped by the sound engineering which makes it sound as if taped while it is happening. (Fortunately, the director does not use hand-held camera – which would be too much).

So, praise to the experimental approach, to the performances and the skills that went into the improvisation. But not to the sometimes over-pounding guitar score.

The trouble for this reviewer is that the whole thing is not particularly interesting. Mark Duplass plays Jack, the middle-aged slacker of a brother, Tom, whose memorial is being celebrated. Emily Blunt plays Iris, Tom's girlfriend who is devoted to Jack. Rosemarie de Witt plays Iris' sister who has just broken with her lesbian partner of seven years. Most of the action takes place at a holiday house on an island off Seattle (wonderful scenery). Lots of talk, lots of misunderstandings. The sisters have a strong bond. Jack finds himself in the middle of an emotional tangle which leads to questions about pregnancy, sperm donors and bringing up the children.

For the audience for whom this all clicks, satisfaction and praise. For those who are not drawn into the lives of this trio, who feel that they are trapped on the island and being forced to listen in to and observe what is going on, it will be a film difficult to sit through and be as interested in the characters as all that.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS OCTOBER 2012

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ARBITRAGE

US, 2012,

Richard Gere, Susan Sarandon, Britt Marling, Tim Roth, Nate Parker.

Directed by Nicholas Jarecki

We might not be able to win an economics quiz accurately describing what arbitrage is, but it is a term which deals with competing bids and margins of profit (more or less). It is clearly a theme in this financial drama and thriller – it also serves as a metaphor for the behaviour of the central character, corporation high flyer, Robert Martin, concerning his life and risks as patriarch of his family (his word) and the interests and risks of his financial empire.

For most audiences, this will prove to be a fascinating drama of a man who has made major wrong decisions and is trapped when the circumstances he has created begin to unravel. He has told initial lies and they have disastrous consequences as they lead to other lies and other lies.

This is a Richard Gere film and he dominates it as he has for more than 35 years. He is Robert Miller, 60, one of those (until recently) seemingly unassailable lords of finance. The audience is quickly led into his dilemmas concerning selling his company, a false audit, his borrowing over four hundred million dollars from a colleague who wants it back while the potential buyer of his company avoids meeting him and delays the deal.

That in itself would make for an interesting film. However, while he appears as the devoted family man, has his family around him for his 60th birthday, including his loving wife (Susan Sarandon in a better role than she has had in recent years) and his daughter (a strong Britt Marling) who is also his business partner but does not know of her father's troubles, he soon goes out to visit his mistress (Laetitia Castel), an artist whose show he is backing.

More disaster with a car crash. His leaving the scene of the crash and asking for help from the son of an old employee, lead from one deception to another, then another.

The combination of these two plots makes for intriguing watching. It is complicated for our emotional and moral response because of Richard Gere's making Robert Miller quite seductively charming, even as he manipulates people, avoids detection and undermines his family unity. He presumes that he can do what he likes for as long as possible (despite some moments of thinking that

he ought to surrender). Since his philosophy is that there are five things which matter in this world: M.O.N.E.Y., he presumes that it will solve all problems.

There are effective performances from Tim Roth as the detective who is determined to nab the billionaire and who abhors his type, from Nate Parker as the young man and driver who does not want to snitch but finds that he is trapped by the police, and from Stuart Margolin as Miller's wily lawyer.

The film blends questions of morality, plausible arguments about how the truth might harm many others, and cynicism about how the captains of industry can walk unscathed through life

ARGO

US, 2012,

Ben Affleck, Bryan Cranston, John Goodman, Alan Arkin.

Directed by Ben Affleck.

The plight of the hostages trapped in the US Embassy in Tehran from 1979 to 1981 was a strong political focus at the time – and was considered one of the reasons by Jimmy Carter was not re-elected as president. However, there was a story behind the headlines, a story that still seems far-fetched, but which was released for the public only in 1997 by President Clinton.

Argo is that story.

How it relates to current attitudes to Iran and its nuclear program as well as its staunchly religious administration of the country will be an interesting issue with this film's release, reminding audiences of Iranian history. There is an interesting summary (with images) at the beginning of the film: critique of the British and American colonial behaviour in the first part of the 20th century, the brief attempt at democracy and the nationalizing of oil in the 1950s, the placing of the Shah as ruler and his brutal and luxurious regime, the revolt and the accession of Ayotollah Khomeini as supreme ruler.

Protestors went rampant outside the American Embassy, vividly re-created here, with the infiltration of the embassy, the flight of six staff members and their refuge in the home of the Canadian ambassador, with the rest of the staff (around sixty) trapped for over a year.

We are taken into the workings of the American government. There are bizarre plans to rescue the hostages (cycling to the Turkish border, agricultural experts visiting – but it was winter – and teachers visiting, but the international school had been closed).

An expert on hostage release is called in who proposes an extraordinary scenario – which worked, Tony Mendez.

The film is very well-paced, building up the details of the plan, to send in Mendez as scouting for locations in Iran for a science-fantasy (after all, it was the era of Star Wars). An Oscar-winning make-up artist for Planet of the Apes, John Chambers, agrees to participate. John Goodman gives a great and funny performance as Chambers. So does Alan Arkin as a has been director who agrees to join in the plan and move things along – with deals with agents, storyboarding and a full-dress reading of the script. It was called Argo (which leads to a frequently mouthed insult, Aah, go...).

While the planning is interesting, given the time restraints (and the toing and froing of official okaying of the venture), the scenes of the six at the Canadian house, showing them to be generally young men and women, are fascinating. But it is Tony Mendez' daring, getting advice in Istanbul, entering Iran, visiting the minister of culture, briefing the six with new identities, Canadian passports and professional skills for Argo, which create plenty of tension for the audience even though we know the outcome.

A scene where they all go to a market, pass through a riot and cause one of the own, builds up the atmosphere for the actual departure. The scenes at the airport – will they, won't they get away – are particularly effective.

Great credit to Ben Affleck who co-wrote the film and expertly directed it – after making the fine dramas, Gone, Baby, Gone and The Town. He also plays Tony Mendez, making his character, plan and the carrying out, always amazing.

As thrillers for 2012 go, this is one of the best.

BAIT

Australia, 2012

Xavier Samuel, Sharni Vinson, Martin Sacks, Julian McMahon.

Directed by Kimble Rendell.

Since *Jaws* in 1975, which took itself quite seriously, sea creature disaster films have become more tongue-in-cheek, often downright silly. By the time of 2011 *Piranha 3D* and the recent *Piranha 3DD*, they are so absurd that they are designed for DVD release for people to look at at home and get a gory laugh.

Bait does have some of these moments but it takes itself more seriously than usual – which makes it more watchable.

It opens on the Gold Coast, everything seeming quite normal. Before long we have a *Jaws* situation, with bright blood flows trickling vividly towards the camera (especially if you watch the 3D version). Then, a lapse of a year, where Josh (Xavier Samuel) has regrets about the death of his lifeguard friend and his fiancée, Tina (Sharni Vinson) moving to Singapore. (The Singapore emphasis, with some performers from there as well as technicians, comes because this is an Australian-Singapore co-production.) Josh works at a local supermarket, setting him up as a rather morose hero (memories for some of Stephen King's *The Mist*).

A robbery is about to go down (as they say in America, and there are quite a lot of American twangs right through the film) when birds fly in from the sea, dogs bark, and the stillness of the air is ominous. No early warning system because a tsunami suddenly looms, sweeps over the beaches and overwhelms people, vehicles and rushes into the buildings. The car park goes almost under water and the neatness of the supermarket aisles is rocked with collapse, crashing and destruction. There are only a few survivors, characters who have been introduced during the set up in the supermarket and the car park.

If you thought that was bad for all concerned, what should be washed into the supermarket but a 12 foot shark? So, this is a *Jaws* variation with a small cast in a confined space. The heroics are shared around, with a character from Singapore giving his life to switch off the power source while loose wires dangle over the water. A young woman who is angry with her policeman father (Martin Sacks) – he is there too because of the robbery – does a courageous swimming feat. Meanwhile in the car park, there are three survivors – and the wrong one gets eaten by the shark. I think we would have willingly sacrificed the bird-brained (apologies to all birds), self-absorbed young woman instead! Xavier Samuel gets the opportunity to heroically face the car park shark (under water) and destroy it, while Julian McMahon (on a holiday home to Australia with his American accent) helps our hero, Josh, to the final destruction and liberation and a Poseidon Adventure-like ending – except for the final seconds where we all jump.

This is genre material, full of conventional situations adapted to a supermarket. The dialogue is often basic, not all that much attention given to finesse. Most of the performances are functional rather than dramatic. But, as this kind of entertainment goes, it is better than most others.

BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILDS

US, 2012,

Quvenzhané Wallis, Dwight Henry.

Directed by Benh Zeitlin.

Beasts of the Southern Wilds has received a great deal of acclaim at Festivals, from critics and from the public. (One of its awards in Cannes was from SIGNIS, the World Catholic Association for Communication.) It is blend of realism and fantasy, set in Louisiana.

The central character is a little girl, Hushpuppy. Quvenzhané Wallis is impressive, a strong character, in herself and in her care for her ailing father. There has been quite a lot of, as PR calls, 'Oscar buzz' for her performance.

The southern setting introduces us to a survival way of life with a group of poor people who live on the water. Floods come and the way of life is disrupted. Father and daughter sail along the river, encountering their friends who are struggling with the flood. Eventually they are rounded up and taken to a shelter for food, care and for hospital attention. They are wary, want to get back home – which they do.

As a picture of a different community, the film has many vivid and moving moments.

The title, Beasts of the Southern Wilds, has reminded many viewers of Where the Wild Things Are. Not a misplaced reminder, especially as Hushpuppy's imagination actually sees these almost mythical lumbering beasts – but can tame them as they bow before her. She is indomitable.

In fact, the film is a tribute to the indomitability of the human spirit.

CHINESE TAKEAWAY

Argentina, 2011.

Ricardo Darin, Ignacio Huang.

Directed by Sebastian Borensztein.

Chinese Takeaway has a lot going for it. An entertaining story and interesting central characters but with many comic touches and quite serious humane undertones.

It starts romantically in China – but this lasts only a few minutes before an absurd accident brings disaster to the couple. The film does say that it is based on actual events and the final credits are worth staying for, as glimpses of television news show the events in Russia on which the film is based, quite absurd in their way but tragic.

Then we are in Buenos Aires with one of Argentina's top actors, Ricardo Darin, who can do serious police roles as well as more ordinary characters as he does here. He is Roberto who has his own hardware store. He is a middle-aged loner, a man of routine (lights out at 23.00 on the dot) who keeps a scrapbook of newspaper reports of would-you-believe-it stories. He can't be drawn out of himself, even by a woman from the country who obviously loves him.

Where could this be going? China disaster to suburban Argentinian shops?

One of his pastimes is sitting outside the airport watching planes. Suddenly, a young Chinese man is tossed out of a taxi. It is the young man of the opening. Roberto goes to help him – and thus begins a tale. Jun cannot speak Spanish. Roberto is frustrated by the young man's incessant Chinese speech and urgency.

The screenplay poses the question. If this happened to you, what would you do? Jun has an address tattooed on his arm. No luck. Try the police who are not only unco-operative but leads to a moment of violence which becomes very important in the resolution of the dilemma of Jun's future. Take Jun to the Chinese embassy? Of course. But, while initial inquiries seem promising – Jun has worked on a ship and is seeking his uncle who has sold his shop and disappeared. Roberto takes Jun in and gives himself a week to find the uncle.

Not only does the film raise issues of language and verbal communication, signs and miming. It raises questions of language and culture and groping for understanding. And, it does raise the basic questions of human kindness, hospitality and the challenge to be a decent human being. Roberto is not always successful. He gets Jun to work in cleaning up his yard. He is worried about Jun's nightmares. There is a false hope about the uncle, but is an error from the embassy, the staff of which later prove detachedly unhelpful.

The main help comes from Mari, the woman in love with Roberto. She takes Jun on a day of tourism around the city. It culminates in Chinese takeaway – which does provide some relief for Roberto and for the audience (though we, of course, know Jun's sad story). The young man delivering the food is able to do some translating. Verbal communication at last.

There is a moment of disaster and Roberto's anger with Jun and ousting him. But, a neat coincidence involving the policeman from earlier in the film leads to some hope.

Darin is completely believable and very sympathetic though we might find him difficult had we met him in real life. Ignacio Huang is also sympathetic who copes in his performance with speaking in Chinese only.

We smile. We are moved. A touch of tears. In fact, 'touching' is a good word to describe this blend of the serious and the comic, a film of human decency and kindness as the way we should live.

DAMSELS IN DISTRESS

US, 2011,

Greta Gerwig, Analeigh Tipton.

Directed by Whit Stillman

Whit Stillman has not made many films, three in the 1990s (Metropolitan, Barcelona, Last Days of Disco), the last of which was in 1998. So, after thirteen years, a new film, in the vein of the previous films but set amongst college students. Stillman could be considered something of a cousin to Woody Allen, with his wry look at his characters, an emphasis on dialogue and a delight in language and play on language.

This means that Stillman's films are an acquired taste, giving two valid impressions: that there is a serious observer of human nature at work but that the touch is quite light, sometimes witty, sometimes frivolous.

The main focus is on Violet, a character with verve and supreme self-confidence (with some moments of being undermined) played with a performance that demands notice by Greta Gerwig. She looks as if she has everything together, a leader with a clique of like-minded young women, who have no

hesitation in criticising men (and the group on display here are very criticisable, quite dumb at times, mentally and socially). Violet makes pronouncements on everything, especially as she runs a suicide prevention club – and intervenes in people's lives. She also believes in speaking directly and in taking criticism on board, an expert on rationalizing.

Then she experiences a betrayal in love and goes into a tailspin. One way out is her belief in dancing (especially tap-dancing, as a remedy for depression). Despite being mocked, she finally creates a dance which she believes will change world history.

At the beginning of the film, the clique welcome a newcomer, Lily (the other two in the group are Rose and Heather) played by Analeigh Tipton, who has a broader view on life and relationships and offers the audience a way of judging Violet's attitudes and behaviour.

It's difficult to judge how far Stillman has taken us by the end of the film (a long way or, rather, some marking time), but, if you can take Violet, then it is a serious and comic reflection on young adults and their questions, quite different from those many raucous and coarse comedies.

HAIL

Australia, 2011

Daniel P. Jones, Leanne Letch

Directed by Amiel Courtin-Wilson

Writer, producer, editor Amiel Courtin-Wilson has said that his film has polarised audiences. This was true even of the small group at a press preview where several reviewers left during the film. Sitting towards the front, I did not realise this until afterwards and was surprised because, even though the film is demanding and confronting, it seems to me to be something of a high artistic achievement. Which means a limited audience but, for those who are drawn into it, a tellingly disturbing experience of sanity and madness, humanity and inhumanity, ugliness and a great deal of beauty.

I thought the director's statement from the Media Kit explains the intentions.

"HAIL is the culmination of my intensely personal 6 year collaboration with Daniel P. Jones.

I first met Danny in mid 2005 while shooting a documentary about Plan B, a Melbourne theatre company founded to rehabilitate ex-prison inmates through performance. Danny had been released the previous day and arrived at a Plan B rehearsal to take part in that year's performance. I was instantly taken by his mercurial storytelling ability, his inky black sense of humour and his unique turn of phrase. As the weeks went by, I recorded him rehearsing several scenes with the other men in the group and his intensity on stage was striking.

We slowly got to know each other and after six months of shooting, Danny and I become close friends. As I had met Danny in the context of a very collaborative, improvisational theatre group, it was easy to ask him if he wanted to make the leap to film. Danny was thrilled.

In 2006 I started conducting in-depth interviews with Danny about his childhood, life on the streets and life in jail. It was around that time that he first told me the story that unfolds in the short film entitled CICADA.

I was moved to tears by his experience as a 5-year-old and when I spoke to Danny about the impact it had on him, he quoted Oscar Wilde: 'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars. Per Ardua Ad Astra ...'

This was a pivotal moment in my collaboration with Danny as it inspired me to develop a process that was also used in the shooting of HAIL. I interviewed Danny, transcribed that material, edited it, then fed it back to him as honed dialogue in the context of dramatic scenes. In this way Danny was able to truly own the material while performing, thereby transcending the all too common problem of non-actors being given dialogue that never really sits comfortably with them.

This working methodology proved highly successful with CICADA premiering internationally at Directors' Fortnight at Cannes in 2009 as well as winning and being nominated for several major awards in Australia.

HAIL was the exciting next step in our creative relationship and it has become a life changing experience."

We are asked to contemplate a classical painting for the first few minutes of the film, something like the rape of the Sabine women, then a king on horseback with a mallet. The director places all kinds of images before us, artistic, realistic, surreal, as well as the widest range of musical accompaniment and sounds in any film. At one moment, there is an increasing intensity and volume of sound, accompanied but white flashes on the screen that made me wonder how long I could sustain it – a evocation of the torment of a disturbed psyche.

While the narrative to the latter part of the film is clear, once Danny's madness turns into some terrifying brutality and time shifts are part of his madness, it is more complex but always leading us deeper into Danny's statement that there is disturbance in his inner self.

One reviewer remarked that this encounter with Danny and his friends, the working class backgrounds and their pubs, homes, drinking, drugs... is something so many of us do not experience unless our work takes us their directly. How would we handle meeting them? This is part of the challenge that director and actor want to offer their audiences. It is a sombre experience, not to everyone's taste or liking, but very well done indeed.

HOLY MOTORS

France, 2012,

Denis Lavant, Edith Scob, Kylie Minogue, Michel Piccoli, Eva Mendes.

Directed by Leos Carax.

Both *Holy Motors* and David Cronenberg's *Cosmopolis* screened in competition in Cannes 2012. Both of them featured a central character who travels around the city all day with a variety of appointments. At the end of *Cosmopolis*, Robert Pattinson wonders where all the limousines go for the night. In *Holy Motors* we see the answer, they all drive to a vast parking lot, *Holy Motors*, where they blink their lights and have a conversation about how the day has been for them and how they might be destined for the scrap heap. That is the tongue-in-cheek jokey ending for what is one of the strangest of screen rides, serious, comic, sometimes absurd.

Leos Carax has made a number of really offbeat films. He appears at the opening of the film, waking, lighting a cigarette, breaking through a wall into the balcony of a theatre with a full house watching a silent film clip. (A personal reflection: in 2007, guests at the Golden Apricot film festival in Armenia all stayed at the same hotel: Carax sat in the same corner for breakfast the whole week, eating but also smoking incessantly, not talking with anyone and saying that he did not do photos or communication! Much of his film is in this vein.)

Denis Lavant (who starred in several of Carax's films) is Monsieur Oscar, seen leaving home and family and getting into a white stretch limousine driven by a well-coiffeured chauffeur, Celine (Edith Scob). He has a series of nine appointments. We get a shock when we see him at his make-up mirror. In fact, the interior of the limousine is a dressing-space. He emerges as a hunch-bent beggar and spends time on the streets asking for money. Then it is back into the car and preparation for the next appointment where he emerges in diving gear and enters into an office building.

The whole film goes on from there: a provocative intruding, dressed as a kind of human monster, into a photo-shoot with Eva Mendes and then abducting her into a cave for a graphic sexual encounter. For another appointment, he goes into a garage with a mission to kill a worker who turns out to be a mirror image of himself. He also shoots a banker at a street restaurant.

It is all performance, performance art, the love of acting and taking on a diversity of roles. There was a Bacharach-David song, *The Dreams of the Everyday Housewife*. These appointments are enactments of the fantasies of the everyday man taken to extremes. Many of them are confronting, even affronting to sensitivities. Many of them are beguilingly beautiful and ugly. They are always intriguing even if sometimes unpleasant.

Audiences have to be patient for Kylie Minogue's appearance. It comes late in the film. Quite an effective performance from her, looking attractively middle-aged, in a sequence which may be more realistic than the others. One of the final appointments, Monsieur Oscar as a dying old man with a

grieving young woman, has more pathos than the others. But, Carax has decided that the whole thing should be sent up with a midnight appointment – with monkeys. Celine takes the limousine back to Holy Motors and then dons a mask as she returns to her ‘real life’.

French, creative, ugly, confronting – might as well use the word phantasmagoria to describe this (very) adult variation on going through the looking glass of performance.

HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA

US, 2012

Voices of: Adam Sandler, Selena Gomez, Andy Samberg, Steve Buscemi, Kevin James.

Directed by Genndy Tartakovsky

A very pleasant surprise.

After the advertising: monsters, their own hotel, humans as the enemy – and the voices of Adam Sandler and Andy Samberg after the ugliness of *That’s My Boy*, it didn’t look so good. But, I would imagine adults taking their children will quite enjoy it, even get a kick out of it with its playing on the old horror conventions. But, almost immediately, as we are introduced to Dracula in 1895, the birth of his daughter and his planning of his hotel resort just for monsters to get away from it all, the thought comes: what will smaller children make of his this monster lore that they have not been exposed to yet (we hope)? They will enjoy it with all the shenanigans, the odd-looking characters and the comedy – maybe this is their introduction to Dracula and co.

The film is quite bright and breezy, with lots of incidental jokes and plenty of references to the movies for those who enjoy that kind of thing. There is Frankenstein (voiced by Kevin James), large but tending to fall to pieces (and not being put back together quite correctly). There is Wayne the Werewolf (voiced by an excellent Steve Buscemi) and his wife Wanda (Molly Shannon) and their crowd of obstreperous pups (except for the little girl who comes into her own with tracking skills for the climax). There are plenty of zombies, there is Quasimodo, and with his glasses, The Invisible Man (seen shaving his invisible face!).

Actually, this is a father-daughter film. The widowed Dracula (yes, he is voiced, and very effectively, by Adam Sandler) wants to protect his daughter and has arranged a special 118th birthday party with all the monsters invited, and accepting. She is a typical 21st century teenager (who assures her father that she is not 83 any more) and wants to see the world. Daddy does not want her to leave, even though he and his wife were married in Hawaii. Lots of father-daughter talk and arguments.

But, who should arrive at the hotel but a human, Johnny (Andy Samberg)? He is well traveled, and is a party organizer. He persuades Dracula to let him stay – and, sure enough, romance ensues. Dracula gets to like the human despite all the propaganda at the Hotel against them. There is a dramatic climax, including the real monsters encountering a monster festival in the town, a race to the airport to bring Johnny back, and Dracula (in his bat form) risking his life through sun exposure chasing the plane to bring Johnny back.

The parody of the monsters acting as themselves, but also acting like humans, has some very funny moments as well as some poignant ones. And this has to be the nicest Dracula who every trod the screen, the pleasantest Frankenstein monster and the funniest werewolf.

The character drawing is lively, the castle and other backgrounds vivid. I could have done without the rap song at the end – but, I suppose, it is the 21st century!

I WISH/KISEKI

Japan, 2011.

Koki and Ohshiro Maedo.

Directed by Hirokazu Koreeda.

About eight years ago, I was very taken with a Japanese films about children who had been abandoned by their parents and who had to fend for themselves. Watching *I Wish*, again with children as its subject, I was inevitably reminded of *Nobody Knows*. So, it was a pleasure to find when checking the previous films of writer-director, Hirokazu Koreeda, that he had indeed written and directed *Nobody Knows*. While I think *Nobody Knows* is the better film, *I Wish* offers a lot of enjoyment for the audience.

We open with Koichi, a 10 year old, waking up and looking at the nearby volcano which was erupting. He cleans up the dust. This begins his day, breakfast with his mother and grandmother (father lives elsewhere), off to school with his friends, chatting as they walk up hill, a class and an essay on professions which they mostly get wrong. Later, he phones his younger brother, Ryu, who lives with their father. The two brothers miss each other.

There is a great deal of pleasing detail in the storytelling which, without our immediately recognizing it, permeates our experience of Japanese life in its everyday ordinariness. We feel we are there and getting to know the boys and, to a lesser extent, the adults.

A new bullet train line is about to open and Koichi hears that when trains traveling in the opposite directions pass each other, it is a magic moment to make wishes. Koichi decides to visit Ryu and that they will go with a group of young friends to see the trains passing and make their wishes.

One of the drawbacks of the films, especially for critics judging how well the screenplay is written, but less so for audiences who have surrendered to the tale, is that it meanders, some flashbacks, dreams, imaginings, diversions from the main thrust of the story. However, the two boys, Koichi with his assurance in manner and way of talking, Ryu with his engaging grin, carry us with them, especially when they meet, when they travel to watch the trains and the moments of wishing, are very engaging. Then, we discover that they are brothers in real life and have performed together as a comic group.

This is a sometimes delightful, often charming, introduction to contemporary Japanese life, off the tourist track, out in the provinces, with people that we can identify with, in circumstances that might seem mundane but which come alive with personal vitality.

KILLING THEM SOFTLY

US, 2012,

Brad Pitt, Scoot McNairy, Ben Mendelsohn, Ray Liotta, James Gandolfini, Richard Jenkins.

Directed by Andrew Dominik.

Definitely a killing film. However, while there are some grizzly fights and shootings, and this is the world of American thugs (with Ben Mendelsohn joining them as a particularly grinning, callous scammer and thief), it very much a talking film, quite a deal of it, which moves the impact of the film to that of 'arthouse' thug movie. Added to that is the frequent use of speeches (by radio and television) by Barack Obama and George W. Bush, the latter explaining the financial collapses of 2008, the former offering his exhortations on US equality and all Americans being part of one community. Which is treated with some cynicism by Brad Pitt's killer who asserts, for the ending of the film, that the real America is a land of individuals

The film is based on a book, Cogan's Trade, by George V. Higgins who wrote The Friends of Eddie Coyle, one of the notable gangster films of the 1970s. It has been adapted and directed by Australian,

Andrew Dominik. Dominik's three feature films have been strongly focused on criminals. Eric Bana gave a memorably alarming performance as Mark Read, Chopper. Brad Pitt worked with Dominick earlier as Jesse James in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*.

This film opens with quite a long preparation for a robbery between two petty criminals (who definitely prove that many a petty criminal is pretty dumb). Actually, the scam, prepared by the criminal who employs them, is smart. But, of course, it neglects to be aware of stupid bragging and the long arm of criminal interests and their outreach to hired killers.

The killer is played by Brad Pitt with a blend of ruthlessness but some consideration of what his victims might suffer. He opines that he kills them softly.

Much of the film is his having conversations with the go-between from the criminal bosses (played with his usual excellence by Richard Jenkins) as well as with a self-indulgent boss (James Gandolfini excellent as well). This means a lot of reflection on the state of the nation, crime-wise, and how that is dealt with. This means a lot of character revelation (which would be too much and too slow for the action brigade).

The film is visually elegant and dark, experimental at times (especially the handling of an anxious conversation between the two thugs while the Australian is high, very high, the visuals showing us his loss of awareness and his drifting). And, of course, the language of thugs is not polite – though often tiresomely repetitious.

Dominik's films are quite distinctive but he takes us into uncomfortable, often ugly, worlds.

LAWLESS

US, 2012

Shia LaBeouf, Tom Hardy, Jason Clarke, Jessica Chastain, Guy Pearce, Gary Oldman, Mia Wasikowska,

Directed by John Hillcoat.

The original title, from the book by one of the descendants of the three brothers, Bondurant, was 'The Wettest Country in the World', a story about Prohibition days and moonshine smuggling. However, after watching the film, *Lawless* does seem a much more appropriate title.

While there have been films about moonshine in the 1920s and 1930s, the emphasis on the city gangsters or the outlaws who drove around the US robbing banks has been a bigger staple of crime thrillers about the period. However, while there is reference to Al Capone, this is a story of the Virginia mountains and a family (based on a true story) that brewed, delivered and sold around the county (with a wink from some of the police).

We are introduced to the Bondurant brothers as boys, with Jack, the youngest, unable to shoot a pig on the farm. The oldest boy, Howard, drinks a lot but is under the sway of the middle brother, Forest, who had harsh experiences fighting in World War I. The action of the film takes place in 1930 and stays in the small town, in the brothers' home, on the roads and local bridges and at the still. Chicago takes an interest and some gangsters come down to throw their weight around but to buy from the brothers.

But, the law is interested. The law is embodied by one of the most detestable agents we have seen on screen, in demonically ruthless and relentless pursuit of the brothers. He is a fashion dandy with perfume, bow tie and suit, polished black hair, parted in the middle – and no eyebrows. He can beat people brutally. He resents any implications when he is referred to as a nance. He orders attacks on stills but has little personal loyalty from the police and his deputies. In many ways he steals the show in Guy Pearce's near or over the top performance.

While Shia LaBeouf has the main role as Jack, somewhat timid, brutally beaten, wanting to be a someone in the business, meanwhile attracted to the daughter of a pastor in charge of a closed and traditional community, it is Tom Hardy as Forest who is more interesting. Hardy has proven himself in the last five years to be a versatile actor (and handy with American accents). He is quiet but what one might call indomitable, especially when slashed, beaten and shot so often. Jason Clarke is Howard.

There are only two main women in the film, Jessica Chastain as a dancer who has fled from Chicago, and Mia Wasikowska as the pastor's daughter. They have limited screen time but do establish their characters strongly. Gary Oldman has some scenes as the gangster from Chicago.

Filmed in Georgia, the film looks good. The cast is solid. The screenplay, by Nick Cave (who also wrote the score, as he did with John Hillcoat's *The Proposition*) is stronger on characters than offering a complex plot.

The Bondurant brothers were not exactly lawless. They lived outside the law. Their vicious pursuer is much more lawless, exploiting the law on his side. There is a quiet epilogue which reminds us that

Prohibition was repealed and so many of the bootleggers settled down to respectability by the time that World War II broke out, another era.

LOOPER

US, 2012,

Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Bruce Willis, Emily Blunt, Jeff Daniels.

Directed by Rian Johnson.

Almost at once, Joseph Gordon-Levitt's character, Joe, explains what a Looper is and we see vividly how he works. It is 2044 in a futuristic Kansas where gangsters prevail and people live in fear. We also learn that time travel had not been invented but in the 2070s it had and been banned – one of the effects was that it was used as an underground (perhaps more 'undertime') by the new mafia to send victims back to 2044 where loopers await their arrival, shoot them and then burn their bodies while they keep the silver bars that accompanied those to be killed.

Joe has no qualms about his profession. He dresses in a dapper suit and tie style, has been secreting silver for himself, is a man about town. However, he is dependent on eye drops which enhance his perceptions. When his close friend, Seth (Paul Dano) confides that his future self has returned and he could not bring himself to kill him, Joe hides him but is summoned by his boss and patron, Abe (Jeff Daniels as a persuasive heavy) to betray Seth.

Then, Joe's older self arrives in the form of Bruce Willis. To kill or not to kill. In the meantime we have been shown how Joe has survived the thirty years from 2044, gone to China, met his wife, is still addicted to his eye drops, but has been attacked so that the Rainmaker (the ruthless boss of the future) can close Joe's loop by sending him back to his death.

We are also introduced to Sarah (Emily Blunt) who lives on a corn farm with her son, Cyd. Younger Joe takes refuge with her from Abe's shooters. Since the older Joe has brought a mysterious number and a map back from the future, Joe is able to work out what his older self's mission is – (shades of The Terminator movies) to kill the child who will grow into the Rainmaker.

This leads to some tense and some action sequences as older Joe confronts Abe and his henchman and then pursues Cyd – leading to the younger Joe having to make some moral decisions.

Joseph Gordon-Levitt has become one of Hollywood's most dependable character actors (Inception, 50/50, Dark Knight Rises). Emily Blunt is effective in a strong and different action role. We have seen Bruce Willis do this kind of this before, but he does it well.

The production design is imaginative for a dingy future. There are some moments of special effects, especially the rising of the characters and the corn to be suspended in the air at the end. Speaking of the end, it is very quiet, almost imperceptible after the drama and the action.

LORE

AUSTRALIA/GERMANY, 2012

Saskia Rosendahl, Kai Malina.

Directed by Cate Shortland.

This is her first feature film since director Cate Shortland won so many 2004 Australian Film Institute awards for her debut feature film, Somersault. Lore is quite an unanticipated follow-up in terms of story, themes and the decision to film this German story in Germany and in German. (This has enabled Lore to be Australia's submission for the Foreign Language Academy Award.)

Lore is Hannelore, the oldest daughter of five children. Their parents are Germans, the father having fought in Belarus, the mother a mysterious figure. There are glimpses of swastikas and pictures of Hitler. Then comes the news that Hitler is dead. We realise that the mother and father are aware that they will be imprisoned. They want their children to escape the American invaders. There is a moment when the parents burn their documents with a glimpse of a cover which may indicate that one or other was involved in medical experiments.

Most of the film is the trek of the children from the Black Forest to Hamburg to the home of their grandmother.

This survival trek is interesting in itself. How does a teenage girl cope with a younger sister, younger twin boys and a baby? Shelter, food, washing, hostile people? Some money and jewellery to obtain desperately needed food? Hardship in finding ruined buildings, sleeping in the forest? Cate Shortland presents all these hardships with a blend of surreal suggestion (mountains and mists) as well as realism.

Along the way, they are helped by a young man, Thomas, who tells them to say he is their older brother. Lore sees that there is a yellow Jewish star in his documents. This challenges her beliefs. Lore and her family are Nazis. The children have been part of the Hitler youth. They have presumed that the Third Reich would prevail and their realization that Germany has been occupied by Americans, Russians, French and British defies Lore's comprehension. Interestingly, with Thomas helping the children, befriending them, finding food, caring for the baby, they adapt to Thomas, whoever he is.

But, there are some twists in the screenplay which means that this journey is not entirely predictable. One of the complexities is Lore's beginning of sexual awareness and her response to Thomas, sensually but in disgust because he is a Jew. She has moments of bigoted, stereotypical outbursts of anti-Semitism. There is a later, surprising development in terms of Thomas' papers. Another complication is an act of brutality which means that Lore is saved from attack but which disturbs her in terms of responsibility and conscience. The audience is given another shock, some violence as they journey through the Russian territory.

When they finish their journey, the focus is still on Lore and what this trek has meant in terms of her attitudes towards life and her family, to traditions and all that she has taken for granted and can no longer believe in.

One of the most moving of post-war films was Fred Zinneman's *The Search* (1948) where a Czech mother travels over bomb-ravaged central Europe looking for her son. We had been attuned to sympathizing with the refugee-victims of Nazism. We have not been attuned to refugees, Nazi survivors – the leaders, yes, smuggled out of Germany, especially to Latin America, but not the children. How much sympathy do they deserve? How should they be helped? And what would their experiences contribute to their growing up and their future? Some of the questions we are left with at the end of *Lore*.

MENTAL

Australia, 2012,

Toni Collette, Anthony La Paglia, Liev Schreiber, Kerry Fox, Caroline Goodall, Deborah Mailman.

Directed by P.J. Hogan.

Often funny, very often uncomfortable and confronting.

Most people are sensitive as to how they actually refer to, let alone talk about, mental illness and its variety of manifestations. There is a culture of reserve, people not wanting to discriminate or offend. On the other hand, there is a blatant and insensitive reference, and insensitive language, to mock the mentally sick as well as insult those with whom they disagree. These were thoughts continually rising while I watched the film and will probably be the reaction of many audiences.

Writer-director, P.J.Hogan made one of Australia's best wry comedies, *Muriel's Wedding*. The town then was Porpoise Spit, somewhere near the NSW-Queensland border. This time it is Dolphin Beach, not too far away. And, once again, there is a very dysfunctional family (five daughters who think they are mental and keep looking up books and have spirited discussion to affirm that they are), an absent father who is the local mayor, campaigning for re-election, but never home, neglecting his wife, despising his daughters, with plenty of local liaisons (Anthony La Paglia). But, as with Jeanie Drynan's portrait of Muriel's sad and quietly despairing mother. This time it is Rebecca Gibney, similar in many ways. She gives a fine performance. Hogan has explained in many interviews how he has dramatised his own family experiences in both *Muriel* and *Mental*.

The film spends time setting up the family scene, the girls running wild as the neighbours complain. As with the use of ABBA songs for *Muriel*, *Mental* capitalises on the songs from *The Sound of Music* (even to the opening flying over the Gold Coast hinterland mountains to the overture until the camera lands in the backyard with Mum doing a Julie Andrews). There is some exuberant singing as well as an ironic use of Edelweis towards the end. The next door neighbour, Nancy (Kerry Fox) is an obsessive cleaner and a gossip. Mum has to go to an institution – they say she is in Wollongong for a holiday.

What is Dad to do? Then, in the street he notices a hitchhiker and invites her to look after the girls. She is the seemingly (and actually) outlandish Shaz, played with such enthusiastic relish and diverse skills, by Toni Collette.

As with those older films like *Teorema* or *Entertaining Mr Sloane* where a stranger comes to live with a family and transforms it, Shaz in her own eccentric way, takes the girls under her wing and helps them learn self-esteem, gets the feel of things from Nancy (a well-coiffeured disciple of Pauline Hanson) and her daughter (which leads to a surprisingly funny and feeling lesbian sub-plot with Nancy's daughter and Shaz's aboriginal friend, played with mischievous verve by Deborah Mailman. Caroline Goodall is very good as the mother's uptight and jealous older sister.

As if this was not enough, there is a sub-plot with Coral, the eldest girl, and her working in a shark exhibit and a romance with a fellow-worker, as well as the intervention of the owner (taking a long time to recognise who this bearded and heavily Australian-accented actor was: Liev Schreiber) and his interactions with Shaz. (Though I could have done without so much 'youse', 'wuz'... and other over-flat accents and grammar, and there is some crass language.)

While all the characters have plenty of screen time and develop their characters strongly, the film does belong to Toni Collette who gives a whirlwind of a performance, often right over the top, at other times emotionally quiet, manifestations of her own life and being 'mental'.

You might not want to do this, but the film would probably reveal a lot more on a second viewing.

A MONSTER IN PARIS

France, 2012,

Voices of (English version): Jay Harrington, Adam Goldberg, Danny Huston, Sean Lennon, Vanessa Paradis.

Directed by Bibi Bergeron.

French animation films that have been released for a wider audience are very different from the familiar material from Hollywood studios (which have been developing a variety of skills in their productions during the last ten years). The American product is generally aimed at a children's audience or family audiences (and entertaining parents and grandparents who may be taking the children). This is not the case with the French films. Examples are *Les Triplettes de Belleville* and *A Cat in Paris*. It is the same with *A Monster in Paris*. However, a number of bloggers have said that it appealed to the children they took to see it.

It is really an adult story, a period story which highlights familiar landmarks of Paris while showing us the ordinary streets, homes, cabarets, laboratories. The style of drawing is idiosyncratic, evoking the art of the beginning of the 20th century. It was filmed in 3D.

The plot would be more at home in a comic strip, broad sweep of characters and situations, plus a great deal of fantasy. For some adults, it may be too fey and twee.

The monster is not really a monster. Rather, a scientist has been working in his laboratory and two friends doing deliveries explore and discover a flea that has been transformed into something larger than life. They disguise it as a tall man, a singer, who teams with a girlfriend-singer in a cabaret, Lucille, and the couple are a great success. In the meantime, a policeman, ambitious in his career, goes on a quest to arrest a mysterious killer who is identified as a monster. Needless to say, there is a happy ending and comeuppance for the policeman.

One of the best elements is the professor's assistant, a monkey who does not speak but holds up cards with his humorous dialogue.

The musical side of the film (with some attractive songs) has more than a passing resemblance to *The Phantom of the Opera* and echoes of *Beauty and the Beast*. Vanessa Paradis sings as Lucille and the singing voice of the flea is Sean Lennon.

A mixture of the familiar and the offbeat.

ON THE ROAD

France/Brazil, 2012.

Sam Riley, Garrett Hedlund, Kristen Stewart, Kirsten Dunst, Viggo Mortensen, Amy Adams, Tom Sturridge.

Directed by Walter Salles.

On the Road was writer Jack Kerouac's autobiographical novel of his travels along the highways of America, the exuberance of discovery of the wide range of American lifestyles as well as his seeking for greater freedom and freedoms. It was the novel of what was called The Beat Generation, a reflection of life between 1947 and 1951 which was to influence young Americans, especially, over the next decade. A number of film-makers have wanted to transfer it to the screen but failed. Now, using a screenplay by Jorge Rivera, Brazilian director, Walter Salles (best known for his *Central Station* and *The Motorcycle Diaries*) has filmed it.

British Sam Riley is Sal Paradise, the Kerouac character, with writing ambitions who is introduced to a literary group which includes Carlo (the novel's equivalent of poet Allen Ginsburg) who then introduce him to the confident and charismatic Dean Moriarty (the equivalent of Neal Cassady). Sal and Dean immediately click. Sal is in admiration of Dean's energy and freedom despite his car-stealing life and prison, Dean admiring the more dependable and creative Sal. There is also Dean's young ex-wife, Marylou (Kristen Stewart) and his new wife and baby, Camille (Kirsten Dunst).

Sal has already been on the road after his father's funeral and travelled across the states, joining in casual work including cotton-picking in California. Sal then travels with Dean and Marylou, sharing their escapades, from sex and drugs and shoplifting to encounters like that with Old Bull Lee (Viggo Mortensen) and his wife Jane (Amy Adams) and their alternate lifestyle in Louisiana.

All the time, Sal is taking notes, writing.

On another trip to Mexico, Sal becomes very sick and is finally abandoned there by Dean. Which means that Sal goes back to his more ordinary life in New York to write his book – yet still pondering on the influence of Dean. Dean has become inspiration – and, at one stage, is referred to as holy, almost sanctifying his freedoms quest.

Audiences who have read Kerouac and been moved and inspired by his work will have a judgment on whether the film dramatises the book well or adequately, capturing the depths of its themes. Audiences who have not read the book or who do not know the Beat Generation may be fascinated by this road movie of rebellion against the status quo. Other audiences may wonder about what freedoms the film is really exploring and expounding. Is it transcending one's limitations, developing oneself – and in relationships with others? Or is it, as seems so often during the film as we see, over and over, sexual promiscuity, indulgence in drugs, personal betrayals and refusal to take responsibility for behaviour (which is what Old Bull Lee seems to be saying about Dean), freedom merely as the capacity for moving beyond any felt restraints just for oneself. (And that leads to the temptation of thinking that a lot of what we are seeing is just the Emperor's New Clothes.)

At well over two hours, with a lot of repetition, and despite Garrett Hedlund's arresting performance, what are we left with?

(Audiences interested in these characters should see *Heart Beat* with Nick Nolte as Neal Cassady and Sissy Spacek as his wife; John Heard is Kerouac and Ray Sharkey is called Ira but is based on Allen Ginsberg. There is also the 2011 film about Ginsberg's poem, *Howl*, with James Franco. Ginsberg is to be portrayed by Daniel Radcliffe in the forthcoming, *Kill Your Darlings*, with Jack Huston as Jack Kerouac.)

RESIDENT EVIL: RETRIBUTION

US, 2012.

Milla Jovovich, Michelle Rodriguez.

Directed by Paul W. S. Anderson.

Number 5 in the franchise. And the film: shootouts and chases, chases and shootouts, then more shootouts and chases. The series derives from computer games and has that kind of aggressive plot, characters who are more cyphers of good and evil rather than personalities, special effects that enable guns to blaze, blaze and then blaze some more.

The opening does give a resume of what happened in the previous episodes (the first one ten years ago), so we are reminded of the dastardly doings of the Umbrella Company and how it developed malicious viruses which by this stage are monstrous zombies (who do a fair amount of chasing and of being shot) whose mouths open to repulsive extended tongues.

Milla Jovovich (who is now married to her director, Paul Anderson) is once again heroine Alice, svelte, leatherbound, agile and nimble – and deadly. Except that he has acquired a daughter (with happy memory implants), which gives her more motive for defence and attack. There are her old allies, her old enemies.

There is an interesting feature in *Rainbow*'s setting up experimental neighbourhoods, Moscow, New York and Suburbia. The Moscow sequences at least arrest the eye with something different.

Retribution? Not exactly. Rather, when the film looks as if it will end, it goes on to a Washington DC, White House sequence which, we realise, serves as a trailer for the next installment. Maybe retribution will come next time. In the meantime, it's repetition!

SAVAGES

US, 2012,

Taylor Kitsch, Aaron Johnson, Blake Lively, Salma Hayak, Benicio del Toro, John Travolta.

Directed by Oliver Stone.

Well, the film lives up to its title. This is a film which is often savage, sometimes brutish. It is the work of Oliver Stone, attempting to portray the ugliness and inherent violence and greed in the Mexican drug cartels as well as in the American growers and dealers – with the Mexicans moving in on the border states, and with the connivance of some DEA officers.

Stone knows how to make films and has two directing Oscars to demonstrate it (*Platoon* and *Born of the Fourth of July*). Come to think of it, this reviewer prefers his Vietnam trilogy and his forays into American presidential politics (and conspiracies) of JFK, Nixon and the two Bush presidents. *Savages* has a lot in common with his *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and the picture of violence and the exploitation by the media.

The cast all do their contribution well, interesting to see Salma Hayak as the drug (usually lord because usually a man, but what is the title for a woman) boss. Benicio del Toro is her enforcer, unscrupulously brutal and double-dealing, a character without a redeeming feature.

But, the focus is on young Americans. While they have their own brutality and see the tactics of the Mexicans as 'savage', the screenplay makes the point they too are caught up in this world, a consequence of their choices to grow, sell and deal (and use) and that they do savage things (and they do). But, they are ambiguous central characters. They might be set up as the victims of the brutal cartels, but by the end, despite some regrets, they escape into sunsets, tropical isles and glorification.

Taylor Kitsch is the Afghanistan veteran, short (very short) fuse who is used to violence and deaths. And he has military buddies who come to the party against the Mexicans. Redeeming features? Not particularly. Aaron Johnson, his buddy from school days and wiz at economics and business, has set up the marijuana project (the best in the US, he claims). He devotes some of his profits to charity and developments in Africa. Obviously redeemable – and it is he who is forced to set fire to a cartel officer who has been set-up as scapegoat. Blake Lively is the attractive girl, to both of the men, a ménage a trois. For a lot of the film, which she narrates, she is an abduction victim to pressurize the two men to deal with the cartel. Then there is John Travolta (not looking particularly healthy) as the corrupt Drug Enforcement official.

The presence of Benicio del Toro will remind many audiences that he was in *Traffic* (and won an Oscar for his performance). *Traffic* is the more impressive and impactful film on US-Mexican drug issues. *Savages* is harder to take.

TAKEN 2

US/France, 2012,

Liam Neeson, Maggie Grace, Famke Janssen, Rade Serbidzija.

Directed by Olivier Megatron

Liam Neeson is an actor who seems to be able to bridge any gap between action fans and more serious cinemagoers. In recent years, he has opted for a number of action films, *The A- Team*, *Taken*, *Unknown*. On its first weekend in the US, *Taken 2* gained \$50 million at the box-office, audiences being older rather than younger.

The original Taken (with some flashbacks here for reminders) was an abduction story, security agent Bryan Mills (Neeson) has to rescue his young daughter who was taken in by a smooth-talking Frenchman and found herself captive with a group of brutal Albanian sex-trade smugglers. Mills hounds them down and rescues his daughter – of course.

This sequel is far more straightforward. The head of the Albanian gang (Rade Serbidzija) is bent on revenge for the death of his son. His wife and daughter (Famke Janssen and Maggie Grace) join Bryan for a holiday in Istanbul. As foreseen by the audience, Bryan and his wife are abducted, his daughter escaping. And, after shootouts and a smasheroo car chase, Bryan confronts his enemies – and wins, of course.

One very interesting aspect of this thriller is Bryan's skill, not just with guns (no doubts of that) but with his mind. During the abduction, he notes all street turns, counts between each turn, notes any sounds. This enables him to calculate where he is – with the help of a concealed mobile phone and conversations with his daughter, her setting of grenades so that he can count and calculate distances from the sounds... Brains and brawn.

Down with the Albanians – again. They seem to be ready villains these years in the movies, especially targeting Eastern Europe and the sex-trade.

Liam Neeson is a big man, commanding with his screen presence, always a good man, even a nice man at times, who nevertheless draws on his guns and his wits to rescue those in peril, a hero that appeals to older audiences who can accept him as an action hero.

The film ends comfortably back in LA with some humour about his daughter's passing her driving test (after surviving all that speed and crashing in Istanbul) and a meal where her boyfriend is invited. Well, of course, he could be the subject of abduction in Taken 3 – all that is needed is a photogenic city, after Paris and Istanbul, for it all to take place.

THE WATCH

US, 2012.

Ben Stiller, Vince Vaughn, Jonah Hill, Richard Ayoade, Rosemarie de Witt, Billy Crudup.

Directed by Akiva Schaffer.

Trying to think of a reason why you might want to watch *The Watch*.

If you have to see all Ben Stiller's films... though again he does his typical serious shtick in the middle of mayhem (think *Greg Focker*). If you have to see all Vince Vaughan's comedies (and he does put a lot more energy into this one than is merited). Not, if you have to see all Jonah Hill's comedies. He is rather more subdued than usual. And, you may not want to see Billy Crudup as a creepy neighbour with some leering innuendo. Rosemarie de Witt, who has done some good films, has a smaller role as Stiller's wife. Will Forte is a dumb local cop. The director in recent years has been working at *Saturday Night Live*.

Is it funny? Think crass humour, jokes and farce with little wit. It is both raucous and strained. There is a lot of pratfall humour and mock violence. It looks as if it were made by committee, someone suggesting one line, someone suggesting a different plot development, others looking at box-office possibilities for coarse comedy - and it all went into the pot, not a melting pot as the whole thing does not brew (or gel, to mix metaphors).

Is it clever? It moves from one genre to another and doesn't really bring them together very well. Set in a small Ohio town, it looks like a domestic comedy, set in a supermarket. When a character is gorily killed, Stiller (who has inaugurated many clubs in the town) organises a neighbourhood watch group, with only three volunteers. Stiller plays a control freak. Vaughn is an exuberant hedonist. Hill lives with his mother and wants to break away and branch out. Ayoade is British, eager but not all that he seems.

On the one hand, it is a comedy of male bonding and unbonding. When it is revealed that there are aliens in town and that they plan a take over of the world, the film descends into some stupid situations and behaviour, especially confronting the monsters – and suddenly organising a happy ending that overstrains credibility.

Given the cast, it is a disappointing show.

THE WORDS

US, 2012,

Bradley Cooper, Jeremy Irons, Denis Quaid, Ben Barnes, Zoe Saldana.

Directed by Brian Klugman and Lee Sternthal.

Perhaps it is not so surprising that many younger reviewers (thirty plus or minus) have not been impressed at all by *The Words*. Older reviewers have liked it. Yes, it is a film for older audiences who are interested in a more literate plot, even if it relies on some familiar devices, complexity of character, and arresting moral issues to chew on.

The film opens with Dennis Quaid reading from his recent book. In fact, quite a lot of voiceover from Quaid throughout the film. As he reads to his audience, the film visualises his story of a contemporary celebrated author who, after having his novels praised but not published, discovers a manuscript in an old brief case his wife buys him during their honeymoon in Paris. Of course, his dilemma is whether he should present it as his own or not, so moved is he in reading it. He resists, but circumstances, including his wife's reading of the manuscript and telling him that he has revealed his truer and deeper self, he goes ahead. He is feted as a great and sensitive novelist.

The core of the story (and we ignore the coincidences and accept them as plot devices) is the approach of an old man who, we quickly, realize is the author of the manuscript. And, so, there are flashback as this back story comes to life, set at the end of World War II with a young American and a young Frenchwoman, their love and his writing their story – and its being lost. The celebrated author is played by Bradley Cooper who brings credibility to his role. The great benefit of the film is the presence of Jeremy Irons. He plays the old man (Ben Barnes in the flashbacks), moving in his telling of the story, challenging in his questions about the ethics of what has been done.

In the meantime, there is another plot development with Quaid and Olivia Wilde as a student who is a groupie of the author – which leads to Quaid finishing his story, but making the audience ask whether we are getting a story within a story, within...

The Words is not going to set the movie industry on fire. Rather, it offers some now old-fashioned pleasures of perhaps familiar plot devices in a story, stories, that have an emotional interest as well as raising questions as to the appropriating of the manuscript and what should be done to atone – or should that be an end of it?

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

UK, 2011.

James Howson, Solomon Klave, Kaya Scodelario, Shannon Bear, Lee Shaw.

Directed by Andrea Arnold.

Wuthering Heights is Emily Bronte's 19th century literary classic. There have been a number of versions, especially the romantic doom and gloom of William Wyler's 1939 version with Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon. In a cinematic sense, Olivier with his theatrical delivery became the visual equivalent of the Bronte prose and Merle Oberon's classic beauty was that of Catherine Earnshaw. The Internet Movie Database lists 15 versions since 1920. Luis Bunuel made a version in Spanish (*Abismos de Pasión*). Keith Michel and Claire Bloom in 1962 and Ian McShane was Heathcliff on television in 1967. Anna Calder Marshall teamed with Timothy Dalton (also a smouldering theatrical presence) in 1970. In the 1990s, Ralph Fiennes was Heathcliff to Juliet Binoche's Catherine. Tom Hardy, who has proven himself a strong and versatile actor, was Heathcliff in a British television in 2009 with Charlotte Riley.

Audiences expecting a continuation of that kind of classic cinema should not venture into this much more experimental interpretation unless they want to see something quite different and to be challenged.

Andrea Arnold made her mark with awards for her contemporary domestic dramas, *Red Road* and *Fish Tank*. Now she takes her visual style back into the 19th century and the Yorkshire moors and dales.

A gathering in the dark. Dim hallway. A face. Sky vista. A half-framed picture of two riders. Quivering camera.

This is the technique that Andrea Arnold brings to this 129 minute version of *Wuthering Heights*. It is both intimate and sometimes off kilter. It is dark. It is grubby. It is episodic. Characters are sometimes glimpsed, then contemplated in close-up. The first part of the film, centred on the dingy Earnshaw farm, has little relief. The second part of the film with much more attention given to the Linton mansion is much more sunny (at times), even with blue skies, the interiors, with some red walls, far more colourful than we had become accustomed to.

The director and her director of photography are attempting an interpretation of the novel via the visual style rather than literary style, although the screenplay offers much of Emily Bronte's words. It is a disruptive style, at times upsetting, at times puzzling with its idiosyncratic handheld camera work that avoids finesse or neatness. And there are several jolts as characters use expletives that Emily Bronte may not have even known.

This is the context for unsettling characters. Hindley Earnshaw is a brute. His foreman, Joseph, has moments of cruelty. The rest of the family are there, often in the dark, not particularly delineated. Except for Cathy, in her teens, a wild, impetuous young woman. Into this household comes a black slave, bought in charity in Liverpool, to be brought into this Yorkshire life and to become a Christian,

Heathcliff. Already this is a jolt for purists, but one of the most interesting features of the film. At first, Cathy spits at him. But, soon, they are kindred spirits, escaping to the top of the heights, riding over the moors. Heathcliff becomes the centre of the film. His plight holds the interest and the emotions.

When Cathy goes to the Linton home and finds herself at home in this different environment, Heathcliff leaves. He disappears for some years.

When he returns, there is different casting for both Heathcliff and Cathy. The continuity between Solomon Glave as the young Heathcliff (offbeat and memorable) and James Howson as the older and more sophisticated Heathcliff is well sustained. This means that Heathcliff's made passion and revenge and his cruel marriage to Isabella more credible. However, the younger Cathy (Shannon Bear) is what can be called a buxom country lass, full of verve, even of song, impetuous, contradictory, at home at the Earnshaw farm rather than at the Linton's. However, the older Cathy (Kaya Scodelario) is glamorous and svelte (despite her attempts at a rough accent). Many audiences will find it hard to accept this transformation. Which undermines the drama and Cathy's responses to Heathcliff.

Edgar Linton is what was once called 'a wet and a weed). Isabella is hard done by. Nelly Dean must have been there earlier but emerges more significantly when Heathcliff returns. It is Lee Shaw as Hindley who is the most consistent character.

Doubtless there will be more versions of Wuthering Heights. This is the more puzzling and challenging one.

SIGNIS REVIEWS NOVEMBER 2012

2 DAYS IN NEW YORK

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ALEX CROSS

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ROBOT & FRANK

RUBY SPARKS

SESSIONS, The

SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS

SINISTER

SKYFALL

SOUND OF MY VOICE

TO ROME WITH LOVE

TU SERAS MON FILS/ YOU WILL BE MY SON

WUNDERKINDER

2 DAYS IN NEW YORK

France/US, 2012

Julie Delpy, Chris Rock, Albert Delpy, Alexia Landeau.

Directed by Julie Delpy.

Julie Delpy has had a significant career, not just as an actress, but as a writer and a director. She has been widely popular as star, with Ethan Hawke, of Richard Linklater's talk dramas, Before Sunrise and Before Sunset and the soon to be released, Before Midnight. In many ways, she continues this style in her two films, 2 Days in Paris and, now, 2 Days in New York.

She is Marion who was with partner, Jack (Adam Goldberg) in Paris trying to rekindle their relationship in 2 Days in Paris. Failure. Now she is back in the US, living with Mingus (Chris Rock) with two children, one hers, one his. So far, so reasonable.

Then she hears that her father and sister are coming to visit New York. Dad (her own father, Albert Delpy) showed his eccentricity in the first film. Now he does it again – and more – complicated by his not speaking much English. Nor does Mingus. Dad is a born mischief-maker and a lot of the film shows him at work being mischievous. Marion has always clashed with her sister, Rose (Alexia Landeau), and there is plenty of that here, fights at home, fights at a restaurant... Another complication is the arrival of a former boyfriend who is now with Rose. He is an obtuse buffoon for a lot of the time, which some may find funny but others, along with the sparring sisters, many may find irritating.

While Marion is a complex character, trying to juggle the complexities of the visit, a photography exhibition opening and her relationship with Mingus and care of the children, Julie Delpy is able to handle it well. And, as we suspect, she is pregnant.

The surprise of the film is Chris Rock. Best known as a stand-up comedian with a loud and coarse mouth who can be both very funny and very offensive, he plays a straightforward character (with a couple of scene connection with his comedy routines, especially in an imaginary conversation with Barack Obama). He is quite effective, bringing together elements of frustration with the visitors, care for the children, his job as a writer and radio personality and trying to make his relationship with Marion work.

It is a talky film, plenty of farcical situations (especially when Marion clashes with a neighbour in the elevator who is upset with Rose and the boyfriend smoking pot and she invents a story that she has terminal cancer) which overlay more serious themes of love and relationships and the contradictions and the contrariness within families.

360

US, 2011,

Anthony Hopkins, Jude Law, Rachel Weisz, Ben Foster.

Directed by Fernando Meirelles.

ALEX CROSS

US, 2012

Tyler Perry, Matthew Fox, Edward Burns,

Directed by Rob Cohen

I'm afraid that this will probably be quite a disappointment for fans of James Patterson's Alex Cross novels, even though he and his Entertainment Company have producer's credits. For those unfamiliar with the books and the characters, this film will be a routine police movie.

The plot is a prequel to the stories of Dr Alex Cross, forensic psychologist, working for the CBI. Here he is in Detroit as a detective, working with schoolfriend, Tome Kan (Edward Burns). Cross is happily married with two children and they live with his mother, Mama Nana. She is played by the fine actress, Cicely Tyson, but does not resemble the character in the novels very much. She is rather skinny and irascible rather than a nice, if demanding, mammy type of the books.

We are introduced to the villain, a skinhead, gaunt ex-army assassin, Mathew Fox (rather nasty as are so many of the villains Alex Cross has to confront). The plot takes the global financial crash as the basis for the killing of several international financiers, led by Jean Reno.

Cross does his detective work, smart in his conclusions, incurring the enmity of the ambitious but rather dumb police chief, John C. McGinley.

After a very personal section which moves Cross to a spirit of vengeance, the main action is in the attempt to kill the victims, the subsequent chase, and the following through to who hired him. Rather formulaic, as they say.

There is probably more appeal for an American audience, especially the African American audience with writer-director-actor, Tyler Perry in the central role. He has made a number of very popular films which have had no theatrical release in Australia. He is also taking the place of Morgan Freeman who was Alex Cross in *Kiss the Girls* and *Along Came a Spider*. Kiss the

Girls was one of the best adaptations of a novel, keeping the basic plot, preserving the mystery and with Freeman creating a memorable character with strength and dignity.

This time the director is Rob Cohen in his action thriller vein, like The Fast and the Furious. Which all means that the film is rather average.

THE ANGELS' SHARE

UK, 2012,

Paul Brannigan, John Henshaw.

Directed by Ken Loach.

A film about whisky – and more.

Ken Loach has been directing films on the working classes for almost fifty years. And he is definitely still on their side. And, as this film goes on, we are invited to be on their side – with mixed results, on side with some, yes, and others...

The film opens with the dopest of the lot, a bespectacled nong on a railway station, almost killed by a passing train. But, he finds himself in court as do a succession of men and women charged with petty crimes, quite an entertaining credits sequence. Then they are sentenced to do community service. (Actually, the film makes a very good case for community service instead of prison sentences.) They are under the care of the rather benign Harry (John Henshaw) with the focus narrowing to Robbie (Paul Brannigan) who has been in jail, is bashed by his prospective father-in-law and other thugs, especially when he goes to hospital for the birth of his son.

With Harry and Robbie, the audience gets involved empathetically with them and to some of the rest of the group who paint halls, clean cemeteries and other jobs.

Harry is fond of whisky and knows more than a bit about malts. It emerges quite quickly that Rob has a nose and a palette for tasting and identifying the whiskies. He shines at a competition

and makes a contact with an expert. Will it lead to something substantial for Rob, for Leonie and their son Luke?

What it actually leads to is a clever whisky heist, stealing some of the whisky, that which may not be missed, the angels' share.

This is a film about hope, Robbie's hope, and the possibilities of overcoming one's background and mistakes. It is both serious and funny (especially that dopey character from the opening).

And, if you find you are leaning forward in your seat, you soon realise that it is not because you are involved (which you are) but you are straining to understand as much of the heavily-accented dialogue as you can!

BACHELORETTE

US, 2012, 87 minutes, Colour.

Kirsten Dunst, Isla Fisher, Lilzy Kaplan, Rebel Wilson, James Marsden, Adam Scott.

Directed by Leslye Headland.

All the reviewers and many of the bloggers have been talking about women behaving badly (and they are certainly not wrong) and the influence of *The Hangover* and *Bridesmaids* (although in fact, *Bachelorette* was a play written some years before the release of *Bridesmaids*). Women reviewers have been more benign in their estimates of the humour and the vulgarity of *Bachelorette*.

Raucous is one of the common denominator words to describe the screenplay. It is a useful word, indicating loud, boisterous and crude. It usually indicates a screenplay that is full of sexual references and innuendo, but also of quite explicit and frank treatment of sexual behaviour. And that is true here.

The ugly duckling (Rebel Wilson doing her comic large girl comedy routines but with far more pathos and sympathy than her bridesmaids) is about to be married (unbelievably to her friends) to a tall, dark, handsome and rich fiancé. This brings out the worst in them, even as they enviously celebrate: hens' night, stripper, club, destroying the wedding dress and desperately trying to repair and clean it in time.

They are very unlikeable. Kristen Dunst (apparently breaking free from her more serious roles) is snobby and bitter. Isla Fisher gives new meaning to ditzy. Lizzy Caplan is a promiscuous, drug-taking type, with some of the more salacious dialogue, is actually the most interesting and sympathetic of the three. And then, the boyfriends are men behaving badly and stupidly.

There are some funny moments, but, overall, there is some bitterness in the harsh portrait of the bridesmaids and a question whether they can better themselves or are in their own created ruts.

York St John's University, UK, has been sponsoring international conferences on Peace and Reconciliation since 2006. The 2012 conference, Mediating Peace: Reconciliation through Art, Music & Film, was held in Jerusalem at the Truman Institute in the Hebrew University on Mt Scopus, Jerusalem.

While the Jerusalem setting meant that attention was given to the Israeli-Palestinian issues, this served as a backdrop to wider world considerations. More than 30 of the delegates came from Korea, the only severely divided country in the world.

While confrontation and diplomacy are the two principal ways usually chosen for conflict resolution, the conference, in its 10 plenary sessions and its 56 45-minute seminars, wanted to present alternative imaginings (and actual achievements) of how music, art and film can contribute to greater respect, dialogue and reconciliation.

Over 100 invited participants from Europe, Asia, Africa, North America and Australia spent three full days listening, speaking, watching. While Islam and Bahai were represented, most of those present were Christian. Australia was represented by Peter Malone MSC who conducted one of the seminars on film and reconciliation and presented the synthesis of the film seminars overall at the final plenary and assessment.

The creativity and hope of the conference offered an alternative to the harsher approaches to conflict resolution.

Within a day and a half of the conference finishing, rockets were being fired on Israel and within a few days, Israel had assassinated a Hamas leader leading to an escalation of hostilities and deaths.

DEAD EUROPE

Australia, 2012

Ewen Leslie, Marton Csokas, Kodi Smit-McPhee, William Zappa.

Directed by Tony Krawitz.

Christos Tsiolkas has become one of Australia's celebrated novelists. There was a 1999 film version of his novel, *Loaded*, called *Head On*. ABC television produced an 8-part series of his multi-faceted *The Slap*. This version of his novel, *Dead Europe*, a large book, runs for only 84 minutes, offers key elements by brief episodes, succinct character sketches and pieces of dialogue which reveal character and plot quickly and economically.

Dead Europe is often a morose look at Greek migrants to Australia, their culture and their faith and their superstitions, especially curses, the secrets from the old country and the need for purging past guilts. It is also something of a morose look at present Europe, from Greece to France to Hungary. While there is some beauty and vitality, the film focuses on bitterness and hatreds, betrayals, drug culture and sex slavery. And leaves us with few answers to our queries and questions.

Ewen Leslie plays Isaak, a gay photographer, who is appalled by his father's death and his mother's talking of a curse. He decides to go back to Greece, the first of his family to do so, and scatter his father's ashes in the mountains. He meets relatives who are hostile to his family, a cousin who had visited Melbourne and another friend (which leads to drugs and sexual gropings). But, photographing in Athens, he comes across a teenage boy who is being beaten and rescues him (Kodi Smit-McPhee). The boy reappears throughout the film in different guises and in dreams. He becomes identified with a boy that Isaak's father was to have sheltered during the war but failed him. Is the boy to be the instrument of vengeance and fulfillment of the curse?

Isaak's journey takes him to Paris to connect with a friend of his father. But that leads nowhere. So, he travels to Budapest to find his brother who had left Australia long since and has immersed himself in a seedy world of drugs and exploitation of young boys – where the mysterious Josef reappears, again confronting Isaak.

Whether this is an adequate version of Tsiolkas large novel, experts will have their say. What writer, Louise Fox, and director Tony Krawitz (*Jewboy*, *The Tall Man*) have done is to distill the core of the novel and the characters and to portray a man's sometimes morbid search for the truth and for his own personal, family and ethnic identity. It is striking and challenging film-making.

DREDD

UK, 2012,

Karl Urban, Lena Headey, Olivia Thirlby.

Directed by Pete Travis.

A grim future: 80,000,000 people crammed into the space from Boston to New York, high rise ugliness, a department of justice that controls the behaviour with 'Big Brother and Sister' screens and sends Judges to administer justice, even executions. Drug thuggery is rife.

This is really a short story at feature film length. One judge goes to a trouble area, accompanied by a recruit who is being assessed. However, she has the power to see into people's minds. Which comes in very handily at various steps in their mission. The villain is Ma-Ma (Lena Headey) who controls the drug traffic in her high rise and beyond.

The whole drama is the Judge and his offsider detecting the villains, confronting the villains, doing violence on the villains, executing the villains and so, despite the odds and being outnumbered and often outgunned, they succeed in their mission.

Filmed in South Africa, the film boasts futuristic sets and a lot of action, comic-book style.

Karl Urban is the judge, Judge Dredd. It won't do much for his visual recognition in his career as he is heavily masked, only mouth and jutting and fixed jaw being visible. It doesn't give him as much exposure as Sylvester Stallone had in the previous film, Judge Dredd.

A film designed solely for aficionados of graphic novel action.

END OF WATCH

US, 2012,

Jake Gyllenhaal, Michael Pena, Anna Kendrick, Natalie Martinez.

Directed by David Ayer.

End of Watch begins with the car chase and the shootout. However, there is an even stronger chase and violent shootout at the end. In between, we are shown the day by day work of two Los Angeles cops, as well as glimpses of their personal life and relationships. This is the kind of thing that was very popular in films of the 1970s (with such titles as Supercops) and on television shows like Starsky and Hutch and, more seriously, Hill Street Blues. Then came the reality TV shows like Cops. End of Watch relies on fans' experience, and liking, of these films and television programs.

One of the differences is that much of End of Watch is filmed as home/work movie, cameras recording people and events in close-up, some of it on mini-recorders on lapels, much of it with handheld cameras. (This can have some giddy consequences on audiences who prefer few wobbles and twists in what they watch.)

Otherwise this is familiar material, harsh situations, danger, killing, drugs, as well as the more routine patrols of the LA streets. However, this is South Central, Hispanic families (and dealers and killers) moving in on what was once African American territory. These culture clashes are to the fore. As is the multi-cultural make-up of the force itself.

We follow Brian and Mike, their good fellowship and banter, their discussions about all kinds of things, their going into action and the interaction of white and Hispanic. Mike is married, Brian about to be (with Anna Kendrick and Natalie Martinez as the wives). Brian is filming for one of his course projects which gives some reason for the visual style of the film.

Jake Gyllenhaal is always reliable and makes Brian convincing. Michael Pena appears in many films but this one gives him a chance to make a stronger impact.

Needless to say, with the cops but, especially with the criminals, much of the dialogue is monotonously four letter worded but, just when you might feel it is too much, the film comes up for air.

End of Watch is dedicated to the police forces in LA who collaborated with the film-making. The film is sometimes a grim reminder of the risks that the dedicated police are exposed to and take.

LOCKOUT

US, 2012,

Guy Pearce, Maggie Grace, Vincent Regan.

Directed by James Mathers and Stephen St Leger.

In the 1990s, there were a number of prison break films, like *Fortress*, *No Escape*, with action stars like Christopher Lambert and Ray Liotta, some of which were set on planets in space. This is one of those films, 21st century graphic novel style. Time, 2079.

Guy Pearce plays a hero type who is more than nonchalant, fast with the couldn't-care-less wisecrack. He has been arrested for handling government secrets, for a murder of an official. He is being tortured, questioned. He had taken possession of a case with documents which he passed on to a colleague on a subway station.

In the meantime, the daughter of the US president has gone to a maximum security facility in space to hold inquiries about prisoner treatment, especially methods of tranquilising the men to zombie states. Pearce's subway ally is one of the prisoners. Just the moment for an uprising (with two Irish-accented leaders) and mayhem breaks out – and the lockout of officials.

The rest of the film is basically, Pearce persuaded to go to the prison to rescue the president's daughter, officials trying to rescue hostages, communications breakdowns, lots of brutal action – and the ringleader's brother's mad upsetting of plans.

Underlying the action is a mystery about who committed the initial murder, so that after the mayhem and the rescue, there are the mystery-solving explanations. All tied up neatly.

It's loud, dark, grim – except for Pearce's cheeky performance and seeing him as an action hero.

THE MASTER

US, 2012,

Joaquin Phoenix, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams,

Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

The Master implies a disciple. This quite long film spends its first fifteen minutes offering a sketch of the disciple, Freddy Quill (Joaquin Phoenix). At the end of World War II, he is on a Pacific Island with a squad, mucking around, sex-preoccupied, chopping cocoanuts and making liquors. Then he is in rehabilitation, mentally affected by his navy experiences and fighting the Japanese. He becomes a photographer in a large store (still drinking, still sexually active) but fights with a customer. He picks cabbages, still drinking. When an old man dies because of his alcohol concoction, Freddy flees, jumping aboard a cruise ship.

When he comes to, he meets the Master, Lancaster Dodd (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a benign looking presence with a way with words (and sometimes breaking into song). His pregnant wife (Amy Addams) assists him. There is an entourage for the wedding of his daughter, which the master conducts.

The bulk of the film concerns the friendship between master and disciple (sometimes touches of the intimate). We watch the charm of the master as well as his relentless 'processes', more repetitive and relentless, than military training or old-style religious novitiates. In urging Freddy to recover memories, re-live his past, the master is exercising a kind of brainwashing. Freddy becomes more and more dependent, sometimes resisting (and drinking), sometimes adopting the master as a father-figure.

There is an alarming episode when the master is arrested because of accusations of financial fraud and is jailed, as is Freddy who has violently taken on the arresting officers. It is a frantic breaking point for Freddy.

At times, the master's wife is more stern and demanding on Freddy than the master is. She is suspicious of Freddy's motives, perhaps a spy.

The film does not offer a neat ending. It is quite open. The master expands his ministry to England. Freddy rides away, lapsing into his old way of life.

There has been much comment on the links between the film and Scientology. Whether this be the case or not, The Master and the portrait of Lancaster Dodd, his presumptions about himself, his alleged mysticism, his writings (with Dianetic overtones), his making it up as he goes along, suggest how L. Ron Hubbard might have developed Scientology. The portrait of Freddy reminds us of searching people and the need for some kind of leadership, even dependence.

Paul Thomas Anderson continues his thoughtful studies of disturbed characters and disturbing situations, Boogie Nights, Magnolia and There Will Be Blood.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 4

US, 2012

Katie Featherston.

Henry Joost, Ariel Schullman.

With episode 4, the release of each film has become an annual event. For the fans, the only problem seems to be that they feel the series is becoming weaker and weaker though some liked this one better than the previous one. For the rest of us it is, more or less, just more of the same.

Once again, Katie is part of the action, celebrating with her nephew, then abducting him and disappearing.

Then to 2011 and a family story (tensions between mother and father), a teenage daughter and her younger brother. There is also a mysterious house across the street. When the mother is taken to hospital, the little boy comes to stay with the family. The two boys bond and play together.

In the meantime, the daughter's boyfriend seems always in the house, with camera, with computer visual connections. Plenty of recording going on as we have come to expect. This is all fairly arbitrary but necessary for this plot.

Then, of course, all kinds of disturbances during the night, mysteries about the little boy's behaviour, lots of threats and something of a more disastrous ending than we might have anticipated.

The directors of Paranormal Activity 3 are back again. Box Office has been up to expectations. Which means that Paranormal Activity will also be back again.

ROBOT AND FRANK,

US, 2012,

Frank Langella, Susan Sarandon, James Marsden, Liv Tyler, Jeremy Sisto,

Directed by Joe Schweier.

This is a small whimsical film that will appeal to those facing ageing and will offer a little challenge to the next generation who will be responsible for their parents' care.

Frank lives alone. His memory is going – and, in fact, with his burglar background, he tries to steal from his own house. He is played by Frank Langella in a pleasantly low-key way. Frank is Skyped by his world-travelling daughter (Liv Tyler). His son (James Marsden) visits him every week. Frank is more than a little obstreperous, in denial about his forgetting details. One week his son brings Frank a robot (the setting is 'the near future') who is programmed to care for Frank, keep an eye on his diet, his rest, all the details of his daily life. Frank is not happy, but, bit by bit, he warms to Robot and finds himself having friendly chats with him.

He is fond of Jennifer, the local librarian (Susan Sarandon) who is being edged out of her job, also by robots. Frank's urgings to be on the job again are fostered by his stealing a book from the library. He then has eyes for the jewelry owned by yuppy neighbours. Robot is not in favour but thinks the planning (rather than the execution) might be good for Frank's health.

A number of comic hijinks ensue, with the local sheriff suspicious of Frank, keeping him under surveillance. The situation exercises Frank's ingenuity. And Robot's.

Then the film veers towards care for the aged, especially those with memory loss. There is a nice feel about these episodes, especially with Frank having a meal with his family. But, the film ends with a wry comment about where the jewels are hidden.

It has a short running time. I wouldn't have minded some more.

RUBY SPARKS

US, 2012,

Paul Dano, Zoe Kazan, Elliot Gould, Annette Bening, Antonio Banderas,

Directed by Jonathan Dayton, Valerie Farris.

There have been many films about imaginary friends, even films where a writer's muse comes alive. This is one of those films. Ruby Sparks is the creation of a young writer, Calvin (Paul Dano), who had success in a novel published in his late teens and has been silent for ten years. Critics are clamouring for his new work.

But, he is something of a recluse, especially in contrast with his over-libidinous brother, Harry (Chris Messina) and his eccentric mother (Annette Bening) who has taken up with a furniture-artist (Antonio Banderas). He is going to a psychologist (a genial performance from Elliot Gould) who urges him to write something, however small. He meets a girl in a park who takes a liking to his dog. He begins to write about her, Ruby Sparks, vividly – and then she is there, alive and sparking in his life. Not only that, his brother and then his mother and others are able to see her and interact with her as normal.

He is rather possessive and discovers that by typing her story, he is able to control her, to speak French, to be angry, to be loving.

A main reason why Zoe Kazan is so believable as Ruby is that she wrote the screenplay herself, doing what Calvin is doing in the film, giving her a rich and varied life, which she as screenwriter, can control.

At this stage, while watching the film, and its picture of bringing a person to life, of having control, of creating in one's own image and likeness (or not), the screenplay was suggesting far more than the life of a creative writing. The emphasis was on creation – and, what is lightly called, 'playing God'. There was in old philosophy curricula a course called Theodicy, a reflective course on the meaning of life and the possibilities of God (rather than Theology which is an exploration of revelation about God). This film would be an intellectual-emotional illustration of issues of playing God (or whether God's creatures are endowed with free will and can choose their destinies and behaviour even if it is not what the creator intended and hoped for).

So, the film took on new meaning over and above the entertainment value of watching a writer and his creation and personal dilemmas.

Paul Dano often specialises in sad sack characters, like the non-talking young man in the directors' previous *Little Miss Sunshine* or in his eventual confronting of Daniel Day Lewis in *There Will*

be Blood. This suits the film. We sympathise with Calvin but not overly. It is more interesting thinking about the implications of what he is doing in creating Ruby Sparks.

THE SESSIONS

US, 2012,

John Hawkes, Helen Hunt, William H. Macy

Directed by Ben Lewin.

Sex and the disabled.

This is not a topic frequently seen in films, although there have been a number about some persons with mental disabilities and their relationships. It is significant part of the recently popular, *The Intouchables*. This one is more probing, physically, emotionally, morally. It highlights the issues for a 38 year old man who virtually lives in an iron lung, his muscular system debilitated by his contracting polio at the age of six.

One of the factors which complicates audience response (especially for practising Catholics) is that Mark O'Brien has been brought up a Catholic and visits his parish priest, Fr Brendan, not exactly for Confession but for him to listen to his questions, his decisions and his experiences. He says he wants advice from Fr Brendan as a friend rather than as a priest.

The issue is that Mark wants to experience his full sexuality. He is put in touch with a sex surrogate who has a program of body awareness leading to full sexual experience, a limit of six sessions. Though exceedingly nervous, he begins the sessions, then follows through. Intercut with his experiences, are his conversations, quite frank, in church, with Fr Brendan.

The film, based on an article by Mark O'Brien, has been adapted for the screen and directed by Ben Lewin (Australian director of *The Dunera Boys* who himself had polio when young) who has not had a prolific career at home or in Hollywood. It is quite sensitively written, with a lot of humour, tracing the effect of the therapy on Mark, on the surrogate, Cheryl, and on Fr Brendan. The surrogate Cheryl Cohen acted as an adviser for the film, as did Susan Fernbach, a volunteer who was the love of Mark's life.

John Hawkes, who has appeared in minor roles in many films but has stood out in *Winter's Bone* (with an Oscar nomination) and as the cult leader in *Martha, Marcy, May, Marlene*, makes

Mark a completely convincing character, a poet (because, as he says, he has to live most of his life in his mind), a writer, a man who blames himself for his young sister's death because his mother had to focus on him so much, a man with a religious culture, and a man who experiences the ordinary sexual longings and desires and who lacks the opportunity for fulfillment – or, at least, fears there will be no opportunities. Much of Hawkes' performance is in voiceover, telling his life story, recounting his feelings and reciting his poetry.

Helen Hunt brings an extraordinarily sympathetic presence to the role of Cheryl, seeing herself as a professional sexual surrogate rather than in any way a prostitute, with her own private family life. She is quite uninhibited, though restrained in her work, in being comfortable with her body, considerate for her clients. Again, she is not a character one sees often in films, which is a challenge to how we respond to her in theory and in practice.

William H. Macy spends most of the film as Fr Brendan, listening to Mark, making his judgments about morality and compassion with a priority on his sympathies before traditions of moral teaching.

There are good performances from several actors who portray the helpers upon whom Mark is dependent.

This is a sensitive, not exploitative film. However, it does raise moral issues concerning sexual behaviour which might seem easy to solve in principle but which require pastoral considerations as well.

SEVEN PSYCHOPATHS

US/UK, 2012

Colin Farrell, Christopher Walken, Sam Rockwell, Woody Harrelson.

Directed by Martin McDonagh.

Two people in the audience, sitting side by side in the cinema, could well be having opposite experiences. One might be thoroughly amused by the bizarre plot and characters as well as the black humour. The next might be finding it quite distasteful, a lot of violence, random

and planned, too silly to enjoy. A bit of checking on the film is necessary to decide which seat one wants to sit in.

Martin McDonagh had a great hit with *In Bruges*. It was bizarre and funny, oddball criminal characters, black humour and wordplay – and the beauty of the city of Bruges. This time he is in Los Angeles, not so beautiful.

Seven Psychopaths is not only the title of the film, it is the title of the potential film within the film. It is being written by Irish screenwriter, Martin (Colin Farrell, this time rather quietly subdued). He is desperate to find some psychopaths to fill out a plot for his title, and he certainly finds them, especially among his friends.

The most psychopathic is actor, Billy, played cleverly with general nonchalance and an amoral outlook on life by Sam Rockwell. Rockwell can take on any kind of role with flair. He does so here. Although rivalry for the title of most psychopathic comes with thug, Charlie, Woody Harrelson. Harrelson is devoted above all people and all things to his pet dog, Bonnie. Billy teams up with Hans (Christopher Walken at his best) to abduct dogs and turn up for the reward. You can see the set-up when Bonnie is dognapped.

Meanwhile, Billy offers all kinds of suggestions for Martin's film – many played out on screen for the audience. Hans also has suggestions. In the meantime, we see Charlie's search for his dog who scares the walker who lost his dog by shooting at her, then racially hostilely shooting someone for revenge (real killing, not a scare). It all builds up to a shootout climax, contrived by Billy.

Other characters wander in and out: Charlie's mistress, Martin's edgy girlfriend, and Tom Waits with a story all of his own (a violent one) which he wants Martin to put into his film (and he interrupts the film's credits to complain that it is missing).

Then there is the story of the Viet Cong soldier who plans to murder those responsible for the massacre at My Lai – the subject of Hans' final suggestion for Martin, described so well by Christopher Walken.

So, a movie about a movie, of how movies and real life can relate and connect – but all with tongue very much in cheek. It won the People's Choice award for the Midnight Madness screening at the Toronto International Film Festival. Not surprising.

SINISTER

US, 2012,

Ethan Hawke, Juliet Rylance.

Directed by Scott Derrickson.

Sinister? Definitely.

As a reviewer who rarely really jumps at films (after all, 'it's only a movie'!), I will confess to jumping any number of times during sinister – even at the last image. Not only the jumping, but frequent peculiar feelings of spine-tingling. It was the succession of things that were banging and bumping in the night, the eerie atmosphere from the opening shot of four hanged people, through the sense of ghosts and the mystery of why this was all happening. And the synthesizer score, the percussion, the pounding.

Which means that if you are prone to be unsettled during a film, you perhaps should be alert to the effects of this one.

Actually, the plot is well worked out and all explained (well not explained but story lines logically followed through). Perhaps another reason for the atmosphere is that it is all played straight, no winking at the audience or tongue-in-cheek ironies. And one can identify with the family at the centre of the story, ordinary enough but the victims of sinister powers.

Basically, it is the story of a writer who moves house so that he can do a true crime story on the spot. He does research, finds a mysterious box of old film which shows the family who have been killed, except for a missing daughter. Most of the action takes place inside the house, especially at night as the writer looks at the films and asks questions of himself. Then the bangs begin, boxes fall, loud sounds (quick cut editing with the synthesizer sounds) and he (and we) begin to be really jumpy.

The sheriff warns him off. A deputy agrees to find out information for him. His wife is supportive, but his young son and daughter start to behave strangely. He receives computer chat information from a professor who says that the signs he has seen and images at the other crime scenes lead to a cult of an ancient evil deity, Baghul (the Boogy Man). The worship of Baghul includes the sacrifice and devouring of children.

Then the ghosts appear.

The end is not what we expected when the film started but it seems more inevitable as the film goes on – and the end of the film is where all the information (with the solution worked out by the deputy) as to what has happened – and will happen.

Ethan Hawke is convincing as the author who is obsessed with his research and book, more and more tormented, more frightened. Juliet Rylance is his wife.

Scott Derrickson directed *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* and the remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. He knows how to do eerie films – and has been most successful with *Sinister*.

SKYFALL

UK, 2012,

Daniel Craig, Judi Dench, Javier Bardem, Naomie Harris, Ralph Fiennes.

Directed by Sam Mendes.

It looks as though this is a James Bond film that you will have to see to make up your own mind. The critics have been generally very favourable. The box-office has been very good. But, the bloggers on the net have been devastating in their critiques and condemnations.

This review will be favourable.

While admittedly there are some plot holes and some improbabilities (and should you want details, the IMDb has more than 590 entries and counting, some growling about in minute detail and numbered lists, the flaws), this celebration of James Bond's fifty years is quite entertaining. It is also a consolidation of Daniel Craig's taking on the role. He is a rather unsmiling actor and has been tough and rugged in his previous two films. Here he is still rugged but has a little more debonair charm than before and does a lot of his confronting of villains wearing suit and tie. This is true of the opening sequence, chases in Turker and over the roofs (as in *The International* and *Taken 2*), car

chases, pursuit on the top of a train (with the help of a bulldozer) and a sequence where he is shot and plunges into a river. And that's just the beginning.

Fans have complained that the film is boring. Depends on what you want. If it's non-stop bursts of action and guns, then it will be boring. However, there is much more to the plot. The list of agents has been hijacked and M and Gareth Mallory (Judi Dench and Ralph Fiennes) are being pressurised by expert computer hacking and the blowing up of MI6 buildings. It's about time for Bond to return – and he does.

In tracking down the villain, there is an assassination in Imax-like panoramas of Shanghai. There is a femme fatale (Berenice rather good in what turns out to be a small role) and, ultimately, a meeting with the arch-villain. His entry is most striking. A long shot as he walks towards a bound Bond, arriving in close-up as he explains himself. It is Javier Bardem as Silva. Bardem won an Oscar for his oddly-coiffed assassin in *No Country for Old Men*. This time he is much quieter, somewhat camp in manner and conversation, blonde hair, a master narcissistic psychopath – whose motives are revealed and make sense in the context of MI6.

But, most of the final action is in England and, then, in Scotland. Silva, after being captured by Bond, is targeting both Bond and M and engineers an escape which sets him loose in London where he wreaks disaster (the Tube crash of a Wimbledon-bound District Line train) and death (especially at a parliamentary enquiry).

Bond decides that a showdown is needed and opts for the highlands (where Albert Finney turns up for an entertaining cameo).

While there are explosions and shootouts, the level of sex and violence is played down compared with previous films.

Women are to the fore in this outing. Naomie Harris has plenty of action in Turkey, action and glamour in Shanghai before she settles down as Miss Money Penny. And, this is very much Judi Dench's film, appearing right throughout the film and essential to plot development.

The film is long and there may be too much character development and talk for the action-only addicts, but Sam Mendes is a stylish director, the performances are fine, there is wit in the dialogue and some sentiment, with even Craig-Bond shedding a tear at one stage.

And the late explanation of the title helps bring it all together nicely.

SOUND OF MY VOICE

US, 2012,

Christopher Denham, Brit Marling, Nicole Vicius.

Directed by Zat Batmanglij

The voice in question is that of Maggie, played with confident allure by Brit Marling (Another Earth, Arbitrage) who co-wrote the screenplay. It is a charming voice, but can it be trusted?

As the film opens, we see a young couple being showered, robed, bound, blindfolded and transported to a mysterious destination. On arrival, we realize that they are coming to a cult group and are about to be received. Then, Maggie, with breathing apparatus support, comes in veiled, suggesting a sacred presence. She seems to be from the future and has returned to bring salvation to chosen ones.

We then realize that the couple are documentary film-makers, getting footage surreptitiously to expose Maggie as con and fake. Most of us will realize that we share their scepticism and listen to Maggie's plausible moralizing, her condemnations and her embracing her disciples. Brain and emotion-washing.

It is not as easy to infiltrate a cult as the couple imagine and Maggie is a mixture of charm and insightful insinuation. She also makes a demand of the young man which could put him outside the law. Will he do it? Has he succumbed to Maggie's persuasion?

As is probably proper for this kind of hypothetical situation, there are enough indications that Maggie is a fraud, but also some moments where we wonder whether she is actually who she claims she is. Which means that there could be a lot of discussion and argument after the final credits.

TO ROME WITH LOVE

US, 2012,

Woody Allen, Judy Davis, Alec Baldwin, Jesse Eisenberg, Roberto Benigni, Penelope Cruz.

Directed by Woody Allen.

For almost ten years, Woody Allen has been filming around Europe, several times in London, in Spain, in Paris and now he has come to Rome. He has taken as his model those Italian portmanteau films of the 1960s, several stories, intercut but not connected to each other in characters or plots.

One trouble is that the stories are so slight. Perhaps intercutting them makes them seem better than they are when taken separately. The sum is certainly no better than the parts.

There are plenty of wonderful views of Rome. No problem there. And there is a very good cast who do their best with the material.

There are some good one-liners, especially those delivered by Allen himself, with Judy Davis offering wry support as his wife as they are concerned about their daughter planning to marry an Italian. A lot of the comedy here comes with the contrast between the Americans abroad and the Italians at home. This is particularly the case with the Italian father, a mortician who sings beautifully in the shower. Allen is playing a director with avant-garde tendencies and this story develops as he auditions the singer, realizes that he needs the shower to perform well and provides concerts and then Rigoletto with a shower on stage! Tenor Fabio Armiliato proves himself a good sport, singing in the shower (wherever it is, even on stage, mid-opera).

There is a Roberto Benigni short story. He is an ordinary office worker who suddenly becomes a TV celebrity and is followed around reality TV style, even to morning shaving. He speaks what are really platitudes but is hailed as an expert. It cannot last long and doesn't. It is a pleasure to see Benigni in the kind of role he does well.

The story of the young couple who come to Rome full of hopes and are seduced by some decadence and opportunity, he with a prostitute (Penelope Cruz) who comes to his room by mistake and his young wife who is charmed by one of her favourite actors as she comes to a film set by accident.

There is also a magic realism story – is it happening in the present time with Alec Baldwin something of a ghost from the past or is it a story that parallels his from the past. It concerns an American student, Jesse Eisenberg intense as usual, and his girlfriend, Greta Gerwig, who has the least interesting role despite her talent and an erratic would-be actress (Ellen Page) who turns up at the apartment and turns the students' head.

Having listed the stories and their casts, there are no great memories except for Allen, Judy Davis and the opera singer. On to Woody Allen's next film.

TU SERAS MON FILS/ YOU WILL BE MY SON

France, 2012

Niels Arestrup, Lorant Deutsch, Patrick Chesnais.

Directed by Gilles Legrand.

An impressive French drama. Set in the beautiful and fruitful Provence countryside, a vineyards town, this is a family story as the title suggests.

It can be said that those tempted to see the film principally because of the vines, the harvests, the production of the wine – and the tasting and descriptions of the taster – will be satisfied. The audience will really feel as if they have been living the French tradition and its modern developments.

But, the family...

Paul is the patriarch, from a long line of wine producers. He is played by Niels Arestrup who has been making a strong impression in recent years and in his senior years with performances as different from the prisoner in *Un Prophete* and the grandfather in *War Horse*. Paul lives for his wines. They fields and vines are his kingdom. But, his son, Martin - not only does he not like him, he despises him, putting him down as often as he can, meanly, sometimes in pettiness, but always with the intention that his son will not succeed him even though he wants an heir from Martin and his wife (who can stand up to the old man).

The complication comes with another father and son. Francois (Patrick Chesnais) has been Paul's manager for many years, with skilled knowledge and experience of all aspects of wine. He is a confidant of Paul but can never be his equal. Francois' son, Philippe, has been working in vineyards in California. He has developed many skills himself and is not lacking in confidence. When his father becomes fatally ill, he returns home.

While he has been Martin's friend, he finds himself being asked by Paul to do more and more for him. It is clear that, in the words of the title, Paul is indicating to Philippe, 'you will be my son' and acts accordingly.

How can this be resolved? Not in the way we might have expected, so that there is a highly dramatic ending which we (morally uncomfortably) will sympathise with.

WUNDERKINDER

Germany, 2011

Gedeon Burkhard, Natalia Avelon.

Directed by Markus Rosenmuller.

Wunderkinder are child prodigies. The three children in this moving World War II drama are musically talented, two violinists and a pianist. They are around 12 years old.

The setting is a town in Ukraine. It is 1942. The population consists of Ukrainian traditional families as well as Jews. Two of the children are Jews. The other, who becomes friends with them, plays music with them, introduced by the local music teacher, herself Jewish. All seems to be calm despite the war. And that other girl is German, son of the local diplomatic representative who also owns the local brewery.

When German troops arrive, the purging of Jews begins. However, the three children are still in demand for performances. But, then, the German pact with Stalin broken, Russian troops arrive and situations are reversed. While the Jews are still cautious and have been sheltered in a country house by the benign German, it is the German family which now has to go into hiding. And, in a reverse of so many films where Jews are sheltered by sympathetic locals, it is now the German girl who is protected.

The film presents the possibilities of harmonious living but does not shirk the anti-Semitism which is quick to rise to the surface, the exercise of power by local officials (who then have to go into hiding when the politics change). However, it is the basic, common humanity which underlies this portrait of people who share values, who communicate by music. It is a sad story of childhood, with some tragic consequences.

Audiences will appreciate this different perspective on World War II, the experience of Ukraine, and the effect on children.

SIGNIS REVIEWS, DECEMBER 2012

ALL THE WAY THROUGH EVENING

AMERICAN MARY

BACK TO 1942

BREAKING DAWN, PART 2

DANGEROUS LIAISONS

DO-DECA PENTATHLON, The

FUN SIZE

GOD BLESS AMERICA

HERE COMES THE BOOM

HITCHCOCK

HOBBIT, The

INTOUCHABLES, The

JACK REACHER

LES MISERABLES

LIBERAL ARTS

LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED

MAN WITH THE IRON FISTS, The

MISS BALA

ODD LIFE OF TIMOTHY GREEN, The

PARIS, MANHATTAN

PEOPLE LIKE US

PITCH PERFECT

QUARTET

RAVEN, The

SIGHTSEERS

TROUBLE WITH THE CURVE

ALL THE WAY THROUGH EVENING

Australia, 2011,

Mimi Sterne Wolfe.

Directed by Rohan Spong.

A musical documentary.

Response to this film will depend on the age of the audience. The reason for this is that it takes us back to the 1980s-1990s and the era of HIV AIDS. And it does this through music.

Documentary maker, Rohan Spong, came across the website of Mimi Sterne Wolfe, a now elderly pianist and campaigner for human rights in New York City. She had been friendly with a musician who died from HIV AIDS in the early 1990s and decided that she would stage a memorial concert every year in his memory. She has done it for twenty years. Spong met

Mimi and they became very good friends. She invited him to film her at home, at rehearsals and at the 2010 concert, which he did.

However, he realised that he did not know very much, being too young, about the impact of the mysterious virus in the 1980s and the number of deaths, especially of gay men. Mimi introduced him to a lyricist, Perry, whom he interviews at length about his friends who had died and about their music. Several of them were composers. Mimi also contacts two singers who have participated in the concerts for some years.

So, the film, very genial because of Mimi's personality and zest, works on several levels. It is a fine tribute to Mimi and her loyalties and friendships. And she is a character! The film is also a concert of quite a number of songs, classical in their style rather than popular or pop. Some of them have music to poems of Emily Dickinson and Walter de la Mare as well as a tribute to Walt Whitman and a song from an unfinished opera, Titanic. Music lovers will find the songs worth their while.

And the film works as a reminder for those who remember what the 1980s, especially in the New York City arts circles, were like with the puzzle and sadness of HIV AIDS. For younger audiences, it may open up an era they may be unfamiliar with and be very surprised at what happened. The memories, images, verbal tributes and the music are sometimes quite moving.

AMERICAN MARY

US, 2012,

Katharine Isabelle, Antonio Cupo

Directed by Jen Soska, Sylvia Soska.

Sounds innocent but beware. This is one of those popular torture horror films, better made than usual (and dedicated to Eli Roth, specialist in horror like Hostel). It may be difficult to watch because it is to do with surgical modification of people and not just hospital surgery.

Katharine Isabelle plays a precocious medical student specializing in surgery. She comes to the attention of some of her teachers whose motivations are not in accordance with medical ethics. She is struggling with debt problems. She finds herself in a situation, using her talents to help a victim surgically. She attracts the attention of a club owner and some of his

staff and clientele and she is faced with a moral (and financial) dilemma: whether to accept the highly-paid but illegal and unethical jobs of modification she is offered – or not. No guessing what she decides. She does.

This leads to a number of surgical scenes, some quite explicit, others where the modifications are suggested (effectively). Because of the criminal connections of the club (which never seems to have many clients) and the malevolent intentions of the lustful doctors, she is assaulted and abducted. What is a girl to do? Abduct the lascivious doctor and submit him to gross surgery and abhorrent modifications.

So, many commentators have referred to this kind of film as ‘torture porn’. Defence is that it is telling a story vividly. Prosecution is whether this leads to indulgence in graphic mutilating violence.

Not a mainstream film but one which raises issues, for those who would wish to venture into this world, of themes and treatment and sensibilities.

BACK TO 1942

China, 2012,

Guoli Zhang, Adrien Brody, Tim Robbins.

Directed by Xioagang Feng.

In recent years, Chinese cinema has been going back to the war with Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. There have been several moving films about the siege of Nanking, especially 2009’s *City of Life and Death*. The 2012 Chinese film, *The Flowers of War*, in collaboration with the US, included Christian Bale as part of the story. Such collaborations make the film more accessible for American audiences, by including Adrien Brody as Time Magazine war correspondent Theodore White and Tim Robbins (to far less effective extent, including an unrecognisable accent) as a Catholic priest dispensing pious reflections.

Director Xioagang Feng has made some impressive films including *Wedding Banquet* (a variation on *Hamlet*) and the historical film, *The Assembly*. This time, with a large budget, he recreates

the famine in Henan province which sent millions on to the roads as starving refugees, three million of them dying. This is the backdrop to Japanese occupation and the attempts of the Chinese military under the leadership of Chiang-Kai-Chek to defeat Japan.

For audience identification as the film moves from military headquarters to American consulate and Japanese officials, the screenplay focuses on a family and its sufferings. Master Fan is wealthy and has grain as the famine begins to bite. He presides over a family that is wilful and arrogant. Challenged by local bandits, a fight breaks out which leads to everyone taking to the roads.

There are some extremely harrowing scenes, some horrifying deaths and two very powerful and frightening sequences of Japanese planes dropping bombs on the refugees causing callous injuries and deaths. By the end of the film, the audience is quite vividly aware of the toll of starvation on body and spirit.

The film also shows the initial ineffectiveness of the Chinese government, underestimating the famine and hesitating to help – food was necessary to keep the troops alive and fighting, so civilians were deemed expendable. Ultimately Chiang-Kai-Chek tries to do something but the Japanese have advanced too far.

Adrien Brody has a good role as the war correspondent, sharing the miseries of the road and photographing some of the savagery which he presents to the Generalissimo and ultimately publishes to alert Chinese and American readers. Tim Robbins plays a missionary who welcomes the correspondent but also has to deal with a Chinese fellow priest who has taken a faith stance (a cause rather than faith as he preaches to the refugees) and who becomes disillusioned by the bombings. His questioning of God and non-intervention echoes the desperation of Master Fan as he loses everyone and everything – except finding a little girl by her dead mother. The narrator tells us that she survived to be his mother.

The narration offers moments of questioning as to why these stories should not be left in the past. Watching the film with no appreciable knowledge beforehand of the events reminds us that we must not forget the past but must learn from it.

BREAKING DAWN PART 2

US, 2012,

Kristen Stewart, Robert Pattinson, Taylor Lautner, Michael Sheen, Peter Facinelli.

Directed by Bill Condon.

Only for those who have followed the series until this last episode. It presupposes knowledge of what has gone before – though it does give an overview at the end and generously shows the faces and names of all who have had featured roles in the five films.

So, there is very little to say. Bella and Edward love each other (lots of that). Bella is adjusting to being a vampire (lots of that as she moves as swiftly as the pack, flies over forests and cliffs, tries to control her desire for blood). Their baby, mortal because half human, is able to communicate by touch (illustrated as Jakob helps as a kind of nanny) and grows quickly to the stage of a seven year old.

And plot developments? The Volturi are still hostile (and looking pasty-faced as ever, especially Michael Sheen as their malevolent leader), discover the secret of the child and prepare for war. In the meantime, members of the Cullen family (who look and act like any other very nice family in America) go abroad to get witnesses who will prove that it is all right to have a half-vampire, half-mortal child. There are some flashbacks to the Volturi condemning a woman who bore such a child – and they massacre her.

So, all is set on a frozen lake for confrontation. Actually, the film has it both ways with a spectacular battle between foes, with the werewolves lending paws and teeth to help. Then, we discover that this is a vision of what might be – and peace is nicely established and a happy ever after, and after, and after, and after... ending.

DANGEROUS LIAISONS

China, 2011

Cecilia Cheung, Dong-jan, Zhang Ziyi.

Directed by Jin-ho Hur.

There have been several versions of Laclos' novel of 18th century manners and manipulation. It was updated to the middle of the 20th century for Roger Vadim's 1960 version with Gerard Philippe and . The classic film version was Stephen Frears 1988 beautifully elegant but

deadly portrait of corrupt society. Milos Forman released *Valmont* the following year with Colin Firth and Annette Bening. There was the American update for young adults in *Cruel Intentions*. A Korean interpretation was made in 2007, *Untold Scandals*. The present film is Chinese and has a 1930s Shanghai setting.

Audiences familiar with the basic plot will be pleased to recognise the principal characters, the womanizing playboy who makes the bet of seduction of the proper widow with the decadent society woman. There is the innocent young girl and her ambitious mother and the young man who is in love with her and is seduced by the manipulative madam.

The performances are persuasive although the drama builds up to a rather violent and melodramatic ending.

One of the benefits is the setting the film in the 1930s, an affluent Shanghai and glamorous society – on the verge of the Japanese invasion and the consequent suffering for China portrayed in so many historical films in recent years.

Audiences who have appreciated other versions of *Dangerous Liaisons* will not be disappointed with this one.

THE DO-DECA PENTATHLON

US, 2012,

Steve Zissis, Mark Kelly.

Directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass.

You don't often get that kind of title for a movie. But, that is what it is about, except that the competition is between two brothers, who invented it when they were young and who have been haunted by its outcome every since – and they are now in their forties. As you can guess, it is mainly about sibling rivalry rather than any sports prowess, though we do see some table tennis and other activities.

Film buffs will recognize the names of the Duplass Brothers. Their films in the past have been small, independent pieces, focusing on eccentric characters and with lots of dialogue. Same here. This kind of film does not have immediate commercial appeal but is designed for those who want something different in their stories, with a touch of the amusing and the odd.

It should be said that Mark Duplass has been featured in quite a number of films recently, gaining more recognition as an actor (*Your Sister's Sister*, *Safety Not Guaranteed*, *People Like Us*).

The film runs only an hour and a quarter and centres on Mark (Steve Zissis), a bit fat and foodbound at this age, but who can be provoked instantly concerning his losing the old pentathlon. He lives with his caring wife, his son who is a bit critical of dad, and his kind, peace-fostering mother.

Then Jeremy (Mark Kelly), the winning brother who puts a lot into his sports (and his card-playing) decides to visit the family, taunting his brother who becomes even more heated and competitive. Mother wrings her hands. Wife threatens to leave him. Son hero-worships his uncle. What are they to do? Re-live their pentathlon.

This is a brief character study of the five central characters but dramatizes very well the brothers, their tensions, their vanity, their being bent on winning – and their ultimate sibling bonds.

Since the film is written and directed by the Duplass brothers, there is always the temptation to be wondering how much they draw on their own younger days.

FUN SIZE

US, 2012,

Victoria Justice, Jackson Nicoll, Thomas Middleditch,

Directed by Josh Schwartz.

Checking out some IMDb bloggers to find out whether they thought this slight Halloween tale funny, I was surprised at how favourable the comments were. This review won't be one of those favourable comments.

Plot? A variation on what was a pleasingly funny night on the town (the UK title), *Adventures in Babysitting*. This one concerns a senior, Wren (Victoria Justice), eager to leave home and get away to college. Her widowed mother has been kicking over the traces with a boyfriend fifteen years younger or more. She goes to his party, dressed as Dorothy on the way to Oz, and finds herself alien among his fairly dumb friends and gets to know his parents better.

But Wren has a younger brother who is precocious (that was a complimentary word to substitute my reactions to his obnoxious character and presence), Albert. Wren wants to go to the party at the home of the school heartthrob but loses Albert on the way with her friend, April. The rest of the film is adventures in Albert-sitting. She is helped by a very nerdy captain of the debating team, Roosevelt () who is encouraged by his two mothers. Also on the search is a libidinous friend, Peng. Actually, April could be described as libidinous as well.

Meanwhile Albert (who is pretty creepy a lot of the time) encounters a drug store clerk who loves graphic comics. He is (Thomas Middleditch). In these wary days about adult encounters with children, one automatically becomes wary of the rather infantile Fuzzy and his teaming up with Albert. Then there is a strange episode involving *Jackass*'s Johnny Knoxville, imprisoning Albert and threatening him with violence. (Creepy again.)

So, lots of episodes that are not as funny as intended, sometimes suspicious. Lots of ambiguous humour which may go over the heads of children (the Americans have classified it PG 13). And, if children identify with Albert, that's a worry. While all finishes happily (how else?), *Fun Size* is not a film to recommend for younger audiences. Older audiences (and the oldest) will find it too light, slight and that bit unsettling.

GOD BLESS AMERICA

US, 2012,

Joel Murray, Tara Lynne Barr,

Directed by Bobcat Goldthwait.

No, it's not the kind of title that evokes traditional patriotism. The patriotism here is a severe questioning of contemporary American values, especially contemporary media and communications.

Many a member of the audience will be emotionally applauding the targets of this very black satire. It involves gun culture as well.

Bobcat Goldthwait used to be a comic actor (in the Police Academy films) but has turned to directing recently, films with unexpectedly black tones (like The World's Greatest Father). This one is even blacker.

Joel Murray plays Frank, a middle-aged man, at the end of this tether who is told he is terminally ill. No job, his wife and daughter alienated. He watches television – and takes a dead set against reality TV shows. By this stage of the film, many more in the audience will be on side with him. And, even though he decides that he will rid the US of repellent characters, and has guns to achieve it, the same audiences will be torn by their desire to support the riddance of the repellents and the use of the violent means that Frank uses to achieve it.

He travels the countryside, discovering more and more people who give a bad name to humanity. He also encounters a young runaway (Tara Lynne Barr) who discovers a soul-mate in Frank. There were Bonnie and Clyde, then Natural Born Killers (which also targeted the exploitative media), now Frank and Roxy. The mitigating circumstances are that it is only the obnoxious who are got rid of, not good citizens.

The on-side viewer will relish, in a ghoulish kind of way, the portrayals of these awful people (both old and young).

The nature of satire is to set up society in the darkest way and attack it. It is obviously exaggerated and stylized. It is not realistic. It is a contrived way of storytelling, that asks questions by taking extreme stances. Unfortunately, some crazed individuals in society, especially American society, have taken their guns and caused mayhem and tragic loss of life.

A warning that this is a clever kind of satiric comedy which is meant to be provocative. For those who can appreciate it, it is well-targeted.

HERE COMES THE BOOM

US, 2012

Kevin James, Salma Hayek, Henry Winkler,

Directed by Frank Coraci.

Another Kevin James comedy from Adam Sandler's company. We know what to expect. Some knockabout comedy, a lot of corny humour, some PG vulgarity, laughter at the expense of a star who could lose some weight. While this is in some ways true of this film, it doesn't quite do it justice. There is much more of a niceness in this one. There are quite a few funny moments. And it is minimally vulgar. Perhaps a bit more appeal than the usual films with and/or from Adam Sandler.

It is definitely a knockabout comedy. And lots of knocks at that. It is a multi martial arts story. Memories of the recent, Warrior with Joel Edgerton and Tom Hardy which brought multi martial arts to mainstream movies. Someone remarked that it was a bit like Bad Teacher, with Cameron Diaz, with problems in a school. These comments came from audiences familiar with the latest films.

In fact, it reminded this reviewer more strongly of films like Rocky and the story of the underdog who triumphs and of Dead Poets Society where an unorthodox teacher is able to communicate with his students, willing and unwilling.

Perhaps that gives too elevated an impression of Here Comes the Boom Kevin James plays a biology teacher who has given up on his initial teaching zest and has become something of a slob. But, he has some sensitive moments with his friend, music teacher Henry Winkler. (And it is a pleasure to see a grey-haired Winkler in a substantial role that gives him both serious and farcical moments.) The school is in dire financial straits. And the music course is to be cut.

James brashly attacks the authorities and suggests the staff help find the money. One of the students at his night classes to prepare adults for citizenship watches multi-martial arts on TV and, now the former wrestler (well, twenty years former!) decides that he can find the money if he competes and gets the prize money for the loser, \$10,000.

School authorities are not pleased. The students gradually see him as a hero. He loses and loses but... well you've seen Rocky! And his old teaching zeal is re-ignited. He has spent a lot of time courting the school nurse (Salma Hayek) who resists him but admires his perseverance. There are some nice, sentimental sub-plots about his brother who hates his job but is a great cook, about a young girl from a Filipino family who need her to work in a restaurant.

There is a huge finale in Las Vegas.

Kevin James has some abrasive aspects in his screen personality but he does win everyone over. Henry Winkler is able to bridge the gulf between sport and the arts. The film is very much pro music in school.

It is a pastime kind of comedy but has some good moments and is better than we might have thought as we sat down to watch it.

HITCHCOCK

US, 2012,

Anthony Hopkins, Helen Mirren, Toni Collette, Danny Huston, Scarlet Johansson, Jessica Biel, James McAvoy.

Directed by Sacha Gervasi.

As they might say, 'Loved the film. Hated him'.

Alfred Hitchcock was a literally larger than life figure, a director who had established himself in England in the 1920s, consolidated his reputation in the 1930s and went to the United States in the late 30s and directed *Rebecca*, which won the Oscar for Best Film of 1940 (though Hitchcock never won an Oscar, receiving an honorary life-time achievement Oscar in 1979). He flourished in America in the 1940s and 1950s but was hesitating by 1959. This film opens with the premiere of *North By Northwest* and its success after the seeming failure of *Vertigo* (in recent years now on the list of critics' ten best films). Hitchcock was sixty. Should he retire? Should he stay with his television show (which was not his highest film-making ambition)?

While this film does show the making of *Psycho* and all that it meant to the master, it is a dramatic, sometimes fictional, sometimes fantasy imagining of what the process was like for Hitchcock himself and for his wife of decades, Alma Reville. Alma had been his boss in the 1920s. They married in 1926 and were together for more than fifty years.

One of the devices of this film is to have Hitchcock imagining and dreaming of encounters with Ed Gein, the man devoted to his mother but a murderer on whom Robert Bloch based his book, *Psycho*. Discussions with Ed Gein (Michael Wincott) punctuate the film and are a means of getting us into the

mind of Hitchcock, his preoccupation with crime, with bizarre behaviour, his touches of morbidity (including his humour). This leads on to his reputation as being infatuated with his leading ladies, the 'Hitchcock Blondes' which included Grace Kelly, Vera Miles, Eva Marie Saint, Kim Novak and Tippi Hedren. In Psycho he had Janet Leigh (Scarlet Johansson) who found him a gentleman and Vera Miles (Jessica Biel) whom he thought betrayed him by wanting marriage and a family.

This is the context for quite some detailed accounts of the making of the film, the studio's hesitations, the urgings of his agent Lew Wasserman (Michael Stuhlbarg), the wariness of his loyal production assistant of many years, Peggy Robertson (Toni Collette), his investing his own money in the project. There are auditions (James McAvoy looking very like Anthony Perkins), building of sets, storyboarding, the filming of the shower sequence, of course, and troubles with censorship – as well as his masterful grandstanding to promote the film (dire warnings of audience response) and his dispute about using Bernard Herrman's slashing score for the shower murder (and enjoying the audience's successive screams during early screenings).

That means quite some material in 97 minutes – the making of a film and the study of a strange personality as director.

However, the film is also a portrait of Alfred and Alma, the story of a marriage, the commitment of a practical wife who is also talented in script-doctoring and editing, the pomposity of a man with inner demons (morbidity, the urges for the blondes and who eats and drinks too much). Anthony Hopkins does quite an impersonation of Hitchcock and his speech and manners. It is very clever and well worth seeing (especially for audiences who still remember Hitchcock).

But audiences will be rewarded with a very fine performance by Helen Mirren as Alma Reville. After years of devotion, putting up with her husband, urging him to be abstemious, the film suggests that she needed more support and affection and introduces a fictional relationship with writer Whitfield Cook (Danny Huston) with whom Hitchcock had worked on Strangers on a Train and Stage Fright (with a scene from his The Secret Heart screening on television in one scene). Helen Mirren can suggest a great deal simply by body language, facial expression and silences. She is at her best here – and has the opportunity of a speech telling her husband off, a scene that has had some audiences applauding.

Plenty to interest and to enjoy. And it is not a biography. It is an evocative portrait.

THE HOBBIT, AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

New Zealand, 2012,

Ian McKellen, Martin Freeman, Richard Armitage, Hugo Weaving, Cate Blanchett.

Directed by Peter Jackson.

Back to Middle Earth and beyond.

While J.R.R. Tolkien's 'prequel' to The Lord of the Rings is a smaller book, there will be a trilogy of films again, Christmas 2012, 2013, 2014. And, we can presume, most Tolkien fans will be welcoming each of them, happy to have an initial enjoyment phase with this film.

Tolkien experts will be able to point out the extra episodes for the film (like the opening in The Shire where Bilbo Baggins (Ian Holm) is beginning his memoirs for Frodo (Elijah Wood) returned from his quest for the ring). They will be able to point out the changes in order of episodes from book to film (as of mid-December, there are already more than 500 blog entries on the Internet Movie Database!). Non-readers will accept the film as it is.

Peter Jackson has experimented with a filming process of 48 frames per second – ordinary filming is 24 frames per second. This means our eyes and brains respond by perceiving smoother, sharper action – which is beautifully enhanced if you see the film in 3D.

Spectacular it is, a wonder of models, CGI, fine photography, with Howard Shore again writing the musical score. And the New Zealand locations are beautiful – and may encourage a new spate of Tolkien tours. There are monsters galore, from Smaug the dragon, to the Orc warriors, to the Necromancer and to the Great Goblin (voiced by Barry Humphries) and his army. There are the amazing rock giants. There are quite a number of battles with the dwarves, Gandalf and Bilbo confronting hordes. And Gollum makes a reappearance (and loses the ring which Bilbo finds).

In one sense, the action is more limited than in The Lord of the Rings. While we see the kingdom of the Dwarves, their prosperity, their wealth and the dark shadows and attack of the dragon, the film focuses on the dwarves and their quest to find and regain their kingdom.

Audiences may find the arrival of the dwarves to interrupt Bilbo's quiet life very funny (plenty of meal and kitchen farce), it may also seem more than a bit long. The same with the initial trek until they arrive at Rivendell – with Gandalf particularly meagre in using any magic to help the expedition.

Here the plot begins to thicken and become more interesting. We see familiar faces: Elrond (Hugo Weaving), Galadriel (Cate Blanchett) and Saruman (Christopher Lee). But, of course, we are in familiar territory (even though, as the caption says, '60 years earlier') with Gandalf the guide for the expedition. Ian McKellen has top billing for the film – and does look a little like 60 years later (his beard is not so white here, Gandalf the Grey). And then there is Martin Freeman doing a fine job as the younger Bilbo, somewhat tagging along at first but then emerging as more important, especially after he confronts Gollum (Andy Serkis again) and charges in to defend the Dwarf leader, Thorin. Richard Armitage is particularly strong and striking as Thorin. Unfortunately, most of the dwarves do not get the chance to come across as individuals. They appear as a comic, motely group.

While the film is long, most audiences, if not into the atmosphere instantly, will be gradually absorbed into the tale, amazed at the artistry and look of the film, and becoming more eager for the Dwarves to win. They deserve it after quite an amount of battering in the battles.

The view of the distant mountain of the kingdom at the end, and the stirring of the dragon under the piles of gold, indicate the setting up of the new confrontation for the next episode, The Desolation of Smaug.

JACK REACHER

US, 2012.

Tom Cruise, Rosamund Pike, Richard Jenkins, Werner Herzog, David Oyelowo.

Directed by Christopher McQuarrie.

Many of Lee Child's readers of the Jack Reacher novels (including this reviewer), know that he is a former military policeman, now a loner, who continually gets caught up in other people's problems despite himself. He is tough, laconic (though also sardonic), standing at five feet six and weighing 250 pounds or so.

So, who thought of having Tom Cruise (a foot or so shorter and some years older) for the screen version of Jack Reacher?

Despite strong misgivings, I will admit that Tom Cruise is not too bad at all. Lee Child himself remarked that in the books Jack Reacher is like a sledgehammer whereas in the film, he will be more

like a scalpel. Maybe. Tom Cruise does get the opportunity to go the sledgehammer route. The main difficulty is not his height but that, despite many Mission Impossible actioners, his face does not look as lived in as Jack Reacher's should be. Despite the long career, Tom Cruise still has touches of the baby-face.

One other thing for Reacher readers. This film version of One Shot is a pretty good adaptation of the novel. The first ten minutes or so are exact, with a lot of detail, which can reassure hesitant readers. Needless to say, a number of characters are shed, but the core of the novel is faithfully followed for screen action rather than merely being literal.

For those not familiar with the novels and character, Jack Reacher should prove an interesting, even intelligent, mystery action thriller.

A shooter who has shot five victims in the city centre is arrested and asks for Jack Reacher. It is assumed that he is to witness to the character of the shooter. Not at all. The two have a difficult history. This baffles the shooter's lawyer (Rosamund Pike), the DA (Richard Jenkins) who happens to be the lawyer's father, and the chief of police (British Shakespearean actor, David Oyelowo).

This is one of those things are not what they seem tales and it is interesting to see where incidents and clues lead us. Some lead to a veteran shooter, played with his pleasing customary bluff by Robert Duvall, and to a mysterious Russian who is played, capitalising on his sinister voice and accent, by celebrated director, Werner Herzog.

While Jack Reacher does have some fights and Cruise makes them credible enough, there is a car chase, probably the visual equivalent of the physicality of fists, kicks and blows.

We probably won't mind if this is the beginning of a movie franchise – but Mr Cruise is now venturing into his 50s as should be the literary Jack Reacher.

THE INTOUCHABLES

France, 2012,

Francois Cluzet, Omar Sy,

Directed by Olivier Nakache, Eric Toledano.

A film that proved most popular in its native France, a popularity that carried over into the wider world.

This is a film about the physically disabled and carers, but takes the humorous path to communicate serious realities.

Francois Cluzet, one of France's best actors in recent times, plays Philippe, a wealthy man who can do what he likes and pay for it, but is hampered because he is quadriplegic. He can sack carers at whim (and does), wants his own way always and likes to make some mischief but is dependent.

Another day, on a whim, and exasperating his staff, he takes on the most unlikely carer who has little or no experience but has a mouth that can get him into trouble and an attitude which does rate respect highly on a list of values. He is a would-be thief, Driss (Omar Sy), who doesn't really want the job and has his exasperated moments, juggling events in his own complicated life and the increasing demands of Philippe. But, he stays.

Needless to say, this is going to lead to a series of unconventional episodes as the pair go on the loose (and raise the sexual issues treated with such sensitivity in *The Sessions*). And, of course, despite the differences, he is from Africa, Philippe belongs to French society, a strong bond is forged and an unusual friendship.

The inherent sense of humanity is what has appealed to audiences as well as the genial presence of Omar Sy. We are entertained even as we are challenged about disability, health, care, class, crime, friendship.

LES MISERABLES

UK, 2012,

Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe, Anne Hathaway, Amanda Seyfried, Eddie Redmayne, Helena Bonham Carter, Sacha Baron Cohen,

Directed by Tom Hooper.

For over twenty five years, (French opening, 1980, London, 1985) theatre audiences around the world have been profoundly moved by Victor Hugo's classic story, by the book and music of Alain Boublil (lyricist) and Claude-Michel Schonberg (composer). The wonderful English lyrics were written by Herbert Kretzmer whose fine work is not acknowledged enough. There has been a DVD of the 25th anniversary performance. Wisely, the writers and director have decided to honour the theatre experience rather than 'opening up' the musical to a 'realistic' presentation.

This means that the audience who have seen the stage version will continue to remember and re-experience what they enjoyed. It is over to the power of the plot, the music and the performances to win over those who may have seen versions of the Hugo novel (1930s with Fredric March and Charles Laughton, 1950s with Michael Rennie and Robert Newton, 1990s with Liam Neeson and Geoffrey Rush) and those who have not. It may be a hard sell for those not used to this kind of musical theatre on screen. It is very long (157 minutes). It is basically sung. The locations (galleys, French mountains, town, Paris, the barricades and sewers) are real but stylized.

What the film adds to the theatre experience is the decision to film most of the songs in close-up, something audiences cannot do in theatres except with theatre glasses. We realise this early in the film with the well-known song, sung by Fantine, I dreamed a dream. The camera stays close on Anne Hathaway's face throughout the whole song, drawing the audience to see her, hear her, feel with her and to do this intensely. It is a powerful experience.

The same method is used for songs by Jean Valjean, Inspector Javert, Cosette, Marius and Eponyne.

While there are close-ups of the Thenardiers at the inn and in Paris, the Thenardiers offer the only comic relief in this long saga of the miserable and the suffering. With Helena Bonham Carter, again looking bonkers as in so many of her films – just as well she portrayed the Queen Mother which reassures us she can do normal – and Sacha Baron Cohen bringing his satiric style to try to steal the show, there is a lot of singing, thieving, cooking and hypocritical lying to contrast with the somber story.

No complaints about the acting. Hugh Jackman is a wonderful presence as Jean Valjean, ranging through many emotions as he survives almost twenty years after his servitude in the galleys. Russell Crowe looks the part as Javert. Amanda Seyfried is Cosette and Eddie Redmayne is surprisingly strong as Marius. The drama of the film is communicated powerfully.

The singing? It was all recorded in performance rather than pre-recording for lip-synch during filming which offers more authenticity than in most films. Hugh Jackman is very good, though his

tone and range are best suited to his successes on stage in Oklahoma, Beauty and the Beast. Others who have sung Jean Valjean have had a more operatic range that suits such songs as 'God, on high'. Colm Wilkinson, who plays the Bishop here, sang Jean Valjean for the tenth anniversary concert and has the ideal voice for the role. Russell Crowe's singing does seem forced at times and his singing voice is not the purest or clearest. The others are impressive, especially Anne Hathaway, as well as Eddie Redmayne and, particularly, Samantha Barks very moving as Eponyne.

Tom Hooper has directed after his Oscar-winning work for The King's Speech.

Jean Valjean is one of literature's great Everyman characters, living through humiliation for a meagre crime, bitter but redeemed by the kindness of the Bishop, able to do good for people, even when he is hounded by the legal rigidity of Javert. He learns to forgive, not hate. His joy is in Cosette as his daughter. This is powerfully seen when, as Javert says, he gives him his freedom but, in fact, has killed him and his reliance on the law for controlling his life.

Les Miserables has been popular with religious groups. With the film drawing us to the close-ups, we listen attentively to the lyrics, the language of grace, God and heaven, 'to love another person is to see the face of God'.

LIBERAL ARTS

US, 2012,

Josh Radnor, Elizabeth Olsen, Richard Jenkins, Allison Janney, Zac Efron.

Directed by Josh Radnor.

There are some films that we really like and identify with – despite any critic telling us that we shouldn't be giving it any attention. This one seems to have divided reviewers and audiences. It really did it nicely for me! And surprisingly.

On paper, the description would seem ordinary enough. Young man, Jesse, from Ohio finishes his degree and has a job with admissions at a New York university. His relationship breaks up. He accepts the invitation to a farewell dinner from one of his professors. He goes and gets the opportunity to re-assess his life, talking with his professor friend, but making a connection with Zibby (Elizaeth Olsen) the daughter of the professor's friends. She is nineteen, studying drama and improvisation, is not bashful or shy and finds that she can talk easily and comfortably with Jesse. And, because they live thousands of miles apart, she urges him to write letters. (One hopes that

younger audiences are not put off by this advocating of letters!) He is also an inveterate reader of actual books!).

The title indicates that this is a film which relies on the subjects of the liberal arts. Lots of references to and discussions about literature, about drama, about classical music, about history. So, it is aimed at younger audiences comfortable in the world of liberal arts – and draws in older audiences as well. Speaking of young and old, much is made of the age difference, 16 years, between Jesse and Zibby, and the relationship and experiences of young adults and those contemplating moving through adulthood.

With the focus on the professor (Richard Jenkins), we listen to an older man who has had a 38 year academic career, has resigned, then wonders what he has done and wants to take back his decision. Allison Janney plays another academic who has influenced Jesse but who, in real life, is a cold and contemptuous woman. There are two other influential characters that Jesse encounters, one a young man with leftist views who influences Jesse when they chance meet in a park (a surprisingly sympathetic Zac Efron) and a depressed student for whom Jesse becomes a lifeline (John Magaro).

The cast is excellent. Elizabeth Olsen is persuasive as the young woman, sure in manner, less sure in herself and how she should behave. Josh Radnor is sympathetic as Jesse, inviting the audience to empathise and hope that he can settle in his life and grow up as he needs to. He is prone to challenging comments and questions as is Zibby. It must be difficult to act and to direct, which Radnor does, for him to react to lines from other characters with surprise when, in fact, he has written them.

An intelligent, often witty, entertainment for liberal arts-type audiences.

LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED

Denmark, 2012,

Pierce Brosnan, Trine Dyrholm.

Directed by Suzanne Bier.

The tone of the title indicates that this will be a lighter than darker film, softer than harder. It is, although the lightness is Scandinavian lightness, which means it is not entirely a frothy love story. There are more serious undertones.

The film is directed by Suzanne Bier whose films tend to be much more serious. Her film, *In a Better Place*, won the Oscar for Best Foreign language film of 2010. Other films include *Things we lost in the Fire*, *After the Wedding*, *Brothers*. Here we are in Denmark but, then, mainly in southern Italy at a wedding.

Trine Dyrholm was excellent in *In a Better World* (and also in a fine Norwegian film, well worth seeking out, *Troubled Waters*). She is very good here as Ida, the mother of the bride, a simple hairdresser with a philandering husband. She is also concerned about her breast cancer. Nervy, she backs her car into the car of a businessman whom we have seen living a serious, workaholic life, with an acerbic manner. It is Philip, Pierce Brosnan, who happens to be the father of the groom.

We also see the engaged couple in Italy, renovating a family house before the guests arrive.

There is a lot of pleasant incident, some humour. But, there is a great deal of serious focus on the characters. The young couple experience some doubts and receive advice and support from their parents – though the philandering husband brings his secretary who has a propensity for blurting out comments and asking blunt questions at the worst times. The working out of what they should do proves to be interesting.

But, of course, it is the growing friendship between Philip and Ida that most concerns us. Brosnan and Dyrholm create believable characters in unusual circumstances. They make connections but not quite in the way we might have expected.

Which makes it a double romantic comedy in a very attractive location.

THE MAN WITH THE IRON FISTS

China, 2012.

RZA, Russell Crowe, Lucy Liu, Rick Yune, Byron Mann.

Directed by RZA

Action and rap music bookend during the opening credits, but the setting is China long ago. This is a matinee movie for adults who like to indulge in this kind of martial arts saga. It is full of action and stunt work and even fuller of special effects to make the action more spectacular. And a range of extraordinary weapons and traps.

I was going to say, 'forget about the plot', but that might not be so helpful as I am not sure I ever grasped the plot in the first place. Gold is being stored in a village, and in the basement of the local brothel. The emperor is concerned about it. The villain has killed his master for it. The master's son arrives bent on revenge. The madam has schemes to hold on to it. The local blacksmith (a marooned American slave) makes weapons that can defend it. A very pommy Englishman rides into town and teams up with the goodies. A sinister emissary also turns up to secure the gold. And a big man who can produce bronze armour over his skin as needed does some dastardly deeds. That outline doesn't necessarily spoil the action for potential audiences. All that plotline does is provide the occasion for martial spectacle.

The slave is the title man – who has lost his arms but has been able to produce and connect hands, arms and, especially, fists of iron while working as a blacksmith. He is played by rapper RZA who co-wrote the film with Eli Roth (Hostel) and directs. It is a Chinese production, but also presented by Quentin Tarantino (echoes of the Kill Bill films).

Recently, some respected Chinese directors have been opening their films for western audiences by including American characters and employing American actors (Christian Bale in Zhang Yimou's siege of Nanking film, Flowers of War, and Adrien Brody and Tim Robbins in Xiaogang Feng's Back to 1942. But, by contrast, Geoffrey Rush appeared in the Korean martial arts film, Warrior's Way. And here is Russell Crowe, with a plum in the mouth accent as the visiting Englishman. Lucy Liu is obviously enjoying herself as the extravagant madam, lots of costumes and jewelry, in the lavishly appointed brothel.

It is all acted in highly melodramatic fashion, slash and gush, (with some tongue-in cheek episodes spouting blood episodes) with some arch dialogue like 'I lost a father but have gained a brother' or Lucy Liu's exhortation to the brutal soldiers, 'Partake of the women'.

It's like a spectacular comic strip come to life. What else would the audience be expecting!

MISS BALA

Mexico, 2011

Stephanie Sigman, Juan Carlos Galvan.

Directed by Gerardo Naranjo.

Mexico's drug wars are one of the most desperate situations as well as violent in recent times. The cartels struggle for control. There are no scruples in the killings which have led to some Mexican cities having the highest murder rates in the world. This is the background for so many films, Mexican like the excellent Backyard or American films like Bordertown and Oliver Stone's ugly Savages.

We are taken into Baja California and Tijuana and the surrounding countryside. Minor drug criminals are fighting one another as well as the police. While life can go on as normal, it may seem inevitable that it can become entangled with the drug wars.

Two young girls decide to audition for the Miss Bala competition. They go to a club afterwards where there is a raid and killings. One of the young women, Laura (Stephanie Sigman), who supports her father and younger brother at home, is taken by the chief thug. While there had been glimpses of the Beauty Contest, most of the film focuses on the thug and his infatuation with the girl and his using her to set up enemies. She tries to escape but is forced to go along with his plans even while being questioned by the police.

There is an irony that the thug is able to manipulate the result of the competition and, despite no evidence that she has presented well, she is named as Miss Bala. Trying to keep out of the limelight, trying to save her family, wanting to be honest but forced into even more set-ups and a car trip to San Diego to deliver drug money, she is finally captured and accused of being part of the gang. She is disposable by both the cartel and the police.

The real-life situations are very grim – and this film tells a story that reinforces the media headlines and stories.

THE ODD LIFE OF TIMOTHY GREEN

US, 2012,

Jennifer Garner, Joel Edgerton, C.J. Adams, Diane Weist, Rosemarie de Witt, Ron Livingston,

Directed by Peter Hedges.

'Odd' is an odd word for the title of this film. Yes, Timothy Green is odd, that is, he is not your usual young boy. But, he is sweetness and light rather than odd. This is a nice piece of Americana, magic realism and sentiment with a sad/happy ending.

Jennifer Garner and Joel Edgerton (fitting easily into the American scene) are a couple who have tried every means available for having a child but without success. We see them at the opening of the film being interviewed by officials of an Adoption Agency. In fact, the whole film is their telling their rather (very) unbelievable tale, punctuated by the flashbacks of their life and what they call their 'miracle', the arrival of Timothy Green during a mysterious storm in their drought-stricken town of Stanleyville.

Timothy (C.J. Adams) is a delightful young lad, what Americans would call 'cute'. And he fits into the family life beautifully bringing enormous joy to the couple who are plunged into instant parenthood. He is nice to everyone, even to the boys who bully him at school. The magic does not immediately help him at soccer practice, tripping over himself, but he gets there. And he improvises, as do his parents, when his aunt (Rosemarie de Witt) has one of her musical afternoons to showcase her own children. He charms an elderly uncle and aunt. He even mellows his grandfather who had not been at all affirming to his own son.

There are some social questions in the background, the economy of the town and its museum, but especially the factory which is about to close down. It makes (and we are shown the detail): pencils.

This review has avoided giving away anything much about Timothy's previous life and his particular gifts. Just a hint: leaves.

Quite a lot of character actors, including Diane Weist and David Morse, build a strong supporting cast.

It is a nice film, about generally nice people. But, for those who use 'twee' as a derogative word, it will be far too sweet.

PARIS – MANTATTAN

France, 2012

Alice Taglioni, Patrick Bruel.

Directed by Sophie Lellouche.

Another very French romantic comedy.

The Manhattan reference will immediately alert potential audiences to a Woody Allen connection. And, it is more than a connection. Woody Allen's presence and quotations from his films (with attention to a large poster on the wall who seems to talk (with quotes from his films to the I-want-to-be-alone heroine) pervade the film and the consciousness of its main character, Alice. She shows us how she was influenced by his movies as a girl. As an adult she goes to see his movies again and again, converses in her imagination with him and the film uses the device of Alice and ourselves hearing his voice from quite a number of his movies.

Alice is a loner. She is awkward in relationships. This does stretch our credulity more than a little because Alice Taglioni is one of the most attractive of French stars we are likely to see on the screen! So, allowing for that, we follow her clashing with her married sister, pestered by her father as to why she is not married. She works at his pharmacy and he retires leaving it to her. At parties she is awkward. After leaving one she misses a taxi and finds herself chatting to Victor (Patrick Bruel), an ordinary kind of man who installs security devices, including in her father's house. We know that they are destined for love, despite Alice's ultra-resistance and the fact that Victor does not know Woody Allen's films – though he finally more than makes up for this.

This means that there are some entertaining moments between Alice and Victor as they take each other for granted, though he is really entranced by her, and eventually, with the help of Woody Allen, Alice's eyes are opened and she realises where her life should be going.

It is easy to say that this is just another French romantic soufflé, but this one has some good things going for it.

PEOPLE LIKE US

US, 2012,

Chris Pine, Elizabeth Banks, Michelle Pfeiffer, Olivia Wilde.

Directed by Alex Kurtzman.

The title has been used before, but here it is given a tone which invites the average, ordinary audience to identify with characters and situations.

Chris Pine is Sam, seen at the beginning as a wheeler-dealer par excellence, the selling snow to Eskimos kind of con-man. But, he goes a step too far (shipping overloads of tomato soup cans without refrigeration; result – explosive mess). He is under investigation, pending being fired.

But that is not what the film is about at all. That is just an introduction and a background looming throughout the film. It is really a film about family, secrets and lies, and consequences.

Sam has been alienated from his record-producing father and unwilling to visit his mother (Michelle Pfeiffer). He does not want to go to his father's funeral, but his partner (Olivia Wilde) makes the arrangements. Sam is in need of money and when he receives a bag with \$150,000, he feels he is made and his father has cared for him after all. No. The money is for the care of the father's secret daughter and her son.

He tracks down the daughter, Frankie (Elizabeth Banks) and the boy (Michael...), becomes intrigued with them, especially Frankie who goes to AA meetings and the boy who is intelligent, over-smart with his mother and destructive at school, but in need of a father-figure. Sam makes himself known but does not reveal the truth – which we (and he) know is going to lead to some heartbreak.

Sam delays going to the inquiry about his disaster with the cans. His partner leaves. He clashes with his mother. On one level, all goes well. Frankie and her boy find Sam dependable and always helpful. Eventually, he has to have things out with his mother who, of course, had

always known about the other family. He has to have things out with Frankie who is upset and angry.

But, this is a nice kind of film and offers images of how people can come to terms with the past, make peace and achieve reconciliation. There is an even nicer home movie development at the end which makes everyone and the audience feel much better. Sadness and joy about people (not really exactly like us).

THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER

US, 2012,

Logan Lerman, Emma Watson, Ezra Miller, Dylan McDermott, Paul Rudd, Joan Cusack.

Directed by Stephen Chbosky.

This is one of those films where it is important to wait until the very end to decide whether you like the film or not. Quite a lot is revealed in the last twenty minutes which makes quite a difference to understanding the central character.

And the central character is Charlie, a high school teenager, who is clever but depressed and low in self-affirmation. Logan Lerman gives a sensitive performance which draws sympathy but is still mysterious until the ending. In the background is his grief at the suicide of a close friend. There are flashbacks to his early childhood and the influence of his aunt who died in a car accident as she went to buy Christmas presents.

Shy, shunned at school, except for some kind encouragement to read and to write by English teacher, Paul Rudd, he meets two eccentric friends, step-brother and sister, who become close and open his eyes to a more bohemian way of life. At home, things are strict, especially with his dominating father who wants him to be more of a man. Charlie has an outlet in writing letters to a fictional friend. In fact, the 1999 novel by Stephen Chbosky who has adapted his novel for the screen, was the series of letters.

In the film, songs from the period become significant.

The real friends are Sam (Emma Watson moving on from the Harry Potter films), with whom Charlie becomes infatuated despite her confused past, and Patrick, who is a closet gay young man in

relationship with a very macho student who denounces Patrick. Patrick is played extravagantly but intriguingly by Ezra Miller who was so persuasive and alienating as Kevin in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*.

This is a portrait of an American family where the public face belies the sadness and confusion behind the scenes. Ultimately, it reveals the realities of mental illness, childhood trauma and the need for serious therapy and a sympathetic psychologist (here played by Joan Cusack) who can empower Charlie to reveal his deep secrets and come to some kind of freedom and hope.

PITCH PERFECT

US, 2012.

Anna Kendrick, Anna Camp, Brittany Snow, Rebel Wilson, Skylar Astin.

Directed by Jason Moore.

This is a very cheerful film.

Pitch perfect refers to the musical term of getting the right note just right. Very important for a cappella singing groups. And this is what the film is about: a cappella, singing, competitions. There is a lot of singing all the way through the film, quite entertaining. Those breakdance and step up films created crazes and competitions in real life. Maybe Pitch Perfect will be the impetus for groups to be established and the staging of competitions. They would involve a lot more participants, with more people being comfortable and able as they sing rather than attempting dance gymnastics. That wouldn't be a bad thing.

Taking the word pitch with another meaning, referring to the way that a potential film is presented to producers and backers, the pitch for Perfect Pitch would not have been an easy one. A movie about college a cappella groups?! Taking its cue from a non-fiction book on this theme, the film is not just about singing, it is a pitch for women singing and competing. A chauvinist leader of the men's group, The Treble-makers, offers the opinion that women can't compete because they can't reach the low-pitched notes. The final competition, of course, puts paid to that theory.

The audience is urged to think about all these issues through the device of having a pair of media commentators at each competition. The style is straight out of *Best in Show* with John Michael

Higgins of that film performing the role that Fred Willard did so well. He is given some outrageously sexist lines and is finally accused of being misogynist by his co-compere, Elizabeth Banks, who can give as good as she gets.

Meanwhile, this is a story about Beca going to college whereas she wants to go to LA to be a music producer. After pressure from her father, she joins the Barden Bellas, the college a cappella women's group. They are a motley crew, trying to build on their disaster (well, their controlling leader's disaster) at the previous year's finals. There is humour in Anna Camp's tall blonde fascist leader. And there is more humour in the participation of Rebel Wilson as Fat Amy (she calls herself to save others calling her this behind her back). Rebel Wilson, from Sydney and here playing a Tasmanian, has been a standout in *A Few Best Men*, *Bridesmaids*, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* and *Bachelorette*. She has quite a few funny lines and situations and audiences warm to her.

Jesse (Skylar Astin) joins the Treble-makers, works with Beca at the college radio station and is attracted to her. She, however, is rather glacial in the relationship department. This is another good turn from Anna Kendrick (appearing in 2012 in *50/50*, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* and *End of Watch*).

Because this is a pleasant film, clashes don't lead to disaster but to friendships and success.

Pitch Perfect is a pleasant surprise.

QUARTET

UK, 2012,

Maggie Smith, Tom Courtenay, Billy Connolly, Pauline Collins, Michael Gambon.

Directed by Dustin Hoffman.

Quartet began as a play on London's West End. It was written by the prolific Ronald Harwood (Oscar for *The Pianist*), and directed by Dustin Hoffman, his first film as director (at age 74).

The film is about the elderly for the elderly (an increasing niche market: think *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*). It is beautifully shot in country England. It is full of music, a wide range of classics, opera and instrumental, and some popular English songs like *Underneath the Arches*. It has a supporting cast of singers and musicians (who are shown in photo with career highlights during the final credits). And it has a star cast at their best. Quoting another song, 'who could ask for anything more?'.

The location is Beacham House (named after conductor, Sir Thomas Beacham), a home for elderly musicians. During the day, they play their instruments, they sing – but they also have their regrets, their happy memories, but also physical weakness and memories going. Some are haughty, some are genial. All have their eccentricities.

Annually, there is a gala musical event, an opportunity to raise funds for Beacham House to continue. Director is Cedric (pronounced Ceedric), Michael Gambon in full flight playing a kind of variation of Professor Dumbledore), snobby about classical music, not averse to photo opportunities and to applause and bows.

But it is the quartet themselves who are the focus. The title also refers to the quartet from *Rigoletto* with which they had had a triumph and which is the request for the finale of the gala.

The four veteran actors who portray the quartet play perfectly off each other. Pauline Collins steals so many of the scenes she appears in. She is Cissie, a singer, who is chatty, scattered and on the way to losing her memory. Billy Connolly plays another singer who has had a stroke which has made him lose some of his inhibitions – though his character makes demands that, while he can offer the rude comment, he has to be more restrained than many of his other screen personas. Connolly does this very well and ingratiatingly.

Tom Courtenay has the serious central role, a singer who is conscious of lost opportunities, of his failed marriage which has haunted him for decades. He has his moods but is kindly – there is a fine scene where he teaches a group of teenagers and makes links between the experience of popular opera and of rap music.

Into their midst comes Maggie Smith, a diva who has been driven by ambition and is humiliated in coming to Beacham House. She has a history with the other members of the quartet. There are clashes, highly emotional at times. But, this is a benign imagining of growing old, a basic niceness underlying the whole film.

There are some funny situations and lines (from Billy Connolly's innuendo to Maggie Smith's acerbity), but a lot emotion, pathos and, all the time, music and song. (Busloads of older audiences flocked to the Marigold Hotel; the buses will surely be re-hired for trips to Beacham House.)

THE RAVEN

US, 2012,

John Cusack, Brendan Gleeson, Alice Eve, Luke Evans,

Directed by James McTieue

For literature and film people, The Raven will suggest the poem of Edgar Allan Poe. And that would be right for this film, a story about Poe himself.

Poe is seated on a park bench in Baltimore, 1849, just before his death. In the meantime, a gruesome murder of a rival critic has taken place, suggesting to the detective investigator, a parallel to Poe's Murders in the Rue Morgue. A second murder (with visuals) suggests The Pit and the Pendulum. There are more murders which suggest other stories, especially The Premature Burial.

All of this is the invention of the writers and of the director, James McTieue who worked on The Matrix series and directed the evocative V for Vendetta. It is what could have happened.

Poe is alcoholic, vain about his writing, in need of money from his editor, in love with a local young woman (Alice Eve), daughter of a wealthy citizen (Brendan Gleeson) who is opposed to the relationship.

Detective Fields (Luke Evans) takes an active interest, engaging Poe's involvement in the investigations, erratic though they are – and which include writing stories about the murders in the hope that they can be solved, especially when his fiancée is abducted and buried.

Eventually, the Poe-like serial killer is vain enough to reveal himself and demand the master's applause. Poe is defiant but, of course, recognizes the clues which lead to his fiancée's rescue.

Most of the action takes place at night and, on the whole in theme and visual tone, the film is very dark. John Cusack gives an interesting performance as Poe, a mixture of preening self-importance despite his falling on hard times, offering readings and poetry classes to the ladies of Baltimore, an arrogant drinker. He is also partly guilt-ridden because of the copycat killer.

It is interesting and entertaining to speculate about the lives of real-life characters – it worked for Shakespeare in Love and Anonymous. It also worked for Guy Ritchie's reinventing of Sherlock Holmes with Robert Downey Jr. However, accurate or inaccurate The Raven is as a portrait of Poe, it nevertheless takes us into his sometimes bizarre and eerie mentality and his tales (many of which were so vividly filmed in the 1960s by Roger Corman).

SIGHTSEERS

UK, 2011,

Alice Lowe, Steve Oram, Eileen Davies.

Directed by Ben Wheatley.

Let's hope you don't encounter sightseers like Chris and Tina when you are caravanning around Yorkshire and the Lakes District. You might not get home, especially if you get into Chris and Tina's bad books, not a difficult thing to do at all.

This small budget black comedy is very black indeed, despite the outdoors locations and the eccentric tourist sites that the couple visit (tramway museum, pencil museum...). It was written by the leads who are also stand-up comics. The dialogue and the delivery, deadpanly ironic and simple, are very important.

Tina lives with her hypochondriac mum and looks to have few prospects in life. She was devoted to her dog Poppy – there is a flashback to a death scene which will mean some looking away aghast while others will burst out laughing. It is that kind of film. Mum is the kind who keeps ringing up during the trip to manipulate her daughter into coming home to look after her. Chris seems a jovial

kind of bloke, eccentric interests certainly, but with a charming way as far as Tina is concerned. That is until he runs over a man.

Chris does not take to criticism kindly and senses others' competitiveness (not his own) with deadly earnest. His opponents do not live to see the day.

Here is awful behaviour, conscienceless and cheery, presented as if Tina and Chris really have very few cares in the world – and it is easy to get rid of those. Which makes them all the creepier. In fact, Tina is becoming rather exhilarated by the disposals as the trip goes further north. And, especially, as they reach the end of their road and prepare for a culmination – which doesn't quite work out as anticipated.

You have to be in the mood for this kind of thing, a relishing delight in really black comedy.

TROUBLE WITH THE CURVE

US, 2012,

Clint Eastwood, Amy Adams, Justin Timberlake, John Goodman.

Directed by Robert Lorenz.

No, not a film about safe driving. Rather, a film about baseball and the question posed by Moneyball in 2011, whether talent scouting using computer data is more accurate than relying on the human eye and the instinct for observing the capacities and gifts of players. Moneyball favoured the computer. Trouble favours experience and the veteran human being. And, with Clint Eastwood playing the talent scout and allowing the screenplay to mock his lack of IT experience, there is no prize for guessing which method is in favour here.

Many of us had wished that Gran Torino would be the final screen performance for Eastwood, the redemption of the crusty curmudgeon, Dirty Harry seeing the light. But no, here he is again doing his curmudgeon with a vengeance – and, of course, being vindicated with his scouting ability against the bureaucrats and the presumptuous desk scouts.

Eastwood plays Gus (81 at the time of filming) whose contract is up for consideration, who persists in using the old ways, whose eyesight is failing and who can growl and growl with the best of them. His good friend (John Goodman) worries about him and asks Gus's lawyer daughter (about to become a partner in her firm) to visit her father to see what she can do. She is played by the ever-versatile Amy Adams. Father and daughter are more or less estranged. He grieved after his wife's death, tended to ignore his daughter and sent her away to be educated.

As might be guessed, this is a story about father-daughter understandings and reconciliation as well as about baseball. There is also a complication when a former player, Justin Timberlake, falls for the daughter.

Non-baseball fans will be able to live through the sports scenes because they are watching Gus as a character, relating (or not) to his daughter and defying the on-line experts. There is also a most obnoxious player who presumes he will be selected and will live the hedonistic life of a sports celebrity. We obviously enjoy his comeuppance at the pitch of the Latino son of the motel landlady when he has trouble with the curve ball.

As baseball films go, this is not in the ideal league of Field of Dreams. But, it is a chance to see Clint Eastwood in his 80s doing his thing once again, a screen icon if ever there was one.