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ANNIE

US, 2014, 118 minutes, Colour.
Quvenzhané Wallis, Jamie Foxx, Rose Byrne, Cameron Diaz, Bobby Cannavale.
Directed by Will Gluck.

Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow... For many, that and its tune (which can run irritatingly around in the imagination), is the lead in into the popular Broadway musical, Annie, from the 1970s, filmed by John Huston in 1982 and for television in 1999. And here we are again. Interestingly, the trailer for this version does not emphasise Tomorrow but keeps repeating It's a Hard Knock Life.

While most of the patrons in the theatre queues were grandmothers, mothers and little daughters, there were some little boys there who were about to experience A Hard Knock Life for two hours as they watched this movie! This is definitely a film for female sensibilities.

As indicated, the principal songs are there but there are also some new ones, generally very repetitive in the vein of all the songs, especially a montage of 'It's a New Life', sung by several of the characters – over and over and over again. While still on complaints, the lyric for Tomorrow "love ya tomorrow" is especially grating, repeated and over emphasised. It grates on ya.

Of course, there are things to enjoy in Annie.

The scenario has been updated to an affluent, technological, 21st century. And, instead of Daddy Warbucks, there is now Will Stacks, an entrepreneur with phones and technology who decides that he should run for Mayor of New York City. He is played by Jamie Foxx. The Oscar-nominated young

actress, Quvenzhanie Wallace, for *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, is more than the Moppet, Little Orphan Annie (she is determined not to be an orphan here because of a note from her disappearing parents and her stating that she is a foster child). This Annie is full of life, not for a moment lacking in self confidence. She is the life of the party at the orphanage, a chief antagonist for Miss Hannigan, the failed and would-be alcoholic actress who is in charge of the girls.

Where can all this go? Annie sits every Friday night the Domani restaurant (Italian for tomorrow!) because their note says that this is where they will come. She sits in vain. What will become of her?

In the meantime, Sticks who has few social graces, few touches of personality for a political campaign, is being fed information and lines by the devious Guy (Bobby Canavale) a go-getting political adviser. Sticks also has a personal assistant, Grace or from, Oxford, who tries to be a minder but, without realising it – and sometimes are not realising it - she is really in love with Stacks. She is played by Rose Byrne.

The key to the future is in Annie's running across the street, almost run over, but saved by Stacks, everything captured, of course, on a passer's-by camera. What better for a campaign? With the idea that Stacks hold a press conference, with many photo opportunities with Annie, stacks invites her to stay with him. Annie has never seen such luxury – it is always forthcoming with her opinions at helping with the photo-opportunities..

The plot thickens with the intervention of the angry Miss Hannigan. In the past she has been played by Carol Burnett and Kathy Bates, but this time the usually glamorous Cameron Diaz opts for mugging. False parents are set up. Annie is deceived, Miss Hannigan repents. Grace is concerned. Stacks realises that life is not just business... And everyone hurries off in pursuit of Annie by car and helicopter culminating in an elaborate curtain-call song and dance routine on the streets of New York.

Not a great show. But a show that a lot of people have enjoyed.

BIG HERO 6

US, 2014, 102 minutes,.Colour.

Voices of: Scott Adsit, Ryan Potter, Daniel Henney, T.J.Miller, Jamie Chung, Damon Wayans Jr, Genesis Rodriguez, James Cromwell, Alan Tudyk, Maya.Rudolph.

Directed by Don Hall, Charles Williams.

Big Hero 6 is a Disney animation film, an entertaining adventure, based on a Marvel comic, featuring small characters who become superheroes.

It was a bit of a surprise when the publicist announced at the preview that Big Hero 6 came from the same studios that gave audiences *Frozen*. The two films are at extreme opposites – *Frozen* for the female audience, especially young girls, with Big Hero 6 for the boys, of whatever age. Not that the girls won't enjoy it. There are some female superheroes as well and the abduction of the daughter of a scientist and her rescue, but it is aimed mainly at the boys.

The narrative and the settings acknowledge the influence of the Japanese Anime comics and on films

as well as the United States comments. The city has called San Fransokyo! The hero is called Hiro, an enterprising young boy, talented in making robots – and he takes them to illegal robot fights, the equivalent of cockfights, where he reigns supreme.

His brother is a much more serious young man, with a laboratory for inventions as well as an eccentric group of male and female scientists. Hiro is persuaded to study after he sees such inventions and passes his exam by building a whole lot of bots which can combine in all kinds of inventive formations.

Hiro's brother has invented a very engaging character, Baymax, a large volume, a cuddly white mass. It has been designed with all kinds of powers, especially care, diagnosis of illness – but is used in the super battle, donning some armour, joining in the action, but really only at home when stripped of the armour, and able to perform his caring functions. We wouldn't be surprised if the next film focused on him and was Baymax, Big Hero 7.

Reflecting the times, there are business deals to be done, entrepreneurs and scientists wanting to get their hands on patents and go into production. Sadly, this involves a death and an abduction, which puts Hiro and his friends on guard, determined to save their inventions, determined to make up for the death of Hiro's brother, confronting a masked villain who seems bent on world power.

This means that there are some spectacular action sequences in the latter part of the film, all kinds of dangerous feats that would be too difficult to do with live action and special effects. The unmasking of the villain is a bit of a surprise, but justice is seen to be done and everybody goes back to scientific enquiry. Hiro is a hero – as all his friends.

FINDING VIVIAN MAIER

US, 2014, 83 minutes, Colour.

Directed by John Maloof, Charlie Siskel.

This is very interesting film-making, nominated for and winning many awards. It is also intriguing.

Vivian Maier was a photographer, amateur, proud of her work even though she did not develop many of her negatives. She did work as a nanny in New York City and two of her charges were able to transfer her into a home for the elderly where she died in 2009.

John Maloof was searching, in 2007, for photographs to illustrate his book on the local area in Chicago. He bought Vivian Myers photographs at an auction but did not do anything about the photos, not even using them for the book, until he developed an interest in photography himself and went back to the cache, examining them, being impressed by them, and put about 100 online asking for people's response.

Later, an exhibition was organised and Kickstarter was used to raise money for this documentary which Maloof himself co-directed with Charlie Siskel.

The film offers audiences a great number of Vivian Maier's photographs, most taken in New York City, with a small camera at her waist, snapping ordinary characters, unusual characters, many on

the margins of society. To this extent, the documentary is most impressive in its presentation of the photos and life in New York City.

However, the film also is a kind of investigation of the life of Vivian Maier, trying to track down records, some of which lead to friends and interesting stories about her background. It emerges that her work as a nanny with many families over many decades. The remaining talking heads, especially of those who were in her charge, contribute to a range of memories, mostly admiring, some expressing some old stories about her.

She herself emerges from some photos and some movie clips, a tall woman, smartly but rather severely dressed, photographing great number of subjects as well as herself. With the mystery of her name, differences about her birthplace, some suspecting French accented English, she becomes a mystery character, a number indicating that perhaps she suffered from some mental illnesses.

The BBC produced a documentary on her, *The Vivian Maier Mystery*, some months before the release of this film. Commentators note that it is more objective than the present documentary, especially because John Maloof himself produced and co-directed the film as well as being front camera and explaining his search. Nevertheless, what he has done has been of service to Vivian Maier, letting the world know her photographs, presenting so many of them on screen, as well as raising questions about the photographer herself which later investigators can develop.

THE HOBBIT: THE BATTLE OF THE FIVE ARMIES

New Zealand, 2014, 144 minutes, Colour.

Ian Mc Kellen, Martin Freeman, Richard Armitage, Orlando Bloom, Luke Evans, Lee Pace, Stephen Fry, Billy Connolly, Ian Holm, James Nesbitt, Ken Stott, Ryan Gage, Graham Mc Tavish, Dean O' Gorman, voice of Benedict Cumberbatch.

Directed by Peter Jackson.

It had to come eventually, the completion of Peter Jackson's vision and energy in bringing J.R.R.Tolkien's characters, world, adventures to a cinematic end.

While *The Lord of The Rings* had a vast scope, *The Hobbit* has a much narrower focus. But, in the tradition of dividing up the final chapters of various franchises, like *Harry Potter*, like *The Hunger Games*, like the *Twilight* series, as well as *Divergent* and *The Maze Runner*, *The Hobbit* was broke up into three films.

For the fans, allowing for the differences of the amplification of the action, the first of *The Hobbit* trilogy was a welcome re-immersing of audiences in the world of Middle Earth, 60 years before *The Lord of Thorins*. Here was a younger Bilbo (with an appearance of Ian Holm as the older Bilbo). While Bilbo has a comfortable life in the Shire, Gandalf visits and reveals that there is another quest he should undertake. And then the dwarves invaded his home, not a stroke of etiquette between them, and off of reluctant Bilbo goes. There were a lot of complications with the various monsters, with the Orcs, and a series of adventures that resemble much of the quest of Frodo in the original films. For those who were not fans of these films, although there was now a very effective 3-D, they were complicated which made them less interesting.

However, the second film was more straightforward in the storytelling, and, so, easier to follow for everyone, focusing on Bilbo, but also focusing on the dwarves and their quest to get back their traditional home, finding the cave full of gold that would re-establish their kingdom. We were also introduced to the inhabitants of Laketown, and their troubles – all being combined in the menace of the giant dragon, Smaug, fighting the dwarves, confronting Bilbo, threatening the town.

And this is where the third film takes up, the dragon, unconquered, swooping mercilessly over Laketown and setting the various districts on fire, and not just fire, immense fire. The action is quite spectacular as the inhabitants try to flee, the Master of Laketown (Stephen Fry) ransacking the Treasury, pushing his mealy-mouthed assistant, Alfrid, over the side of the boat to lessen the weight. But the hero is Bard, imprisoned but escaping and hurrying to the tower to shoot down the dragon. It takes his son coming and a vast metal arrow-weapon to defeat the dragon. The inhabitants, led by Bard, take refuge in the town on the side of the mountain.

Meanwhile, Bilbo, (the ever-welcome Martin Freeman) is watching the destruction of Laketown with the dwarves. With Smaug gone, the leader of the dwarves, Thorin (Richard Armitage displaying a strong dramatic capacity for greed, madness, repentance and warrior skills) is overwhelmed by the vast wealth, coins and gold, and clutching to power, destroying his relationship with Bilbo and the other dwarves.

The King to whom the dwarves had given their word that they would repay when they found the gold, comes to claim what he is owed. Even when Bilbo tries to arrange a deal between the King and Thorin, Thorin prefers war.

And war there is, long battle sequences, close-up fighting, the arrival of the Orcs and their monstrous clashing with the army of the Elves, Thorin's cousin (played by Billy Connolly, Scottish accent and swearing and all) also brings his army. Huge birds sweep through the sky and while there is death and slaughter on the battlefield, there is an invasion of the mountainside town, huge characters built of stone bashing through the walls. It is Bard (Luke Evans, a strong presence) who is the leader in the town, the hero leader of the film.

At one stage, less for the plot than for a touch of nostalgia, Cate Blanchett, Galadriel, arrives to rescue Gandalf (Ian McKellen? just the same as always). Also turning up is Hugo Weaving as the Elf King and a wonderful cameo, deep voice and all, by Christopher Lee as Suriman and, as might be expected, when Bilbo returns home there is a glimpse of Ian Holm as the older Bilbo.

There is a great deal of pathos, especially with Bilbo and his relationship to the dwarves, concealing the precious stone that Thorin was desperately trying to find. And there is a moving death scene with Thorin. There is Bard, always trying to protect his children as well as lead the people in battle and to safety. Legolas re-appeared in the previous film and continues his heroics, Orlando Bloom deserving a special award for athletic gymnastics, especially in the final fights, balancing over holes in bridges, leaping up a staircase which is continually breaking up. And Tauriel (Evangeline Lilly) who fell in love with the dwarf, Fili (Dean O'Gorman) discovers that her love for him is real.

After all the fights, after all the tragic happenings and the increasing number of deaths, there is a peacefulness at the end of the film as Bilbo goes home, finds that the inhabitants think he has died and are auctioning his house and making off with all the furniture and goods, but re-establishes himself and all is at peace in Middle Earth.

THE IMITATION GAME

UK, 2014, 114 minutes, Colour.

Benedict Cumberbatch, Keira Knightley, Matthew Goode, Mark Strong, Charles Dance, Alan Leach, Tuppence Middleton, Rory Kinnear, Steven Waddington, Matthew Beard.
Directed by Morton Tylden.

A fine, interesting drama.

Over the years, there has been great interest in the story of Bletchley Park, the team assembled to work on the Enigma code, the elaborate Nazi code for transmitting information during World War II. Michael Apted directed a somewhat fictitious fashion, Enigma (2000). Television offered a series, Bletchley Park.

But, not only is the breaking of the Enigma code something significant in war history, the breaking was the work of mathematician, Alan Turing. This film is a tribute to a brilliantly intelligent man, with some autism characteristics, something of a personal loner, who had his own personal secrets at the time, his sexual orientation and behaviour, which led to his death in 1954.

All these aspects are covered in The Imitation Game.

The film uses the framework of a police investigation of Turing the early 1950s. We are introduced to Turing, having experienced a break-in at his flat, arrested and interrogated by the police. Because the documents of his war activity are classified as top secret, the police are suspicious of him, possibly as a traitor (the era of Burgess and Maclean's defection to the Soviet Union), and his strange personality. He finds it difficult to collaborate with the police. During the action in the 1940s, the screenplay does come back to this 1950 situation as a more sympathetic investigator (Rory Kinnear) is able to access more documents and understand him.

This offers a more ambiguous opening to the portrait of Turing. As he is played by Benedict Cumberbatch, we are offered a complex portrayal of Turing's complexities. He makes quite some impact when he goes to an interview for work at Bletchley Park, not given to modest understatement about his abilities, his success at school, at Oxford University, his university tenure in his early 20s. The subsequent drama, the conflict between Turing and the military establishment, as highlighted by the performance of Charles Dance as an officer with more knowledge about rules and pomposity than what was required for the job. Also at the interview is the head of MI6, played with some sinister sympathy by Mark Strong.

While most of us will not understand the technical details or the technological requirements workings of the machine to break Enigma, there is enough drama, sequences in the computer room, discussions amongst the workers, a kind of antipathy towards Turing and his seemingly smug superiority, that we get a great feel for what happened, what was demanded for breaking the code, for Turing's contribution and the eventual collaboration which broke the code.

Turing wants some collaborators and sets up a crossword puzzle test through the newspapers to find minds who are quick at codes and think laterally. One of those who emerges years is Joan, played by

Keira Knightley, doing an intelligent variation on her English rose performances.

Of course, there is great suspense as to how the code will be broken, with Turing coming to the realisation that it needs a machine to break a machine. In fact, in looking back at the history of computers, Turing has a singular place in his contribution to the building of computers and understanding their intelligence and their achievements.

During the film, there are some flashbacks to his days at school, where he was bullied, but made great friends with a young boy, Christopher, after whom he called his machine. There is insight into Turing's character, his understanding of himself, his self-confidence, and his emotional dependence on Christopher.

At the end of the film, there is explanation given about Turing and his sexual orientation, the use of 'chemical castration' medication, the effect of secrecy and possibilities of criminality on his consciousness and his death. The film tries to give some acknowledgement of him and his achievement and the information that a pardon was extended by Queen Elizabeth in 2007.

While the whole cast is very strong, this is yet another achievement for Benedict Cumberbatch, who has shown his wide range in his performance in the Sherlock series, as the voice of Smaug in the Hobbit trilogy, his villain in Star Trek, his portrayal of Julian Assange in The Fifth Estate.

INTO THE WOODS

US, 2014, 124 minutes, Colour.

Anna Kendrick, Johnny Depp, Emily Blunt, Chris Pine, Meryl Streep, Lucy Punch, Christine Baranski, James Corden, Mackenzie Mauzey, Lilla Crawford, Billy Magnussen, Daniel Huttleston, Frances de la Tour, Tammy Blanchard, Tracy Ullman, Simon Russell Beale, Annette Crosby, Joanna Riding.
Directed by Rob Marshall.

This is a lavish production and filled with quite an accomplished cast. Those who go to see the film without any previous knowledge may be taken aback and will have to adapt themselves to a style of musical theatre, which is a blend of the very theatrical treatment along with attempts at realism, all in the cause of telling fairy stories in words and music.

For many audiences, this is a great opportunity, a spectacular opportunity in fact, to be part of a Stephen Sondheim musical. From West Side Story and for over more than half a century, Sondheim has created many musical theatre pieces, often adapting films and plays, using his characteristic recitatif style for the singers and his own idiosyncratic mood melodies for the musical score. Not necessarily to everyone's taste. But Into The Woods offers a rare opportunity for Sondheim lovers and those who wonder what his style is like.

It should be said that this is not a light entertainment. Even though it combines the stories of many familiar fairytales, it is not the sweetness and light of the fairytales but rather the grim aspects of storytelling, tales of the dark side of human nature, at times truly grim fairytales.

The film begins, Sondheim-style, with many of the characters, seen in a variety of situations, combining with the recitation of what it is to go into the woods. This introduces the range of

characters which include Cinderella, her stepmother and the ugly sisters, the town baker and his wife, Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel in her tower, Jack and his mother, the ugly witch and Prince Charming and his friends. The song also offers the opportunity for audiences to identify, quite quickly, the cast with characters. We find Anna Kendrick as Cinderella, Christine Baranski, Lucy Punch, Tammy Blanchard as her stepmother and the sisters, James Corden and Emily Blunt as the baker and his wife, the Lilla Crawford as Little Red Riding Hood, Mackenzie Mauzey as Rapunzel, Daniel Huttleston and Tracy Ullman as Jack and his mother, Meryl Streep as the witch, Chris Klein as the Prince. A number of prominent British character actors have small cameos. They include stage actors like Simon Russell Beale, Annette Crosby, Joanna Riding, Frances de la Tour.

While all of them give striking performances, there is the exception with Chris Pine as the Prince, not particularly charming, not particularly persuasive, even though he is offering something of a sendup of charming princes. It is James Corden and Emily Blunt as the baker and his wife who offer the most humanity. And by way of postscript, Johnny Depp has a very brief appearance as a rather odd Wolf.

At the core is a curse by the witch on the baker and his wife, hoping for children, but the witch preventing pregnancy until she collects four items belonging to the fairytale characters, Jack's white cow, Red's Riding Hood, Rapunzel's hair, Cinderella's slipper. This provides occasion for strange adventures in the woods as well as a number of musical interludes.

One of the major complications is that the baker pays for Jack's cow with some beans which are carelessly tossed away leading to the growth of the giant Beanstalk and the descent of the giants to earth, with the need to combat them and destroy them. Another complication is that of the witch who has abducted Rapunzel as a little girl and kept in a tower, pretending to be her mother, transformed after she obtains all her desired objects into a much more familiar Meryl Streep.

This is not a story of happy endings, especially for the baker and his wife, which takes some time for an emotional adjustment. For those in the know, they will have a lavish Sondheim experience. For those not in the know, there may be more pleasure in reflecting on what they have seen than in the experience while they watched the film.

KEEP ON KEEPIN' ON

US, 2014, 84 minutes, Colour.

Clark Terry, Justin Kauflin, Quincy Jones, Gwen Terry.

Directed by Alan Hicks.

There are many films which are called "feel good". With this film, the audience feels good, but feels even better.

Jazz aficionados will know the name Clark Terry. Those not into jazz may not have heard of him, but he is considered one of the best jazz artists of the 20th century, a trumpeter par excellence. This is his story.

The film was co-written and directed by Australian, Alan Hicks, a drummer who attended the William Paterson University for Music/Jazz Studies and was tutored by Clark Terry. However, Hicks is very self-effacing and does not appear in the film at all, no mention of his musical background. Rather, he

wants to concentrate on Terry but also introduces another student at the William Paterson University, Justin Kauflin. This makes for an interesting and entertaining interaction, the elderly musician as teacher and the young piano player as student, relating to Clark Terry not only as mentor but as friend.

During the filming, Clark Terry turned 90, 91 and 92. He was still living at the time of the film's release. We see him more immediately in past action before the film goes to the biographical aspects. At once, we realise that he is a very genial man and who is supported by his wife, Gwen, not only for their long marriage but, especially, as his health fails. He has been a long-time diabetic, now experiencing trouble with his eyes and, eventually, the need for amputating both legs. (As with the film about Roger Ebert, the Chicago critic, *Life Itself*, which showed Ebert in his years dealing with cancer in his chin and face, not afraid to appear on screen in the debilitated state, so this film shows Terry, often in hospital, in treatment, and at home.

It should be noted the Justin Kauflin suffered from a rare eye disease when he was born, losing his sight as a child, but optimistic, especially when he discovered that he had a talent and an urge to play the piano, fine long fingers enabling him to play with dexterity. He met Terry when he was a student in 2007 and they became friends, Justin often visiting him, having classes and jam sessions together, Terry encouraging Justin to practice and enter competitions. just comes across as a fine young man, in the scenes at home with his mother, with Terry and Gwen, in performance.

Clark Terry had a very interesting career, playing with the Duke Ellington band for 10 years, then joining Count Basie, then being one of the first African Americans to play for a television studio orchestra. A young man who was in awe of Terry approached him and Terry became his mentor as well. This was Quincy Jones. Terry then played for Quincy Jones in his band and they became lifelong friends. In the film (and Quincy Jones became a producer of the film) he is seen visiting Terry when Justin is present, sees him playing the piano and, ultimately, invites him to join him on a world tour and offer him a contract. Justin wrote a great deal of the music for this film.

With so much archival material presented, the audience has a very good impression of Terry's life and career, his performance and skill. Audiences will enjoy his manner of teaching, lying ill in bed, riffing on themes, advising students, and all the time enjoying things thoroughly, with his idiosyncratic vocabulary which means that practically everyone is referred to as, baby.

The film is an excellent musical documentary – but, it is far more, really showing the nature of a vocation to music, a vocation to teaching, the effect of human interaction between teachers and students.

Definitely, feel-better.

MR TURNER

UK, 2014, 150 minutes, Colour.

Timothy Spall, Paul Jesson, Dorothy Atkinson, Marion Bailey, Karl Johnson, Ruth Sheen, Lesley Manville, Martin Savage, Niall Buggy, James Fleet.

Directed by Mike Leigh.

It is not only asked lovers who know something of the paintings by J.M.W. Turner, paintings which he bequeathed to the nation as his heritage. We may remember seascapes, the Fighting Temeraire. What do most of us know about the artist himself, Billy Turner, who flourished in the first part of the 19th century?

This is a portrait of Turner as an artist, a cinema sketch of him as a man, offering an experience of him at work, getting to know something of his character, not always genial.

Years ago, cinemagoers might have been surprised to find that Mike Leigh was directing this film. However, after his great success in 1989 in bringing Gilbert and Sullivan to live in Topsy-Turvy, we know that Turner is in good hands and that this will be an exemplary experience of Britain in the 19th century as well appreciating the skills which Mike Leigh uses in bringing characters to intense life, their interactions, their conflicts, their gifts, their foibles.

And those who know Mike Leigh's work will appreciate the contribution of actor, Timothy Spall, to so many of them, especially Secrets and Lies, All or Nothing. Spall, who spent some years practising painting in preparation for his performance, won the Best Actor Award in Cannes 2014.

We first see Turner in Holland, walking along canals, finding scenes to paint. We realise at once that what Leigh is doing is providing scenery and locations which Turner painted but also getting his cinematographer to recreate the colours, the light and shade, the clarity and the mistiness which characterise Turner's paintings. This continues throughout the film, especially with scenes on the English Channel coast around Margate, the sea, the storms, the sand, the beaches. At one stage Turner ties himself to the mast of a ship sailing through an icy storm to live the experience.

And there is Turner, a middle-aged, pudgy character, with very little charm, but with good manners and a beautiful 19th-century English vocabulary and turn of phrase – for instance, he mentions he has something to cogitate on. One of his specialties is his capacity to grunt and growl. This is very noticeable in a discussion on art with a pretentious John Ruskin.

On the personal level, he is something of a recluse. He has fathered two daughters by the aunt of his maid, spurns them on their visits. And, regarding the maid, he treats her as a very menial servant and is not above using her as sex relief. It is when he goes to Margate and encounters a couple, especially an old man who had been a ship slaver, then is attracted to the widowed wife who supports him in a de factor relationship for many years, looking after his needs, referring to his pretty little pictures, looking after him in his illnesses and, especially, at his death. In his relationship with her, we see Turner at his personal best.

On the professional level, there is an interesting sequence at the National Gallery when he brings his paintings, as do all the other artists, to see where they will be hung for exhibition, in the main hall, or in the outer. He is placed next to Constable whom he does not admire. There is a painter, Haydon, who is rejected and who depends on Turner for some financial support. Not everybody appreciated Turner's work, two ladies at an exhibition mocking him with their comments – and a theatrical scene from a play where Turner and his style are being sent up, not to Turner's pleasure.

The fine cast includes Paul Jeason as Turner's father, a former barber who, in his retirement, buys the paints for his son, is loud in his praise and to whom his son is devoted, especially in a sad death scene. Dorothy Hutchison is his maid, Marion Bailey is the widow, Ruth Sheen is the mother of his

daughters and Lesley Manville is a sympathetic visitor with an interest in science.

The film runs for 2 ½ hours so there is plenty of time for us to observe Leigh's portrait, appreciate Spall's performance, and realise what an artistic genius Turner was with paintings that blend the classic with the modern and still draw our attention and admiration.

THE MYSTERY OF HAPPINESS/ EL MISTERIO DE LA FELICIDAD

Argentina, 2014, 92 minutes, Colour.

Guillermo Francella, Fabian Arenillas, Inez Estevez.

Directed by Daniel Burman.

The Mystery of Happiness is yet another quite insightful, slightly bizarre, comedy-drama from Argentinian director, Daniel Burman.

For those would like to solve the mystery of happiness, unfortunately, there is no ultimate explanation. Rather, questions are raised and suggestions indicated. Because this is a story and not a philosophical exposé, identifying with the characters and their searches, their discoveries and their resolutions will have to suffice.

The opening credits are very quirky. We see two middle-aged men, obviously close friends, doing everything parallel with each other, including their driving, their parking, coming into the office, there are adjacent offices, the window between them... This will be very important as one of them, Santiago, is completely satisfied, really relishes this way of life, the shop they mutually own, the supplying of household goods, the exhilaration of a business that is going well. On the other hand, Eduardo seems to be committed to everything and to Santiago, their eating together, their going to the races together..., the complete ease of being in each other's company.

However, there is an offer on the table and some young businessman visit the office to make a proposal. Santiago definitely does not want to sell. But Eduardo is not so sure. When he goes home and has a meal with his wife, the incessantly chattering Laura, he realises that she is very much for the sale and what it might mean for them.

Then Eduardo disappears. Santiago is flabbergasted and emotionally upset, never imagining such an event. Laura is also affected and comes in to discuss things with Santiago and a visit to the police to report Eduardo is missing. She finds she has a new life in the office and talent for examining books and accounts. What happens is that they talk a great deal, sharing memories of Eduardo, Santiago coming to some kind of terms with his friend's disappearance and Laura mellowing. They are advised to consult a former policeman who runs an exotic restaurant, something of a seer, who asks questions, suggests clues, opens their eyes to themselves and the nature of their search.

By this time, we ourselves are wondering where Eduardo is – and whether he has just simply given up on his old way of life, its routines, its lack of fulfilment, and has gone off on his own. This means that we share the experience of the search by Santiago and Laura.

There is some kind of solution which we can understand and which Santiago understands – but that is for the audience to see and to reflect on. It is fitting for this film that the review should end with a

question. Is happiness a way of life, is it found in success and routine, succumbing to people's expectations and the consequent expectation on imposes on oneself or is it...?

NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM: THE SECRET OF THE TOMB

US, 2014, 98 minutes, Colour.

Ben Stiller, Robin Williams, Owen Wilson, Steve Coogan, Ricky Gervais, Dan Stevens, Rebel Wilson, Skyler Gisondo, Remi Malek, Patrick Gallagher, Mizuo Peck, Ben Kingsley, Dick Van Dyke, Mickey Rooney, Bill Cobbs, Andrea Martin, Brad Garrett.

Directed by Shawn Levy.

They're back! Who's back? Zombies, vampires, aliens...? No, all those characters and creatures who come to life at nightfall in the New York Museum which we have visited twice before. This third film is intended as the finale, gathering together all the characters and themes.

In 2006, this was all a great novelty, and a lively entertainment. In 2009, there was a visit to Washington DC and the Smithsonian Museum. So, where to go for this encore? There has always been the special relationship between the United States and Great Britain, so why not go off to the British Museum?

There is a prologue to the film, an expedition to Egypt in 1938, a team discovery of a tomb and the transferring of the treasures back to the United States. However..., the locals repeat a warning that this could be the end. Back to 2014, the special gold plaque that was found in 1938 is beginning to corrode, the museum creatures and characters losing their power. The young son of the Pharaoh indicates that the secret lies with his father – who is preserved with his wife in the British Museum.

Getting permission from the manager, Ricky Gervais, is not easy since all the characters and creatures put on a special display for sponsors of the museum – the guests assuming that they were watching special effects whereas they were looking at the real thing, the real things. Needless to say, catastrophe ensued, the manager losing his job. But, he is persuaded to let Larry, our friendly security guard (Ben Stiller) to go to London. He takes some of the exhibits with the cowboy and the Roman Centurion (Owen Wilson and Steve Coogan) hiding in the rim of Attila's hat!

They have all the documents to get into the British Museum, but the security guard, comedian Rebel Wilson at her chubby and cheerful best, make some difficulties – although she does fall in love with Laa, the caveman (also played by Ben Stiller to prove that he can do more than serious comic roles!). While it is a matter of finding the Pharaoh, Pharaoh (Ben Kingsley) stands on his imperial dignity. But Larry proves his worth, the secret is revealed – it needs direct moonlight to be renewed.

But, we are only halfway through the film. What else could happen? The answer is, Sir Lancelot.

He is played with tongue-in-cheek pomposity by Dan Stevens. The trouble is that Lancelot does not know much of the early history or the later history and finds contemporary English/American somewhat difficult to understand. He sees the plaque as the Holy Grail, wants to return to Camelot and claim Guinevere and confront King Arthur. By coincidence, Camelot is playing at the London Palladium, so off he rides, finding Arthur and Guinevere singing on stage, and confronts them. The Palladium audience is rather taken aback and then enters into the spirit of things, especially with

Hugh Jackman and Alice Eve as Arthur and Guinevere. When he explains that he is an actor and his name is Hugh Jackman, Lancelot thinks it a silly name, Huge Ackerman. As regards other guest appearances, Larry has visited the old security guards in their nursing home for the elderly, Dick Van Dyke, doing a sprightly dance at 89, Mickey Rooney in a wheelchair, his last film appearance, and Bill Cobbs.

There are all kinds of crises, chases, deadlines before dawn, the exhibits, especially Robin Williams as Teddy Roosevelt (his vigorous performance making us regret his death even more), the cheeky monkey, Dexter, and various dinosaurs and bony creatures.

And, with the son of the Pharaoh deciding to stay with his father and mother, everybody hastens back to New York – but, instead of the sad farewell, there are a few cheerily raucous moments to say farewell to nights at the Museum.

RED WING

US, 2013, 108 minutes, Colour.

Glen Powell, Bill Paxton, Luke Perry, Joelle Carter, Frances Fisher, Briand Johnson.

Directed by Will Wallace.

Red Wing is definitely a story for American audiences, especially those in America's South and South West. It has a Texas setting. However, it should please audiences beyond the United States who come across it and watch it.

In one sense, the plot and the treatment resemble many of the recent American films which have religious background backing. This film is more secular in tone but highlights American values, integrity, love and fidelity.

The film is adapted from a French story, Francois le Champi/ The Country Waif, by Georges Sand. This is rather unusual for an American film, borrowing from the French.

Francis is a young orphan, looked after by an African-American woman who fosters him, living in a trailer adjacent to a farm. The people at the farm are the Branton family, Breann Johnson as Maddie, wife and mother, Carl, her farmer husband, their son Johnny and Carl's mother who lives with them. Carl is played by Luke Perry and his mother is played by Frances Fisher.

When Francis comes over the fence, Carl's mother takes an immediate dislike, warning him off, advising his foster-mother to move on. However, Maddie has taken a great liking to Francis, inviting him over, advising his foster mother to ignore the threats from Carl's mother. When the mother dies, Maddie persuades Carl to take him on for work on the farm. Carl is severe towards Francis but he works hard and has a happy life.

When he turns 18, there is an echo of the Joseph story from the book of Genesis, Vera (Joelle Carter), Carl's girlfriend, propositions Francis, and when he refuses she denounces him, accusing him of an affair with Maddie.

The honourable Francis decides to move on, goes on the road, gets a good job at another farm, run

by Bill Paxton, attracts the daughter of the farmer – but, when news comes of a car accident and Carl's death, Francis decides to return to help. The rumours resurface and he returns to his new job, only to be persuaded by the young woman that he should return home and resolve all his problems.

Generally familiar material, except for the theme of the younger man and his love for the older woman, people's reactions – but, after the marriage, as the adult Johnny's voice-over says, people tend to forget and to accept reality.

St VINCENT

US, 2014, 102 minutes, Colour.

Bill Murray, Melissa Mc Carthy, Naomi Watts, Chris O' Dowd, Terrence Howard, Jaeden Lieberher, Kimberly Quinn, Donna Mitchell, Ann Dowd, Scott Adsit.

Directed by Theodore Melfi.

Do you have a working definition of a saint? Do you have an opinion of what holiness comprises?

These are fair enough questions to put before the audience because Brother Geraghty, at St Patrick's School in Brooklyn, asks these same questions of his young students as he conducts a course on saints, contemporary saints. Of course, they come up with Mother Teresa as many audiences would. But, are there some unlikely saints? With a title like St Vincent, this film will probably put forward a case.

Especially when Vincent is played by Bill Murray, who in the past has been scrooged, lost in Tokyo and in translation, and can do a very good eccentrically misanthropic curmudgeon. Which he does here. This is Bill Murray and his best, completely inhabiting an oddball character, interacting with others with seemingly little regard for their opinions and feelings. The first thing we see as him drinking and driving home drunk, backing into his house and smashing his picket fence. No worries, he goes inside his messy house, drinking and watching television. Such is his life.

It changes the next morning when a delivery van backs into his fence and knocks down a branch from his tree, never confessing that he had already broken the fence and, throughout the film, getting it mended and paid for by others! The delivery van is for Maggie (Melissa Mc Carthy in a rather enjoyably toned-down performance from her usual) and Oliver (a very welcome child actor, Jaeden Lieberher), a polite and sensible young man, aged 11, who, we know, will have a transforming influence on Vin (but don't get your hopes too high).

Maggie, of course, has separated from her philandering husband, is wary about court proceedings for custody, is busy with her job at the hospital, and find she has to leave Oliver in Vin's care (not without financial cost to herself).

Oliver is slight and is bullied at school but, fortunately, although none of us and the characters approve of fighting, Vin has been a boxer and trains Oliver with his punching bag to do a fierce upper cut. And that is not the only influence Viin has on Oliver, taking him to the races where his threatening bookie (Terrence Howard) is after repayment, taking him to a bar to meet his friends, but Oliver drinking only cola. Then there is Vin's friend, who, Vin explains to Oliver, is a "lady of the night". Daka is played by Naomi Watts, Russian-accented and all, a good friend to Vin, cleans up his

house, is pregnant and helped by Vin with insurance coverage as well as buying a pram. Oliver takes much of this for granted, as well as a visit to a residence for the elderly where Vin's wife rather cheerfully lives with dementia, Ben visiting her and pretending to be her doctor.

This means that there is quite a lot of plot, especially with Vin's later hospitalisation and therapy, with everybody pitching in. And the custody court case where Maggie realises that she does not know a lot of what has been going on.

In the meantime, Brother Geraghty (and exuberantly Irish Chris O' Dowd) has been a good support, helps the students through an understanding of what goodness in contemporary society could mean, and gets them to do a project on a Saint they have experienced, possibly a parent. So it's not spoiling the plot when we realise that Oliver researches Vin, finds out a great deal about his life which surprises us, and then presents his project to the school, family and friends.

So, by the end of the film, audiences will be measuring Vin and his alleged sanctity against people they know – and, as from the Gospels and Jesus' friendship with and compassion for those on society's edge, we can acknowledge that it is not quite inappropriate to call Oliver's friend and mentor, St Vincent.

THE WATER DIVINER

Australia, 2014, 111 minutes, Colour.

Russell Crowe, Olga Kurylenko, Jai Courtney, Yilmaz Erdogan, Dylan Georgiades, Dan Wyllie, Robert Mammone, Isabel Lucas, Daniel Herriman.

Directed by Russell Crowe.

A fine film and well worth seeing, especially for Australian audiences. Released in the first few months of the centenary of World War I, and anticipating the centenary of Gallipoli, this is a film which will find a ready audience, middle-aged and older. It is also an effective film for younger audiences who are in the process of learning about Australia's ANZAC past.

It is a tribute to Russell Crowe that he has made such a stylish film, with Andrew Lesnie's beautiful cinematography, both in Turkey and in Australia, and an intelligent screenplay with the combined authorship of Andrew Knights and Andrew Anastasios. It is well edited, especially with effective insertions of flashbacks. The performances are all creditable.

The film sets a tone by starting in Turkey, at Gallipoli in 1915, at the end of the months when Australians were entrenched at the bottom of the hill with the Turks above them. We are introduced to the Turks before we are introduced to the Australians, with the reminder that while 10,000 Australians died in the campaign, 70,000 Turks were killed. A strong officer (Yilmaz Erdogan) is making decisions about an attack, sending a young recruit back to find his binoculars so that he is not present with the gunfire. When the Turks attack, they find the trenches empty, booby-trapped. The Turks consider it a retreat, the Australians a withdrawal.

It is only then that we go to north-western Victoria where we see Joshua Connor, Russell Crowe in a fine and dignified performance, doing his water divining, his sticks poised ready to follow their

direction for water. It is 1919. Joshua and his wife (Jacqueline McKenzie) are living the grief of the death of their three sons who all volunteered to fight together. They are reported to have died together.

Joshua's wife is in depression, wanting him to read the Arabian Nights to the empty beds of their sons, blaming her husband for their going to war. She drowns herself in the dam. This leads to a discussion with the local Irish parish priest who is severe in his pastoral attitude, applying the letter of the law to the burial of the suicide. When Joshua persuades him that it was an accident (or that he can assuage his conscience with that explanation), he suggests that Joshua donate his van to the parish – a reminder of mercenary attitudes mixed with severity.

Joshua decides to travel to Turkey to find his sons' graves. British officials forbid any travel to the peninsula but there is an Australian group there trying to identify the bodies and bury the soldiers respectfully. The group is headed by Lt- Colonel Cyril Hughes (Jai Courtney) who has welcomed the Turkish officer whom we saw at the beginning, along with his sergeant, to collaborate with the identification of the dead soldiers, Australian and Turkish.

In the meantime, a young boy at the wharf has led Joshua a lengthy chase through the busy markets and streets, to a hotel in Constantinople where the manager is the widow of a Turkish soldier, although she will not admit that he has died. She is hostile but her brother-in-law, who wants to marry her and adopt her son, welcomes Joshua. Joshua returns to the hotel several times, the young woman gradually mellowing, helping him, and the son enjoying Joshua's being a kind of father-figure. Ayshe is played by Olga Kurylenko and the little boy, is a most engaging Dylan Georgiades. Steve Bastoni is the brother-in-law.

Audiences will be very moved by the sequences at Gallipoli, Joshua initially refused access then setting up camp on the beach after his arrival in a fishing boat, the Australian official and the Turkish soldier both helping him, with his date from his son's diary and his map of Lone Pine and the action. Joshua is angry with the Turkish officer then comes to an awareness that both sides acted in the same way, especially as we see the close-up flashbacks of the cruel hand-to hand combat in the trenches. We are also shown the flashback of the three sons, two going to the rescue of the other, lying wounded on the battlefield.

The screenplay opens up another possibility for Joshua who has been ordered to leave by the British commander. He encounters the Turks who are gathering in a national resistance to the invading Greeks. Joshua joins the Turks on a train, which is attacked by the Greeks and the officers lined-up for execution – then, with some derring-do, they escape into a neighbouring village where there are discoveries to be made and an emotionally-wrenching experience for Joshua.

Russell Crowe has offered the Australian audience an opportunity to see the Turkish countryside, Constantinople, the clash between Turks and Greeks, the effect of the war on the Turks and the consequences – even as his character is sometimes unwittingly insensitive towards Turkish customs, the place of women, honour codes among the men and, especially, with a breakfast episode and the Australian reacting to the Turkish food.

The past as 100 years ago and so many events have happened, including World War II, the current history of Turkey, interested in joining the European Union, neighbour to Syria during its bitter civil war, close to Iraq and Lebanon. This is the time to look back to the war, not only its heroism and self-

sacrifice but also raising questions as regards the nature of war, motivations for war and the many futilities of war.

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AMERICAN SNIPER

US, 2014, 132 minutes, Colour.
Bradley Cooper, Sienna Miller, Ben Read, Jake Mc Dorman.
Directed by Clinton Eastwood.

Clint Eastwood, in his own films and in those he directed, has taken us into many war zones, especially in his early years, in the American West and in the police and detective world. In the 1990s, he made Heartbreak Ridge, about American invasions in the Caribbean. But his main war impact was in his treatment of American patriotism in Flags of our Fathers and then looking at the other side of the Pacific battles, Letters from Iwo Jima. Eastwood offered both sides of the war effort, the battles, the strategies, the tactics, the patriotic feelings, both American and Japanese.

With this background in mind, he has now made American Sniper – released when he was 84.

The film is based on an actual character and actual events, especially in Iraqi after 9/11.

Chris Kyle was a sturdy Texan man, the film offerings glimpses of his childhood, his father taking him hunting, training him to kill with accuracy, but also instilling him and his brother with a sense of knowing who were sheep, needing protection, wolves, the bullies, and the sheepdogs, those

prepared to care for and defend the sheep. He wanted that role for his sons.

In adult life, Chris and his brother were rodeo riders but, after the news about the massacres by Al Qaeda in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, Chris enlists and goes through the rigorous training for Navy SEALs. This is captured visually in a collage of moments of training. A bulked-up Bradley Cooper gives one of his best performances as the intense sniper, loving his wife and family, but more at home with his comrades in arms and in action in war.

Besides the sniper action, with which the film opens and then leaves unfinished for about 30 minutes, there is the flashbacks story of Chris Kyle, his meeting Taya (Sienna Miller) in a bar, pleasant repartee, phone calls, dating, engagement, marriage, her pregnancy – but then he is sent to Iraq after 9/11.

The action sequences are quite strongly staged and acted, with Kyle and his skills as a sniper, his accuracy, the number of kills, and his getting a strong reputation with the nickname, Legend. There are scenes of door-to-door knocking to search out insurgents. There are confrontations with local leaders, especially a cruel man nicknamed The Butcher. There is a tense scene where a young boy who picks up a weapon after a man is killed in the street, looking as if to fire it, with Kyle watching, hoping that the boy will drop the weapon and not fire it so that Kyle will not have to shoot him.

Kyle had four tours in Iraq. While it did not take a physical toll on him, it took a psychological toll which he could not appreciate, saying nothing was wrong with him, mouthing patriotic statements about defending his country. But, on his return, he could not fully relate with his wife emotionally which then took its toll on her, especially as at times, he phoned her and action came on the line immediately, she listening to it in dismay.

Dramatically, the film builds up to an engagement which involved an insurgent sniper, Kyle having to make decisions whether to eliminate him or not, what was the best interests of the group, and a storming of the building where Kyle was on the roof by some aggressive militants.

While the screenplay and Eastwood take no explicitly political stands about the American presence in Iraq in its historical post-invasion sense, it shows the American SEALs and military devoted to their task, with spasmodic sympathy for the people whom they sometimes refer to as “savages”.

What the film does do is focus, especially at the end, on the effect of war on the veterans, physical and psychological, after their return.

For audiences who do not know anything about Kyle, there is a surprise ending, and a tribute to him.

Whatever our political viewpoints, whatever our attitudes towards films about war, Clint Eastwood certainly knows how to make involving films.

BIRDMAN

US, 2014, 119 minutes, Colour.

Michael Keaton, Emma Stone, Edward Norton, Naomi Watts, Andrea Riseborough, Zach Galifiniakis,

Amy Ryan, Lindsay Duncan.

Directed by Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu.

Well, this is not quite what many audiences might have been anticipating. And the trailer, while featuring many sequences, does not really indicate the content and tone of the film.

In one sense, this is a Broadway film, the putting on a play in New York's theatre district, the problems, the emotions, casting difficulties, accidents, and the threat of a killing-review. But it is more than this, it is something of a portrait of a movie star, Riggan Thompson, who had succeeded 20 years earlier in an action-hero series, *Birdman*. He is trying to stage a comeback, having adapted a Raymond Carver story for the stage, directing and featuring himself. There are quotes from Carver at the beginning of the film and a final speech where the emphasis is on love.

One of the striking features of the film is that it has been designed with director and cinematographer to be completely continuous as if it were a one-take film. This is sometimes quite ingenious.

Riggan is played by Michael Keaton, and many people have been ready with the comment that Keaton himself played Batman/Bruce Wayne in *Batman* and *Batman Returns*, 1989, 1991. In fact, Michael Keaton has had a successful career, moving into character roles. However, he was best known at the beginning of his career as being a zany comedian, although he has made a number of serious films, ranging from his alcoholic in *Clean and Sober* and his menacing landlord in *Pacific Heights*. So, for those familiar with Michael Keaton, there is a lot of baggage and background.

The action takes place over a couple of days, days of rehearsal and the opening night of the play. At first, disaster seems to loom as one of the main characters is injured by a falling property on stage. One of the stars, played by Naomi Watts, who has dreamt of being on Broadway suggests a very talented actor who could come in at short notice. He is played by Edward Norton, quite at tour-de-force performance as a wilful, self-absorbed actor, not embarrassed in creating stir and upstaging people during rehearsals. And, in real life, he is much the same. Also in the play is Keaton's girlfriend played by English actress Andrea Riseborough. There is an effective cameo, only in three scenes but quite moving, by Amy Ryan as Riggan's ex-wife.

But, key to this story, is his daughter, Sam, out of rehabilitation for drug problems, loving him, critical of him, intrigued by the new actor, sympathetic towards the other members of the cast, dealing with her own problems. She is played by Emma Stone.

On the realistic level, the film could be very interesting for those who like the theatre, the putting on of the play, the staging and costumes, the details of the rehearsals and their problems, the build-up to the opening night along with episodes which seem to indicate that the opening night might never happen. One of the very effective episodes is the encounter with the New York journalist, who has power with her reviews to destroy plays and performances. She is played in two strong sequences by British actress, Lindsay Duncan.

But, the film is not realistic in the sense that the hero is psychologically disturbed, has had some drinking problems, relationship problems, artistic problems, and the continual wondering whether he can carry off the performance. So, to heighten atmosphere of surrealism, the director introduces a bird man in costume who is continually present to the actor by voice and sometimes physically,

describing situations, taunting and challenging Riggan, questioning him as to the wisdom of his choices. Towards the end of the film, there is a completely surreal sequence where Birdman urges the hero to trust his powers, his seeming ability to cause an object to go up in flames, even to fly, which he does soaring over New York City. This is in contrast to the time when he goes out for a breather before his performance, wearing his underpants and a towel coat, only for the door to slam and his coat to get caught which means that he has to run through Times Square in his underwear, through the crowds many wanting an autograph.

It is significant that Michael Keaton is able to carry off all these sequences, the serious, the comic, the emotional, the emotionally blocked sequences as well as the fantasies.

The film was co-written and directed by Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, a Mexican director, who made an impact with his Mexican film, *Amores Perros*, three stories set in the slums of Mexico City, in 2000. His subsequent films have been very varied in genres, generally praised: *21 Grams*, the multi-storied *Babel*, *Biutiful*, about a dying man. So, he is an unpredictable in his work, choices,

But he is also quite unpredictable in this film, especially at the end of the premiere of the film and a final symbolic sequence which leaves audience opinions quite open. And it has the subtitle, which comes from the final review of the play by the reputation-killing critic, *The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*.

DUMB AND DUMBER TO

US, 2014, 109 minutes, Colour.

Jim Carrey, Jeff Daniels, Rob Riggle, Laurie Holden, Rachel Melvin, Kathleen Turner, Bill Murray.
Directed by Bobby Farrelly, Peter Farrelly.

If you wait long enough, something might happen. 20 years is a comparatively long time in film history, and a lot of those lining up at the box office to see this comedy were not even thought of when the *Dumb and Dumber* first came out. Those who laughed, some unashamedly, some with embarrassment, in those 90s days might line up for this one and find it more than a touch embarrassing! Of course, the writers-directors, the Farrelly Bros, intended this.

For those who wonder how they enjoyed the dumbness on screen in the 1990s, but will be hard put to explain why the present film has been made and what audience it will attract. The good news is, if you wait right until the end of the credits, and watched the final gag, a card comes up which announces *Dumb and Dumber For*. But it adds the information that this sequel is due for release in 2034! Why not! The stars will be in their 70s, the fans from the 90s will possibly be in their 50s (or more) and the young kids who laughed loudly and delightedly during the screening will be into their 30s – or, for quite a number of them, approaching 30.

Jim Carrey and Jeff Daniels back again. Jim Carrey not having had such a successful career in recent years seems to be putting extra effort into his traditional mugging, to make sure that nobody makes a mistake about his interpretation of Lloyd. Jeff Daniels has had a strong career both before *Dumb and Dumber* and afterwards, including a top televisions, *The Newsroom*. He seems far more relaxed in this film, being a good sport, still game enough to play the mop head (awry) Harry and expose himself to his public, in more ways than one.

Lloyd has been in an institution for 20 years, immobile, not responding – and suddenly he explains why. Harry has been visiting in the 20 years and looking after him, and surviving who knows how – and we realise that they have continually played games of Gotch on each other! They go to see Harry's parents, Koreans who adopted him, and he finds in his mail, a letter 20 years from an old flame, Frida Filcher (a game Kathleen Turner) who tells him that she had a daughter.. He assumes it is his (and with the revelation at the end of the film, it is a wonder that he and Lloyd could have thought this) and, since he says he has been diagnosed as needing kidney transplant, he and Lloyd go off to find the girl, and a potential kidney.

One joke is that they arrive back at Frida's house because in their search, Harry had looked only at the back of the envelope with the return address instead of where the letter had been sent! That is one of the funnier jokes for an adult audience. The rest of the film is full of dopey interchanges between the two, elaboration of their dopey characters, lots of pratfalls, lots of slapstick, lots of bodily function innuendo and situations, and behaviour like 10-year-olds (with apologies to most 10-year-olds). The comedy is for some guffaws, especially from the 10-year-olds in the audience (which happened).

The finding of the daughter is not too difficult after the initial stupidities, and it is revealed that she has been adopted by a top scientist who was about to go to a convention in El Paso to receive an award and to offer, in a box, hope for the future of the human race. The daughter certainly does not look anything like Harry, is more like Lloyd and behaves a bit like him – the scientist's intelligence does not seem to have rubbed off on her. But, the scientist is married to an avaricious wife who wants his money, especially from his science insights, and conspires with the handyman to get rid of him – but, since the daughter left the important box behind, he has to travel with Harry and Lloyd, leading to a whole lot of dumb and dumber situations and practical jokes -and attempted murder.

There are some twists at the end of the film, especially with Kathleen Turner turning up to meet her daughter. And the paternity issue is solved.

There was some years back a prequel called Dumb and Dumberer. This does mean that Dumb and Dumberest was available as a title for this film. It would have been most suitable as it turns out. So, who is the film for? Nostalgia for the middle-aged? But they will realise that they have moved beyond Harry and Lloyd. For the younger audiences, probably – but they will now have to wait another 20 years for their moments of disillusionment.

That's it: a film in which we can release our dopey inner child!

FOXCATCHER

US, 2014, 134 minutes, Colour.

Steve Carell, Channing Tatum, Mark Ruffalo, Vanessa Redgrave, Sienna Miller, Anthony Michael Hall, Guy Boyd.

Directed by Bennett Miller.

Foxcatcher has been very well reviewed and nominated for many awards. It certainly is a very interesting and well-made film, worth seeing for its characters, power plays, American wealth and a

film about Olympic wrestling.

There is an opening scene with people riding to hounds in pursuit of a fox. There is both realism and symbolism. Foxcatcher is the name of a company, set up by John du Pont, the heir to the du Pont business millions. It was a company for the training of wrestlers, with the intention of training athletes for the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Team Foxcatcher.

At the centre of the film is a young man, Mark Schultz, quite a single-minded young man, intent on his wrestling. He is something of a loner, goes to training in a gym and is managed by his older brother, Dave. The two brothers had won Olympic called at the 19th 84 Los Angeles Games. There is a certain rivalry but Dave is a more assured man, happily married with children.

Into their lives comes John du Pont, multimillionaire, with an interest in wrestling and especially in Mark Schultz and a summons to his Pennsylvania estate, plane ticket and helicopter reception provided. He makes Mark an offer which he cannot and does not refuse, coming to Pennsylvania, joining Team Foxcatcher, working with a number of elite wrestlers. While the film is about wrestling and there are quite a number of sequences which illustrate techniques, this is not solely a sports film. Soon John du Pont is inviting Dave Schultz to join the group. He is reluctant but is finally persuaded.

While the director, Bennett Miller, won the best director award at the 2014 Cannes film Festival, this is very much an actors' film. Channing Tatum is quite intense as Mark Schultz, one of his best performances, a serious young man, not relating very well to others, finding in John du Pont not only a sponsor but something as a father-figure. Mark Ruffalo, a fine actor in many a film, is certainly very good as Dave Schultz, happy to work with his brother, wary of John du Pont, yet working within the Foxcatcher Team, only to be the victim of the intensity.

The surprise is the performance of Steve Carell, best known as a comedian, often zany and loopy, but here very serious as John du Pont. His make up, especially his nose, given great prominence and often filmed from a low angle, suggest, at times, a bird of prey. Humour is not one of his qualities. Everything is serious, everything is intense, including his exercise of power to persuade athletes to join his Team, his joining in in their training, fancying himself as one of them. He is not only a father figure for Mark but also a sinister mentor.

The du Pont family traced its lineage back to the War of Independence, with pictures and other mementos in their mansion. John du Pont takes wealth for granted, has a range of assistants who do his bidding, summoning people to meetings, enforcing his regimes. He has a strong and strange relationship with his dominant mother, played by Vanessa Redgrave, who considers wrestling a lowly sport, herself very involved with horse breeding and training.

But, it becomes all too much for John du Pont, leading, for those who do not know the true story, to a surprising and jolting ending.

While the film is a picture of the sport of wrestling in the United States, it is also a significant piece of Americana, the status and power of the wealthy, exercise of dominance, with tragic results.

HUMAN CAPITAL/ IL CAPITALE UMANO

Italy, 2014, 111 minutes, Colour.

Fabrizio Bentivoglio, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi Fabrizio Gifuni, Matilde Gioli, Valeria Golino.

Directed by Paolo Virzi.

This is an impressive Italian film, a drama with a range of characters and a central mystery. It was the official entry Italian entry for the Foreign Language Academy Awards for 2014.

During the film, many audiences will be wondering what the meaning of Human Capital, the title, actually is. It is explained at the end of the film but indicating the meaning here does not spoil the plot in any way. Human Capital is the technical word for used by Italian insurance companies to estimate the worth for beneficiaries of a person who has died. It does seem a harsh and abstract phrase.

However, the film is not abstract at all. It opens with a party for socialites. One of the waiters cycling home is injured in a hit-run accident. It is not clear who the driver of the car was, whose car it was, and the screenplay offers several possibilities as the film goes on.

The screenplay is structured in three parts, each focusing on a central character, telling the story from their point of view, while advancing the narrative – although there is a six month period in the film between the accident and the move towards resolution.

The first story is that of Dino (Fabio Bentivoglio), a real estate agent, pushy and brash, who wants to have something more in life. He has a daughter, Serena (Matilde Gioli), who is studying. Dino is married to a psychologist, Roberta (Valeria Golino), his second wife. Serena is dating Giovanni, the son of a wealthy businessman and his former-actress wife. When Dino arrives at the mansion of the businessman, he is invited to play tennis and makes a success of it, asking for financial advice, which leads him to borrow heavily, lying about his money status. When he imposes later, asking for his money, he is fobbed off, and tries to rectify his situation by further lying and borrowing.

The second story is that of Carla (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi), the former actress, unhappy in her marriage, remembering happier days, especially when she wants to buy a run-down theatre and calls on a friend, a lecturer and director, to give advice to the board she sets up for the running of the theatre and its contribution to the town. She has a tenuous relationship with Giovanni, the son, but is open to his relationship with Serena. However, her husband is more preoccupied with his business than with her.

The third story is that of Serena herself, her relationship with Giovanni which is not as it seemed earlier in the film. He is irresponsible, drinking, going to parties – with his car, which raises all kinds of questions as to which car was involved in the accident and who could have been driving. There are some interesting twists which we do not anticipate.

The other interesting character is Luca, living with his uncle, becoming involved in his uncle's drug-dealings, having his own personal problems – and a client of Dino's wife, Roberta. It is in her waiting room that he encounters Serena, which leads to the final complications.

The fourth chapter is the resolution and is called Human Capital.

The film keeps the interest, throwing light on the wealthy class in Italy, the business dealings, especially with the financial crises in Italy. It also throws light on the less wealthy classes, their struggles, their ambitions.

For audiences who are on the lookout for strong, well-written and well-acted dramas, Human Capital can be recommended.

MORTDECAI

US, 2014, 107 minutes, Colour.

Johnny Depp, Gwyneth Paltrow, Ewan McGregor [?](#), Paul Bettany, Olivia Munn, Michael Culkin, Ulrich Thomsen, Jeff Goldblum.

Directed by David Koepp.

Twit? Twittiest!

This is certainly an oddball comedy, a star vehicle for Johnny Depp to do one of his impersonations. He is Lord Mortdecai, allegedly British aristocracy, with country mansion, with a trophy wife who is smarter than he is, Joanna (Gwyneth Paltrow), an art dealer who gets himself involved in frauds. Depp portrays him as one of those silly-ass Englishman, accent, vocabulary-a-twitter, all that can be spoofed about the upper-class.

How his fans might find this a bit difficult to predict – and his wife later in the film remarking that sometimes he can be irritating. However most audiences will become used to this kind of performance – as we have with his Jack Sparrow.

As the film opens, he is involved in double-crossing some Chinese art dealers – but, as always, his loyal, ultra-loyal, manservant, with a gangster's voice and tone, comes to his rescue, throws the punches, takes the shots, is ever ready to come to the aid of his respected boss. This is Jock, played with an amusing consistency and loyalty by Paul Bettany.

When an art restorer is murdered, and the main suspect is a Latin American terrorist who wants to finance his groups by art sales and who keeps reappearing during the film, a murder or two more, some mayhem, and suffering all kinds of shock tactics during a car chase, Mortdecai is asked to get involved by MI5, represented by Ewan McGregor [?](#), playing straight man to Johnny Depp's antics.

Mortdecai's adventures include his abduction by a Communist art connoisseur and his interrogation in Moscow – with Jock, once again, to the rescue. Then he is off to LA to sell his car to another art connoisseur, Jeff Goldblum. Who has an intriguing daughter who gets up to all kinds of intrigue. Everybody turns up in's LA, Joanna, the MI5 agent, the terrorist, and Jock, once again to the rescue.

The fraud involves a painting by Goya which seems to have disappeared but has an art history of disappearance, acquisition by Goerring, and several fakes – all of which is exposed in a finale at a London auction.

While watching it, older audiences may be reminded of The Pink Panther, then of Peter Sellers who might have taken on the role had the script been available in his day – and then, there are many

Terry- Thomas mannerisms, with Depp even having the gap teeth. Probably Peter sellers would have done the role with much more ease and aplomb.

PAPER PLANES

Australia, 2014, 94 minutes, Colour.

Sam Worthington, Ed Oxenbould, Deborah Mailman, David Wenham, Nicholas Bakapoulos-Cooke?, Ina Imai, Terry Norris, Julian Dennison.

Directed by Robert Connolly.

This entertaining film has everything going for it. It is designed for a family audience and should be satisfying for everyone, parents and children. It is feelgood, generally pleasantly predictable, telling a good story, having interesting characters, a 12-year-old that many children could identify with, a theme of children's activities, a competition, a touch of pre-adolescent romance, a snobby child villain... What more could we want?

The title indicates what the principal focus is, the making of paper planes (and some of us finding that it is far more complicated and creative than we might have thought, a variety of forms and shapes for the planes). In fact, during the titles, where shown the process of paper making – because the quality of the paper, its futures, its texture, are important for the shaping of the planes.

At the centre of all this is a 12-year-old, Dylan. He is played by the very talented Ed Oxenbould. He made his mark in television series, *Underbelly* and *Puberty Blues*, credibly playing an American child as Alexander in the family comedy, *Alexander and his Terrible, Horrible, Very Bad Day*. It looks as if he has a very strong career ahead of him.

He lives at home with his father, Sam Worthington, who seems to have given up on life after the death, five months earlier, of his wife in accident. Dylan is the stronger in coping, missing his mother but acknowledging the truth of her death. His father mopes at home, lying down, leaving the television on with sport, unable to go to work. Dylan rides his bike to the local country primary school where the students are a mixture of white, ethnic, aboriginal. The teacher is played by Peter Rowsthorn, full of enthusiasm for the students and the classes (after he collects all their phones and devices before class) and encourages them when a visitor comes to talk to them about paper planes and gets them to test out their skills.(if you're wondering where you saw Peter Rowsthorn before, he played Brett, the exceedingly put-upon husband of Kim in *Kath and Kim*.)

Dylan becomes enthusiastic about paper planes, qualifies to go to the finals, is helped by his mischievous friend, Kevin, with some explosive experiments, and visits his grandfather in a home for the elderly, a former pilot who takes Dylan to the flight museum and imagines some war action, helping Dylan to get ideas were his planes. His father does help him in showing him the winged keel for the America's Cup in 1983, Dylan incorporating this into the design of his paper planes, also studying an eagle in-flight - he feeds the bird each day with a rasher of bacon.

The Australian finals are to be held in Sydney. Dylan's father eventually drives him (something of a credibility gap for the audience since the film was photographed in Western Australia and they drive along a few dirt roads et cetera and then quickly arrive in Sydney!)

At the finals, presided over by a very exuberant former champion, Deborah Mailman, Dylan meets a young Japanese paper plane champion, Kim, and they become friends. Also present is a very caddish would-be champion, Jason (Nicholas Boukapolus-Cooke) and his father, played by David Wenham, a man who realises he has a very obnoxious child, who insists on calling him Patrick instead of dad, and who spouts a philosophy of winning is everything. There is some excitement as all the contestants fly their plane over a swimming pool.

As we anticipate, Jason and Dylan win the competition and travel to Tokyo for the world finals. Dylan works hard because he has no money, his teacher trying to take up a collection, his father having the idea of a garage sale, his grandfather and the ladies at the home providing cakes, lamingtons prominent, and they collect enough money for Dylan to go, but not his father. The key point is that his father does not want to sell his wife's piano, she was a piano teacher, even though he is offered \$3000 for it.

There is plenty of excitement in Tokyo, and the Tokyo tourist agency will not be disappointed at the presentation in the film. Kim is there. Dylan and Kim continue their friendship. Jason is also there and indulges in some bullying which means that Dylan might not be able to participate in the contest. But on the contest goes, Dylan adjusting his plane, remembering his mother who taught him to make the paper planes, the advice of his father and grandfather, the image of the eagle.

This is a very nice film, so happiness all round, including Dylan being very supportive of his father, Jason having some redemptive moments.

The film was co-written and directed by Robert Connolly who has had a strong career in the Australian film industry with producing and directing such films as *The Bank*, *Three Dollars*, *Balibo* and producing and directing a segment of the Tim Winton film, *The Turning*.

It is hoped that this film is popular not only in Australia but around the world.

PENGUINS OF MADAGASCAR

US, 2014, 90 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Tom Mc Grath, Chris Miller, Christopher Knights, Conrad Vernon, John Malkovich, Benedict Cumberbatch, Ken Jeong, Peter Stormare, Andy Richter, Danny Jacobs and Werner Herzog. Directed by Eric Dunnell, Simon J. Smith

Everybody enjoyed the appearances of the penguins in the three Madagascar films. They were, to say the least, disruptive. They also had a lot of zany dialogue and found themselves in all kinds of humorous, slapstick, action-filled sequences, with a propensity for undermining the plans of the key animal characters. So popular were they that a number of short films were made in which they starred and they had their own television series. Here they are again, with their own film.

In the past, the Penguin said they had never been to Antarctica. But that does not matter for this film. It re-invents their origins. In fact, the film opens with a March of the Penguins, reminding us of the documentary that was extremely popular, familiarising audiences around the world with the habits of penguins, their coping with the seasons, their march through the ice continent, then mating, their producing eggs and chicks. Here we see them in a long, long file, marching, conformed

to the traditions – with a lot of dialogue indicating that they have no idea why they should be so conformist and following these traditions.

It is in this context, that Skipper questions the traditions and decides to be independent, taking with him his pals, Kowalski and Ricco. They see an egg rolling down the snow cliffs and try to save it – and from it, emerges the rather cute penguin, with the nice voice, Private. We have to acknowledge the skills of Tom McGrath², Christopher Knights, Conrad Vernon, Chris Miller who really do have distinctive styles to bring these penguins to lively interchanges.

The main audiences for the film will not appreciate the joke at the beginning – but film buffs who appreciate the idiosyncratic career of director, Werner Herzog, will enjoy the fact that he is the introductory voice-over, reminding audiences that he made a film about Antarctica, and that he is a director who has made extraordinary physical demands of those who appear in his films. He has some very jokey lines about documentary makers, cuteness of penguins, and is not above showing us how directors can be bit unscrupulous in engineering the scenes, by hitting the three penguins over the cliff!

The penguins encounter four international agents, led by Classified (Benedict Cumberbatch) and an assortment of animals. They are recruited to try to combat a mad Professor who wants to transform all the animals, get rid of them, starting with penguins. He is a mad scientist who transforms himself into a giant octopus, a creature who readily suggests villainy, and has crew of small octopi to do his dirty work, as well as some vast machines. After some international visits, the focus is in New York City, the transformation of penguins into mutants, the confrontation with Dave – or other names starting with D because Skipper doesn't always remember the correct name.

And, while Herzog's appearance might be a surprise to many, the voice of Dave is also a surprise, John Malkovich.

The agents run away at first, calling it re-grouping, but finally come to the aid of the penguins, their transformation back to normal, the vanquishing of Dave and the other octopi.

The screenplay, after all, is rather conventional, presenting a familiar enough plot, but aiming for entertainment for younger audiences rather than for their parents.

SELMA

US, 2014, 128 minutes,,,Colour.

David Oyelowo, Carmen Ejogo, Tom Wilkinson, Oprah Winfrey, Giovanni Ribisi, Andre Holland, Common, Tim Roth, Dylan Baker, Martin Sheen, Stephen Root, Wendell Pierce, Cuba Gooding Jr, Alessandro Nivola.

Directed by Ava Du Vernay.

It is 50 years ago, this year, that Martin Luther King led the march on Selma. And this film is a worthy commemoration.

Martin Luther King, vilified by many during his life, especially by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, and losing his life to an assassin in 1968, at the age of 39. After his death, his wife, Coretta, campaigned for the introduction of a public holiday in his honour, something which was eventually achieved and is still celebrated.

Selma is a film that takes us back to 1964 and 1965. Audience knowledge of the 1963 March on Washington and King's speech of his dream is presupposed. While the film is a portrait of King, it focuses on his racial equality cause, spread by non-violence, his political contacts, his collaboration with other activists, differences from the approach of Malcolm X, the issue of the Selma March. There is also some focus on his relationship with his wife, his infidelities but his love for Coretta, his care for his children, and Coretta's standing by her husband, especially at Selma.

King and his associates are central to the film as his Coretta. However, the president of the time was Lyndon B. Johnson who inherited the presidency after the death of JFK but who was elected in a landslide in his own right in 1964. A Texan, he met with King and spoke to him by phone, challenged by an equality issue that King was raising: black Americans had the right to vote but, especially in the South, officials, from Governor George Wallace to petty bureaucrats, did their best to make it impossible for the registration to vote to be accepted. This is dramatised in an early scene when a nurse, played significantly and symbolically by Oprah Winfrey, tries to register and is asked how many districts there are in the state, which she answers correctly, but then fails because she cannot name the officials in each of the 67 districts.

King and a group went to Selma, Alabama, to decide whether it was a suitable place to have a march and a demonstration, the attitudes of the locals (shown to be fairly hostile with Confederate flags, spitting and denunciations) and the risk of protest and violence.

The apprehensions were not misplaced. In the first attempt, the troopers stood their ground and confronted the quiet and peaceful marchers, chasing them and brutally bashing them. King made television appeals to the American public who watched the television news of the events. For the next March, people from all over the United States, black and white, especially with religious leaders of all denominations as well as nuns, coming to help and to join in the March. Crucial to the campaign and public opinion was the murder of a Boston Episcopalian priest by local bashing thugs.

Governor George Wallace, his sheriffs and other officials had no time for black Americans, mouthing denunciations, even urging President Johnson to think about the dire and dread consequences if segregation was lifted...

Ultimately, the march did take place and is a satisfying ending to this film, although the drama comes in the preparations, the thwarting of the original march, the police trooper brutality, and the effect on the American public bracket heightened by our seeing excerpts of news coverage of the time edited into this film.

It is interesting to note that four of the central characters are played by British actors. David Oyelowo is a theatre actor from England, of Nigerian background, who played on the London stage, moved to the United States and appeared in the sheriff in Jack Reacher, the rebellious son in The Butler, the fellow-journalist in Paper Boy. He gives a powerful performance, an impersonation of King, yet getting inside King's character and communicating his mind, his thoughts, his hopes, and his faith, seen significantly as he knelt on the bridge at Selma when the march was held up. He also captures the voice, the modulations, the power of rhetoric in King's speeches. The film ends with King's speech at the capital in Montgomery, Alabama.

British Carmen Ejogo plays Coretta King. Tom Wilkinson is Lyndon Johnson and Tim Roth is Governor Wallace. There is an uncredited appearance by Martin Sheen as the judge who presides over the case as to whether the march should go ahead. The rest of the cast is made up of a number of black character actors like Wendell Pierce, Cuba Gooding Jr, Andre Holland and white actors like Giovanni Ribisi and Alessandro Nivola.

This is a very earnest film, some American audiences finding it too preachy – although, for them, that might be an important point. As it is, this is a tribute to Martin Luther King and his achievement in the middle of the 20th century, a heritage that has lasted, despite frequent flareups, riots and injustices towards African Americans.

STILL ALICE

US, 2014, 101 minutes, Colour.

Julianne Moore, Alec Baldwin, Kristin Stewart, Kate Bosworth, Hunter Parish.

Directed by Richard Glatzer, Wash Westmoreland.

It was extraordinary the silence in the cinema as people, we together, watched Still Alice. What were we thinking, what were we feeling? Were we identifying with Alice personally, the early onset of Alzheimer's disease, the fact that she was only 50, that she was a world-class academic and expert on linguistics and was suffering deterioration in her deepest talent? Were we thinking about relatives or friends with Alzheimer's, trying to appreciate the condition, their feelings? Had we had some experience of care for a person with Alzheimer's or was this a prospect to come? Watching the film was certainly a personal, sad, even draining experience.

That we felt and thought this way is to the credit of the film, based on a 2007 novel by Lisa Genova, and its very sensitive screenplay by the writers-directors, Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland (whose previous career focused on features and documentaries on gay issues).

But, of course, it is to the credit of Julianne Moore and her award-winning performance. Julianne Moore has been a significant actress for over 20 years, creating many memorable characters. But Alice is a major achievement. And the screenplay doesn't stint on showing her experiences, the initial touches of forgetfulness, even when giving a significant national lecture, her groping for a memory to continue. While jogging to Columbia University where she was on the staff, she suddenly is bewildered and does not know where she is.

It is in the ensuing sequences that are important for Alice and for her husband, John (Alec Baldwin) to understand what is happening, that we learned the background for the early Alzheimer's. She consults a neurologist who does verbal and memory tests, which she is unable to complete successfully. MRI follows, the accumulating of information, and the neurologist explaining to her and John, as well as to the audience, how rare it is to have an early onset, but the physical realities, the genetic inheritance, and the pessimistic, but real, prognosis.

There is great subtlety with which Julianne Moore portrays the initial phase, the growing difficulties, and a most poignant scene where she and John tell their three adult children what is happening, including the genetic possibility for one of the children to have the same experience. In another, also most poignant scene, where Alice visits a home for sufferers from Alzheimer's, getting a tour, seeing the elderly people, sitting quietly, getting agitated. The nurse giving the tour obviously thinks that Alice is looking at the place for a parent to settle there.

Part of the silence of the audience watching the film was in the intense concentration in watching the details, even small details, of Alice losing the words, the thread of conversation, not recognising somebody she had met moments earlier, unable to read a book, repeating the page, even unable to find the bathroom at the house on the coast where she loved walking along the beach, contemplating the water.

Alec Baldwin is the sympathetic husband who has to sacrifice aspects of his own academic career and promotion - and that is quite a stretch for him as an actor because he always seems a touch cynical, ready for betrayal rather than fidelity. A final scene where he takes Alice to a favourite place for an ice cream and she can only repeat his words is very moving.

Kristin Stewart (Twilight) is Lydia, the younger daughter, who has decided not to go to college, who wants to act in California, finds it difficult to get auditions, with her mother interfering and wanting her to be better educated, with a backup plan. Towards the end of the film, she appears in the final scene of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, with a part of a speech about her hopes and going to the city. Lydia comes to stay with her mother and care for her, the film becoming ever sadder and sadder.

It is surprising, though not really surprising, how tearful one feels writing this review and re-living Alice's experiences, the woman and her dignity, remembering Alice gone, but still Alice.

TAKEN 3

US, 2014, 109 minutes, Colour.

Liam Neeson, Forrest Whitaker, Famke Janssen, Maggie Grace, Dougray Scott, Andrew Howard.
Directed by Olivier Megatron.

Who would have thought there would be three Taken films? In the first, Bryan Mills, a solid and sympathetic Liam Neeson, finds that his daughter is kidnapped in Paris and that he has to find her, drawing on his skills in detection and combat action in his past Secret Service, before she is sold into sexual slavery. Plenty of action, much of it violent, created by French writer-director, Luke Besson and directed by Pierre Morell.

Besson and writer Robert Mark Kamen got together with director, Olivier Megatron (a distracting

thought is that his name sounds as if it is one of the Transformers) for a sequel, Taken 2, This time Mills' wife, Famke Janssen, was kidnapped. Much the same plot except for some spectacular location photography in Istanbul and throughout Turkey.

Again Besson, Kamen and Megatron combined for this sequel. Since Mills had only one daughter, who could be taken in the third film? Apparently Liam Neeson did not want an abduction this time, so there is not. Rather, there is a murder, and the whole action is set in Los Angeles. Brian Mills goes through the same anguish as he did in the other films, relentlessly seeking out the murderer, which brings in subplots of arms deals, business companies and blackmail, loan sharks and violent demands for repayment, the Russian Mafia. Mills is deceived a couple of times, being set up not only for the murder, but for the hunting down of the Russian criminals.

This time the Los Angeles Police are a bit slow, going by the book, being fairly certain that Mills is the suspect that they are after, concentrating on him rather than the subplots which, eventually, they have to do. It is Forrest Whitaker who plays the main police chief.

Mills wife, Famke Janssen, has married again, to businessman, Stuart (Dougray Scott), who is not very happy about her keeping contact with her former husband, and Mills fostering that contact. In the meantime, Mills's daughter, Kim (Maggie Grace), is pregnant but is wary of telling her father. Needless to say, the Mafia thugs are after as well.

There are some twists in the plot – which may make us not so alert to some of the improbabilities and holes in the plot. Nevertheless, this is an action show, detection show – and the last in the series.

THAT SUGAR FILM

Australia, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Damon Gameau, Hugh Jackman, Stephen Fry, Brenton Thwaites, Isabel Lucas, Jessica Marais and many medical experts.

Directed by Damon Gameau.

It might sound like this film will have a sweet taste but it is designed to make audiences concerned about their propensity for sweet tastes and, especially, for consumption of sugar and fructose. This is a documentary, a very entertaining one, that examines the role of sugar in our diet, in our metabolism, and the consequences – with a look at how sugar is so strongly promoted in our commercial culture.

Some years ago, American documentary-maker, Morgan Spurlock, decided that he would film an experiment about diet and takeaway food, especially at McDonald's [?](#) and other such franchises. It was called Supersize Me. He decided that the focus of the experiment would be his Supersizing every order and eat just this for a month to see what happened to him. Needless to say, he put on weight became unwell, certainly needed some medical checkups and processes for getting back to normal.

Damon Gameau is an actor who has been a number of Australian and television programs, generally the cheeky and cheerful character, quick on the draw with his remarks and cracks. This means that he is very well suited to the role he has set up for himself, not exactly doing a Spurlock, but

something very similar with sugar.

He genially introduces himself and his girlfriend who is pregnant. Since he wrote the film as well as directing, it is clear that he has strong views on sugar intake and its results. He does get a panel of experts, blood, the diet, the general health, who are interviewed during the film – and they are introduced with our bit of animation and giving them superhero names. They are wary about his experiment.

The film uses an entertaining device for the expert talking heads, and there are many of them, but he generally has quick bites which bring home the points – but they all appear and are seen within frameworks, machines, which can be moved, turned over... So we are continually alert to what these experts have to offer.

The film uses a number of celebrities to give us background, and sugar information. Hugh Jackman turns up and does some sand drawings to illustrate the origins of sugar in this part of the world, eventually going to India, making its way to Europe where a couple of centuries ago it was looked on as a specialty by the wealthy. Stephen Fry turns up to give us a humorous talk about the different kinds of sugar, the glucose that put energy into our system, the sucrose and its effects and a warning about fructose and its absorption in the liver, turning to fat, increasing triglycerides... Later, up-and-coming Australian actor, Brenton Thwaites serves as a model to indicate what is happening in our interiors and the damage that too much sugar can do to the liver, to the heart, to the bloodstream.

The information Gameau gets for the experiment is that the sugar intake will be the equivalent of 40 teaspoonfuls of sugar per day. And it is immediately alarming as he begins, that his first breakfast cereal and juice is more than a third of the teaspoonfuls already. As he continues, he finds ways of adding the sugar even to a chicken lunch! Within some days he is put on several kilos and finds his mood is changing, some lethargy...

Over a decade ago he had contact with a group of aboriginal people at Mia Wiru in the Northern Territory, especially in a community whose medical adviser had changed their diet, especially as regards sugar. But, with the advent of the supermarkets and the bombarding advertising, the increased intake of sugar was doing harm.

Next, he went off to the United States and, while obesity had been mentioned, there are quite a few off-putting close-ups of obesity. He is still having the equivalent of 40 teaspoonfuls a day, finding smoothies, drinks, and, alarmingly finding that such a drink Mountain Dew has more sugar than Coke or Pepsi and more caffeine. In fact, he accompanies a dentist who travels around the state of Kentucky working with locals, including a young man who has been drinking an enormous amount of Mountain Dew since he was a little child and his teeth have either fallen out or rotted. We may not want to look at the close-ups of his mouth, but this is a salutary tale. Gameau also finds a pill that one can put in one's mouth which will sweeten food with a more savoury taste – he even tries it with a chilli but says it doesn't work.

In fairness, he decides to interview a scientist who has been working on sugar research for some time. He is not alarmed, and it seems his studies have been financed by Coca-Cola.

He has been keeping in touch with his girlfriend by Skype and, on his return, as large, he suggests, as

she is in her pregnancy, she gives birth and he is delighted with his daughter. With the help of the experts, he gets back to normal size, and gets to editing this film so that we can share his extremely cautionary experience.

Older people probably need to see this film and act on it. Parents certainly need to see the film to check on their children's diets and the effect, especially of their brain capacities and attention at school. (A school kit is available.)

THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING

UK, 2014, 123 minutes, Colour.

Eddie Redmayne, Felicity Jones, Simon McBurney?, Emily Watson, David Thewlis.

Directed by James Marsh.

While Stephen Hawking may not have developed a theory of everything, he was certainly one of the major science theoreticians of the 20th century. Because of his book, *A Brief History of Time*, he became more than celebrated and has continued famous, this film reinforcing audience knowledge of him and admiration for him.

It is not the first time that Hawking has appeared in a biographical film. In 2004, he was portrayed in a film and television by the then comparatively-unknown, Benedict Cumberbatch. The film treated his early years, the onset of motor neuron disease and his marriage to Jane.

Since then, there have been documentary films and television programs, on his science, on his personality, on his coping with his illness. American documentary-maker, Errol Morris, also made a film of *A Brief History of Time*. Audiences coming to see *The Theory of Everything*, may well have some idea, many ideas, about Hawking and his life and work.

The major challenge for any actor portraying Hawking is to communicate his experience of motor neuron disease, its gradual debilitating effect, the initial anticipation that he would have only two years to live, his being reduced to travelling in a wheelchair, less able to speak, undergoing surgery and a tracheotomy which meant that he had to use a computer simulation speech to communicate by word. All this, and more, are extraordinarily communicated by Eddie Redmayne (who had been Marius in the film version of *Les Misérables*).

The early part of the film is set in the 1960s with Hawking as a student at Oxford, seemingly casual with his approach to studies, having an extraordinarily quick brain and an ability to penetrate and solve mathematical problems. With his doctorate, he was interested in old stars and the collapsing in on themselves, theories of black holes. Later, he was to change his opinions and return to the beginnings of the universe and explorations of the Big Bang Theory. He continued to think, write, speculate on physics questions and draw on mathematical theory.

In case anyone thinks that the film is overloaded with scientific information that does not communicate well to the general audience, they are only partly right. There are sufficient indications of Hawking's thinking and some explanations, but not overly taxing for a general audience. Scientists might think it is theory-light.

While the film is about science and mathematics, it also tells the story of a man who in his early 20s was diagnosed with motor-neuron disease. The beginnings are suggested, and then Hawking collapses, is diagnosed by the doctors and, often reluctantly, has to come to terms with his condition. In fact, it is quite extraordinary to see what happened to Hawking in terms of the disease, the gradual degeneration, but his extraordinary survival.

The film also has a love story. Stephen met Jane, a devout Church of England young woman compared to his atheistic stances. They meet, date, some courting and then the crisis of his illness. In retrospect, audiences may well know the Jane spent 25 years of her life looking after Hawking, bearing three children and bringing them up, a lifetime of generosity. But, it all became too much for both of them, Jane experiencing the toll on her life with and for Stephen, his becoming dependent on his nurse, whom he married after divorcing Jane. While this might be the sensationalism of headlines, it is important to see just what happened with each of the two, hardships, regrets, the experience of a long time. (the screenplay for this film is based on Jane's book about her life with Stephen Hawking, the second book she wrote, it seems less angry than the first one – and both Stephen and Jane approved of this screen version.

For anyone expecting something of a scientific treatise, they will be disappointed. For those who find the screen portrayal of serious illness demanding but informative, there will be much to offer in this film. And for all who get caught up in the love story, live through the hardships of the decades and see a marriage collapsing, it will seem more realistic than they might have thought, yet still very disappointing in its finish.

Which means, on the whole, this is a moving experience for a general audience.

UNBROKEN

US, 2014, 137 minutes, Colour.

Jack O'Connell, Domhnall Gleeson, Garrett Hedlund, Finn Witrock, Jai Courtney, Luke Treadaway.
Directed by Angelina Jolie.

Unbroken is based on the life story of Lou Zamperini, son of Italian migrants to the United States, who went on to acclaim at the 1936 Olympic Games, winning a gold medal in distance track, then a bombardier in World War II, prisoner in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. While the narrative of the film ends in 1945, Zamperini had another almost 70 years of life, dying as late as 2014.

The film was directed by Angelina Jolie and has received mixed reactions from critics and audience, some of which, judging by the harsh spirit in which they were written, seem to be reviewing Angelina Jolie herself (and alleged limitations) rather than her film. In fact, this is her second directorial film. The first was the unfortunately little-seen film, *Land of Blood and Honey*, a sometimes harrowing picture of the war in the Balkans in the 1990s, focusing on the treatment of women, abuse, rape, victimisation. Angelina Jolie seems to be interested in presenting the more harrowing aspects of life and of human nature.

This film is almost four films in one, the director showing a talent for an aerial warfare film, a sports film, a lost-at-sea film and a prison camp film. This means that it is quite demanding on the audience, an invitation to share in the continuing hardships of Zamperini, especially in the camps.

As a matter of interest, while the film setting is the United States and Japan, the film was made in Australia, most of it in Queensland.

The star of the film is the British actor, Jack O'Connell, who gives the film his all and will probably ensure constant employment in films in the years to come.

The film opens with a close-up of a group in a bomber, going on a mission to do destroy a factory, set upon by Japanese fighter planes, the film showing the detail of the role of each man, pilot and co-pilot, bombardier, the approach to the target, opening the bomb bay doors, letting the bombs go, but coping with a Japanese attack, some of the men wounded, and the drama of a crash landing at the airbase on return. There is another aerial action sequence, but this time the mission is to find pilots adrift in the ocean, but after crashing into the ocean, three of the men find themselves adrift.

The aerial action is interrupted by flashbacks to Lou's childhood, a cheeky and problematic child, from fervent Catholic family (with a sequence of homily by the parish priest about creation, the dark in the light, and being faithful to commitment). Fortunately, Lou's older brother, Peter, a runner, takes Lou in hand, trains him, overcomes his low self-image and encourages him so that eventually he is chosen for the 1936 Olympic team (with the screenplay noting Jesse Owens' achievement at those games). A winner, he has achieved a goal and developed his better self.

After this, the film moves into the lost at sea drama, three men surviving a crash into the ocean, over 45 days on life rafts, with few rations, trying to keep their minds active in conversation, fishing, surrounded by sharks (with a Jaws moment that makes us leap from our seats), being strafed by a Japanese plane. This is a close-up of the will to live, endurance and survival.

But there is still more demanding narrative. Zamperini and his friend, Phil (Domhnall Gleeson) are captured. The sequences are in the prisoner-of-war camp in Tokyo and then the prisoners removed towards the end of the war to work on the wharves, loading coal. While audiences are familiar with Japanese camps and the frequent cruel treatment, humiliations, brutality, there are some distinctive sequences here which bring into focus the treatment of prisoners by the cruel Japanese, a young sadistic commander who has not received the promotion he anticipated it has a fixation on Zamperini, and some moments trying to cultivate his friendship, even allowing him to broadcast on Tokyo radio to tell his parents that he was alive – though he refuses any collaboration for radio propaganda and is punished by the demand that every prisoner punch him in the face. He is frequently beaten, taunted by the commander, and made to hold aloft a wooden beam with the threat of execution should he drop it.

Life in the camp, its highs and lows, are brought vividly to life.

Woven into the screenplay (with famous writers and directors collaborating on it including the Coen brothers, Richard La Gravenese and William Nicholson) are issues of belief in God, the role of prayer, the nature of faith, and pledges to God for commitment after survival. The experiences of Zamperini dramatise the power of the human spirit, and its indomitability in the face of suffering.

Information is given at the end of the film – including the fact that Zamperini went back to Japan after the war, worked towards friendship and reconciliation (except for the commander who refused to meet Zamperini on his visits) and that forgiveness is all important.

THE WEDDING RINGER

US, 2015, 101 minutes, Colour.

Kevin Hart, Josh Gadd, Kaley Cuoco- Sweeting, Jorge Garcia, Dan Gill, Ken Howard, Chloris Leachman, Jenefer Lewis, Mimi Rogers, Olivia Thirlby.

Directed by Jeremy Garelick.

It is not as if they have not been enough films about weddings,: Wedding Planet, Wedding Singer, Wedding, Wedding Crashers, Big Wedding, American Wedding, Four Weddings and... So, here is another.

This is a star vehicle for Kevin Hart, a short, African- American comedian, with unbelievable rapid delivery, a whole stack of double takes and patter that get him into all kinds of trouble as well is out of all kinds of trouble. Hart is an acquired taste, irritating in Ride Along, almost unbearable in the remake of About Last Night. Actually, in The Wedding Ringer, on the whole, he or is rather good.

Doug (Josh Gadd) is a rather big lump of a man, bespectacled, not a prospect for a quick marriage to a glamorous wife. But, here he is engaged to Gretchen (Kaley Cuoco-Sweeting) whose main aim in life seems to be to get married, have something of an up-market, extravagant wedding ceremony and wedding breakfast. And her whole family are right behind her, her concerned mother, her homophobic football-loving husband, and grandma (Chloris Leachman) who, at one stage of a family dinner, begins to go up in flames.

The wedding planner knows that Doug has no friends and no best man. He refers him to Jimmy (Kevin Hart) who runs a company to find best men as well as groomsmen. We see him in operation, very smooth talking, much appreciated, but only doing the work as business and not wanting to have any personal friendships or attachments afterwards.

Most of the film is about his setting up Doug with a best man, himself, and the oddest-looking lot of groomsmen, who all polish up rather better than expected, and providing Doug with a past history of extraordinary exploits including skydiving, climbing mountains in Patagonia...

When Doug and Jimmy go to the family dinner, the family is under the impression that Jimmy is a priest, not only a priest, but a military chaplain, providing opportunity for lots of doubletalk, improvisation, and, something of a compliment to priests and expectations of them, often credible enough, even to the wedding ceremony.

Eventually the friends are prepared with their back stories, rehearse them, have their own particular acts for when the going goes badly. They do take Doug for a night on the town, which liberates him (although his mother had him do dancing lessons when he was young and he excels at this), but he is the victim of the kind of joke that was funny in There's Something About Mary, this time with a tenacious dog.

There is a touch of suspense throughout: will Gretchen and the family cotton on to what is happening, will the wedding go ahead, will Doug want to tell the truth? All these questions are answered, and Doug seems to be the better man for the whole experience – mainly liberated from

his inhibitions.

Of course, there are some crass jokes, but fewer than usual and there are more amusing moments than might be expected.

WHAT WE DID ON OUR HOLIDAY

UK, 2014, 95 minutes, Colour.

Rosamund Pike, David Tennant, Billy Connolly, Ben Miller, Annette Crosby, Celia Imrie, Emilia Jones, Amelia Bullimore, Bobby Smallbridge.

Directed by Andy Hamilton, Guy Jenkin.

The title sounds like one of those essay topics which desperate teachers hand out to their students as the school year begins. If the children in this film had to write such an essay, it certainly wouldn't be your ordinary themes, action or enjoyment.

The film is billed as a comedy and there is a great deal of humour in it, verbal, action, eccentric characters. However, the mood does change in the middle of the film and while there are some humorous and absurd situations, there is also a great deal of pathos.

The film opens with lovely Scottish loch scenery and a lone fisherman in a boat – who is then revealed as Billy Connolly, the grandfather of the family, not well, but about to celebrate his 75th birthday party. And he is not always fishing as there is a portable TV in his boat as well! But that is justified as he was a prominent footballer in his past, with a still strong reputation.

And then the film transfers to busy London, mother and father trying to organise their three children to get away to Scotland for the celebration. David Tennant (after Doctor Who) is Doug, the father, one of grandfather's sons, the younger. His wife, Abi, is played by Rosamund Pike (just before she became Gone Girl). They seem fairly desperate, and it emerges that they are not living together, mainly his fault, but they are trying to keep up appearances for the sake of the children. Not that the children aren't alert, but they also their own eccentricities, the older girl, Lottie, takes a diary with her and has a desperate need to tell the truth, utterly serious. The little girl, Jessie, has a propensity for taking things with her, this time favourite bricks and stones! And Michael, the son in the middle of the two sisters, is very much involved in Viking lore, something which becomes very important in the latter part of the film. After much excitement and getting away, the inevitable question is asked, "are we there yet?" – With the answer that they have only just got to Watford (outer London for those who don't know it).

Meanwhile in Scotland, the other son, Gavin (Ben Miller), takes himself very seriously and is preparing to host a party in his father's honour. In the meantime, there is eccentricity in this household as well, the audience later seeing a video with Gavin's wife absolutely losing it in a supermarket (which, of course, goes viral on YouTube). Gavin thinks his son, Kenneth, something of a nerd, which he may well be, but he has a real talent for playing the violin. And grandfather genially loves all his grandchildren.

When a crisis occurs in the middle of the film, and the party is about to begin, the musicians are playing, the guests are arriving, including the local laird whom they are all trying to impress, there is

a fair bit of chaos, the children having made a decision which they are standing by, and most of the adults not believing them. The police are called in. The media have a field day, hounding the family, the adults in turn going out to try to pacify the media, only making a mess of their interventions. And a child welfare officer also turns up to interrogate the children.

This review has tried to be very careful in not revealing the twist in the middle of the film, so for those the who decide to go to see it, there are very entertaining performances, some witty dialogue, Billy Connolly as his usual self with a touch of sentiment, unexpected interactions – and, with the hope of some happy ever after after, perhaps, more than a touch of counselling!

WILD

US, 2014, 115 minutes, Colour.

Reese Witherspoon, Laura Dern, Thomas Sadowski, Gaby Hoffmann.

Directed by Jean- Marc Vallee.

How well an audience enjoys this film will probably depend on how quickly it can identify with the central character, Cheryl Strayed. At once we see her on a mountain, pulling off her boots, footsore, the boots being knocked over and careering down the mountainside, to her pained exasperation. The question is what did she do, go down, recover the boots, keep walking...? But, the screenplay does not return to the scene at all, so no specific answer.

But we do get answers, at least some of them, to why Cheryl was in the wilderness at all. The film is called Wild, a focus on the wilderness that Cheryl travels through along the west side of the United States. As the flashbacks increase in number, we see that her life prior to this trek had been very wild at times.

It is the Pacific Crest Trail, PCT, that Cheryl decides to walk along, over 1000 miles, from the Mexican border, through the Mojave Valley, to the mountains of California, into Oregon and into the North. It becomes pretty evident, almost immediately, that she is not well prepared at all for this trek, which may make some audiences who like things organised, rather irritated, especially when it appears she bought the wrong gas that her stove and she has to eat cold mash for several days before she gets to a house where she can get some help.

This, perhaps, is the point. We learn from the flashbacks that she has gone on this walk in some desperation, the breakup of her seven-year marriage (all her fault) and the death of the mother whom she loved dearly. At the beginning, she does not really know why she is walking except that she wants the time, to be alone, to reflect, to remember, to read some poetry, to write in a journal. And that is what she does – and not always engrossingly for the audience. It is a long walk for her, and for us.

The film runs for almost 2 hours but this reviewer for one, would have appreciated some longer time given to flashbacks because there are just glimpses, not always connected, the audience trying to work out the causal link in the episodes in her life, but not enough information or dramatisation being offered. We can feel sorry for her ex-husband, both of them getting tattoos to celebrate their separation, but he still loving her, she going off on promiscuous adventures, and yet he had a letter and a parcel for her at the key posts along the Crest Trail.

There are a number of flashbacks to Cheryl and her little brother and their relationship with their mother, most engagingly played, optimistic even in physical abuse, by Laura Dern. She had married an alcoholic and abusive husband, had left, brought up the children, shown them great love and tenderness. At one point, she goes to college to study, exhilarating by the amount of learning before her, coping with the rather prim and judgmental Cheryl at this stage of her life. How Cheryl goes off the tracks is not explained, quite wild, casual affairs, one night stands, led into drugs, resolving not to inject heroin but doing it, doing a waitressing job, with sexual favours out the back of the diner. These aspects of the character are quite clear.

Cheryl is portrayed by Reese Witherspoon (and the actual Cheryl Strayed accompanied her to the Golden Globe awards). She gives it all she can, having to show a rather wide range of emotional responses, in her past, in her grief for and memories of her mother, in her uncertainties along the track, the physical hardships, the encounters with male walkers and some hunters, mainly fearful. She does have some friends, especially a good friend played by Gaby Hoffmann, who challenges her and who supports her.

And then the film ends, with some verbal information about what would happen to her in the coming years, all of it positive, marriage and family and the writing and publishing of a successful book.

Some audiences will enjoy Cheryl's history, her response to challenges, the physical and psychological and emotional impact of her walk. Others may find it something of an endurance, not just the walk, but in the puzzle about Cheryl's character, what really was the influence of the past, why she went so wild, why exactly she went, so unprepared, on this walk – which, in fact, did change her life.

WYRMWOOD: ROAD OF THE DEAD

Australia, 2014, 98 minutes, Colour.
Jay Gallagher, Bianca Bradey, Leon Burchill.
Directed by Kiah Roche-Turner.

With an out-and-out zombie movie, it is not too helpful to compare to other movies, especially mainstream, except other out-and-out zombie movies. Wyrwood: Road of the Dead is definitely an out-and-out zombie movie.

The surprising thing is that it is an Australian film, made in and around Sydney for a small-budget by two brothers, who wrote the screenplay, with Kiah Roche-Turner directing and doing all kinds of technical things including editing, with his brother Tristan producing, doing all kinds of things as well, and even turning up as a zombie extra. The other surprising thing is that Screen Australia also contributed to the production. And, if the response of the fans is any indication, the film should make its money back – and then some...

For a lot of the time, as we focus on the hero, Barry (Jay Gallagher) as he takes the road fighting off the zombies, experiencing his wife and daughter turning, hoping to rescue his sister, Brooke (Bianca Bradey), he is certainly reminiscent of Mel Gibson as Mad Max. It seems that the brothers were keen

to make a Mad Max film and they have succeeded. They have also declared an interest in films by George A. Romero, like Dawn of the Dead and wanted to incorporate that with Mad Max.

It takes very little time to introduce the audience to the zombies, no explanations, they are just there, looking their ugly best, on the rampage to destroy humans. There is also a group of military men in masks, who seem to be on the side of good, but throughout the film a fairly aggressive, the suggestion being that they are cautious about the spread of the plague.

As might be expected, there is quite a lot of firepower, up close and personal, as the zombies attack, are repulsed, are slaughtered.

But, there are some personal aspects of the plot. Brooke is involved with some artists but the studio is invaded and she is the only survivor, captured, put in a van with a number of characters, some of whom have turned, with a scientist, a scientist with the touch of the mad, who is keeping her alive and doing tests on her. It takes a while, but she does escape and meet up with her brother, Barry, the mechanic. He seems to have been leading a happy life at home and at work, loving wife and daughter, but when somebody is in the house at night, he evacuates them, goes on the road, only for them to turn and for him to try to survive first with his car which breaks down, then with a truck which, it is revealed, runs on zombie energy and requires a live zombie (so to speak) as an engine to keep the vehicle going!

Barry meets up with some anti-zombie fighters, but they are dubious characters and there is more Mad Max action on the roads. Barry is relentlessly tough and withstands a lot of fighting, slashing, bullets.

Then he meets up with an aboriginal character, Benny (Leon Burchill). Benny had appeared early in the film with some aboriginal friends who are chased through the bush by zombies, and he lives to tell the tale. Despite initial appearances, Benny has survived, and joins with Barry with the pursuing zombies turning on them (perhaps the first zombie film with aboriginal characters!).

This is a film for zombie fans only, audiences coming in from the outside may find it too much fairly early in the piece and bow out. But, for those who are fans, it is well done of its kind, given the limited resources, and it is a more imaginative turn on the zombie genre than usual.

REVIEWS BERLINALE 2015

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DANIEL'S WORLD

EISENSTEIN IN GUANAJUTA
ELSER
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FIFTY SHADES OF GREY
GONE WITH THE BULLETS
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I AM MICHAEL
IXCANUL/ VOLCANO
JOURNAL D' UNE FEMME DE CHAMBRE/ DIARY OF A CHAMBERMAID
KNIGHT OF CUPS
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MARIPOSA/ BUTTERFLY
MR HOLMES
NOBODY WANTS THE NIGHT
PEARL BUTTON, THE/ EL BOTON DE NACAR
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SELMA
SWORN VIRGIN
TAXI
THANATOS, DRUNK
THAT SUGAR FILM
TORNERANNO I PRATI/ GREENERY WILL RETURN
UMPHEFUMLO/ BREATHE
UNDER ELECTRIC CLOUDS
VICTORIA
WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE?

45 YEARS

UK, 2015, 90 minutes, Colour.
Charlotte Rampling, Tom Courtenay, Geraldine James.
Directed by Andrew Haigh.

45 Years is one of those quiet and modest dramas that has quite an effect on its audience.

The 45 Years of the title are those of the married life of the central protagonists, Kate and Jeff. The film takes place over a week, a week of preparation for the weekend celebration of the marriage. Captions are given for the day by day drama.

Katie and Geoff seem a typical enough English couple. They are played most effectively, with a great deal of understatement, by Charlotte Rampling and Tom Courtenay. It is not a surprise to learn that they won awards at the Berlin Film Festival for Best Actress and Best Actor.

Andrew Haigh, who wrote and directed a perceptive gay story, Weekend, and was responsible for the television series, Looking, has a fine sense of the lives of ordinary people, men and women, in ordinary British cities like Norwich. More of the attention goes to Kate, the audience looking at Geoff and situations through her eyes. Normally, the week would have been very ordinary. Kate walks her dog in the morning, greets her neighbours, goes to the hall where this celebration will be held to check out that all, including the songs, is ready, has conversations with her friend Lila (Geraldine James), urges Geoff to go to a dinner for workers at the factory where he spent such a long time.

But, at the beginning of the film, something happens which surprises both Kate and Geoff and the film moves into something of a modest secrets and lies story.

Geoff receives news that the body has been found of a young woman who fell into a crevasse in the Swiss Alps, Geoff with her at the time. Her body had been preserved in the ice all this time and Geoff is asked to come to identify her body as next of kin. What follows is Kate's surprise to learn something of the rather more intense relationship than she had thought between Geoff and the young woman, as well as Geoff wondering whether he should go to Switzerland.

The couple work through these revelations, especially after Kate rummages in the attic and finds photos from that time, surprising her even more. It is not as if there were a great mystery. Rather, it is Kate ruminating on the 45 years of marriage given these previous events and her not knowing the detail during the years.

In some ways, this is Mike Leigh territory, but Andrew Haigh has made a much more gentle film, exploring the characters and their interactions, of two people who might well live up the street.

600 MILES

Mexico, 2015, 85 minutes, Colour.

Tim Roth, Krystian Ferrer, Noe Hernandez, Harrison Thomas.

Directed by Gabriel Ripstein.

600 miles is a rather small film, directed by Gabriel Ripstein, some of the celebrated Mexican director, Arturo Ripstein, set on the border of Mexico and the United States. The film was supported by Tim Roth who appears as an investigator living in Tucson.

The 600 miles of the title is from Tucson down into Mexico, a trip made by a young man and the investigator. It is something of a violent story although the treatment is rather restrained.

Guns and illegal smuggling of arms is key to the film. During the opening sequences, the young American goes from shop to shop, trying to buy guns and other weapons, served by very willing experts in their shops. He has a young Mexican friend and, together, they are building up a cache of arms to smuggle across the border.

All would have been simple, and probably was on many of their trips, until the local investigator is on to them. They overwhelm him, and the young Mexican man drives him down to his uncle who is the arms dealer.

The central drama of the plot is not the issue of the arms smuggling though that is significant, but it is the story of the interaction between the young man, more and more nervous, emotional, despite his manifestations of toughness, put to the test by his uncle, who is the dealer, who wants him to shoot the investigator. With some turning of tables, it means that the investigator gets the upper hand, has to decide how to deal with the young man, who is prone to fear and tears, and to return home.

This gives some suspense to the latter part of the film, the audience having some sympathy for the boy despite his being involved and his attempts at bravado (though there are some scenes with him studying himself in the mirror, some references to him as fag, and the suggestions that part of his gentleness may be due to a homosexual orientation).

Not a great film, but an indication that this young director might have a solid career before him.

AFERIM!

Romania, 2015, 108 minutes, Black and white.

Teodor Corban, Mihal Comanolu, Cuzin Toma.

Directed by Radu Jude.

This is a harsh film, depicting some of Romania's history, in 1835, in a remote area, under the power of the Ottoman Empire, but also ruled by the local authorities, the boyars, trying to maintain order in a rough society and be loyal to the Turks.

The framework of the film is a journey by a local constable and his son, his apprentice, searching for a runaway gypsy who has stolen money from the boyar. In fact, the man is innocent, and has been accused because he has had a sexual relationship with the boyar's wife.

With graphic black and white photography, the film shows the journey of the two men, the different communities that they encounter, including an Orthodox monastery where gypsies have been employed to work, a river where gypsies pan for gold, encountering a travelling monk and fixing the wheel of his cart while he gives an extraordinary and belligerent summation of prejudices in Romanian society, especially against the Jews, with strange interpretation of Jewish giants, but following through with a criticism of the major countries of Europe. Father and son have many conversations illuminating how society was at the time.

They pay a bribe to a neighbouring authority who gives information about where the gypsy could be found and they follow through to the village. However, they are somewhat sympathetic to the gypsy when they eventually find him. They stay the night in the village for a rather raucous time of drinking and sexual activity.

By the end of their journey, they are back home, presenting their captive to the boyar, the wife being made to confess, a fierce and shocking punishment for the gypsy, and life returning to normal.

This is a striking reminder of how human nature is prone to barbarity along with its gentle qualities.

AS WE WERE DREAMING

Germany, 2015, 117 minutes, Colour.

Merlin Rose, Julius Nitschkoff, Joel Basman, Frederic Haselon, Marcel Heuperman.

Directed by Andreas Dresen.

Director Andreas Dresen some years ago made a film about elderly people and their relationships, Cloud 9. This time he has focused on children at school and young teenagers. And he presents a fairly grim picture.

The film is based on a well-known novel which takes place in East Germany, the GDR, during the 1980s, the buildup to the Berlin Wall coming down and what life was like in East Germany at this time, the indoctrination that the children received at school, the expected loyalties to the government and to the state, the role of the teachers and their influence on the students, but the

squalor of the aftermath as the students found a certain amount of freedom, gangs were formed in the cities and towns, the response to the music, the kind of hard rock mentality, the availability of drugs, the rebellion against adults are all dramatised in a way that will have a resonance on those who lived through this experience but could be quite alienating to an audience just looking in.

In fact, this presentation of young people, seeing them as good little children at school with high hopes, and then seeing how they turned out within 10 years, many of their lives in ruins, some dead from drug overdoses, others operating as dealers, some trained in boxing but falling foul of organisations and indulging in violence, one of the girls becoming a stripper.

Much of the action is seen from the point of view of the central character, Danny, who finds his friend Mark in squalid circumstances and drugs trauma. There are flashbacks, not only to childhood days, but also to the events and interactions which led to this situation.

Probably important as a record of difficulties in this particular time, the time when people were dreaming of what might be, but this is something of the harsh reality.

BIG FATHER, SMALL FATHER, AND OTHER STORIES/ CHA VA, CON VA

Vietnam, 2015, 100 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Phang Dang Di

A film from which takes on quite a lot of stories, as indicated by the title. Most of them are connected, but there are some which seem to be introduced at random.

The most impressive aspect of the film is its picture of life along the river, the various huts, the boats, the people and their different ways of life, some working, some unemployed, some students, especially the central character who wants to be a photographer. The film also presents some of the sleazy aspects of life, especially the clubs, the women and their seductive dancing, the group dancing men, along the lines of Broadway musical. There are also gangs, fights, and some of the characters taking refuge in the countryside. There are also issues of homosexual orientation.

The picture of Vietnam is quite effective – but there are many more films which bring the country to life more strongly and interestingly.

BODY

Poland, 2015, 90 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Malgorzata Szumowska.

Body is an unusual mixture of the serious and comic. It has been directed by Malgazorta Szumowski whose films included the story about prostitutes, Elles, and a film about a priest with a homosexual orientation, In the Name of...

At the beginning of this film, a police inspector goes to find a body hanging by the banks of the river in Warsaw. As they continue their investigations, the police see the corpse come alive and walk away. This introduces the theme of the body, life and death, health... And the possibility of ghosts or the dead walking amongst us in a kind of purgatorial experience.

Part of the film concentrates on the policeman, his work, the death of his wife and his seeming lack

of grief, from the perspective of his daughter, a big fat and drinking man, smoking, earning his daughter's dislike, even hatred. The daughter goes to a rehabilitation centre which is run by a widow, a very strict and prim woman, who enjoys her work with the women, role play, eliciting deep screams... And then going home, had strict and regular routines, her affection for an enormous dog.

She crosses paths with the police inspector when he goes to visit the doctor for discussions about his daughter's situation. We have seen the daughter at home, exasperated with her father, taking an overdose. We have also seen the daughter at a session, role-playing about the relationship of herself with her father, expressing her angers, vocally and physically.

The woman from the institution also has psychic sense, conduct seances putting grateful customers in contact with the dead. Finally, the father and daughter agree to hold a seance in the hope of contacting her mother. Nothing happens – and, Spiritualists would not be particularly pleased, the film ends with father and daughter bonding together in laughing at the failed experience.

CHASUKE'S JOURNEY/TEN NO CHASUKE

Japan, 2015, 106 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Sabu.

This is a Japanese fantasy, a story about writers in heaven, devising scenarios for people on earth, under the overall supervision of the The Man, a God-equivalent.

The opening scenes are in heaven where the hero, Chasuke, serves tea to the writers. He comments on some of the screenplays and is concerned about a young woman who is killed, and is then sent down to save her. He encounters several people who are central characters in the stories by other writers. They help him to save the young woman – although, it emerges that Chasuke was a member of the Yakuza and is being pursued by gangsters. Needless to say, there is happy ending, along the lines of women Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* – happiness on earth seems to be better than happiness in heaven.

The film was written and directed by novelist, Sabu.

CINDERELLA

UK, 2015, 105 minutes, Colour.
Cate Blanchett, Lily James, Richard Madden, Stellan Skarsgaard, Derek Jacobi, Ben Chaplin, Hayley Atwell, Rob Bryden.
Directed by Kenneth Branagh.

This version of Cinderella is one of great charm, a pleasure to watch, entertaining and often funny, with some witty and wry lines – a film for girls of every age, young girls and old girls, but not one for boys of any age!

The screenplay was written by Chris Weitz, writer and director of several very entertaining films, including *About a Boy*, and directed by that fine actor, Kenneth Branagh. And the cast is top-class, Lily James a lovely as Cinderella, Richard Madden making an impression as the Prince. But it is some of the adults who are entertaining, principally Cate Blanchett as a smilingly cruel stepmother (often wearing green, indicating her envy and jealousy), uttering quite ironic and cutting lines. She spends a

lot of time promoting her daughters simply because they are her daughters, whom she thinks are rather stupid (and not incorrectly). Derek Jacobi is the King, Stellan Skarsgaard is the scheming Grand Duke, Ben Chaplin Cinderella's sympathetic father, with a brief comic turn from Rob Bryden as the artist commissioned to paint the Prince.

The thing is, of course, that we all know what is going to happen. The pleasure is in anticipation and then the satisfaction of seeing how what we were expecting turns out.

There is something of a more serious opening to the film, Cinderella as a young baby, the loving parents, her mother's death, the father and his travels, and the charming Cinderella making no objections at all to her father's wanting to marry again. It is clear that she has not yet met her prospective stepmother!

All goes according to the stepmother's plan when she moves in, installing the daughters, relegating Cinderella to the attic, not allowing her to eat with the family, Cinderella not allowed to do anything much in fact. But, Cinderella has great comfort in her four pet mice, the most engaging little animals on screen since that chorus in *Babe* 20 years ago. Their comic presence and some of their antics are very entertaining – especially in comparison with the stepmother's big ugly cat.

Cinderella is certainly an energetic young woman who does ride off in frustration into the forest, encountering the Prince going hunting, pleads for the life of the stag that the hunters are chasing, and thinks the Prince is an apprentice. In the meantime, the Prince has fallen in love, telling his dying father and irritating the Grand Duke who wants the Prince to marry into foreign royalty. So, the ball is proclaimed, stepmother and daughters get their dresses ready, Cinderella being reduced to having to put on her mother's stress and having stepmother berate her, mock her and tear the dress.

It is time for the fairy godmother to arrive – although it is she who has been doing the amusing voiceover. She appears as an old beggar at the mansion door to whom Cinderella is kind and, lo and behold, a transformed begowned blonde beauty, Helena Bonham Carter. She is very funny as she goes choosing the pumpkin, transforming the lizards into footman, the goose into the coach driver, and the four mice into the horses.

The ball is as lavish as might be expected as is Cinderella's blue gown, her skill in dancing, talking with the Prince – but it is soon midnight and the spell is lost (except, of course, for the glass slippers which do not disappear).

Some comedy as everybody tries to get the slippers to fit, the cruel stepmother preventing Cinderella from trying – but, and it's thanks to the mice and their thoughtfulness, that she gets her opportunity and, then, happy ever after. And the final credits conclude with the song from Disney's 1950 film, *Bibbity, Bobbity Boo*. What more could one ask for?

EL CLUB/THE CLUB

Chilli, 2015, 95 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Pablo Larraín.

The Club seems something of a flippant name for the drama that unfolds.

This particular club is a house in an isolated town on the Chilean coast. Four men live there as well as a woman. However, the four men are all priests who have been removed from public ministry. One

has dementia and has no knowledge of what he has done to merit his removal. Another is a priest who was a chaplain to the military, listening to the confessions of the personnel for seventeen years, noting everything in a book, which led to disapproval from the military, confiscation of the book (although he says he has everything in his memory), and the church sending him to this house. Another priest is guilty of selling unwanted babies on the black market to the wealthy, saying that you have the poor with you always and this was something of a service. The fourth priest is a paedophile, homosexual in orientation, who finds ways of justifying and even sanctifying his behaviour.

When another priest arrives and is suspicious, the four priests are not welcoming. But, outside the house, one of this priest's victims is shouting, describing his sexual experiences in great and specific detail, the priest denying it but then shooting himself.

The upshot is that a Jesuit visitor, a psychologist with mission experience in Africa, is sent by officials to examine the priests, and to close down the house, even if it means sending the priests to the police and jail. He questions all the priests which gives the audience an opportunity to look at the priests, listen to them, try to understand their attitude towards the behaviour, justifying it, and living with it while accepting the punishment from the church.

Also in the house is a woman who has been a nun and has decided to stay in the house as housekeeper, caring for the priests, even defending them, not liking the visitor with the impression that he belongs to a new church.

The film shows the life of the priests in some detail, especially their particular interest in training a greyhound and racing it. But, with a kind of vengeance, greyhounds in the town are killed by the priests and the sister kills their own pet greyhound – leading to a lynch-mob against the victim of the sexual abuse.

The visiting priest is shocked at this behaviour takes pity on the wounded victim, talking with him, and bringing him into the house, holding it over the priests and the sister that they have to take him in and care for him. He will not report them.

While there have been many films about priests, and especially about paedophile priests, this one is challenging with the broader range of offences. In terms of paedophilia, the priest rationalises his behaviour, talks about love, that formerly homosexuality was frowned and is now pronounced on as God's gift, and the effect of his interaction with the boy whom he abused.

This is of particular interest in the situations of the churches of Latin America and of Chile, Catholic countries facing up to the realities of abuse. While some think of this kind of film as an attack on the church, it is an attack on aspects of the church, on individuals and church authorities.

The film was directed by Peter Biskind, internationally known for his Tony Chapman the arrow and his political film, No. (his wife portrays the sister in the house.)

DANIEL'S WORLD

Czech Republic, 2014, 75 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Veronika Listova.

Daniel's World is significant documentary on a very difficult subject, especially in the 21st century,

paedophilia having been something of a closed area in the 20th century, but changing, especially when sexual abuse cases emerged.

This film was made for Czech television but it is of interest worldwide. The subject is Daniel, who understands himself as a paedophile but does not wish to abuse children. He appears in several discussions with sexologists and psychologists, explaining his situation, his history, and his understanding himself, acknowledging the restricted aspects of a future life. He is 25 the time of the making, studying literature, has published a children's book about a mermaid.

He discovered his orientation while young, and further realised that he had an attraction to pre-pubescent boys, thus fulfilling the clinical definition of a paedophile. But, as the opening indicates, the paedophile condition does not mean acting out, especially in harming the children. Daniel does discover a young boy that he is attracted to, falls in love with, permits himself to visit the boy once a month, allowing some hugs, but only in the presence of the boy's parents. His happiest hours are spent in being with the boy. He has not confided his psychological state to the parents.

The film is important for audiences to look at and listen to. It is clear from Daniel that he is not in favour of child pornography or any legislation in favour of it, or lowering the age of consent. Rather, he is concerned about the psychological state of the child and the child not being involved in experiences beyond comprehension.

Daniel also explains how he went on to the Internet, had discussions online with men with similar problems, received advice and, with a protest march in Prague, he checks with some gay men and is permitted to join the march, with his own banner, "coming out" as a non-threatening paedophile. He is joined by some friends for support.

This is an opportunity for an audience to try to understand the psychological make-up of the condition in which paedophile was born. This raises questions of therapy, change and the possibility of change – or not. It also helps the audience realise that a paedophile will not be able to express the affection felt, and will not have a life partner. Sexual urges will remain in the imagination and fantasy and in masturbation.

Statistics are given about the number of paedophiles, from 5 to 0.1%. And information is also given about the numbers of paedophiles who contemplate suicide.

With so many cases of sexual abuse, within the family, with stepfathers, with those working in institutions of care, with clergy, this profile of the paedophile may be able to throw light on the condition of so many of the offenders.

EISENSTEIN IN GUANAJUATO

Netherlands, 2015, 105 minutes, Colour.

Elmer Baeck, Luis Alberti.

Directed by Peter Greenaway.

Peter Greenaway's films are an acquired taste. With expertise in Fine Arts, and after many short films, he began making features in the 1980s, beginning with an exercise in design and architecture, *The Draughtsman's Contract*. He continued his artistic vein, but with narrative, during that decade.

However, his films of the 1990s were less accessible to the general audience, more esoteric in

theme, and more packed with visual design, even crowded pictures around the framework of the image. This was the era of Prospero's Books, The Baby of Macon, The Pillow Book. He then retired to make more experimental films although he did do a study of Rembrandt and now this rather more straightforward film on Russian director, Sergei Eisenstein.

Eisenstein had become celebrated in Russia, especially with his films October and The Battleship Potemkin. He received invitations from Hollywood to visit and did so, making friends with Charlie Chaplin, and there are allusions to this visit in this film. However, he moved on to Mexico with the intention of making a film, a documentary. He did film an enormous amount of footage for Que Viva Mexico.

While this film does focus on his ability as director, this is a more personal portrait of a Russian absorbing some of the culture of Central America. He comes across as a rather boisterous personality, partly uninhibited in manner, but inhibited in his own sexual orientation which is put to the test, especially through his Mexican guide, an ethnological professor, married with a family, who seduces Eisenstein. Eisenstein is shocked by the experience but also begins to feel liberated. It can be noted that the seduction sequence is fairly explicit.

Greenaway does not use a lot of his expected techniques. This is a much more restrained film, using the split screen to great advantage, sometimes putting actual photos of celebrities on the margins of the screen to highlight the realistic background of this narrative.

Eisenstein is played by a Finnish actor, Elmer Bäck, who gives a performance that is a blend of the uninhibited extrovert and the quieter introvert who is on a voyage of discovery, of himself, of his film career, of a different country and culture from what he was used to.

There are some verbal interventions by Stalin and Eisenstein had to return to the Soviet Union and to the furthering of his career, although, by his visit, he seems to have lost some of the esteem that he experienced in Russia.

Whether the film is accurate or not, it is so well made, capturing audience interest, that we feel that we have got to know Sergei Eisenstein.

ELSER

Germany, 2015, 110 minutes, Colour.

Christian Friedel, Katharina Schüttler, Johan Von Bülow, Burghard Klaußner.

Directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel.

Oliver Hirschbiegel's, Downfall, showing the last days of Hitler, was a great international success though causing some controversy in Germany with its picture of Hitler, indicating some more humane aspects of his behaviour. Hirschbiegel had already made quite an impression with his feature debut, The Experiment.

After several years making films abroad, The Invasion and the portrait of Princess Diana, both of which were received, he returned to Germany to make this film about the era of National Socialism.

The subject is Georg Elser, a man in his 30s, seemingly quiet, interested in folk music, a touch of the womaniser and his work in the town in the Jura Mountains. The film opens with his setting up a

bomb in a hall in Munich, timed to assassinate Hitler as he made an address. It is 1938.

However, the attempt to kill Hitler was a failure, with Hitler leaving the room 13 minutes earlier than anticipated. Elser is caught, interrogated with torture, threatened by bringing his lover into the interrogation, but his never giving up any information. Hitler thought that it was a conspiracy and would not believe that it was the work of one man – with Elser spending some time explaining the bomb and his skills to the interrogators.

The film offers flashbacks to his character, his mother, life in the town, his music, the clashes with National Socialists, the birth of the child and its death. Elser was condemned to Dachau and was executed just before the liberation of the camp.

Christian Friedel gives a convincing performance and the film makes the point that while attention is given to Von Stauffenberg and his attempt to kill Hitler, and people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer are held in high regard, with films made about Sophie Scholl and others who resisted, Elser was often considered something of an eccentric loner. This film rehabilitates his memory.

EVERY THING WILL BE FINE

US/Germany, 2015, 119 minutes, Colour.

James Franco, Rachel McAdams, Charlotte Gainsbourg,
Directed by Wim Wenders.

Director, Wim Wenders, would not have imagined 40 years ago that his entry to the Berlin Film Festival of 2015 would be an American film, set in Canada, rather conventional in its style, with a great deal of feeling, even sentiment - which did not exactly endear him to the Festival audience or to Germans.

This is the story of a novelist, played with quite some feeling by James Franco, different from many of the roles he usually takes on. He is in an unhappy situation, relations-wise, with Rachel McAdams. He has taken some time off, spending it in the ice and snow with a group of workers, getting material for a novel.

The key event occurs almost immediately, a little boy sliding out from the snow into the path of his car. He is shocked, takes the boy, gives him to his mother, Charlotte Gainsbourg, who makes a frightening discovery. This affects the novelist, but he is exonerated from any blame by the police for the accident and the mother is extraordinarily forgiving, although she blames herself for being absorbed in a novel (Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, which Franco had directed in its film version!) and not noticing the evening coming on and the children at play.

The screenplay has three time jumps, a two-year period, to four-year periods.

This means that we can follow the life of the novelist, the effect of the accident, his contacting the mother, offering to do anything that he could, comforting the mother who goes through a ritual of burning the novel to purge something of her guilt.

During these time gaps, the author begins a new relationship with a woman who has a daughter, rather outgoing and precocious, who likes the novelist and would not be unhappy to have him as her stepfather. Another key event happens, rather more low key, when the group go to a fair, enjoy the rides, but witness the collapse of one of the carriages and the novelist lifting the carriage so that the injured person can be retrieved. His partner is quite moved and, then, upset that the novelist is so

phlegmatic in his response, even to reading a book calmly – and she refers angrily to the effect of the previous accident on him.

In the last period, the boy of the accident has now grown into a teenager, puzzled about the novelist and his role in the accident, writing him a letter wanting to meet him. He has not told his mother, but she discovers the letter and urges the novelist to meet with her son. Which he does. In the meantime, he has married, the stepdaughter is growing up, and there seems to be some happiness in this family life. At one stage, he encounters his previous lover and is surprised by her unexpected reaction to him

There is something of a bizarre incident towards the end of the film which disturbs the wife, but it is something which helps bond him to the young man and his hopes for the future, even to being a writer.

The film was made in 3D, effective in its way, but seemingly unnecessary for this kind of film. It is an American film of sentiment, probably pleasing for most audiences, but still rankling with those who have put Wenders on a pedestal and cannot forgiving forgive him for making such a conventional entertainment.

FIFTY SHADES OF GREY

US, 2015, 119 minutes, Colour.

Dakota Johnson, Jamie Dornan, Jennifer Ehle, Eloise Mumford, Victor Rasuk, Hayward, Marcia Gay Harden.

Directed by Sam Taylor- Johnson.

Notoriety and big box-office.

By 2005, readers the world over were indulging in Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code, millions of them. And then came the movie version with everybody going to see it. 10 years later, everybody seems to be reading or have read 50 Shades of Grey (but not this reviewer). More than a ready market for the movie version. And here it is.

Different groups have had some negative reactions. Those concerned about sexual morality question the behaviour of the characters, especially with the issues of dominance and submissiveness in sexual interactions. Many concerned about sexual violence, especially towards women, consider that this is a story about a male exploiting a woman for his own gratification – and, to a large extent, it is.

But, in many ways, it is not a film to get to het up about. It is not as if we have not seen this kind of behaviour on screen before – there was Nine and ½ Weeks almost 30 years ago, quite explicit and contentious for its time. Themes of bondage and dominance have been present in many films, perhaps not so much in American films but, certainly, in those from continental Europe.

The film is a variation on adult men and women, sexual attraction and behaviour, dominance and freedom.

Christian Grey (Jamie Dornan) does not seem exactly like your ordinary citizen. Not only is he good-looking, he is a billionaire, controlling a company, shown to be effective in business, from a respectable family, and dreamworld character rather than a character who seems real. Anastasia

(Dakota Johnson) does seem a little more real. She has a loving father who turns up to her graduation. She has a loving mother, although she is on her fourth husband and cannot make it to the graduation, but keeps contact by phone and a visit from Anastasia. Anastasia is studying literature at the University, has a roommate who gossips, and has been holding herself back in terms of relationships. Awkwardly stepping in to do an interview for her roommate with Christian, she is smitten, infatuated, flattered by his attentions (which include helicopter rides, new clothes, an expensive car, a trip in a glider...). And falls in love.

Christian, in Jung's psychological terms, is the epitome of the introverted decisive type who is focused completely on the detail of the present and seems in no way subjective in his approach to decision making – and his conversations with Anastasia are straightforward, even blunt, certainly not good at humour or jokes. And, of all things, he hands Anastasia a multi-page contract about the relationship, his dominance, her submission, the rules and possible punishment (but she does reject some clauses). Some of these scenes are serious, seriously ludicrous.

There is a revelation that as a 15-year-old boy, Christian was seduced by a friend of his mother and involved in this kind of dominant-submissive sexual relationship, He the submissive, finding it liberating, so he says.

Many of the scenes in the film are quite ordinary, Anastasia and her work, her graduation, her visit to her mother, a meal with Christian's parents... However, whether out of interest from reading the book or whether from touches of prurient curiosity, it is the sex scenes (rather restrained in comparison with many other films) that draw in the audiences.

It might be difficult to let go of 50 Shades of Grey because there are another two novels in the trilogy.

GONE WITH THE BULLETS

China/ Hong Kong, 2015, 120 minutes, Colour.

Jiang Wen, Ge You, Zhou Yun, Shu Qui.

Directed by Jiang Wen.

This film is quite an experience, although many audiences at the Berlin Film Festival Press Show, left halfway through. While it is on the screen, it is difficult enough to follow – but, if one reads the synopsis, the characters and events all fall into place.

The film has some historical background, the transition from the Empire to the Republic and the consequences for individuals, for the Empress and her advisers, for the warlords who now abounded and were creating nations for themselves, their own structures and government, as well as finance and corruption.

There is a competition in the film for courtesans from around the world – which is based on actual events.

The stories told from the point of view of a conman who claims that he was an adviser to the Empress, but was drunk when the transition took place and so lost his position, concentrating on frauds. In an opening scenes reminiscent of The Godfather , he listens to a young man who is upset that his warlord family has “new money” while he wants the respectability of “old money”. The conman and his friend – who was later to become an antagonistic police chief – decide to launder

the money with the huge spectacle of the courtesan competition.

This film acknowledges film genres, not only The Godfather, but American musicals, especially those designed choreographies of Busby Berkely. And there is considerable tribute to opera, Puccini and Verdi, La Boheme and La Traviata. And Grieg features in the soundtrack.

There are quite some complications with the conman, his attraction to a woman who is found dead in next to him after a drug night, his imprisonment, the making of a black-and-white film (this is also based on fact) in which he stars, recounting the events of his life. A young socialite woman, with the disapproval of her parents, is in love with a conman and this leads to some final decisions and heroism.

The film was directed by Jiang Wen. His films are diverse, The Sun Also Rises as well the comedy and action of Let the Bullets Fly. He further enjoys himself by playing the central role in all its comic and serious complexity.

L' HISTOIRE DE JUDAS

France, 2015, 99 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Rabah Ameur- Zaimeche.

This is an impressive biblical film, all the more interesting because it was written and directed by a French Algerian director, influenced by Islam. In 2005, the Iranian film, Jesus, Spirit of God, told the Gospel story from the point of view of the Koran, a rather traditional-looking film, with an ending where Jesus goes to heaven and Judas takes his place. The director used the film as a dialogue between Christians and Muslims, touring America and Europe with his film, and, after two years, adding some more scenes, offering a Christian ending.

The Story of Judas received an Ecumenical Award at the Berlin Film Festival, 2015, in the Forum section. The film could be very useful in discussions between Christians and Muslims, with the development of a different perspective on Judas and his relationship to Jesus. He is first seen climbing a high mountain to bring Jesus down after his fast. He and Jesus are clearly good friends, and this continues throughout the film.

The portrait of Jesus is sympathetic, he is perceived to be the Messiah and welcomed by people with whom he relates well. There are a number of gospel episodes, the woman taken in adultery, Jesus being anointed with nard, the condemnation of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and scenes with Pontius Pilate. There is an equivalent Barabbas, a man with mental difficulties called Carabas.

There is no sense of betrayal by Judas. Rather, he is loyal to Jesus, but makes an enemy of a man who is copying of Jesus words and is critical of Judas, even stabbing him and mortally wounding him, with Judas going into Jesus' tomb and dying where Jesus had been laid.

The film is beautifully photographed, magnificent landscapes, the use of ordinary people as the cast, offering a different interpretation of Judas.

I AM MICHAEL

US, 2015, 95 minutes, Colour.

James Franco, Zachary Quinto, Charles Carver, Emma Roberts, Daryl Hannah, Leslie Ann Warren.
Directed by Justin Kelly.

The Michael of the title is Michael Glatze on whose experience the story is based.

At the opening, he appears in 2008 as a pastor during a counselling session with a young man with a homosexual orientation, indicating that the man could change, and drawing on biblical teaching for his point of view.

The transition in the screenplay is strong, going back to San Francisco in 1998 where Michael is an openly gay man, a well-known journalist on a gay magazine, and in a partnership which seems to be solid and has a future. Michael is played by James Franco, who has been involved in a number of gay-friendly features and documentaries. Zachary Quinto is his partner. The film has been executive produced by Gus Van Sant.

Michael seemed to have everything going for him, work on the magazine, strong editorial discussions about stances to be taken, many critical of more evangelical religious organisations who use biblical arguments against homosexuality. He is popular as a speaker and a number of gay men express their appreciation of his perspective and advice. When his partner, Ben, gets an invitation to go to Canada for work, Michael hesitates but goes with him. However, in Canada he is unsettled, his outlet being a blog.

But, on the way, he visits his old home town of Olympia, remembers the effect of his mother, encounters a young gay man who prays devoutly at a family funeral, seeming to be able to cope with his sexual orientation and his religious faith. Michael has entered into a new relationship which becomes a threesome with Ben. They have a grant to travel around the United States interviewing young gay people and presenting their findings to audiences for discussion.

Michael, however, has a panic attack, remembering his father's illness and sudden death. While he is reassured, his mind turns to thoughts of death, God, faith, life after death. To the surprise of everyone, especially Ben and the readers of the blog, Michael starts to talk about faith, changing his sexual orientation, returning to what is "normal", phrases which hurt Ben and others who read the blog.

In fact, Michael leaves Ben, travels in the United States, decides to go to biblical school to get a degree and to become a pastor. While he is there and plays in a recital, music having been his major study at university, he encounters a young woman, Rebecca (Emma Roberts) who is to be his future wife. While he still wants a certain independence in his life, he does become a pastor with his own church. (The screenplay also takes up the theme seen at the beginning of the film, with the young man not following through the advice that he received from Michael.)

The film ends in 2008 with Michael and Rebecca on the verge of the Ministry in their own church, which seems rather open-ended. However, the actual Michael Glatze saw the film and approved of it, which seems to mean that there has been until now a happy-ever-after ending with Michael pursuing his religious direction, moving away from his sexual orientation).

It is interesting that James Franco supported this film, which seems to offer an open-mind on changes in sexual orientation while maintaining that this is, if not impossible, rather improbable.

IXCANUL/ IXCANUL VOLCANO

Ixanul/ Volcano is a film of interest because of its portrayal of life in Guatemala and indications of a film industry in that country.

The film could be described as ethnographical, situated in a tribal village, under the shadow of a volcano. The volcano itself is considered having some of the divine, a mother taking her daughter to the volcano to pray and prepare her for a happy marriage. But, the indigenous people have been evangelised centuries earlier so that along with the nature religion, there are elements of Catholicism.

The focus of the family film is the mother and daughter in the family, the mother concerned about their livelihood, the daughter's marriage, her husband having a job, their dependence on a landowner whom they invite to a meal to discuss a possible marriage. In the meantime, the young girl is attracted by a man of the village who intends to migrate to the United States for a comfortable life. She resists his sexual advances at eventually consents. She had hoped that he would take her away but, of course, he does not and leaves her pregnant.

The mother tries to help her daughter to abort the child but then accepts the reality, with the father in fear of losing his job from the landowner who will despise his daughter. She is beaten by a snake and taken to hospital, gives birth, but is told that the child is dead, and the family is given a coffin which is buried. The daughter feels that the child is still alive, digs up the coffin, finds a brick enclosed – the landowner had got his revenge on the girl by selling her baby.

In its 90 minutes, the film takes on a great number of themes. There is a sympathetic picture of the village, indigenous people speaking their own language, many not understanding Spanish, relying on translators who are not always honest (as in the taking of the census as well as the lies of the landowner).

This is an ethnological film taking audiences deeper into Guatemala and its variety of cultures.

JOURNAL D' UNE FEMME DE CHAMBRE/DIARY OF A CHAMBERMAID

France, 2015, 96 minutes, Colour.

Lea Seydoux, Vincent Lindon, Clotilde Mollet.

Directed by Benoit Jacquot.

Octave Mirabeau wrote the book on which this film is based at the turn of the 20th century, capturing the atmosphere of the 19th century in France, the new bourgeoisie, life in the provinces, the class distinctions of the period, the role of servants, the continuing atmosphere of revolution and the sexual mores of the period. The screenplay refers to the Dreyfus case, a reminder that this was the period of anti-Semitism.

The first version of this story was made by French director Jean Renoir in Hollywood with Paulette Goddard as Celestine, the chambermaid. In the 1960s, Luis Buñuel made his version with Jeanne Moreau in the title role. The films used black-and-white. This film is in colour, giving full value to the costumes, sets and decor of the period, aspects of life in Paris, the mansion in the provinces, the local inhabitants and their way of life.

The film is critical of the arrogance of the newly-rich and their use of their class superiority. Clotilde Mollet is very effective in the role of Madame, a bigoted and nasty woman who exploits the

chambermaid – although, after all her treasures stolen, she gradually mellows. Her husband, the master of the house, is something of a nitwit as well as a womaniser.

Lea Seudoux, who appeared in the director's Farewell to the Queen, and who also appeared in a number of films including Blue is the Warmest Colour, is sufficiently self-possessed and rather haughty in her own way as the chambermaid who finds faults with her employees but takes the position in the country house, muttering criticism under her breath, being used by Madame, but making friends with people in the village. Vincent Lindon is Joseph, seemingly devoted to the family for 15 years but who is secretly a revolutionary, stealing the money and possessions from the employers to finance his revolutionary cause, which is, very explicitly, anti-Semitic.

This is the kind of traditional filmmaking where everything is beautifully produced, film versions according to the style of the novels of the 19th and early 20th centuries, something which has an appeal for the public but which irritates film critics who want something more challenging.

KNIGHT OF CUPS

US, 2015, 118 minutes, Colour.

Christian Bale, Cate Blanchett, Natalie Portman, Antonio Banderas, Brian Dennehy, Wes Bentley, Imogen Poots, Isabel Lucas, Teresa Palmer, Freida Pinto, Jason Clarke, Michael Wincott, Ryan O'Neal. Voices of: John Gielgud, Ben Kingsley.

Directed by Terence Malick.

In recent years, many audiences and, certainly, many movie buffs, have been eagerly anticipating the films of Terence Malick. He made an extraordinary impact in the 1970s with *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, interest in American narratives, but a greater focus on cinematography, especially the beauty of American landscapes. And then he didn't make a film until *The Thin Red Line* in 1998. Since then, he has been a little more prolific with *The New World* and then, amazing many audiences and critics with *The Tree of Life*.

There was a huge cosmic focus with *The Tree of Life* and Malick has always been interested in exploring the more transcendent aspects of human experience. This was important for *To the Wonder*.

With *The Knight of Cups*, opinion is rather divided. Once again, the narrative is not as important as the visual imagery, symbolism, interior monologues, the meaning of the society and culture portrayed. Even the actors seem to concur that they were not really in the know about the development of the plot but were given instructions each day on what they might do on the set. For many, this kind of improvisation is impressive. For those with more traditional expectations, even conventional, this kind of filmmaking seems extraordinarily meandering, sometimes puzzling, maybe even inconclusive. But, for those who are impressed by this, *The Knight of Cups* seems to be another Malick masterpiece.

At the opening, there are quotations from Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*, with the voice of John Gielgud, and then a reference to a fable where a father lets his son go to search for meaning but fails. Throughout the film, there is voice-over from Ben Kingsley.

The film is set, of all places, in Los Angeles, in Hollywood, not an expected Malick setting. His character, Rick, played by Christian Bale, is a writer, not one who is struggling (and that is one of the main points) but who has achieved a great deal, is accepted, moves comfortably through Hollywood

society, lavish parties, discussions with agents and a range of LA types. And that is what we see and hear him doing. The fact is that, while he has been successful, it has not been enough. He wants more because there seems to be a void in his life, even in the centre of his character.

While he meanders, he experiences a great number of flashbacks, through which he tries to explain himself to himself – as does Malik try to explain him to the audience. One of the principal areas of flashback is to his father, a hard man, who has treated his sons harshly but also seems to want to be forgiven. He is played strongly by Brian Dennehy. His son who is a failure, played by Wes Bentley, has a great number of encounters with Rick, but it is hard to tell what are the outcomes.

At a party, where many celebrities can be glimpsed if you are alert, with celebrities like Ryan O'Neal, there are discussions with an eager producer, played by Antonio Banderas.

And then there are the women (three Australian actresses being prominent among them). The most interesting and significant is his former wife, played by Cate Blanchett, a doctor with social concerns, seen working with disfigured people, and trying to have straightforward conversations with Rick. Then there is a married woman, pregnant, played by Natalie Portman, a sympathetic woman. Sympathetic can also be used to describe the stripper (Teresa Palmer) whom he encounters in a club but tries to open his eyes beyond himself. This is the case with some of the other women, including Isabel Lucas, and his visit to Japan to a Buddhist Centre. Malik has focused on Christian, even Catholic, themes and this is the case, late in the film, where Rick goes to consult a priest, played by Armin Mueller-Stahl.

But Rick spends a lot of time on his own, wandering, walking meditatively along the beach (and there are quite a number of water sequences and symbols in the film).

Now whether audiences want to spend all this time with Rick depends on their response to Malik and his filmmaking. Expectation should be that there will not really be any or many solutions, but rather, explorations.

LOVE AND MERCY

US, 2014, 122 minutes, Colour.

John Cusack, Paul Dano, Elizabeth Banks, Paul Giamatti, Bill Camp.

Directed by Bill Pohlad.

Love and Mercy is the title of music by Brian Wilson, one of the original Beach Boys, composing many of their songs, sometimes performing them.

At this stage of his career, Wilson is portrayed by Paul Dano, always an idiosyncratic actor but here relishing the opportunity for performance, a man on the edge, singing but not wanting to tour, composing songs, comfortable in playing with a studio orchestra, encouraging their improvising, but wanting to compose serious music.

The older Wilson is played by John Cusack, an interesting performance, initially appearing quite normal but also with some oddities. We are introduced to him as he tries to buy a luxury car, fascinated by the woman selling the car, his future wife, Melinda, played by Elizabeth Banks. However, it soon emerges that he has had mental illness difficulties, is under the very strict supervision of psychologist Dr Eugene Landry, (Paul Giamatti) whose diagnosis is paranoid schizophrenia.

The structure of the film moves from one time period to the other and back again, the experience of the younger Brian Wilson throwing light on his later experiences. Wilson has a sense of responsibility for his brothers, being the oldest. But he also has very strong issues with his father, whose strict attitudes have not encouraged Brian with a good self-image. There are scenes with his father, his father putting him down, especially listening to the composition of one of his songs and, later, selling the copyright to all Brian songs.

The later part of the film has a courtship between Brian and Melinda, their falling in love, but Brian always cautious and the doctor continually intruding, wanting reports of all activities. Ultimately, this is too much and Melinda moves in bringing Brian out of the shadow of the doctor who does not hesitate to enter a vicious and vigorous fight, targeting Melinda.

At the end of the film, there is a resume of what happened to Brian Wilson after this, especially his marriage to Melinda, his acknowledgement of the help of his first wife, and his relationship with all his children. He is also seen as being successful in composing his music, performing it in 2004, and being considered a significant figure in the development of American music.

MARIPOSA/ BUTTERFLY

Argentina, 2050, 103 minutes, Colour.

Ailin Salas, Javier de Pietro, Julian Infantino, Malena Villa.

Directed by the Marco Berger.

The opening of the film shows a young girl carrying a baby and she soon abandons it, but sees a beautiful butterfly. The scene of abandonment is seen twice, suggesting a surrealist approach to the film. This is important because there are two parallel worlds, two parallel stories, with the characters having the same names and being played by the same performers. It is intriguing to see how hair styles and glasses can make quite a difference to the appearance of the same actor or actress.

The plot is rather simple, love between the two central characters, the difficulty being that one couple thinks they are brother and sister and so the love is forbidden – although the audience knows that they are not blood brother and sister because the girl is the abandoned baby of the opening of the film. The other couple and their romance is complicated but with a lighter touch. One of the women has a brother who is gay and makes a liaison with the other man who seems to be initially partnered with the women.

That this means of the film is quite clever – although, some of the characters are not particularly engaging. However, the performances and the contrast between the two worlds retains interest.

MR. HOLMES

UK, 2015, 105 minutes, Colour.

Ian Mc Kellen, Milo Parker, Laura Linney, Hattie Morahan, Patrick Kennedy, Hiroyuki Sanada, Roger Allam, Colin Starkey, Philip Davies, Nicholas Rowe, Frances de la Tour.

Directed by Bill Condon.

This very entertaining film has a lot going for it, a lot of fine ingredients and all fitting together perfectly.

In a press conference, Ian Mc Kellen stated that Sherlock Holmes was the greatest Englishman who never lived. Fans of Sherlock Holmes will appreciate this film, a story of Mr Holmes who gave up his investigations 35 years earlier, regretting that he did not understand the case that he was dealing with, the personalities involved, and the sad ending to the case. He has retired to Sussex, as was mentioned in some of the stories and some of the film versions, to keep bees.

Ian Mc Kellen is a very good choice to portray Holmes. He has the opportunity to play him at age 93, in that retirement in Sussex, keeping the bees, living quietly and unobtrusively, cared for by his stern housekeeper, Mrs Munro (played plainly but subtly by Laura Linney), a war widow, with a young son, Tom (a lively Milo Parker), who sees Holmes as something of a father or grandfather-figure. It is 1947.

We learn, however, that Holmes has made a visit to Japan, searching for a herb, Prickly Ash, that, with Royal Jelly, could be a means of healing for the ailments of old age. And Holmes is not without his ailments. We do see scenes of Holmes in Japan, especially visiting Hiroshima, and some visuals of local people who had been effected by the radiation. His host, who helps him to find the Prickly Ash, also has his own story which Holmes uncovers and, rather uncharacteristically, writes a letter at the end to this Japanese man, a letter of comfort about his father who disappeared long since to work with the British.

And, there are also flashbacks to the story, in 1912, where a man comes to ask Holmes advice about his wife who is deeply disturbed after two miscarriages. Speaking of flashbacks, there are also flashbacks within this story, to illustrate and traumatise it. It also means that we see Holmes at 58, investigating the case, indulging in some of his propensity for disguises, having an emotional discussion with the distraught mother, but quite misreading the situation, something which has haunted him and is now compelling him, at age 93, to write the story. As he writes, at different stages during the film, he has discussions with young Tom who is an alert lad and offers some clues and indications of how the story might be written.

In the scenes in 1947, Mrs Munro feels that Holmes is alienating the affections of her son (and with our 21st century alertness, noticing that Laura Linney plays Mrs Munro as looking at Holmes with a look of a mother who is apprehensive that the man is a paedophile). Rather, Holmes is very supportive of Mrs Munro, teaches Tom a great deal about bees, though there is some melodrama towards the end when Tom is stung.

This is a fine Sherlock Holmes story, a portrayal of his character, and indications of mellowing as he grows older, a touch of the old investigation style, his conversation which is always strong on facts and deductive reasoning, a film that happily shows us the best of Sherlock Holmes.

NOBODY WANTS THE NIGHT

Spain, 2014, 119 minutes, Colour.

Juliette Binoche, Rinko Kikuchi, Gabriel Byrne.

Directed by Isabel Coixet.

Nobody Wants the Night is an odd title for this film, not really indicating what the film is about, even though the darkest night of the Arctic is significant for the plot.

Captain Robert Peary had great ambitions to reach the North Pole, going on many expeditions,

sometimes accompanied by his wife, Josephine. This film focuses on Josephine herself, a New York socialite, a woman used to comfort yet happy to go on rugged expeditions, are stubborn and dominant woman, commanding and pressurising all those who worked for the expeditions.

Juliette Binoche plays Josephine. It is a role that requires her to be haughty at the beginning, to participate in the ruggedness of the travelling through the Arctic ice and snow, determined to reach the rendezvous with her husband, no matter what the storms, avalanches, injuries and deaths.

However, when she arrives, her husband is not there. There is a young Inuit woman whom she discovers had a relationship with her husband and is pregnant. She is devastated but has to survive with the young woman, especially as the Arctic darkness comes on. There is not much food to be had, Josephine becoming ill, the young woman being pregnant. It is a transforming experience for Josephine who has to let go of her presuppositions, her sense of power and importance, her sense of superiority over the Inuits, and become much more human.

Rinko Kikuchi, the Japanese actress who appeared in such films as *Babel*, is the young Inuit woman. There is a guest role for Gabriel Byrne as a philosophising, atheistic, lover of solitude who accompanies the expedition.

There is some interesting information at the end of the film, that Peary's claim to have reached the North Pole first was disputed, that a doctor claimed the honour, but that afterwards, it seems that both claims were not verified. Josephine Peary returned to New York, wrote a number of books and lived until 1955.

The film was directed by Isabel Coixet, a veteran of a rather wide range of films, *My Life without Me*, *The Secret Life of Words*, *Map of the Sounds of Tokyo*.

THE PEARL BUTTON/ EL BOTON DE NACAR

Chile, 2015, 82 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Patricio Guzman.

A very interesting documentary about Chile, from a well-renowned documentary maker, award-winning, with insights into Chile and its history.

This film, winner of the Ecumenical Award in Berlin, 2015, begins with a cosmic view, symbolised by a block of quartz which contains a drop of water, thousands of years old, with reflection on the cosmos, a reflection on water, on its significance for the world and the Chile. There also scenes of dishes facing into space, gathering information for the 21st century.

However, the director goes back in history, using a device of a group of people unrolling a long carpet-like map of the country, showing how narrow it is, with the Andes and the mountains, and the vast link and extent of the Pacific Coast and its southern islands. Guzman also highlights the original inhabitants, their way of life, the industries, fishing, and how, at the beginning of the 21st century, with British map-makers, there was an intrusion into their way of life and it changed. As with a number of indigenous cultures, the British expeditionaries took individuals to London, dressed them in English clothes, exhibiting them – but, when the individuals returned home, they took off the British clothes and returned to their old way of life.

With the historical information, with the transitions in the 19th and into the 20th century, Guzman finally arrives at the exploitation of the Chilean people, the experience of the dictatorship, the

thousands of disappeared, the prisons and conditions, the killing of a number of prisoners by throwing them from planes and helicopters.

Guzman has been long interested in the dictatorship and the Pinochet experience and brings it once again vividly to life in the context of Chilean history and culture.

QUEEN OF THE DESERT

US, 2015, 190 minutes, Colour.

Nicole Kidman, James Franco, Damian Lewis, David Calder, Jenny Agutter.

Directed by Werner Herzog.

For more than 40 years, Werner Herzog has been both provocative and profound in his range of films. He began with some art-house narrative features, including *The Enigma of Kasper Hauser* as well as a version of *Nosferatu* in the 1970s. He has also continued to make a number of documentaries, and is well-known for his hard treatment of his cast, especially in the Latin American-set films, *Aguirre*, *The Wrath of God* and *Fitzcaraldo*.

Over the decades, he has been prolific, blending features and documentaries, often going to remote areas to exploit human experience there, including the Antarctic (and, in some moments of irony, he comically voices a film-maker in Antarctica in the animated film, *Penguins of Madagascar*). In recent years, he has worked from a base in the United States, making such features as *Bad Lieutenant*, *New Orleans*, as well as a documentary on the prehistoric drawings in the caves in France, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, filming in 3 D.

Yet, it is something of a surprise to find him making *Queen of the Desert*. It is very much in the traditional modes of filmmaking, a straightforward narrative, action sequences and romance, with a historical perspective.

Gertrude Bell was an English woman, educated at the University, a pioneer in her times at the beginning of the 20th century. Dissatisfied with life in England, she goes to the British Embassy in Tehran, finds the old Persian culture congenial, begins to learn Farsi, which becomes a preparation for her return to the Middle East and becoming something of an explorer and archaeologist.

However, the screenplay alerts the audience to her role during World War I, her friendship and association with T.E. Lawrence and the repercussions for knowledge of the Bedouin tribes, their alliances, the experience of the war and the reshaping by the conquering allies, creating Middle Eastern countries. Winston Churchill presides at a meeting early in the film to discuss the repercussions for the war and his advisers at the meeting refer him to Gertrude Bell, some very traditional male types sneering at her and what she has achieved.

The film looks very good, the scenes in England very much in the Merchant-Ivory² respectable style. Iran looks more than a touch exotic. But the film and its photography are beautiful and strong in the many desert sequences as Gertrude ventures into the Arabian pensioner, visits Damascus, and shares in aspects of the life of the tribes. Considering that *Lawrence of Arabia* was made in 1962, it is very surprising that there has not been a film about Gertrude Bell before this.

Herzog is well served by his cast. Nicole Kidman is at her best as Gertrude Bell, very much an English lady at all times, but one with a keen sense of enquiry, and empathy for the Arabs who receive her very well and consider that she is one of the best westerners for understanding them. On the

personal level, Gertrude clashes with her newly-rich parents and their desire for a good marriage. In Tehran, she meets one of the staff who is attracted to her, teaches her Farsi, falls in love but has to return to England where her father forbids her to marry, with tragic consequences for the young man. Surprisingly, he is played by James Franco.

In Damascus, a married official (Damian Lewis) falls in love with her. She hesitates, but reciprocate only to find that he volunteers to fight in the war. Audiences might be surprised to find that after her adventures in the desert, Gertrude Bell worked for the British government, based in Cairo, collaborating with T.E. Lawrence and that she continued this work until her death in 1926.

Film buffs might be disappointed that Herzog, at this stage of his life and career, has made such a popular kind of film. Most audiences will find it interesting and entertaining.

SELMA

US, 2014, 128 minutes,,.Colour.

David Oyelowo, Carmen Ejogo, Tom Wilkinson, Oprah Winfrey, Giovanni Ribisi, Andre Holland, Common, Tim Roth, Dylan Baker, Martin Sheen, Stephen Root, Wendell Pierce, Cuba Gooding Jr, Alessandro Nivola.

Directed by Ava DuVernay?

It is 50 years ago, this year, that Martin Luther King led the march on Selma. And this film is a worthy commemoration.

Martin Luther King, vilified by many during his life, especially by J.Edgar Hoover and the FBI, and losing his life to an assassin in 1968, at the age of 39. After his death, his wife, Coretta, campaigned for the introduction of a public holiday in his honour, something which was eventually achieved and is still celebrated.

Selma is a film that takes us back to 1964 and 1965. Audience knowledge of the 1963 March on Washington and King's speech of his dream is presupposed. While the film is a portrait of King, it focuses on his racial equality cause, spread by non-violence, his political contacts, his collaboration with other activists, differences from the approach of Malcolm X, the issue of the Selma March. There is also some focus on his relationship with his wife, his infidelities but his love for Coretta, his care for his children, and Coretta's standing by her husband, especially at Selma.

King and his associates are central to the film as his Coretta. However, the president of the time was Lyndon B. Johnson who inherited the presidency after the death of JFK but who was elected in a landslide in his own right in 1964. A Texan, he met with King and spoke to him by phone, challenged by an equality issue that King was raising: black Americans had the right to vote but, especially in the South, officials, from Governor George Wallace to petty bureaucrats, did their best to make it impossible for the registration to vote to be accepted. This is dramatised in an early scene when a nurse, played significantly and symbolically by Oprah Winfrey, tries to register and is asked how many districts there are in the state, which she answers correctly, but then fails because she cannot name the officials in each of the 67 districts.

King and a group went to Selma, Alabama, to decide whether it was a suitable place to have a march

and a demonstration, the attitudes of the locals (shown to be fairly hostile with Confederate flags, spitting and denunciations) and the risk of protest and violence.

The apprehensions were not misplaced. In the first attempt, the troopers stood their ground and confronted the quiet and peaceful marchers, chasing them and brutally bashing them. King made television appeals to the American public who watched the television news of the events. For the next March, people from all over the United States, black and white, especially with religious leaders of all denominations as well as nuns, coming to help and to join in the March. Crucial to the campaign and public opinion was the murder of a Boston Episcopalian priest by local bashing thugs.

Governor George Wallace, his sheriffs and other officials had no time for black Americans, mouthing denunciations, even urging President Johnson to think about the dire and dread consequences if segregation was lifted...

Ultimately, the march did take place and is a satisfying ending to this film, although the drama comes in the preparations, the thwarting of the original march, the police trooper brutality, and the effect on the American public bracket heightened by our seeing excerpts of news coverage of the time edited into this film.

It is interesting to note that four of the central characters are played by British actors. David Oyelowo is a theatre actor from England, of Nigerian background, who played on the London stage, moved to the United States and appeared in the sheriff in Jack Reacher, the rebellious son in The Butler, the fellow-journalist in Paper Boy. He gives a powerful performance, an impersonation of King, yet getting inside King's character and communicating his mind, his thoughts, his hopes, and his faith, seen significantly as he knelt on the bridge at Selma when the march was held up. He also captures the voice, the modulations, the power of rhetoric in King's speeches. The film ends with King's speech at the capital in Montgomery, Alabama.

British Carmen Ejogo plays Coretta King. Tom Wilkinson is Lyndon Johnson and Tim Roth is Governor Wallace. There is an uncredited appearance by Martin Sheen as the judge who presides over the case as to whether the march should go ahead. The rest of the cast is made up of a number of black character actors like Wendell Pierce, Cuba Gooding Jr, Andre Holland and white actors like Giovanni Ribisi and Alessandro Nivola.

This is a very earnest film, some American audiences finding it too preachy – although, for them, that might be an important point. As it is, this is a tribute to Martin Luther King and his achievement in the middle of the 20th century, a heritage that has lasted, despite frequent flareups, riots and injustices towards African Americans.

SWORN VIRGIN

Albania/Italy, 2015, 90 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Laura Bispuri.

It is not usual to see a film from Albania. This one opens in the mountains of that country but spends

a great deal of its action time in Italy.

The sworn virgin of the title is the second daughter of a strong mountain man who seems to have wanted a son. There are flashbacks to the life of the two little girls together but, it soon emerges, that one of them has migrated to Italy. The younger daughter, Hanah, makes a decision that she would live as a man, Mark, with her father presiding over a ritual ceremony, cutting her plaits, and declaring that she is his son. When he dies, accompanied by a vivid ritual with the fellow men of the village, she decides to migrate to Italy, arriving at her sister's house, partly welcomed, not liked by her niece, but eventually accepted. She explains that she is Mark and conducts herself as a man. Her brother-in-law finds her an apartment, she makes friends with her niece who is involved in synchronised swimming, and reconciles with her sister. She is also attracted by the man who looks after the pool. At the end of the process, she decides that she would like to live as a woman, returning to the identity of Hanah.

This theme would be interesting in a film from many cultures, but is especially of interest is being treated by Albanian filmmakers.

TAXI

Iran, 2015, 85 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Jafar Panahi.

Taxi is quite an entertaining story in itself, but it has to be seen in the life of its director, Jafar Panahi, one Iran's great film directors, claimed with awards. He fell foul of the authorities in Iran a run and was confined to his home, home imprisonment. He was also forbidden to make films for 20 years.

Panahi received very strong support from international film makers. Encouraged, he used a camera to fill himself in his apartment, for the audience to experience his confinement and way of life, finally going down in the elevator but unable to leave the building. With the ban on his film-making, he called this film This is Not a Film.

Several years later, with a certain amount of freedom of movement within the country, he made another film, Closed Curtain, a sometimes rather enigmatic film about a confined man, his friends, and visitors to his house, and the questioning of identities.

With this film, he has a simple concept (used more in the art-house style by director, Abbas Kierostami in 10) of putting the camera at the front of his taxi, Panahi playing the taxi driver, with a range of passengers, selected and briefed, which meant that the camera could look out from the taxi and see vistas of the city of Tehran. The camera could also easily film the passengers in the back seats but could turn on Panahi himself to see his response to his passengers and their conversations.

The choice of passengers is somewhat provocative for the Iranian authorities. Initially, two people get in, the man rather aggressively traditional in his attitudes towards crime and execution while the woman, turns out to be a teacher with rather liberal views about society. Another passenger is a video bootlegger who claims to know Panahi, goes to visit a film student, enabling Panahi to give some advice about film-making, as well as a selection of foreign language DVDs, all bootleg, which the student would find helpful. The point is made that bootlegging is the only way of distribution for Panahi's own film.

There are two elderly ladies with a fishbowl who want to get to some fish springs before midday, nattering in the back, irritating Panahi, the bowl breaking but his saving the fish with plastic, and letting them get out of the taxi as soon as possible.

There is also a friend who has some conversation about muggings and dire experiences. The last passenger is the director's niece, picking her up from school, her being able to recite the rules (very restrictive) for making films in Iran and she is interested in a project, seeing young lad near a wedding party who steals money that has fallen on the ground and her trying to persuade him to give it back while she films him for her project.

The final passenger is a lawyer, who has been banned, but is quite forthright in her government criticisms. When they find a purse in the car, they realise it is from the two ladies and they go to track them down. The final image is of police searching Panahi's taxi to find the memory stick with the film – but they are unable.

In the spirit of solidarity, the Berlin jury awarded the Golden Bear to Taxi.

THANATOS, DRUNK

Taiwan, 2015, 107 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Zui Sheng Meng Si.

This drama is a slice of contemporary Taiwanese life, set in rather sleazy parts of the city of Taipei.

It opens with a young man, sitting with his alcoholic mother, long abandoned by her husband, favouring her older son who has migrated to the United States. She makes bad comparisons with the older brother for her younger son. His name is Rat.

Rat has been a good student but has fallen on bad times, becoming involved in petty crime, linked with some of the gangsters of the city. He also has a propensity for contemplating ants, and later, maggots.

His brother returns the United States, unhappy with the breakup of a partnership, becomes a dancer in a gay club, becomes infatuated with his younger brother's good friend who, himself, is a gigolo (or, as contemptuously described by the chief gangster who has lent him money, a sperm-seller). The gigolo, despite his work, is in a relationship with a young woman who, as it emerges, is a strong controller, especially when he becomes infatuated with the gay brother. Rat is also concerned about a cousin and goes to rescue her from a situation where a client has been castrated.

The film is episodic, not always providing the links with what is happening on and off screen.

The film becomes rather bloodthirsty at the end. The gay brother and the gigolo do have an evening together, the brother decides to go back to the United States and the gigolo is angrily killed by his girlfriend. But not before he confronts the gangster chief whose thugs have bashed him and he violently kills the gangster. The mother is confronted by both her sons, talks about changing her way of life, but when reaching for a bottle of alcohol on a high shelf, she topples and is killed (Rat later finding her after some days, with many, many maggots).

She does appear momentarily in a hallucination for Rat. He seems to have turned a corner and is finally seen trying to sell vegetables market, though not reliably – and then he also has a kind of

vision of the gigolo.

The film may be of interest in Taiwan but is limited in interest and in style of filmmaking for wider audiences. But, it is certainly a grim picture.

THAT SUGAR FILM

Australia, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Damon Gameau, Hugh Jackman, Stephen Fry, Brenton Thwaites, Isabel Lucas, Jessica Marais and many medical experts.

Directed by Damon Gameau.

It might sound like this film will have a sweet taste but it is designed to make audiences concerned about their propensity for sweet tastes and, especially, for consumption of sugar and fructose. This is a documentary, a very entertaining one, that examines the role of sugar in our diet, in our metabolism, and the consequences – with a look at how sugar is so strongly promoted in our commercial culture.

Some years ago, American documentary-maker, Morgan Spurlock, decided that he would film an experiment about diet and takeaway food, especially at McDonald's[?] and other such franchises. It was Called Supersize Me. He decided that the focus of the experiment would be his Supersizing every order and eat just this for a month to see what happened to him. Needless to say, he put on weight became unwell, certainly needed some medical checkups and processes for getting back to normal.

Damon Gameau is an actor who has been a number of Australian and television programs, generally the cheeky and cheerful character, quick on the draw with his remarks and cracks. This means that he is very well suited to the role he has set up for himself, not exactly doing a Spurlock, but something very similar with sugar.

He genially introduces himself and his girlfriend who is pregnant. Since he wrote the film as well as directing, it is clear that he has strong views on sugar intake and its results. He does get a panel of experts, blood, the diet, the general health, who are interviewed during the film – and they are introduced with our bit of animation and giving them superhero names. They are wary about his experiment.

The film uses an entertaining device for the expert talking heads, and there are many of them, but he generally has quick bites which bring home the points – but they all appear and are seen within frameworks, machines, which can be moved, turned over... So we are continually alert to what these experts have to offer.

The film uses a number of celebrities to give us background, and sugar information. Hugh Jackman turns up and does some sand drawings to illustrate the origins of sugar in this part of the world, eventually going to India, making its way to Europe where a couple of centuries ago it was looked on as a specialty by the wealthy. Stephen Fry turns up to give us a humorous talk about the different kinds of sugar, the glucose that put energy into our system, the sucrose and its effects and a warning about fructose and its absorption in the liver, turning to fat, increasing triglycerides... Later, up-and-coming Australian actor, Brenton Thwaites serves as a model to indicate what is happening in our interiors and the damage that too much sugar can do to the liver, to the heart, to the bloodstream.

The information Gameau gets for the experiment is that the sugar intake will be the equivalent of 40 teaspoonfuls of sugar per day. And it is immediately alarming as he begins, that his first breakfast cereal and juice is more than a third of the teaspoonfuls already. As he continues, he finds ways of adding the sugar even to a chicken lunch! Within some days he is put on several kilos and finds his mood is changing, some lethargy...

Over a decade ago he had contact with a group of aboriginal people at Mia Wiru in the Northern Territory, especially in a community whose medical adviser had changed their diet, especially as regards sugar. But, with the advent of the supermarkets and the bombarding advertising, the increased intake of sugar was doing harm.

Next, he went off to the United States and, while obesity had been mentioned, there are quite a few off-putting close-ups of obesity. He is still having the equivalent of 40 teaspoonfuls a day, finding smoothies, drinks, and, alarmingly finding that such a drinks Mountain Dew has more sugar than Coke or Pepsi and more Carfin. In fact, he accompanies a dentist who travels around the state of Kentucky working with locals, including a young man who has been drinking an enormous amount of Mountain Dew since he was a little child and his teeth have either fallen out or rotted. We may not want to look at the close-ups of his mouth, but this is a salutary tale. Gameau also finds a pill that one can put in one's mouth which will sweeten food with a more savoury taste – he even tries it with a chilli but says it doesn't work.

In fairness, he decides to interview a scientist who has been working on sugar research for some time. He is not alarmed, and it seems his studies have been financed by Coca-Cola².

He has been keeping in touch with his girlfriend by Skype and, on his return, as large, he suggests, as she is in her pregnancy, she gives birth and he is delighted with his daughter. With the help of the experts, he gets back to normal size, and gets to editing this film so that we can share his extremely cautionary experience.

Older people probably need to see this film and act on it. Parents certainly need to see the film to check on their children's diets and the effect, especially of their brain capacities and attention at school.

TORNERANNO I PRATI/GREENERY WILL RETURN

Italy, 2015, 78 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Ermanno Olmi.

Ermanno Olmi began directing films in 1958 and has had a very successful career in his native Italy, a focus on Italian life, on Italian traditions, the great values in Italian life and culture.

In the 1970s, he made two films which are considered masterpieces, *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* and *The Legend of the Holy Drinker*.

In the years of the 21st century, there were reports that this would be the last film from Olmi, then there was another, and another.

This time this could be his last part he has made a brief film, effective nonetheless. He takes a military outpost on the border between Italy and Austria during World War I. It is winter and the

men have dug in, surviving in a trench with accommodation as well as offices for the military authorities. The men dig paths so that rations can be brought in. There are wooden barriers, wire barriers. Flares leaders go up at night.

There is a focus on the men, the responsibility of the officers, the wounded and their hallucinations, the care from the other man. Officials make a decision which the men consider wrong, that a scout needs to go out from the trench to get information about the attack. One man goes out, promised 10 lire for his efforts, but he is shot almost immediately. Another volunteers but strips himself of his rank and then shoots himself.

Then begin the bombardments, exceedingly heavy, and the decision is made that the men retreat. The new young officer makes decisions, the men go down the hill, others remaining to care for the wounded.

The Chaplain is glimpsed, giving blessings to the sick, their burial, for those retreating – and some dialogue criticising the role of the absent God, the wicked God.

Early in the film, a soldier sings, bringing some soothing to the men. Later the young Lieutenant asks the singer to sing again but he refuses, saying that it is not in the regulations and that singing is for happy situations.

The film is reminiscent of such films as *Paths of Glory*, the picture of warfare, the ordinary men, and the bad decisions of officers. There is a pessimistic ending the soldier commenting that all this activity and heroism will be forgotten.

UMPHEFUMLO/BREATHE

South Africa, 2015, 90 minutes, Colour.

Busiswe Ngejane, Mhelekazi Mosiea, Pauline Malefane, Zebulon Mmusi.

Directed by Mark Dornford- May.

In 2005, the team behind the making of this film, won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival for their interpretation of Bizet's, *Carmen*, *U-Carmen*[?]. The next film was a gospel story, a focus on Jesus, Son of Man, which also incorporated a great deal of song, especially for the star performer, Pauline Malefane, portraying Mary, mother of Jesus.

This time they have done an interpretation of Puccini's *La Boheme*, setting it in the township outside Cape Town, where *Carmen* was set, Khayelitsha. The setting is also contemporary, using a group of university students for the central characters. This works quite well, incorporating the arias and other music from Puccini but also having a chorus, at times, of the main musical theme sung in choral fashion.

The story makes sense in the contemporary setting, poor students, winter, cuts in electricity, the cold – with the information that the area is one of the worst for tuberculosis in the world, certainly a place for Mimi to be ill. She falls in love with her fellow student, as he does with her, very briefly presented during song. There are moments of happiness, Mimi leaving because of her illness, returning with her friend Zoleka (Pauline Malefane) only to die.

The film is vividly made, with an emotional pull, and a celebration of Puccini's music.

UNDER ELECTRIC CLOUDS

Russia, 2015, 130 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Alexey German Jr.

This is a film designed for Russian audience or audiences who are aware of Russian history, politics, economics, industry as well as the traditions. It has social implications, ethnographic situations and implications, personal stories.

The film also has a singular visual style, is divided into seven chapters with headings, and indications of interconnections between the stories. The setting is 2017, the film released in 2015 at the time of the presidency of Vladimir Putin and the Russian experience, unrest and war, especially in Ukraine, in the context of international sanctions.

The camera work is distinctive, many tracking shots, close-ups, Russian editing and pace. There is also voice-over, explaining the background of the building, the links with particular characters, the building and its being unfinished serving as a symbol. There are sequences in chapters with architects, vying about the design, wondering the parking lot, others asking questions about a cupola or a spire. A range of different perspectives.

The film opens with a foreign wanderer, in the cold, difficulties of language, looking for work, and issues of life and death. It is followed by a chapter about the heirs when the owner of the building dies, the son preferring to be with his friends, the daughter wanting to honour her father, getting ideas, inspecting – and the chapter ending with her standing on her hands, upside down on the top of the building.

There is also a story about a real estate agent and his memories, difficult times in 2011, problems.

Whether there is a resolution is a question, visionary, philosophical or whether the whole film has been an exploration, some abstract considerations. To that extent, this is a cleverly made and artistic film for Russians and those familiar with the Russian experience, difficult or even alienating for non-Russians.

VICTORIA

Germany, 2015, 140 minutes, Colour.
Laia Costa, Fredrick Lau.
Directed by Sebastian Schipper.

Victoria is the name of a young Spanish woman spending time in Berlin. While she has work, we see her dancing the night away, and linking up with some men at the club. She agrees to study with them but they have a different agenda, one of them, just out of prison, is in debt to one of the prison bosses and has agreed to commit robbery. He persuades his friends to join him, but one is very drunk and they persuade Victoria to be the chauffeur. She moves willingly into the plan, becoming more and more exhilarated, even when she is fearful. The young man that she is attached to tries to be protective of her but his friend in need prevails.

The main feature of the film, which won an award at the 2015 Berlin Festival, is the Cinematography, the design of the screenplay to take place in real time, meaning that the director of photography has

to ensure that the film looks as if it has been one single take. This does give some rise to artificiality in photography and design, placement of the camera, and this also means that there are some deficiencies in the plot (for example, the group leaving their car with the drunk man in the boot, available to the police, and going out to a club only a few minutes walk away).

There is an intensity about the film, in the difficult relationships, the effect on each of those involved, the impact on Victoria herself, her relationship with the young man, their eventually having to escape, going to a hotel, his being wounded, his urging her to go away with the stolen money – and the final answer to her dilemma.

WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE?

US, 2015, 100 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Liz Garbus.

Nina Simone was something of an American icon in the music world. The title for this film comes from a question by poet, artist, performer, Maya Angelou. Nina Simone had an extraordinary influence as a singer, as pianist, as an activist in the Civil Rights Movement. But, after 1968, she moved out of the United States, some media entrepreneurs wary of performance because of such anti-white, violence-inciting lyrics and songs and her powerful performance and interactions with audiences.

This film has been produced by her daughter, Lisa Simone Kelly, who, after a career in the military, has become a singer in her own right. She had a hard life with her mother but at the age of 14 moved to live with her father in New York City. She sometimes bore the brunt of her mother's violence. It was only later that Nina Simone was diagnosed as bipolar.

The film traces the life and career, highlighting episodes in life with particular songs. Much of the material for the comes from archives and records of Nina Simone's performances. Many photographs but few talking heads, principally her daughter and a 2006 excerpt from her ex-husband.

There are details of the life, her ambitions to be a concert pianist, moving into singing, many recordings and performances, managed by a husband. She was particularly moved by the death of the little girls burned to death in 1964 and became passionate about the Civil Rights Movement, composing the famous, Mississippi Goddam, singing at the 1965 March from Selma to Montgomery, and strongly influenced by Martin Luther King

U 1968, she moved to Africa, especially Liberia, taking her daughter with her. While she did sing at jazz festivals, most of the rest of her life was outside the United States, in Paris, Holland, the south of France, where the depression had been diagnosed and medication help to get better

This is always an interesting film, with good details about the artist's life, many excerpts of the performances, some comments about her personality and illness, the perspective of the daughter making the film as a tribute to mother, a tale of talent and tragedy.

REVIEWS MARCH 2015

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BLACKHAT

US, 2015, 133 minutes, Colour.

Chris Hemsworth, Leehom Wang, Wei Tang, Viola Davis, Yorick van Wageningen.

Directed by Michael Mann.

Blackhat is certainly topical. The title refers to computer hacking and hackers. And that is certainly topical, with experiences in recent months where Sony Pictures was hacked on the occasion of the release of *The Interview*, suspects, amongst others, North Korea which was being satirised in the film. There have been a number of successful hacking's of American government and military sites.

This is not a film for Luddites. If the audience is not sympathetic to computers, there will be far too much detail, too much hacking, too much hacking the hackers, and trying to deal with information technology and communication. But, this screenplay does strive to provide enough information to make what is going on intelligible (more or less).

The audience can see, right from the opening credits, that hacking has explosive results, even literally with government and company installations. As we watch the progress and process of the hacking, we see it leading to destruction in both China and in Chicago. Chinese authorities as well as the FBI come in on the case, one young expert recognising that a program being used was created by a friend who is, in fact, in jail for hacking crimes. FBI authorities (including Viola Davis) agree to get him released temporarily to work on the sabotage but he is particularly strong minded, makes no deals unless he sets the terms. Out of prison he comes.

He is Nick Hathaway, played by Chris Hemsworth, taking time off from being Thor. He is a big man, an abrupt manner, taciturn, not particularly relational, clever at his work, his investigations, his conclusions. Just when we thought he couldn't have a relationship, he is attracted by the sister of one of the Chinese agents. She becomes a significant contributor to the solution of the problems.

The investigation takes place in Chicago but then all and sundry move to China, recognising the hacker but also detecting the influence of some of his clients, which leads to violent shootouts in China. Nick and the Chinese girl then travel to Malaysia visiting and examining a drive river bed where tin is being mined and which is about to be flooded, making tin scarce and so raising profit margins. And the action moves to Indonesia, to a crowded Jakarta, where the climax takes place, violent confrontation during a crowded public ritual ceremony.

The film was directed by Michael Mann, well known in the past for Miami Vice, making films every couple of years, best known for The Last of the Mohicans, Heat and, more recently, Public Enemy. His visual style is idiosyncratic, using muted light with action often taking place at night or in darkness, coming to bright light in the Malaysians sequences, a great relief, and in some of the Indonesian sequences. Because it is dealing with IT, it is more of a cerebral thriller, although there is quite some action, shootouts and fights.

CINDERELLA

UK, 2015, 105 minutes, Colour.

Cate Blanchett, Lily James, Richard Madden, Stellan Skarsgaard, Derek Jacobi, Ben Chaplin, Hayley Atwell, Rob Bryden.

Directed by Kenneth Branagh.

This version of Cinderella is one of great charm, a pleasure to watch, entertaining and often funny, with some witty and wry lines – a film for girls of every age, young girls and old girls, but not one for boys of any age!

The screenplay was written by Chris Weitz, writer and director of several very entertaining films, including About a Boy, and directed by that fine actor, Kenneth Branagh. And the cast is top-class, Lily James a lovely as Cinderella, Richard Madden making an impression as the Prince. But it is some of the adults who are entertaining, principally Cate Blanchett as a smilingly cruel stepmother (often wearing green, indicating her envy and jealousy), uttering quite ironic and cutting lines. She spends a lot of time promoting her daughters simply because they are her daughters, whom she thinks are rather stupid (and not incorrectly). Derek Jacobi is the King, Stellan Skarsgaard is the scheming Grand Duke, Ben Chaplin Cinderella's sympathetic father, with a brief comic turn from Rob Bryden as the artist commissioned to paint the Prince.

The thing is, of course, that we all know what is going to happen. The pleasure is in anticipation and then the satisfaction of seeing how what we were expecting turns out.

There is something of a more serious opening to the film, Cinderella as a young baby, the loving parents, her mother's death, the father and his travels, and the charming Cinderella making no objections at all to her father's wanting to marry again. It is clear that she has not yet met her prospective stepmother!

All goes according to the stepmother's plan when she moves in, installing the daughters, relegating Cinderella to the attic, not allowing her to eat with the family, Cinderella not allowed to do anything much in fact. But, Cinderella has great comfort in her four pet mice, the most engaging little animals on screen since that chorus in Babe 20 years ago. Their comic presence and some of their antics are very entertaining – especially in comparison with the stepmother's big ugly cat.

Cinderella is certainly an energetic young woman who does ride off in frustration into the forest, encountering the Prince going hunting, pleads for the life of the stag that the hunters are chasing, and thinks the Prince is an apprentice. In the meantime, the Prince has fallen in love, telling his dying father and irritating the Grand Duke who wants the Prince to marry into foreign royalty. So, the ball is proclaimed, stepmother and daughters get their dresses ready, Cinderella being reduced to having to put on her mother's stress and having stepmother berate her, mock her and tear the dress.

It is time for the fairy godmother to arrive – although it is she who has been doing the amusing voiceover. She appears as an old beggar at the mansion door to whom Cinderella is kind and, lo and behold, a transformed begowned blonde beauty, Helena Bonham Carter. She is very funny as she goes choosing the pumpkin, transforming the lizards into footman, the goose into the coach driver, and the four mice into the horses.

The ball is as lavish as might be expected as is Cinderella's blue gown, her skill in dancing, talking with the Prince – but it is soon midnight and the spell is lost (except, of course, for the glass slippers which do not disappear).

Some comedy as everybody tries to get the slippers to fit, the cruel stepmother preventing Cinderella from trying – but, and it's thanks to the mice and their thoughtfulness, that she gets her opportunity and, then, happy ever after. And the final credits conclude with the song from Disney's 1950 film, Bibbity, Bobbity Boo. What more could one ask for?

CITIZENFOUR

US, 2014, 114 minutes, Colour.

Edward Snowden, Glenn Greenwald.

Directed by Laura Poitras.

The Edward Snowden case was very much a story of 2013. He made headlines, was praised as well as vilified because of his whistleblowing, documentation he made available, the repercussions for national security, for invasions of privacy by surveillance, and the American government reaction.

Once he took refuge in Russia, he slipped from the headlines and, for world media consumption, he was not so important in 2014.

That was until this documentary about him and the events of 2013 was released, nominated for an Oscar and perhaps, very surprisingly, won the award. This raises the issues of how the case has been thought about in the United States, the hostility of the government and the criminal charges compared with public opinion and the fact that the members of the Academy would give it its award.

In fact, this is a very serious documentary. The maker behind the film, directing, producing, editing it is Laura Poitras who had made several documentaries about American politics in the aftermath of 9/11. She explains that she had been detained at passport control by American authorities after the release of some of her films. She was contacted by Snowden under the pseudonym sea, Citizenfour, and was invited to make contact with him in Hong Kong.

While the film does give some background to Snowden, aged 29, his work, the availability of secret material, his decision to make public documentation, his motivations, the bulk of the film is real-time footage, photographing Snowden in his Hong Kong hotel, cinema verite, it is certainly, offering quite an amount of material for audiences to respond to Snowden and listen to his explanations.

The other character to feature is Glenn Snowden, a journalist based in Brazil, writing articles on Snowden and going to Hong Kong, questioning, exploring, and publishing, with the UK paper, The Guardian, entering into the controversies with some American papers following.

While the public might not understand a lot of the material made available, the film raises issues of the public's right to know, rights of privacy, government capacity for surveillance and the consequent use of data and metadata to track down the movements and activities of citizens.

Towards the end of this film, there is an appearance by Julian Assange, much better known to the public because of WikiLeaks? and the nature of government concerns, moves to extradite him, and his living in the Ecuador embassy in London. He offers advice about countries where Snowden might take refuge.

In many ways this might be a transitional film, opening up the situation, introducing Snowden, but another film could deal with the consequences of his actions, the reactions of the American government and courts and governments around the world and the subsequent history of Snowden outside the United States.

EX MACHINA

UK, 2015, 108 minutes, Colour.

Oscar Isaac, Domhnall Gleeson, Alicia Vikander, Sonoya Mizuno.

Directed by Alex Garland.

Now here's a challenging title!

This Latin phrase, ex machine, has been used, in English, to describe the device in Greek tragedies where, at the end of the play, there would be some kind of intervention, usually of a God who is let down by a machine into the stage action, the full phrase being Deus (God) ex Machina.

So what is it doing as the title of the film, written and directed by author Alex Garland (The Beach, and of screenplays for 28 Days Later, Dredd, Never Let Me Go)? It takes the whole film to interpret this title: other scientists playing God? Who are the machines, in this case sophisticated robots, and some tantalising thinking about the word ex and its meaning 'former' and 'out of'...

This is science fiction for intelligence fans rather than action fans. A lot of talk, a lot of philosophical issues, creativity and robotics, the relationship between humans and robots, the humanising of robots.

Domhnall Gleeson plays a young man who is employed by Blue Book, named as the world's most serious search engine. Here's delighted when he wins a ticket to visit a robotics scientist and

inventor in his remote house in the mountains (filmed beautifully in Norway). He is to stay a week. He then learns from the scientist (Oscar Isaac) that he has a task, the Turing test (posed by Alan Turing or, featured in the film, *The Imitation Game*), to pose questions and interact with a machine to find out whether it can develop emotions or just knows how to simulate emotions.

The main robot – avoiding the word android because of its man/mankind origins in Greek – is female. She is played by Alicia Vikander, visually a machine, especially her metal midriff, but her head, facial features, voice, made to appear and sound very feminine. As might be expected, the young man begins to become infatuated with the robot, thinking that she is responding to him emotionally, but not absolutely sure. And this has some dire repercussions on his response, his report to the scientist, his becoming involved in the protection of the robot, fearing manipulation, but not recognising true manipulation when it happens.

The scientist is a kind of self-indulgent, hard-drinking, boffom who enjoys the company of the young man, wants to test him, and gets a certain satisfaction when he gets the results of the tests and tries to indicate that they are no results and that they still do not know whether the robot, named Ava, has actually developed the capacity for emotional response or is particularly good and simulating it.

This is a film for those who enjoy films about Artificial Intelligence and what this will mean in terms of development of Robotics and interactions with humans. And, because it does not necessarily have a propensity for an American happy ending, audiences will enjoy the final dramatic ironies.

DOLPHIN TALE 2

US, 2014, 107 minutes, Colour.

Harry Connick Jr, Nathan Gamble, Ashley Judd, Kris Kristofferson, Cozi Zuehlsdorff, Charles Martin Smith, Bethany Hamilton.

Directed by Charles Martin Smith.

One quick way for a reviewer to save time with *Dolphin Tale 2*, would be to dig out the original review of *Dolphin Tale*. The same characters turn up in this sequel. The plot is just a variation of the original, pleasant, easy, though an appeal to sentiment because of dolphins getting old and dying, clashes between dolphins, and the difficulty in fulfilling all the regulations and the danger of being closed down.

Once again, there is a loving concern about the dolphins, to rescue, to rehabilitate them, to release them – a motto for the centre, repeated during the film which is managed by Clay, Harry Connick Jr, with Sawyer, Nathan Gamble, a bit older, as the young man responsible, with some other teenagers, for the life and rehabilitation of the dolphins. And there are some romantic touches in the background.

There is actually a new dilemma. Kyle is so good at his work that he is being offered a scholarship, to work as an intern and learn more about dolphins. While this seems to be a no-brainer to some of the characters, Kyle is so attached to working with the local dolphins, especially when an old one of them dies and a new one comes in but is not able to work in a pair, and the centre is threatened by a fussy bureaucrat (played by the film's director, Charles Martin Smith), Kyle is reluctant to go and take the whole film to make up his mind.

Kyle's mother is always there, played by Ashley Judd. Morgan Freeman comes again for a visit and gives Kyle some sound advice. Kris Kristofferson, pleasantly crusty, is there again as Clay's father, offering advice from the older generation.

All in all, for audiences who enjoyed *Dolphin Tale*, it will be a pleasure for them to renew acquaintance with the characters, to learn a little more about the dolphins and more serious rehabilitation and release rather than exhibitions and exploitations at Sea World's (the theme of the impressive documentary, *Blackfish*, of some years ago).

It is obviously a film designed for family audiences and has the value of encouraging children and teenagers to become involved in outdoor activities and concern for nature.

FIFTY SHADES OF GREY

US, 2015, 119 minutes, Colour.

Dakota Johnson, Jamie Dornan, Jennifer Ehle, Eloise Mumford, Victor Rasuk, Marcia Gay Harden.

Directed by Sam Taylor- Johnson.

Notoriety and big box-office.

By 2005, readers the world over were indulging in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, millions of them. And then came the movie version with everybody going to see it. 10 years later, everybody seems to be reading or have read *50 Shades of Grey* (but not this reviewer). More than a ready market for the movie version. And here it is.

Different groups have had some negative reactions. Those concerned about sexual morality question the behaviour of the characters, especially with the issues of dominance and submissiveness in sexual interactions. Many concerned about sexual violence, especially towards women, consider that this is a story about a male exploiting a woman for his own gratification – and, to a large extent, it is.

But, in many ways, it is not a film to get to het up about. It is not as if we have not seen this kind of behaviour on screen before – there was *Nine and ½ Weeks* almost 30 years ago, quite explicit and contentious for its time. Themes of bondage and dominance have been present in many films, perhaps not so much in American films but, certainly, in those from continental Europe.

The film is a variation on adult men and women, sexual attraction and behaviour, dominance and freedom.

Christian Grey (Jamie Dornan) does not seem exactly like your ordinary citizen. Not only is he good-looking, he is a billionaire, controlling a company, shown to be effective in business, from a respectable family, and dreamworld character rather than a character who seems real. Anastasia (Dakota Johnson) does seem a little more real. She has a loving father who turns up to her graduation. She has a loving mother, although she is on her fourth husband and cannot make it to the graduation, but keeps contact by phone and a visit from Anastasia. Anastasia is studying literature at the University, has a roommate who gossips, and has been holding herself back in terms of relationships. Awkwardly stepping in to do an interview for her roommate with Christian, she is

smitten, infatuated, flattered by his attentions (which include helicopter rides, new clothes, an expensive car, a trip in a glider...). And falls in love.

Christian, in Jung's psychological terms, is the epitome of the introverted decisive type who is focused completely on the detail of the present and seems in no way subjective in his approach to decision making – and his conversations with Anastasia are straightforward, even blunt, certainly not good at humour or jokes. And, of all things, he hands Anastasia a multi-page contract about the relationship, his dominance, her submission, the rules and possible punishment (but she does reject some clauses). Some of these scenes are serious, seriously ludicrous.

There is a revelation that as a 15-year-old boy, Christian was seduced by a friend of his mother and involved in this kind of dominant-submissive sexual relationship, He the submissive, finding it liberating, so he says.

Many of the scenes in the film are quite ordinary, Anastasia and her work, her graduation, her visit to her mother, a meal with Christian's parents... However, whether out of interest from reading the book or whether from touches of prurient curiosity, it is the sex scenes (rather restrained in comparison with many other films) that draw in the audiences.

It might be difficult to let go of 50 Shades of Grey because there are another two novels in the trilogy.

THE GAMBLER

US, 2014, 111 minutes, Colour.

Mark Wahlberg, John Goodman, Jessica Lange, Michael Kenneth Williams, Anthony Kelley, Brie Larson, George Kennedy.

Directed by Rupert Wyatt.

In 1974 there was a rather grim film, The Gambler, written by James Toback, his first screenplay - and he was to go on to direct some rather blunt and grim films. James Caan portrayed the title gambler.

Movie-making powers that be decided that 40 years later it was worth telling the story again. Not so sure!

This is certainly a grim film while it has some very strong credentials, the adaptation of Toback's script by William Monahan who has written such screenplays as The Departed and directed by British Rupert Wyatt, who made an impact with a very different kind of film, The Rise of the Planet of the Apes. This time Mark Wahlberg is a gambler of the title and there is an interesting supporting cast including Jessica Lange as his mother, Brie Larson as a student with whom he is having a relationship, John Goodman as a more kind-hearted loan shark, Michael Kenneth Williams as the gambler's nemesis, and a few moments at the beginning of the film with veteran George Kennedy as the hero's dying father.

Jim Bennett is a professor of literature and we are shown some of his classes, his reflections on Shakespeare, his love of language, the reaction of the students. Bennett is in a compromising

position in having a relationship with a student. But he has an even shadowier life in terms of gambling, going to the casinos, not content with to take away any winnings, but seemingly compelled to bet and to bet until he has lost. It seems a kind of death wish.

The casino authorities are wary of him. But a smooth-talking entrepreneur gambler, Neville (Michael Kenneth Williams) interests himself in Bennett, offering lending deals, getting Bennett in his own-shark tentacles. And Bennett allows himself to be caught.

While not winning at the tables, he takes the opportunity to borrow from his mother, a rather hard Jessica Lange who realises that she has alienating her son, but nevertheless goes to a bank to give him access to money. The other source is Frank (John Goodman) who becomes something of a father-figure to Bennett, prepared to support him, but warning him to exercise some gambling prudence.

This all means that Jim Bennett has to face himself, his future, his gambling which he thinks is not an addiction, his relationship with his girlfriend, his dependence on Frank. Rather shrewdly, he works out a way of playing Frank off against Neville, going to a neutral gambling house and playing and playing the house so that his debts might be paid off.

Will they? Will he be able to stop? (And how easy is it to be sympathetic to Jim Bennett as a character for us to want him to achieve some kind of redemption?)

THE INTERVIEW

US, 2014, 112 minutes, Colour.

James Franco, Seth Rogen, Lizzie Kaplan, Randall Park, Diana Bang.

Directed by Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg.

It actually says at the end of the film that it is a work of fiction has no relationship with any person or any place. That, certainly, is a fiction.

At the moment, it is very hard to consider the film without relating it to the hacking of Sony Pictures and suspicions that this was the work of North Korea, as well as all the difficulties about its distribution and the controversies that its theme raised.

What it is, of course, is a political spoof. Given the record of writers Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, and taking a clue from the title of their comedy, *Superbad*, it lives up to their particular context of comic style, a great deal of corny lines and situations, some verbal humour, sometimes crass, sometimes toilet, an American sense of humour that caters for the funnybone of 12-year-old boys of any age!

Seth Rogen does his usual shtick as, perhaps a little more sympathetically this time, jovial, sometimes petulant, a big bear of a man. He plays a producer of a very gossipy talk program, with contents more like the scandal mongering articles of *The National Enquirer*. The interviewer, Dave Skylark, is played by James Franco, obviously enjoying himself, all grins and laughs on air, pausing in the interviews as he listens to his producer in his earpiece. The satire is immediately evident with an interview with Eminem, discussing the lyrics of his songs which indicate that he is gay. Then there is

an interview with Rob Lowe, his baldness and taking off his hairpiece.

Just when Aaron is wanting something better in his life, the call comes through from North Korea official to say that the President, Kim Jung Un, is a great fan of the program and that an interview in North Korea would be welcome.

And this is where the spoof becomes serious, as the two go to the CIA and are granted permission as long as they agree to assassinate the President. While this might seem to be funny and satiric in its way, there seems to be a subtext which is very pro-American, taking for granted that this kind of assassination behaviour is reasonable, given the enemy status of a particular country.

The rest of the shenanigans are in North Korea, the couple's arrival, being settled in a lavish hotel, checking whether it was bugged or not, having meals, when, suddenly, a particularly serious authority sees the means of poisoning the President and is told it is chewing gum, which he immediately choose (death throes are delayed till the next day). The television producer assigned the program is particularly serious though she has a change of head and heart, falling for Aaron, falling out of devotion to the President.

One of the most effective sequences is Dave Skylark being called to chat with Kim, being shown the inside of an old tank, learning that the president likes Katy Perry's music and lyrics, has had difficulties with his father, and is prone to a tear or two. Dave is drawn in as, perhaps, we are. It doesn't always remain that way, once Dave discovers with plastic fruit which means that, probably, the President is lying and is as bad as he has been painted and that life in Korea is terrible.

While the interview goes ahead, Dave is much more serious than in his usual program which means then the soldiers are anxious to cut the program, the president is limited by what is happening, soldiers have the guns at the ready, and Aaron and the producer have to cut and run.

There is always a place for spoof, and, if the North Koreans had a good sense of humour, they could obviously make a parody of American government. But, the American assumption, that heads of state can be eliminated when necessary, means that below the surface, there is some serious and ruthless American patriotism.

IT FOLLOWS

US, 2015, 100 minutes, Colour.

Maika Monroe, Keir Gilchrist, Daniel Zovatto, Jake Weary.

Directed by David Robert Mitchell.

On the one hand, this teenage horror thriller has received accolades from critics and has been popular with the target audience. On the other hand, there have been quite a lot of criticisms that the film is a poor example of what it sets out to be.

A film which has a title It Follows should make logical sense. This is not true of so much of the screenplay here, sometimes giving the impression that the makers were making it up as they went along, not plotting cause and effect, simply offering sequences and moving on to another whether it made sense or not. It might be argued that that the film is a subjective perspective from the central

character, sometimes hallucinating, sometimes dreaming – which might give some explanation to scenes that seemed to have no connection at all (the heroine fleeing from her pursuer in the house, driving away intensely, then found sleeping on the top of her car near the beach, then seeing three men in a boat and stripping to her bathing suit – and a sudden cutting to her sleeping on the floor of the house!).

Once again, those in favour of the film have referred to the performances as “understated”. This reviewer, thought that they were barely stated at all, not very convincing performances and not helped by the rather flat dialogue.

What was stated, or overstated, was a loud and strident discordant musical score from a group called Disasterpeace.

There is a prologue which seems to indicate much more than what follows, a terrified woman running in the streets, getting into the her car, ruminating on the beach, a sense of something dreadful; morning comes and there is her body lying on the beach, limbs distorted, some broken. No other reference made to this throughout the film, simply a suggestion that something fearful could be following.

The main characters are teenagers seemingly in high school, perhaps the final year. One is a visiting male character who is referred to as being 21. Parents seem to be absent, a glimpse or two, and the final glimpse of a murderous mother, but, otherwise, where were they, especially as some of the characters spend some time in hospital with only their friends waiting around?

The central character, Jay, has some girlfriends (one, bespectacled, reading continually from a Kindle which looks like a compact case and quoting Dostoevsky) and an admirer, a kind of dorky character called Paul. She is going out with the 21-year-old visitor who sees a girl in a cinema which his girlfriend doesn't see. He then becomes pretty nervy, but they do have a sexual encounter in his car, with his running off without explanation. The apologising when they track him down. Later, we discover that this sense of dread, with a sense of someone following, can be passed on through sexual encounter, some noting this as an allegory of STDS (though film reviewer, Alan Frank, thought this meant Sexually Transmitted Demons).

There are many more sequences, some isolated, with a kind of cumulative effect of horror and fear, and an attempt at STDing bringing death to a young man, and a final attempt, which seems rather inconclusive – leaving the heroine and the dork still possessed and doing the following, when the film just stops.

As regards youth films, despite the STDS, the film is rather ordinary, the setting being somewhere out of Detroit – although a climactic scene takes place in a dilapidated suburb (or is that just the perspective of the heroine?) in a large, old and neglected building which, inside, says Detroit Pool, quite a good looking and well-kept swimming pool, where a confrontation with an anonymous Follower takes place. This is the blood scene, no gore!

This review is not a fan's response, but rather an expression of exasperation and disappointment.

KINGSMAN: THE SECRET SERVICE

UK, 2014, 129 minutes, Colour.

Colin Firth, Taron Egerton, Samuel L. Jackson, Mark Strong, Mark Hamill, Sofia Boutella, Michael Caine, Sophie Cookson, Jack Davenport.

Directed by Matthew Vaughan.

A surprisingly popular film at the beginning of 2015, not only in the UK where it originated, but also in other English speaking countries, including the US.

Writer-director, Matthew Vaughan, and his co-writer, Jane Goodman, have worked on a number of films including *Stardust* as well as *Kick Ass*. They draw on graphic novels, finding cinematic equivalents both visually and verbally, hyper-real, colourful, and with touches of parody. This is certainly the same here.

The Kingsman Secret Service organisation allegedly originated at the time of the Napoleonic wars, with wealthy men gathering together and forming this agency for England and patriotism's sake. As time went on, the organisation went underground, using a fashionable tailor's store and service as a cover – and, covering quite a bit, as the lift goes down and the underground, as shuttles go through tunnels to open up on a vast arsenal and training facilities for this espionage elite.

As the film opens, and an agent is being held by a deranged scientist, Kingsman agents arrive to save confidently the day, only they don't. But an apprentice saves the suave and gentlemanly agent, played by Colin Firth, falling into the hands of no, rather, the stiletto shoes of quite a vicious martial arts femme fatale.

The principal action takes place 17 years later, where it is revealed that the Kingsman group models itself on the Knights of the Round Table, with Michael Caine as the leader, Arthur, with Colin Firth's Harry Hart's codename, Galahad. Mark Strong, who has appeared so effectively in many films, often as the villain, is the instructor and trainer for Kingsman, codenamed, Merlin.

Harry is on the lookout for further recruits and has his eye on the sound of the agent who saved his life years earlier. The boy, who is called, of all names, Eggsy, (Tamsin Egerton) has had a pretty unhappy life, his slovenly mother taking up with a local brute, his opting out of education despite his intellectual and physical capabilities, running with the local gang. When Galahad arrives to save him, Colin Firth is doing an impersonation both of James Bond as well as John Steed, Patrick Macnee's top-hatted and caned character in *The Avengers* from the 1960s. The local toughs are no match for him. Eggsy, meanwhile and his pals have been going around stealing cars, joyriding so Galahad has to rescue him from prison with the guarantee that Eggsy will train for Kingsman.

There is a lot of rivalry amongst the trainees, who really do have a strict regime, the toffs from British public schools looking down on Eggsy. But, they lose.

It is just as well that Eggsy has been recruited because there is our larger-and-life in the offing, a very insane type who might aspire to be a Bond villain, Valentine, who wants to control the population, giving away free Sim cards with implants to rouse anger so that everyone attacks each other and it won't be too long before the apocalypse. Even world leaders play into his plans and Eggsy's mother, along with millions of others, lines up for the free Sim card. He is played for laughs and mockery by Samuel L. Jackson – and who should be one of his assistants but the stiletto shoes assailant!.

This leads to a whole series of surveillance sequences, Kingsman and the villain having the technology to spy on each other, a rather dramatic confrontation with unexpected ending in a revivalist church in the United States. But, it is finally up to Eggsy, now a suave personality, and James Bond Jr, to use his wits and the advice of Merlin to drum up a dramatic confrontation with Valentine.

Audiences seem to have enjoyed the paralleling of this film with the Bond films, the elements of parody and spoof, the drawing on the Knights of the Round Table imagery, the fact that so many people are mind-affected, the confrontations leading to potential disaster, and the young hero saving the day.

Lots of action, lots of special effects, lots of humorous dialogue – but, it is probably about time that screenwriters gave us a break from not intermittent, but incessant, crass language which is very weary and offputting to some of the audiences who might enjoy this kind of film – we need a break. And Colin Firth, despite his Oscar, seems very awkward in delivering four letter words!

A MOST VIOLENT YEAR

US, 2014, 122 minutes, Colour.

Oscar Isaac, Jessica Chastain, Albert Brooks, Alessandro Nivola, Catalina Sandena Moreno, Peter Geraty.

Directed by J. C. Chandor.

Many of us would think that in any year could be well named a most violent year. For the film makers, the choice is 1981, New York City.

This is very interesting drama, taking us into industrial issues in the United States, the ambitions of big companies, wheeler-dealing, the use of violence to put competition out of action. This has been a long time theme in American films, considering the 1950s and the look at unions and workers and power struggles in *On the Waterfront*, or in the 1980s, the biography of the teamsters boss, Jimmy Hoffa, with Jack Nicholson as Hoffa.

This film has been written by J.C.Chandor, who made his mark with a very interesting film about Wall Street, financial deals, speculations and risks, covert action in *Margin Call*. While expectations might have been that he would made another intense drama, he did do so, but confined his action to a yacht in trouble in the Indian Ocean, and one sailor battling the elements, Robert Redford in *All is Lost*. Now, he has moved back to New York City and strong drama.

The focus of the struggles is the trucking industry and the transportation and distribution of fuel. Oscar Isaac, becoming well known as a leading actor (*Inside Lewynn Davis*, *X Marking*), plays Abel Morales, a man of principle, who wants to do the right thing, but finds himself and his trucks and drivers targets of unknown boxes and their thugs, intimidating and bashing the drivers, stealing the fuel. At the same time, the industry is under investigation by the authorities, especially in the person of DA, Lawrence, played by David Oyelowo, the British actor, settled in the United States, appearing frequently in all kinds of films including *The Butler*, *The Paperboy*, his acclaimed performance as

Martin Luther King in Selma.

Behind Abel is his strong-minded wife, and business partner, played by Jessica Chastain. A major complication is that Abel's plan is to buy an abandoned terminal to turn it into a centre for his oil distribution. Negotiations are well under way with the Jewish community who own the property. He makes the required deposit, has 30 days to pay the rest of the money or he will lose the deposit. With the complications of the attacks on his trucks, the suspicions of the investigating authorities, it would seem that he will not be able to find the money, despite his sounding out various friends and associates, and will lose the edge on his business.

Part of the complications for Abel as well as for the audience is that it is not clear who are the powers-that-be behind the attacks on the trucks, the thugs just being hired without knowledge of who was really employing them. Another complication is Abel's helping a young man in his work, the young man fearful, carrying a gun against the thugs and running away, compromising Abel.

On the one hand, this is an interesting drama about social issues in the American context. On the other hand, it is an interesting drama about a good man trying to do his best in the capitalistic world, becoming a victim, the whole process causing great personal and physical tension, complicated by the influence of his wife.

A Most Violent Year might well be called an adult drama in the best possible sense.

PROJECT ALMANAC

US, 2015 106 minutes, Colour.

Jonny Weston, Sofia Black- D' Elia, Sam Lerner, Allen Evangeliste, Virginia Gardner, Amy Landecker.
Directed by Dean Israelite.

One can't complain about a story which shows teenagers enthusiastic about science, engaging in projects, looking for scholarships so that they can continue study. In this case, the hero wants to be accepted to MIT and we see him, at the opening of the film, controlling quite elaborate experiment to submit for a scholarship. He is joined by his two friends, enthusiastic as he is, as well as his sister who is ever ready with the video camera to record everything.

This is one of those films where everything is recorded, hand-held camera even in the least likely situations, straining the credibility sometimes, using the found-footage conventions so popular since The Blair Witch Project. Sometimes this is giddiness-inducing and we might be much happier with more conventional camera work.

David (Jonny Weston) is an enthusiastic scientist, with very happy memories of his dead father who was an expert in technology. The interesting plot device, very evident in the trailers for the film, is that in looking at the video of his seventh birthday, his teenage self appears in the mirror. How could this be? Time-travel, of course!

There is also teenage romance, David admiring, from a distance, the girl of everyone's dreams, Jessie. Fortunately, despite the reticence, she is attracted to him and joins in the development of the time travel technology. After some experiments, returning objects to one minute earlier, they are

ready for the big travel. Being teenagers, or, at least, now being made to look like teenagers in American teenage movies, they opt for some silly adventures, lottery winning, exercising grudges at school and the decision to go back to a music festival and kicking up their heels. To contribute to the romantic development, David and Jessie go to a wall where people have put answers to the question, "Before the world ends...". This is where the two really bond. But there is a certain coolness between the two when they return.

Where is the plot to go? Obviously, David wants to remedy the situation between himself and Jessie, which leads to his continued return to the past, by himself, which is against the rules because everybody has to go together. As might be expected, especially thinking of the butterfly effect, one small change causes a chain reaction, including plane crashes and deaths...

The film gets serious at the end, the group realising the risks in going back into the past, the risks in changing things, discovering consequences – and the need to take responsibility. And no one could question this.

ROSEWATER

US, 2014, 105 minutes, Colour.

Gael Garcia Banal, Kim Bodnia, Dimitri Leonidas, Haluk Bilginer, Shoreh Agdashloo, Golshifteh Farahani, Claire Foy.

Directed by Jon Stewart.

Rosewater sounds too sweet a name to describe the serious events in this film. Before the final credits, there is a comment about rosewater, its being sprinkled on pilgrims during pilgrimages when they are particularly sweaty – and then there is a pretty picture of collecting roses and extracting the rosewater and scent from them.

But, it all becomes very serious, as an Iranian-born journalist returns home, covering the 2009 elections, staying with his mother, but suddenly accosted at her home and arrested.

He is Maziar Bahari, played with sympathetic intensity by Gael Garcia Bernal. Then the film goes into flashback, 11 days earlier when Maziar is packing in London, farewelling his pregnant wife in some tender scenes and flying to Tehran for his assignment. He is met at the airport by one of those enthusiastic taxidrivars who insists that you go with them. He is sympathetic to the opposition candidate, standing against the famous President, Ahmajinedad.

Maziar is taken on a ride around the city (with some genuine vistas of Tehran mixed with performance footage filmed in Jordan) and meets with a conservative young enthusiast for the President, with students who are not, who are lamenting their experience of repression and unemployment.

There are scenes of the election day, crowds and riots in the city, again some actual footage from the period intermingled with the performances. Maziar keeps filming and sends the material through to London, with the help of Lindsay Hilsum, BBC correspondent of the period, here playing herself.

And then we're back to the arrest, which means that the second half of the film focuses on Maziar in prison, confined in solitary for almost 4 months, the film using the device of naming the number of days of his being in prison. He is interrogated in a cruel and violent way (but with the caution that his face not be damaged if he has to appear on television). He is also interrogated in a ludicrous way, the authorities having taken several DVDs including Pasolini's *Teorema*, the Sopranos, a CD of Leonard Cohen songs, all of which are deemed pornographic. The food is poor and he is for a large part of each day blindfolded. The interrogations are held with him blindfolded.

The authorities, one of whom wears Rosewater scent, which covers the sweat of Maziar in his suffering, want him to admit that he is a spy, something which seems quite bizarre in the context, and especially for journalists working in such magazines as *Newsweek* as he was. The world knows that his confession is only a show trial confession – with footage added in of news coverage from around the world as well as footage of Hillary Clinton commenting on the situation.

The film uses a clever device of having Maziar's father present in the cell, conversing with his son, becoming the consciousness of the son, offering standards, because he himself had been imprisoned because of Communist sympathies but had given the authorities nothing. The father advises his son to play on the weaknesses of his interrogators – and does so, quite comically, eliciting their curiosity about sexual massage descriptions. At another stage, his sister appears in his cell – she had been executed.

While the story is interesting in itself, a lot of detail is given so that we share the experience. It is a strong critique of repressive measures, legislation, imprisonment in Iran.

The film has been written and directed by television host for *The Daily Show* for so many years, John Stewart. In the film there is a scene, made for *The Daily Show*, where Maziar has a mock interview in Tehran with a comedian posing as a spy journalist which the authorities take up, believing it is actually true. Later, Maziar was to write a memoir of his going to Iran, his time in prison, his return to journalism and the birth of his child. John Stewart is drawing on his experience as a television current affairs host, the episode on his program, and adapting as Bahari's book.

This is quite compelling, all the more so because it is based on reality, but a reminder of what so many journalists experience in the contemporary world, arrest and imprisonment, even torture and execution, by repressive powers.

SEVENTH SON

US, 2015, 102 minutes, Colour.

Jeff Bridges, Ben Barnes, Julianne Moore, Alicia Vikander, Antje Traue, Olivia Williams, John De Santis, Kit Harrington, Djimon Hounsou, Jason Scott Lee.

Directed by Sergei Bodrov.

What fans to do now that *The Lord of the Rings* cycle and *The Hobbits* cycle now complete, after 14 years? Television viewers are already hooked on *Game of Thrones*, and for several seasons. *Seventh Son* is a kind of interim filler. It is based on a young adult novel by Joseph Delaney, *The Spook's Apprentice*.

A great deal of money has been spent for the budget of this film with plenty of colourful sets and vigorous action up there on the screen, especially with a 3D version. With mediaeval castles, isolated and lonely villages, flying dragons, evil witches, seventh sons with power to cast out the witches and demons who are instantly and spectacularly cremated, there may be enough to satisfy those who really love this kind of thing.

But it is not quite enough, even though one of the contributors to the screenplay was the British Stephen Knight (*Dirty, Pretty Things, Locke*). Despite a lot of high flying, it is much more on the pedestrian side, imaginative and creative language not one of its strengths. And then there is the question of Jeff Bridges' half-swallowed voice and semi-English accent which may mean that he was trying to channel Ian McKellen as a new Gandalf. And then there is the British star and the Danish star affecting some kind of American twang.

The film opens with the Master Gregory (Bridges) imprisoning what seems a forlorn victim beneath a domed metal grate. When time passes and the grate melts, we realise that he had a point. He has tried to imprison Mother Malkin, truly a malevolent black-clad witch who, inevitably, once loved Master Gregory but who is into incantations, spells, destroying enemies – and in the meantime transforming herself into a vicious dragon sweeping through the skies. Mother Malkin is played by Julianne Moore which seems to remind us that many actresses (think of Meryl Streep recently in *Into the Woods*, or Julia Roberts, or Charlize Theron, or Angelina Jolie) feel that a wicked witch should be part of their repertoire. (Now, with a well deserved reputation and Oscar, Julianne Moore can do what she likes).

Master Gregory has apprentices who are seventh sons but fail to serve out their time, being destroyed by witches or Mother Malkin. He finds another apprentice in the form of Tom Ward, Ben Barnes, who has mysterious prophetic dreams and feels called to his mission, despite all the attacks, pursuits, his having to jump off a very high cliff with Master Gregory, going over waterfalls, falling from another cliff, all kinds of endurance and confrontations, including the attraction of Alice (Alicia Vikander), daughter of a witch, who loves him but is not above bewitching him to steal his protective metal, given to him by his good witch mother, Olivia Williams.

In many ways, the action is the old Saturday Matinee style, chases, confrontations, battles, and even a literal cliffhanger. Which means that audiences who have a reasonable tolerance for this kind of adventure might find it entertaining while it is up there on the screen – and then forgotten.

The director is a Russian, Sergei Bodrov, the Russian director who has made interesting films in the past, *Prisoner of the Mountains*, *Bears Kiss* and *Mongol*, the rise of Genghis Khan.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

US, 2015, 90 minutes, Colour.

Vince Vaughn, Tom Wilkinson, David Franco, Sienna Miller Britton Sear, Ella Anderson, Nick Frost, James Marsden, Ken Scott.

Directed by Ken Scott.

When Vince Vaughan's name appears above titles, we can usually expect a comedy, a touch of the

serious, some crass moments, some sentiment. And they are all here in *Unfinished Business*.

Also above the titles are the names of Tom Wilkinson and David Franco. They are part of the unfinished business in the revelation of how difficult it is in a competitive world to reach a deal and cement it with the handshake.

But the unfinished business of the title while relating to the world of business also refers to the business of family problems. Vince Vaughn's Dan, a family man, a bit too self-sufficient which tangles him with his competition in the office, Chuck, played by Sienna Miller as a hardball player with a masculine name. Dan goes out on his own, taking on Tim (Tom Wilkinson) who is being retrenched because he's 67 and Mike (David Franco) who has gone for an interview taking a business box to make a good impression.

On the business side, the trio have to travel to Portland, Maine, and find that they have been undercut by Chuck with the smooth and sleazy boss, Jim (James Marsden). There is a chance that they might be able to redeem the deal by travelling to Berlin to see the overall corporate boss. This means that a lot of the action takes place in Germany, plenty of vistas of Berlin, but there is Chuck once again, manoeuvring.

When all seems lost, the three go out on the town. Accommodation in Berlin is all occupied except for some corridors for Jim and Mike and the show-display apartment, with tourists passing by, looking in commenting, for Dan. It is Berlin in October and so an Oktoberfest, beer galore, but it is also time for a gay festival – and the film detours for rather longer than necessary here, alcohol, ecstasy, gay bar toilets, the crass component of the film.

We wouldn't be watching the film unless we hoped (and knew) that it had a happy ending – but the drama is in how the happy ending is reached.

On the home level, Dan keeps in touch with his wife and children by Skype, regularly talking to his son who is being bullied at school and his little daughter who has punched someone out in defence of her brother. He has a loving and long-suffering wife.

Tom Wilkinson, who seems to appear in many films a year these days, has a world weariness in his role as the ageing businessman, not really loving his wife and wanting a divorce, but wanting a loving and sexual relationship (which is suddenly parachuted in the end). Dave Franco (with more smiles and grins than his older brother, James Franco) is a naive young man who lives in a special community, is often gauche and awkward but, it seems, something of a whizz at figures.

While there is the crass, there are some positives about the reality of the world of business and focus on a loving family home despite all the problems.

The film was directed by Ken Scott who made a film about a prolific sperm donor, *Starbuck*, which was remade in Hollywood as *Delivery Man*, starring Vince Vaughan.

REVIEWS APRIL 2015

BANKSY DOES NEW YORK
BIG EYES
BLACK SEA
CHAPPIE
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DISAPPEARANCE OF ELEANOR RIGBY – THEM, The
DUFF, The
EASTERN BOYS
FAST AND FURIOUS 7
FOCUS
GET HARD
A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT
HOME
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INFINITELY POLAR BEAR
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KIDNAPPING OF MR HEINEKIN
LEVIATHAN
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LUCKY THEM
MANNY LEWIS
MOMMY
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SAMBA
SECOND BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL. The
SHAUN THE SHEEP
SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS MOVIE, THE: SPONGE OUT OF WATER
TOP FIVE
WHILE WE'RE YOUNG
x & y

BANKSY DOES NEW YORK

US, 2014, 79 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Chris Moukarbel.

One of the best-kept secrets in the world of art, or at least the world of graffiti and street art, is the identity of the British artist called Banksy. In this age of instant social media, it is amazing that over the years the identity of Banksy has not been revealed.

In 2010, there was an intriguing documentary called Banksy, Exit through the Gift Shop, a tantalising quest for the identity of Banksy but an opportunity to look at his Street Art, respond pro or con, and a chance to think about the nature of this kind of art, ephemeral or permanent, art or kitsch.

Now, several years later, Banksy is still a mystery. He is given a commission to spend a month in New York City, October 2013. He has contracted to do a piece of art each day, and fulfils the promise except for one day when the police obstruct his work.

The film makers, with no official connection with Banksy, take the opportunity to photograph each of the works of art, quite important since a number of them were removed or defaced. Mayor Bloomberg of New York City, other officials and the police, take a dim view of this work, considering it a criminal offence to deface buildings with this kind of art and graffiti. The police are in pursuit and try to prevent further art events.

Audiences may be in two minds about the work itself, but the variety of art-words and art-images, actual graffiti, actual paintings and, even a brick sculpture, the Sphinx, have an immediately arresting quality. Some of the New York papers decided to ignore Banksy. One critic, with a touch of the pontificating, dismisses the work as unsubtle, kitsch and hammering home social messages. A more benign commentator is inclined to offer more favourable perspectives. On the other hand, television news across the broad range are continually commenting on the artist, his work, and public response. It makes for instant television

What is intriguing is that each day Banksy goes to an unknown location and does his work of art. There are many Banksy fans who want to see each work each day and a number who refer to themselves as Banksy Hunters, tweeting, using Facebook and Instagram, to let people know where they might find the works with crowds hurrying there. On the other hand, on one day, a stall is set up to sell Banksy works and people pass by, only a few purchasing the art – for about \$50 each, which may then be worth thousands later!

The film captures the ideas and responses of many of the enthusiasts and the Hunters. Audiences can check their own responses in comparison.

Some of the works are quite simple, there is a frequent use of black silhouettes interacting with local objects like fire hydrants, with fans getting their photographs taken in front of the works. One of the most striking is a large art piece reflecting on the Wiki Leaks revelation about American forces and helicopters in Iraq shooting down agents as well as innocent bystanders with shockingly callous remarks. It is well worth Banksy doing a work visualising the implications of this vicious event.

The film is short, but always interesting, our listening to the views, watching the reactions of the fans, and the opportunity to see the variety of works and build up an impression of and response to Banksy.

BIG EYES

US, 2014, 106 minutes, Colour.

Amy Adams, Christophe Waltz, Krysten Ritter, Jason Schwartzman, Danny Huston, Terence Stamp, Jon Polito, Delaney Raye, Madeleine Arthur.

Directed by Tim Burton.

There are quite a number of big eyes in this film. They are the focus of most of the paintings by Margaret Keane, who began her work in the late 1950s and is still painting. She has done a series of pictures of waifs and given them all very big eyes, different colours but a pervading sense of black and darkness around them. They have been very popular over the decades while some of the art critics have dismissed them as kitsch.

It is a surprise to find that this is a Tim Burton film. For more than a quarter of a century, Burton has delivered a wide range of films treating the world of fantasy and vivid, often dark, imagination. While the big eyes do fit into this Burton interest, and there are some moments when Margaret Keane looks into a mirror and sees herself with big eyes, this is a fairly straightforward narrative, often very serious, but with some moments of hilarity and even zany bravado.

We might ask how this could be especially when the film opens with Margaret leaving home with a young daughter, driving away from the outer suburbs of Northern California into San Francisco and establishing herself there, interviewing for a job at a furniture factory, painting children's illustrations on some of that furniture. But she does go outside, offering to paint portraits of passers-by. It is there that she attracts the attention of Walter Keane who is flirting with passers-by, trying to sell his paintings of Montmartre and other Paris settings. They connect, date, marry and go on a colourful honeymoon to Hawaii. Who could ask for anything more?

Margaret's difficulty is that she does not know Walter very well – nor do we. At first he seems too good to be true but when he starts exhibiting his own and Margaret's paintings in the corridor of a club which leads to the toilet and eventually does get some interest, it is in her paintings and not his. Uproar with the club owner brings headlines and photos. Walter makes friends with a San Francisco columnist and users story finds him. Margaret is dismayed when he claims that he did the paintings himself but, in those days, even with a confession sequence, although she is not a Catholic, where she is reminded that the husband is the head of the family, she continues to lie about the paintings to her daughter who is growing up and lets Walter take the credit for the fast-selling paintings. He even set up his own gallery, prints off posters which eager patrons want with an autograph, and then postcards of the posters.

This means that Margaret's time and energy is devoted to work in her studio, churning out big eyes paintings. Walter even gets a commission for a painting for the 1964 World Fair in New York.

When Walter takes to fisticuffs against a critic at a society do, it is the beginning of the end.

The intriguing latter part of the film is the court case when Margaret sues Walter and a newspaper company and she and he, each has to prove that they are the artists who have made the big eyes pictures.

This would be an entertainment if it were not true. However, it is a true story.

Bringing it to life is the performance, intense but restrained, of Amy Adams as Margaret. But it is Walter who holds the limelight on screen, even as he did in real life. This is a cheerfully bombastic, sometimes over-the-top, performance from Christophe Waltz, which reaches its climax in his attempts to speak for himself in court and in his comically absurd self-defence.

In the final credits there is a photo of the real Margaret Keane along with Amy Adams.

BLACK SEA

UK, 2014, 114 minutes, Colour

Jude Law, Tobias Menzies, Jackie Whitaker, Scoot Mc Nairy, David Threlfall, Grigoriy Dobrygin, Ben Mendelsohn, Michael Smiley, Konstantin Khabenskiy, Bobby Schofield.

Directed by Kevin Macdonald.

While the Black Sea, especially out of Sebastopol, is the realistic location for this thriller, the title also means the dark depths of the sea. This is a submarine film.

Over the years there have been many fine dramas and thrillers, from 1950's *Morning Departure*, with John Mills and a stiff upper lip British cast, to Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October* as well as *The Crimson Tide*. There was also the fine German film, *Das Boot*. This film is not quite in the same class as these undersea thrillers but it will do as a piece of underwater entertainment.

Jude Law, who has been doing some excellent roles in recent years from his grim and quiet Karenin in the recent *Anna Karenina* to his boasting bluff Dom Hemingway. Here he looks strong and sturdy, shaven head, Scots accent, a man who has spent 30 years in submarines and working in salvage who is let go with a pittance by his company. His life has been dedicated to the sea to the neglect of his wife and child who are glimpsed in a number of flashbacks. There doesn't seem to be much else to do but drown his sorrows.

When he hears of an interesting operation, the salvage of a submarine with gold that Russia through Stalin had paid to Hitler at the beginning of World War II. This episode is visualised in surreal black and red colour during the opening credits. The captain goes to an interview, agrees to the task, collects his own crew from Britain and half the crew from Russia (played by actual Russian actors) and a quite psychotic diver from Australia, played by Ben Mendelsohn.

The film doesn't waste much time in going into the depths and precipitating a crisis, killing and an explosion with more deaths. This does not enhance the credibility of the plot where the crew in an old Russian rust bucket submarine dive into the depths and locate the vessel. There are the usual anxieties, especially through Daniels, an executive imposed on the crew by the company (Scoot Mc Nairy in a constantly whining and whingeing performance or, rather, trying to do his best with whining and whingeing lines, irritating nonetheless).

With damage to the submarine because of the explosion, they have to find a different way to the surface, but there are also revelations of double dealing in the setup of the contract. The trek by the divers to the submarine and the discovery of corpses and of the gold, increases the motivation to succeed, despite the difficulties in transporting a piston and the gold to the submarine.

The captain decides to go to another port to surface and get away with the gold, some for everyone, but they come across a deep sea canyon which they decide to navigate.

There is quite some dissent, some violence and mayhem before a partly happy ending.

The film was directed by Kevin Macdonald, a prolific maker of documentaries, especially his Oscar-winning *One Day in September* about the Munich Olympics. He has also made a number of feature films including directing Forrest Whitaker to his Oscar in *The Last King of Scotland*. This means that his eye for effective detail makes the action in the submarine rather documentary-like. But he is quite melodramatic with the narrative fiction.

CHAPPIE

US, 2015, 120 minutes, Colour.

Sharlto Copley, Dev Patel, Hugh Jackman, Ninja, Yo- Landi Visser, Jose Pablo Cantillo.

Directed by Neill Blomkamp.

For years now, there has been an increasing interest in the stories about Artificial Intelligence and a range of films about robots, robotics, androids, and the possibility of creating an android with self-consciousness. In this futuristic science-fiction fable, there is a company at work in Johannesburg producing a wide range of android Robocops who keep down the crime rate.

But there are two men working in very different experiments, one an ex-army militaristic type, Vincent, played by Hugh Jackman with an Australian accent and strange brown hair, who is building a rather gigantic robot which can take to the air, survey crimes and uprisings and swoop down and fire at will to destroy the criminals (and it does get an extensive tryout). The other is an Indian South African, Deon, played by Dev Patel, now well-known for *Slumdog Millionaire* as well as the Best Exotic Marigold Hotels. He is desperately doing experiments which will give his androids human intellectual capacities, personality and the ability to learn.

When one of the robot police is partially destroyed, and the severe boss of the company, Sigourney Weaver, forbids both men from progressing with their work, Deon takes the shattered robot and works at home creating the desired android. The way that his programme is designed means that the android begins his life as the equivalent of a child and has to go through a process of learning.

That would be no problem but we have already seen some thugs and gangs around the city, taking advantage of crime possibilities, drug-peddling and three rather dim-witted villains in debt to the gangster leader. When they have the brainwave that they should rob a bank to pay back their debts, they realise that they can get the help of a robot and so abduct the experimental android. Which means that he has a strange learning process, partly from Deon, but strongly influenced by the gangsters, their language, their stances. But, as he grows up, he has been told by his maker always to do the right thing.

Which means that there are a lot of complications, the maker trying to visit his creation and educate him well. The woman in the gang find she has maternal instincts, especially towards this chap, whom she names Chappie. But the leader of the gang is a complete moron, and a violent one as well, abandoning Chappie to the mercilessness of young gangsters on the outskirts of the city with Chappie having to find his way back, increasing his learning experience. The gangsters begin to become a shrewd and find a way of getting him to participate – and the transformation of the moronic gangster to something of a friendly hero more than strains credibility.

These two characters played by South African celebrities, Ninja and Yo- Landi Visser – using their celebrity names for their characters, but whatever their popularity, acting ability is not to the fore.

It is Dev Patel as Deon who is the most convincing. Hugh Jackman turns out to be a kind of comic-book villain, even turning off the power to all the Robocops who collapse in heaps with ultimate riots in Bedlam in the city, and Sigourney Weaver who has either to look extremely bossy or apprehensive.

The premise is quite interesting but, as the film goes along, it becomes more comic-book, even silly in some of the situations as well as the characterisations. Which is a pity because there are many things going for the film.

Directed by Neill Blomkamp, who made a huge impact with his science-fiction drama, District 9. His follow-up film, Elysium, had some interesting ideas in terms of communication between earth and a super resort satellite. But, there was some incipient silliness in that film as well. While Blomkamp is right in designing his science-fiction for a wide audience, his films need to be more intelligently stimulating rather than a reliance on some corny dialogue at times and very effective special effects.

DIOR AND I

France, 2014, 90 minutes, Colour.

Raf Simons, Pieter Mulier, Sidney Toledano, Anna Wintour, Mariel Cottillard, Sharon Stone, Jennifer Lawrence, Harvey Weinstein and all the staff at Dior, behind the scenes.

Directed by Frederic Tcheng.

In recent years there have been documentaries and feature films about couturier, Yves St Laurent, highlighting his work and achievement in fashion as well as a great deal of detail about his personal life. Audiences should not expect this kind of treatment or revelations in Dior and I, even though it is based on book he wrote.

At the beginning, there is voice-over with a quotation from Christian Dior declaring that there were two of him. One was his real self (born 1905), the other being his public self (starting his work at the age of 41 in 1947). Apart from some tributes to him for his work and vision, some photographs from the 1940s and 1950s, and a visit to his family home, swimming in by helicopter, that is about all we discover about Dior himself.

So, this documentary is set in the present, introducing us to Belgian Raf Simons, the man chosen to be the contemporary designer for the company (2013) which is still flourishing, has its shop in Paris as well as its offices and its ateliers. Simons had been working in men's fashion for 10 years with a reputation of being a minimalist, which he rather plays down. His new assistant is, another Belgian, Pieter Mulier.

Then we go behind the scenes and spend most of the film there, especially in the two ateliers with their extensive staff. In fact, we get something of the main designers, their sensibilities, their business sense, the pressure on them to achieve. And there are quite a number of interviews with some of the dressmakers, men and women, and a number of the seamstresses who have worked a

long time for the company, one for 39 years. Most of the time, there are some genial human behind the scenes.

However, most of the attention is given to Simons himself, a middle-aged man, always wearing black, quietly authoritative, perceived at times as authoritarian, feeling the pressure of his work and his first show in the Dior tradition. We see him relating to the staff, approving designs, changing them, selecting materials, adapting the dresses as they are in progress, feeling the pressure of time, of the demands of clients in New York, choosing a mansion for the show, making a decision to cover the walls with flowers, with the logistics of how this can be done as well as keeping the flowers fresh.

We see Pieter Mulier and his liaising with the staff, supporting Simons. And then there is the show, the choosing of models, the fittings, the walk, plans for filming, the photographs, the interviews, focusing on greeting the guests (amongst whom Marion Cotillard, Sharon Stone, Jennifer Lawrence, Harvey Weinstein and, even, editor Anna Wintour), hugs and kisses, with Simons finally following the models onto the catwalk, cheerful, congratulated, a sense of achievement.

For those not up to date on fashion and/or ignorant of the amount of attention in detail it has to go into the design and the making, even down to stitching hems, There is something to learn about fashion. For those who are up-to-date and delight in colour, design, the range of dresses, plenty of satisfaction!

THE DUFF

US, 2015, 100 minutes, Colour.

Mae Whitman, Robbie Amell, Bella Thorne, Bianca A. Santos, Skyler Samuels, Romany Malco, Nick Eversman, Chris Wylde, Ken Jeong, Alison Janney.

Directed by Ari Sandel.

Would anybody be drawn in to see a film which was called The DUFF? Seems rather unlikely! And even when it is explained that DUFF stands for “Designated Ugly Fat Friend”? Possibly not. But, the producers did make the film and here it is.

Mae Whitman is very good as Bianca, the DUFF. She doesn’t realise it at first but as she explains to the audience when we initially see her first with her friends, the attractive Jess and Casey, she points out that everybody greets them and seems to miss out on her, or not notice her, or notice her and ignore her. This is especially the case with Madison (Bella Thorne) who fancies herself as the most attractive girl in the school, claims, when it suits her, Wes (Robbie Amell), the football captain and school jock, as her on-again, off-again boyfriend. Madison informs everybody that life, even at school, is a preparation for her life as a celebrity on Reality Television.

Despite the looks, she is pretty clueless about life and relationships. Which may remind us that this was the 90s equivalent of The DUFF, Clueless, Alicia Silverstone and friends at high school, making a mess of life at times but trying to put it in order. And then, almost a decade later, came Mean Girls, with Rachel Mc Adams as one of the meanest persecuting poor Lindsay Lohan until she joined them. Perhaps every decade has to have its high school mean girls movie.

Bianca is shorter than her friends, with the touch of the tubby which makes her self-conscious about the Fat in DUFF. But Wes assures her as he drops the title on her that it actually means the character in any situation who is overlooked but is approached to get access to the high-flying characters. Bianca has her own life to live, is very good at school work, has to cope with her mother (Alison Janney in yet another cleverly humorous role) who, after being left by her husband, has discovered the five stages (without open acknowledgement of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross) of grieving and incorporates them into seven's seminars dealing with stress, satirised a little, but having their place.

She also works on the school magazine, edited by Ken Jeong, an amusing performance, much, much lower key than how we found him in such films as The Hangover series. He commissions Bianca to write an article on her personal, deeply felt responses to the Homecoming Dance.

Surprisingly influenced by peer pressure, Bianca alienates her two close friends, who really are friends. She also tangles with Wes who, in fact from the childhood, has been the boy next door. While he is a jock, he is a sympathetic character, finds Madison particularly waring, is much more content chatting with Bianca.

Bianca has a crush on musician, Toby, but is awkward in talking with him. She and Wes make a deal, she helping with his studies so that he can resume his football captaincy and get sufficient grades for graduation. He offers to help her to be more sociable, with a long sequence where they go to a store and she tries on numerous dresses – only to find much later that Madison's toadying friend is taking video of Bianca, the clothes and talking about the boyfriend. The girl does the same when Bianca takes Wes to her favourite place, and more video. As might be expected, the video makes its blatant appearance during the Homecoming Dance. Which leads into the later development of principles against cyberbullying.

In case anyone is upset because our heroine, Bianca, alienates herself from her two good friends, she does come to her senses, thank goodness. She doesn't want to get to the dance, but her mother urges her, and there is the almost-but-not-quite ending that we expected!

Older reviewers and older audiences will find that this period of their lives is long, long gone!

EASTERN BOYS

France, 2013, 128 minutes, Colour.

Olivier Rabourdin, Kirill Emelyanov, Daniil Vorobyov.

Directed by Robin Campillo.

Eastern Boys is surprisingly moving film. While it focuses on teenagers and young men, migrating from Eastern European countries, with no documents, trying to survive in a city like Paris, sometimes working as prostitutes, it portrays its character with quite some humanity.

The film opens in Paris' Gare du Nord, the imposing exterior, the very busy interior, the passengers going in and out of the station, the mixture of backgrounds, ethnic differences, a situation that ordinary people could identify with. Then the film starts to focus, with its overhead shots, at individuals, their forming small groups, forming larger groups, looking like a gang, which they are, going to enjoy takeaway food, and one of the young men going off by himself, sensing that a middle-

aged businessman was loitering, watching him, wanting to proposition him. No words spoken for at least 10 minutes but the audience is strongly aware of what is happening.

When the young man, Marek, agrees to visit the man's apartment, all seems set for a film about gay men, sexual relationships. While something of this does happen, the film has a lot more going on and a lot more going for it. There is a very disturbing sequence, especially for the businessman, Daniel, when the group of young men come to his apartment, really innovated, and, while dancing to rock music, remove all his possessions to a truck downstairs. The instigator, a Russian somewhat older than the others, nicknamed The Boss, is an intense and possibly psychotic character.

But the film is about the relationship between Marek, who reveals that his real name is Rouslan and that he is a migrant from Ukraine, though his parents worked in Chechnya and were killed there. At first, his response to Daniel is quite impassive, letting himself be a sex object for a client. But, he returns and continues to return so that the relationship becomes far more personal even in its sensuality.

There is a further surprise in the relationship between Daniel and Marek, a change of attitude, a change of behaviour, different kinds of feelings in Daniel, more paternal than sexual.

However, as might be expected, there is still trouble to come, especially from The Boss, who has dominating roll over the group of men as, helped by Social Services, they occupy some apartments in a suburban hotel. His control extends to locking their documents, if they have any, in a locker in the hotel. When Marek attempts to retrieve some documents, The Boss responds with ferocity and quite some brutality.

The film does not end as we might have expected. There is a clash between The Boss and Daniel but the screenplay opts for a non-violent solution, in fact, one that leaves Daniel and Marek – and the audience – with quite some hope and alternate possibilities for the future and their relationship.

Director, Robin Campillo, uses his camera expertly to focus on the central characters, quite sympathetically, meaning that he tells his story with quite some feeling.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ELEANOR RIGBY -THEM

US, 2014, 122 minutes, Colour.

Jessica Chastain, James Mc Avoy, Nina Arianda, Jess Weixel, Bill Hader, William Hurt, Isabelle Huppert.

Directed by Ned Benson.

The release of The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby – Them will cause some problems for film buffs who have heard that prior to the editing of this film there was a version of The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby which focused on Eleanor with the caption Her and, as well, there was a version with the caption Him. Distributors have opted to release Her and Him by download and DVD and to release only Them to cinemas. For any audiences who have seen Her and Him, the selection of material edited together from the previous film in Them, will be of interest to see the intercutting of the two perspectives. For those see Them first, looking at the previous two films might be similar to the experience of seeing a film and then reading the book on which it was based later, filling in a

great deal of detail and highlighting how different perspectives can be.

One of the difficulties, dramatically, with *Them* is that there are some crises in Eleanor's life but it is only later in the film that we discover what they are and how significant they are. There are initially playful moments but then a rapid transition to Eleanor contemplating suicide. Her husband visits her in hospital but she opts to stay with her parents. He tries to cope, working in his restaurant which is going down in terms of customers. And he has to go to live without his sometimes cantankerous father (Ciaran Hinds).

On the surface it seems a portrait of a failed marriage but it becomes clear that husband and wife do love each other but attempts at reconciliation are ineffectual.

Jessica Chastain portrays Eleanor, in her 30s, a woman floating through life after the crisis. Her loving parents, long-married (William Hurt and Isabelle Huppert) are supportive as is her sister. She attempts to do some studies with the help of the professor (Viola Davis). James Mc Avoy portrays Conor, also in his 30s, who has grieved, adrift in his work, relying on the support of friends at the restaurant, especially Stuart (Bill Hader).

The film shows a number of attempts for each of the couple to try to understand the other, moments of betrayal, moments of love, moments of hesitation.

Finally, both Eleanor and Conor have some time away from each other, with the possibility that things might get better, a glimmer of hope rather than despair.

FOCUS

US, 2015, 105 minutes, Colour.

Will Smith, Margot Robbie, Rodrigo Santoro, Gerard Mc Raney, Adrian Martinez, Brennan Brown, B.D. Wong, Robert Taylor.

Directed by John Requa, Glenn Ficara.

There is often something very attractive about con men and women and fraud stories on screen, the type of characters involved, their motivations, their abilities to take people in, creating fictitious stories and maintaining them. But, it is not as if we would like to encounter them in real life!

Will Smith is very smooth as Nick, consummate charming con man, who lets himself initially be taken in, it seems, by a very attractive young woman, Jess, Margot Robbie. But, when she and an accomplice attempt to blackmail him for being in a compromising situation, he turns the tables and points out how completely ineffective they are. Jess seems to be intrigued and contacts Nick and persuades him to take her on as an apprentice.

The centrepiece of the early part of the film takes place in New Orleans during the Superbowl, Nick having a squad of 30 people, involved in all kinds of tricks, deceits, and common pickpocketing, as well as those at the headquarters who count the money, package it and deliver it. There is a lengthy intriguing episode at the Superbowl when Nick and Jess encounter a wealthy Chinese businessman, B.D. Wong. They keep betting about play moves with double or nothing, until the stakes are in the millions, Nick steadily betting, Jess rather bewildered until it all becomes clear to her and to us as

Nick explains his success.

Move to 3 years later, move to Argentina, after Nick has let Jess go. Nick is involved in a confidence trick dealing with formulas and engines for motor racing, employed by a millionaire, Rodrigo Santoro, who has a bullish bodyguard, Gerald Mc Raney. And then he meets Jess just as he is preparing to set up an Australian entrepreneur, Robert Taylor with as flat an accent as you could wish or not wish. Jess seems to be with the Argentinian but succumbs to Nick's attentions – which may or may not be setups.

There is a bit of melodrama before the end, Jess abducted, Nick in trouble – and then, a strange twist which strains credibility, and all is well (not necessarily good or moral).

This is mainly glossy entertainment for a night out.

GET HARD

US, 2015, 100 minutes, Colour.

Will Ferrell, Kevin Hart, Craig T. Nelson, Alison Brie, T.I. Harris, Edwina Findley Dickerson, Ariana Neal, Paul Ben-Victor, John Mayer.

Directed by Etan Cohen.

This is one of those American comedies which will divide audiences. Many will find it very funny and enjoy the targets and the satire. Many will be repelled by various elements, especially the treatment of race themes, homophobic themes, American class themes.

In the reviews, some writers have commented that the film is attempting realism and so its exaggerations do not work. However, this is satire and spoof, not meant to be taken literally, heightened for the sake of making the points and making the jokes. It may be that the points are not well-made as intended, and the jokes are not as funny as intended. What the screenplay seems to be doing is to taking up the stereotypes and the way they are presented in the movies: class, sexuality, violence, racism. By its pairing of the two central characters and their differences, the film is actually making many points against classes, homophobia, alleged prison violence, racism.

We know that Will Ferrell has played quite a number of idiot types in his career, especially remembering Ron Burgundy, and this is a variation on the theme. His James King, living in luxury, sexy fiancée, a benign father-in-law who makes him a partner in the firm, but caught in the many stupidities of class snobbery, doing all the trendy things including exercises, and everything that is expected of a financial adviser and executive. Actually, in his chosen sphere of finance, he is very well-educated and throughout the film has a sophisticated vocabulary and turn of phrase. But his doom, and his being manipulated await him. During his engagement party, where he tries to upstage singer John Mayer, he is arrested for fraud.

In the meantime there is Kevin Hart. In some films, like *Ride Along* and *About Last Night*, his shrieking comedy routines and in-your-face personality are fairly repellent. It was interesting to see him in *The Wedding Ringer*, that he could subdue the eccentricities and do a credible comic performance. And this is what he does here, playing a straightforward manager of a car-wash business, pleasant wife and daughter, no criminal background, needing \$30,000 to pay off the

mortgage of the home.

The race jokes start when Darnell knocks on the window of James's car and James is afraid that he is a victim of race violence. And he advises Darnell to start saving money. But, after his arrest and his fear of prison where he is sentenced to maximum security and 10 years, he decides that he needs to prepare.

The bulk of the film and the comedy are in attempts at preparing James, and Darnell, pretending he has spent time in prison, consults his cousin, Russell, for ideas. And what ensues are a number of comic routines, according to the audience's sense of humour or not. Darnell makes James do lots of bodybuilding and exercise, trying to get him to make Mad Dog Faces to intimidate, getting the rough and crass language that is expected to be used in prison... Then there are the allegedly popular expectations that there will be a lot of homosexual exploitation among the prisoners, so a lot of discussion, a visit to a gay restaurant where James goes to a toilet for experience but a gay man does approach Darnell who offers a sympathetic ear, and later communicates by mobile phone. To cap it all, there is a scene where Darnell takes the role of an African- American, a Hispanic and a gay prisoner, stands James in the centre while he impersonates each character and their interactions.

The preparation also involves a visit to Darnell's home where his wife persuades Darnell to tell the story of his alleged imprisonment and he recounts the plot of *The Boys in the Hood*. They visit Russell and all the tough African- Americans as well as going to the headquarters of a racist white bikie gang.

Meanwhile, it is not too difficult to work out that James is innocent and who has been framing him – with a scene on a yacht where James' training comes to full force and he and Darnell overcome the villains.

This reviewer was inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to the all the spoof and send-ups.

A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT

US, 2014, 99 minutes, Black and white.

Sheila Vand, Arash Marandi, Marshall Manesh, Dominic Rains.

Directed by Anna Amirpour.

This is a very odd film, an independent film, and one that could have the potential for a cult following.

The film was made in the United States but the background of the director is Iranian and she has set her fantasy-drama in Iran although the settings look like downbeat American neighbourhoods.

The film was billed as the first Iranian vampire film. However, it takes some time, even in a shortish film, for the vampire to appear.

The central character is Arash, a young man who has an elderly father to look after at home, especially with the father being a drug addict. Arash also tangles with a friend who is a brutal man, a pimp, involved with drugs, especially violent in his casual relationships with women in the car and his

ugly discarding of them. Once the vampire appears, he becomes an initial victim, frightening Arash.

The vampire herself seems an ordinary young woman, walking along the streets, encountering people who lead ugly lives and making a number of them victims, especially when they accost her. However, she makes friends with an older prostitute, going to her home, being looked after. At a club, she is seen by Arash and the two of them become acquaintances and even friends. Also in the scene is a young boy who initially begs money from Arash but becomes an observer of what is going on.

After the death of his father, he and the young woman find that they will have a future together. But what that future is is for the audience to anticipate rather than see.

Filmed in black and white, the film seems a throwback to the styles, especially of some Iranian films of the past, with their stark black-and-white photography, the setup of scenes, the dramatic interactions.

HOME

US, 2015, 94 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Jim Parsons, Rihanna, Steve Martin, Jennifer Lopez.

Directed by Tim Johnson.

Home is a pleasant animation film from Dream Works Studios. While parents may enjoy it – or, perhaps, pleasantly tolerate it – it is targeted for a children's audience and younger children might respond happily.

In one sense this is a variation on ET. Except that this creature's two letters are O and H, Oh. This is a variation on ET coming to earth as well as variations on close encounters and the War of the Worlds, G-rated, of course.

Out in space are a race of creatures, short and squat, multi-legged or, who feel that they are being pursued by other aliens and have to be on the move, continually finding somewhere for refuge. They are led by The Captain, voiced by Steve Martin. They are all assembled, the luggage in little balloon bags, ready to go to earth. And then Oh appears. He is voiced by comedian, Jim Parsons.

Oh is the hero of the film, an exuberant creature (his fellow-creatures are definitely not exuberant), the Boovs. In one way they are considerate, they don't want to destroy the human race, simply remove every human from the face of the earth, sucked up by vacuum and relocated, suburban houses and all, on another planet, assuming that they all want to be there, which, obviously, they don't.

In the meantime, the Boovs settle on earth, with Oh getting an apartment, wanting to host a party but everybody avoiding it and him.

Meanwhile, there is one little girl who was not sucked up with all the humans because he had her at pig-cat on her head and the vacuum couldn't penetrate it. She is called Tip and, surprisingly, is voiced by Rihanna. In her search for her mother (Jennifer Lopez), she comes across Oh, clashes at

first, then the beginnings of friendship as he mends her car. What follows are a lot of adventures, even to capital cities around the world. Oh becomes a bit more human, learning that one can make mistakes, seeing families bonding...

When a huge hostile alien craft threatens, Oh decides to defend everyone – only to find that the threat was not nearly as great as was thought. Which means then that humans and Boovs can get to know each other, become friendly, share Earth and its cities, and even want to dance!

Of course, it was inevitable that there would be happy ending, and there is. But, isn't there an allegory about refugees, fleeing in fear, and finally finding a welcome?

THE HOMESMAN

US, 2014, 122 minutes, Colour.

Hilary Swank, Tommy Lee Jones, Grace Gummer, Miranda Otto, Barry Corbin, David Dencik, Evan Jones, William Fichtner, Tim Blake Nelson, John Lithgow, James Spader, Jesse Plemons, Haillee Steinfeld, Meryl Streep.

Directed by Tommy Lee Jones.

Tommy Lee Jones is now a grizzled veteran of 40 years of acting. A decade ago he directed a striking film, a Mexican-Western[?], *The Three Burials of Melchíades Estrada*. For his next directing venture he has not moved absolute West, rather setting his story in Nebraska and a journey into Iowa. It is not exactly a western, rather a story of the 19th century in the midwest.

The screenplay explains that a homesman is a person who escorts someone to their place of origin or their final destination. The title is a bit misleading because the first homesman is actually a woman, Mary Bee, played by Hilary Swank, one of her most striking performances.

The situation is this: several women have been adversely affected by their lives in these isolated surroundings, children dying from diphtheria, a woman adversely affected by her mother's death, another mother suffering mental disorder and killing one of her children. There is a mixed response from their husbands, not always supportive. When the local minister (John Lithgow) arranges that the three women be transported into Iowa to a caring environment under the auspices of religious minister, the husbands are somewhat unwilling, but lots are taken in the church and it is Mary Bee who gets the mission to take the women.

Mary Bee is a lonely woman, hard working on her farm, wanting to get married but men rejecting her because she is severe and because she is plain. Unexpectedly, she comes across a man accused of land grabbing, sitting on his horse, a noose around his neck tied to a tree. She frees him but does a bargain that he will accompany her on the trek. Officially, he is the homesman.

Moving through midwest landscapes, beautifully photographed, the group, with the unwilling women tied up inside a wagon that looks something like a prison cell, they encounter the elements, confronting Indians, a horseman who threatens one of the women. The effect on the homesman is that he keeps his distance in many ways, thinking of his financial reward, but moved at times to help the women and to respond to Mary Bee and her desire to be married.

Just when one thinks that all will be well after the long and arduous journey, there is a shock experience which remains significant right to the end of the film.

There are some more episodes before the homesman is able to hand over the three women, and encounter with an entrepreneur who wants to turn a isolated hotel into a significant centre (James Spader) who is on the eventual end of the homesman's anger. When they arrive at the destination, the minister's wife is there to meet them and receive the women. Meryl Streep must be a friend of Tommy Lee Jones. They appeared together in Hope Springs. Here she has a small cameo role, bringing some civilisation and manners to what has been a hard journey.

One of the other reasons for Meryl Streep's appearance would be her support of one of her daughters, Grace Gummer, who plays one of the women as does Australia's Miranda Otto.

This is a very serious story, well-told, portrait of characters who have succumbed to the hardships of their life in war, in isolation, in marriage, with children, with many hopes dashed.

Not an easy film. A little hope at the end but mainly an hour ironic temporary conclusion to the homesman's journey.

INFINITELY POLAR BEAR

US, 2014, 88 minutes, Colour.

Mark Ruffalo, Zoe Saldana, Imogene Wolodarsky, Ashley Aufderheide, Keir Dullea.

Directed by Maya Forbes.

On noticing this title in the list of films about to be released, I wondered what on earth this film could be about, almost expecting to find that was an animation film for a children's audience. The word polar led to this conclusion.

On the other hand, the word polar is more regularly heard these days as part of bi-polar. And this is the subject of this film. It is based on a true story, the story of the father of the director, Maya Forbes drawing on her own experience as a child. And, in many ways, this is a look at a bi-polar condition from the point of view of the child, not a clinical exploration, but a dramatisation of the experience of living with such a father. What makes the film also interesting is the fact that the young girl in this film, representing the director, is actually played by the director's daughter, Imogene Wolodarsky.

The setting is the past, the 70s the 80s, when diagnoses were more limited and medication for the condition was not extensive, lithium tablets being a regular prescription.

The father, Cameron, is played by Mark Ruffalo, a very good actor who is becoming quite versatile in his choice of roles over the years. He is a sympathetic presence, even when he is frustrating in his manic behaviour, even at times, without his medication, becoming quite threatening. He spends time in an institution, then in a halfway house, but unable to live with his wife and children as a family. This puts extraordinary pressure on his wife, played by Zoe Saldana, who has to be the breadwinner, although her husband comes from a fairly wealthy Boston family and the great-

grandmother pays rent but is not willing to give too much money from her trust fund.

This means that the wife has to find a job but decides that she would be better able to cope and bring in income for the family if she went to New York to study for an MBA. She does and, for 18 months, Cameron has to be the parent for the children, living in an apartment, trying to cope with routines – and routines helping him to settle. He is also good working with his hands but, at times, the girls becoming too much for him (and sometimes too much for this reviewer, being rather petulant towards their father and insensitive to him despite knowing what he was suffering).

The main part of this rather short film focuses on those 18 months in Boston, an intriguing look at how Cameron tries to deal with the situation and, ultimately, comes through successfully.

Infinitely Polar Bear is not meant to be an accurate clinical portrayal of the bi-polar condition. Rather, it is a story which asks for empathy from the audience, appreciation and understanding of how difficult it is to live with the condition, mood swings, Cameron being prone to drinking, and at times trying to escape. But, it is an important part of his life and audiences will come to some understanding of bi-polar experience through sharing in a life rather than by analysis.

INHERENT VICE

US, 2014, 148 minutes, Colour.

Joaquin Phoenix, Josh Brolin, Jemma Newsome, Katherine Waterston, Jeannie Berlin, Eric Roberts, Serena Scott Thomas, Benicio Del Toro, Jena Malone, Martin Short, Peter Mc Robbie, Martin Donovan .

Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson.

First of all, the title. Inherent Vice for those with a religious bent might sound like an alternate description of the Reformation Theology of the inner corruption of every human being, absolutely needing God's grace. Actually, the meaning of the title is far more mundane. As the voice-over astrologist tells us, inherent vice means anything of this nature which cannot be avoided: chocolate melting, ice melting, glass cracking... How that title applies to the situations and characters of this story is a challenge to the audience. It may mean that the central character Doc, who spends a lot of his time stoned, has that particular inherent vice as well as an innate curiosity to solve crimes.

What about Incoherent? That is not a misprint for coherent! And many audiences might offer the opinion that Incoherent would be a more truthful title.

However, when one looks at some of the Private Eye films from the past, especially from the 1940s, like *The Big Sleep* which most commentators say they cannot logically explain, or listening to the last five minutes of *The Maltese Falcon* with Humphrey Bogart giving a speed-spoken explanation of what was what, who was who and why was why which is very difficult to comprehend on first listening, then incoherent is probably a relevant word.

But this film, adapted from a novel by Thomas Pynchon by the director, Paul Thomas Anderson, who has made some impressive films over the years including *Boogie Nights*, *Punch-drunk Love*, *There Will Be Blood*, *The Master*, is not from the 1940s but, rather, from the late 1960s. No black and white here. Instead there are bright colours, a fair amount of sunlight, and re-creation of a hippie

lifestyle on the California beaches of those days.

While Doc, played most effectively by Joaquin Phoenix, is no Humphrey Bogart or Dick Powell, he is in their tradition, a seedy-looking office, lots of interesting, even if shady, contacts, and a girlfriend, Shasta (Katherine Waterston) who may be a good girl or not – and some of the sex scenes later indicate that it might be “or not”. However, it is she who brings a mystery to Doc which sets him following through, getting advice from Benicio Del Toro, interviewing a man just out of prison – and finding himself waking up next to a corpse which certainly arouses police attention and suspicions. The main policeman is Bigfoot, played by Josh Brolin.

There is quite a range of cast, from Reese Witherspoon as an uptight district attorney official (except when she canoodles with Doc), a former band member who has become an undercover informant (Owen Wilson), a lewd dentist with a partiality for young women and cocaine (Martin Short) and an assortment of its citizens as well as corrupt police.

Whether the mainstream audience will respond well to this film is more than doubtful. It makes too many demands in trying to respond to the unravelling of its plot, not an immediate rapport with most of its characters, and not so much of response to these stoner times (except perhaps from those who lived through them).

The inherent vice of many of those who watch the film will be: too difficult to follow and so give up. It is a film for film buffs.

INSURGENT

US, 2015, 119 minutes, Colour.

Shailene Woodley, Theo James, Kate Winslet, Naomi Watts, Ansel Elgort, Miles Teller, Jai Courtney, Mekhi Pfiffer, Octavia Spencer, Zoey Kravitz, Tony Goldwyn Ashley Judd, Janet McTeer, Ray Stevenson, Maggie Q, Jonny Weston.

Directed by Robert Schwenke.

Last year audiences learnt about a post-apocalyptic world, confined to a city, with a social structure of five communities: Dauntless, Erudite, Candor, Amity, Abnegation. Individuals belong to each of the groups according to their personality and talents. In the first film of the series, based on novels by Veronica Roth, *Divergent*, we saw that Abnegation was eliminated, that the military types of Dauntless were in command.

The central character was Tris, played with great energy and determination by Shailene Woodley. It emerges that, though she was from an Abnegation family, she was really different and was a Divergent. The power in the city was Jeanine (Kate Winslet). One of the ways of control was simulation games, akin to some of the heroics now familiar from *The Hunger Games*. Tris, put through extraordinary physical paces, was drawn to Four, actual name Tobias (Theo James) and, by the end of this first episode, Tris's parents (Tony Goldwyn and Ashley Judd) were dead. Rebels went into exile.

With the second episode, *Insurgent*, we find the rebels living with the Amity group, led by Octavia Spencer. While the rebels agree not to disturb Amity, Jeanine's forces invade the outpost with Tris

and Tobias escaping, pursued by the relentless Eric (Jai Courtney). They take refuge on a goods train going to the city where again, they are confronted. Peter (Miles Teller) betrays them and Triss' Erudite brother, Caleb (Ansel Elgort) thinks he is doing right by going to work for Jeanine.

So far, so expected – except that there is a revelation that Tobias's mother has not died when he was a little boy, as had been thought, but has fabricated her death to escape her tyrannical husband, Marcus. It is then that we realise that she is played by Naomi Watts, almost unrecognisable in a dark wig. She wants to lead a revolution with her group, and the Factionless, against Jeanine.

Then the film becomes more interesting and arresting, as Jeanine, Kate Winslet offering a performance of Aryan tyranny without any charm, is testing Divergents hoping to find the perfect candidate who embodies all the factions. The sequences where Tris goes through successive simulation experiments and demanding experiences, showing her capacities of 100% Divergent, focus the attention. We admire the ingenuity of the special effects people as they create extraordinary visual situations for the tests, especially a block of floating rooms on fire with Triss showing that she is a strong female super-hero, in her attempts to save her stranded mother.

With various twists in the plot and changing loyalties, we are introduced to a mysterious box which was in the care of Tricia's mother and is now opened, seeming to offer good news and a happy ending and an improved future for all factions. But, then, there is one brief final scene which leaves us watching the final credits on edge, wondering where the sequels, *Allegiant* will lead us as the inhabitants move beyond the wall of the city. The two-part *Allegiant* is to come.

KIDNAPPING MR. HEINEKEN

Netherlands/UK, 2015, 95 minutes, Colour.

Anthony Hopkins, Jim Sturgess, Sam Worthington, Ryan Kwanten, David Dencik, Jemima West, Mark van Eeuwen, Thomas Cocquerel.

Directed by Daniel Alfredson.

Being a criminal does not necessarily mean being a mastermind, a mistake probably many criminals make. It is certainly a mistake that the criminals involved in this kidnapping make time and time again.

And who is Mr Heineken, the victim of the abduction? It sounds something to do with the famous Dutch beer. And that is correct. Four young men kidnapped Alfred (Freddy) Heineken, the man who built up the Heineken company. The kidnappers think that he is worth at least \$60 million in ransom.

During the opening credits, Heineken is seen making a comment to one of the criminals that most people want friends and money – he makes the point that you can't have both. And that is one of the morals of this film.

The setting is Amsterdam, 1983. In the aftermath of recession, the four young men who had been friends since school days and who had joined for business enterprises find themselves needing to borrow from a bank but unable to provide sufficient collateral for a loan. They do have a building which has been occupied by punks and hippies. Some strong arm tactics lead them into the hands of the police rather than freeing up their asset.

The father of one of the men worked for Heineken who actually sacked him but still has an enormous loyalty to him. Brainwave! Using the word brain seems something of an over-compliment. One significant idea that they have is that the kidnapping should look like the actions of the terrorist groups of time, like the Red Brigade or Baader-Meinhoff?. To emphasise this, they successfully rob a bank.

This is an international production. The conspirators are played by Jim Sturgess (UK), Sam Worthington (Australia), Ryan Kwanten (Australia), Mark van Eeuan (Holland). And Heineken himself is played with his usual intensity by Anthony Hopkins.

When the money is not forthcoming, Heineken himself is surprised and offers to pay the ransom himself, for himself and the driver who was taken with him. Of course, the four begin to get edgy as the days pass, some tempted to be violent, others preoccupied about keeping up normal appearances, visits to family, checking on Heineken's desires, books, Chinese food...

For those not in the know, it is interesting to see how the whole plan works out, the eventual payment, the subsequent actions of the four men, the consequences for them. Interestingly, though the police are involved, the screenplay, based on the writing of investigative journalist, Peter De Vries, does not give any information about the police work except some surveillance and the response to an anonymous tip.

At the end of the film, there is substantial information given about each of the main characters, prison sentences, life after prison, criminal activity in Holland, and the continued success of Heineken himself who, on the basis of his experience, establishes a strong Security company.

Interesting enough while the film was on screen, but not one that stays in the memory.

LEVIATHAN

Russian, 2014, 140 minutes, Colour.

Aleksey Serebryakov, Elena Lyadova, Vladimir Vdovichenkov, Roman Madyanov.

Directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev.

Leviathan is the sea beast in the book of Job, a testimony that God is more powerful than Job or any human and that is a perspective that should guide us in our lives. Leviathan is also the title of this fourth film by Andrey Zvyagintsev whom many critics are praising as one of the great directors of our times. His previous films are well worth seeing, his Venice-winning *The Return*, also *The Banishment* and his alarmingly critical view of contemporary Russian society, *Elena*. With *Leviathan* he continues his critical view.

The film is strikingly photographed, in an isolated town on the northern Russian coast. On the shore, on one of the beaches, there are the massive bones of a stranded whale skeleton. There are also the skeletons of ship hulks. And in one beautiful, but ultimately tragic sequence, there is a sequence of a whale frolicking, leaping out of and then into the vast sea. Plenty of symbolism, a lot of metaphor for what happens in the film.

We are introduced to Kolya, the very ordinary and mundane Job of the film, waiting at the railway

station for an old army friend from Moscow who is going to help him in a court case against one of the town authorities who covets Kolya's property, his house and warehouse, overlooking the sea, for commercial development.

Kolya is going to suffer from his dealings with the authority, a smug and violent man, who manipulates people and, hypocritically, kowtows to the local Russian Orthodox priest, who speaks beautiful words at a closing ceremony about Jesus and the gospel, while conniving at behaviour, the opposite of gospel values.

But, Kolya is also going to suffer at home. He is not a particularly well educated man but has skills with his hands, mending, fixing, creating. At home is his second wife whom he loves but who has ambivalent feelings for him and for his friend. Also at home is his son, Roma, a teenage boy with a bitter attitude towards his stepmother, prone to depression.

The film takes its time in developing the characters in the situations, meal sequences, a picnic which has ominous consequences, to scenes of Kolya at court, with the officials of the court reading charges at great speed and with deadly monotone, striking commentary on the role and indifference of law and its application.

Kolya is not a perfect man by any standards and, along with a number of the characters, puts away an extraordinary amount of vodka, clouding his judgement, inclining him to violence, and, at the end, he becomes a victim of his own behaviour, trapped, imprisoned, but also a victim of the avaricious authorities.

Russian film companies invested in this film but the experience of watching *Leviathan* makes us ask how this story relates to the Vladimir Putin era, the place of individuals, the power and greed of the oligarchs, the effect on ordinary citizens far from Moscow.

A LITTLE CHAOS

UK, 2015, 118 minutes, Colour.

Kate Winslet, Mathias Schoenhaerts, Alan Rickman, Stanley Tucci, Helen Mc Crory, Steve Waddington, Jennifer Ehle, Rupert Penry- Jones, Phylida Law.

Directed by Alan Rickman.

A Little Chaos might be a title for a Marvel Comics action show. But that is not its meaning here at all – and it is a rather misleading title for what we actually see.

We are back in the 17th century, location Versailles. It is the era of Louis XIV, the Sun King, who is doing his utmost to make the Palace of Versailles and its grounds a shining example of architecture and design. This means that the film is quite sumptuous to look at, architecture, gardens, stately interiors, costumes and decor, with the musical score to match.

The use of the word chaos in the title is meant to indicate that there are different ways of and styles for beautiful designs, some very traditional in manner, recognisable by everyone, others that are not quite what is expected, perhaps what we might see as disturbingly beautiful, with a little chaos.

The central character, a fictitious character, Sabine, is a widow who has a reputation for her gardens, her nonconformist attitudes and taste, who is a candidate for developing a particular section of the Versailles Gardens. She is played by Kate Winslet (in between her stints as Jeanine, the rather fascist leader of the government, in the Insurgent series). She plays a strong woman here, determined, a figurehead of female accomplishment in this age.

The film was directed by actor Alan Rickman (probably best known for being Severus Snape, in the Harry Potter series). He also plays Louis XIV, a complex character, an absolute monarch, yet caught in some of the emotional tangles at his court, especially with his wife and mistresses. He is somewhat sardonic, expecting his whims to be fulfilled, but challenged in thinking and attitudes by his encounter with his new gardener.

The other central character is a designer, played by Belgian actor Mathias Schoenaerts, who has often portrayed larger than life bullish characters (Bullhead, Rust and Bone). He seems to be of the traditional school of design and supervises a lot of the changes at Versailles but is intrigued by his interview with Sabine and offers her the position. He is locked in a rather formal marriage, his dominant wife (Helen Mc Crory) does what she likes even while she wants to keep her husband under some control. And she is not impressed by Sabine let alone the emotional response of her husband to Kate and attempts to destroy the project.

While the film offers an interesting insight into the period, the formality of the several thousand people who live at Versailles and work in the court, especially the women in their sequestered area, it is also an interesting drama on the personal interaction level.

The action for some audiences will seem well-paced and measured (or might be called slow). It has been described as a painterly film, one which gives audiences opportunity at some length to gaze and contemplate both the simple and the complex beauty of architecture and design, of trees flowers and landscapes.

LUCKY THEM

US, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Toni Collette, Thomas Hayden Church, Oliver Platt, Ryan Eggold, Nina Arianda, Joanne Woodward, Johnny Depp.

Directed by Megan Griffiths.

At one stage in the film, magazine journalist Ellie, Toni Collette, makes a remark that people who are able to live alone are “Lucky them”. Which means that she should be lucky because a lot of her time is spent alone despite her having friends, associates, and sexual relationships. But, at the opening of the film, she is far from lucky.

Toni Collette always gives a good performance as she does here. Ellie is a journalist for a magazine in Seattle, Oliver Platt playing the editor, who is becoming frustrated by Ellie’s unreliability, especially as magazines are changing, the influence of online publishing. He commissions her to do an investigation about a musician who was popular 10 years earlier, Matthew, who had made a great impact in the music world but had then suddenly withdrawn and there were reports of his death. He and Ellie had been in a relationship and his departure was emotionally hurtful for Ellie. She does not

necessarily want to write this article but the editor insists that she must if she is to keep her job.

Helped by a good friend, she goes online to get some information about Matthew's being alive or dead. She does get a lead and follows through but the informant seems rather unreliable and demands money. She actually has persuaded the editor to give her money to pay leads but she has lost the money.

Part of the job is to be a talent scout in Seattle and she comes across a man singing in the streets and is impressed by him, interviewing him, but failing to write the promised article. However, he does move in with her, sings in a club and is offered more appearances.

The tone of the film changes somewhat when an interesting if bizarre character arrives on the scene, Charlie, Thomas Hayden Church, a millionaire who had met Ellie years earlier. He is interested in all kinds of projects and wants to join Ellie in her search for Matthew, also offering to finance the search as long as he goes along, having decided that he would like to make a documentary about it. He years very (very) straight up and down, quite humourless, which makes his character interesting and a contrast with that of Ellie. They go on the road, interact with their different styles, he doing some filming, she doing the searching.

There is a surprise for the audience when she eventually does find Matthew – played by a top star in a modest cameo role, quite effective in its way. Probably his identity has come out but publicists were asking reviewers not to reveal who it was.

In many ways this is a small film, a local focus, a concentration on magazines and a changing styles, the research for articles. Citizen Kane it is not although it is somewhat in that vein – but audiences who come across the film will probably enjoy it.

MANNY LEWIS

Australia, 2015, 95 minutes, Colour.

Carl Barron, Leeanna Walsman, Roy Billing, Damien Garvey.

Directed by Anthony Mir.

This is a small Australian film which deserves being seen quite widely.

This reviewer was not familiar with the work of Carl Barron, a stand-up comedian who began his working career as a labourer and moved into comedy. He has written the screenplay for this film with his colleague, director Anthony Mir, and plays the part of a fictional stand-up comedian, Manny Lewis. Carl Barron invests a great deal of intensive energy into his portrayal of Manny Lewis which inevitably raises the question how much of this film is autobiographical.

The first few moments are not quite auspicious, some examples of stand-up comedy, heard behind the credits. Not particularly funny – despite the laugh-track sounding quite hearty and rather morbid in subject.

However, as we get to know Manny Lewis, he is not the kind of person we would find enjoyable company but he is the kind of person whose screen story becomes more interesting and intriguing.

He is middle-aged, unmarried, has a difficult relationship with his father whom he drives out to the country to visit now and again. He does not mingle at parties despite all the liveliness around him. He is in constant touch with his agent, played with some exuberance as well as melancholy, by Damien Garvie. There is one bright prospect, the possibility of a tour of the United States.

When Manny goes home after a party to his unit, looking out on Sydney Harbour and the Bridge, his loneliness overcomes him and looks up the phone book for phone-sex numbers. After hanging up, he dials again and is referred to Caroline who speaks with an affected sex-husky voice. The first contact is a mixed success and he will dial again and again.

In the meantime, the audience learns more than Manny does. Caroline is actually Maria, a young woman, from Gympie, making ends meet by the phone work, intending to sail to Brazil, an attractive performance from Leeanna Wiseman. By accident, she sees an interview with Manny on television and sets herself up to meet him by chance.

No one can say that Manny Lewis is not predictable. It is, even to the final fadeout. But that does not matter, because the film becomes sweeter and nicer as it goes on and, unless an audience has excised sentiment, they will find it a pleasant film.

Of course, Manny enjoys Maria's company, the possibility for talking, going out, being himself – but, he confides more and more in Caroline, even telling her some of the mannerisms that he finds irritating in Maria! Maria does her best. Inevitably, the truth comes out with sadness for each of them.

Manny has to perform at the State Theatre in Sydney, to a very enthusiastic audience, stories and jokes about life, death and loneliness, as well as some songs, the lyrics of one relating to his experience with Maria.

The show is a success and the American producer wants him to sign a contract. His dad has come to the performance and is instrumental in apologising to his son for his harshness in the past and urging him, telling the story of his falling in love with his mother, to do the right thing.

It is almost hit and miss as Maria is on the boat for Brazil, but... (Nobody said that the film was not predictable, pleasantly so).

MOMMY

Canada, 2014, 139 minutes, Colour.

Anne Dorval, Antoine- Olivier Pilon, Suzanne Clements.

Directed by Xavier Dolan.

On the day that this review is being written, Xavier Dolan, the precocious French-Canadian? director, has a birthday. He turns 26. Mommy is his fifth film, making an impression, building on I Killed My Mother, following with Heartbeats, Laurence Anyway, Tom at the Farm, and now this film which won the jury prize in Cannes, 2014. He himself has appeared in the four earlier films but does not act in this one. The two female members of his cast have appeared in his other films. His main actor this

time is a young Canadian, Antoine-Olivier [Pilon](#).

The main actors are most impressive in their roles, Anne Dorval as the mother, trying to cope with her son who is ADHD, and Pilon as the teenage son, Steve. Suzanne Clements is the neighbour who helps both mother and son.

This is quite a long film, two hours and 20 minutes, and, while some of it is repetitious, it holds the attention with its dynamic characterisations, situations, interactions. At the opening, the mother, Diane, called Die, is taking her son out of an institution where he has set the kitchen on fire and caused extensive burns to one of the children. She takes him home, where he has a room, and tries to look after him, controlling his moods, urging him for his education. She herself is not well-educated and regrets this, having a fairly rough personality, quite aggressive physically and verbally in her dealings with many people, especially at institutions, and Steve inheriting some of this aggression – with racist and homophobic slurs.

Across the street is Kyla, a good woman who is having a sabbatical, she explains, from her teaching. She is at home with her husband and daughter, but has acquired a nervous impediment which makes her stammer. She makes friends with Die who asks her to mind Steve for a day – with some initial dire consequences, but Kyla is able to calm him somewhat and use her skills as a teacher to interest him in subjects which he follows through and responds so. In the meantime, Die tries to get a job as a translator of children's books and takes on cleaning jobs as well.

Quite a lot of the film is a portrait of Die trying to cope with her son, his losing his temper, his reactions towards her, confiding in Kyla and getting some help. In the meantime, Steve is entirely unpredictable.

The film opens with some information about Canadian legislation, especially in French- Canada, where parents can take unruly children to institutions of care. This is the dilemma for Die, whether she can keep Steve at home as he grows older and more challenging or whether she should place Steve in an institution.

There is some pathos at the end with Die, after an outing to the beach with Kyla and Steve, having to make a decision and the audience sees how it affects her, Kyla moving to Toronto which is sad for Die, and Steve and his way of dealing with his mother's decision.

Xavier Dolan is quite the director. He also writes, edits, designs costumes and writes the subtitles both in English and in French, a lot of it quite slangy given the background of the characters.

So, what will Dolan be doing in five years, 10 years, 15 years, with his life and career before him...!

RUN ALL NIGHT

US, 2015, 112 minutes, Colour.

Liam Neeson, Ed Harris, Joel Kinnaman, Boyd Holbrook, Bruce McGill, Genesis Rodriguez, Vincent D'Onofrio, Lois Smith,. Common.

Directed by Jaume Collet-Serra.

For the last six years there has been a Liam Neeson action thriller every year, sometimes two per year. He has been the lead in the three Taken films, in A Walk among the Tombstones and three films from the present director, Unknown and Non-stop. He clearly likes working with Jaume Collet-Serra.

This time he is not particularly heroic. He portrays, Jimmy, a retired hitman, working for New York gangsters. He is now alcoholic, getting old, alienated from his son, not having much to do or to hope for. His close friend from the past and into the present is also a hitman, Sean, played by Ed Harris. Here's still on the upper, doing business, while not always agree with his crooked son and his proposals for deals, especially when they involve Eastern European thugs.

Jimmy's son is a good man, married with daughters, coaching young African- Americans to box, and driving for a limousine service. By one of those strokes of fate or screenwriters' contrivance, he and a young man witness some killings by Sean's son who proceeds to track him down to kill him. His father has come to warn him and shoots the killer before he can shoot his son.

As the title indicates, the action of the film runs over one night and into the morning, opening with Jimmy wounded, lying in the woods, reflecting on the meaning of his life. It then goes into flashback.

Sean breaks the news to his grieving wife, gathers his henchmen, meets with Jimmy and vows revenge. This pits the two old men against each other both psychologically and physically. Jimmy's son, still detesting his father, makes decisions to help him, risking murder from a hired assassin. The plot also involves the son's wife and children, their having to go into the country to hide, but nevertheless being tracked down and threatened.

Run All Night is set in a world of violence, a world of brutality, a world where those who involve themselves in violence come to violent actions.

The film relies on the strength of the performances of the two leads and of Joel Kinnaman as Jimmy's son. Music star, Common, has an unusual role as a single-minded killer for hire.

Grim stuff for fans of this kind of action thriller.

SAMBA

France, 2014, 118 minutes, Colour.

Omar Sy, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Tahar Rahim, Izia Higilin.

Directed by Olivier Nakache, Eric Toledano.

It is reported that Les Intouchables/The Intouchables has sold over 50 million tickets around the world. Audiences responded to the story of the prisoner, I had to take care of a wheelchair-bound cranky wealthy man. The film was both sad and funny, but had pleasing emotional appeal. The directors have said there is no plan for a sequel but were content that there was going to be an American remake (seemingly the validation of the success of a French film!).

After the success of Les Intouchables, the directors did waited some years for their next film. But

here it is, Samba. And they have invited their star, Omar Sy to come back and team with Charlotte Gainsbourg.

The setting is Paris and the story is that of an illegal migrant, Samba, who came 10 years earlier from Senegal and has been able to survive, living with his uncle, working in a restaurant kitchen, taking on labouring jobs, hoping to become a chef. He has been very careful and has avoided arrest but is attacked in the street, fights back and is arrested. He is detained in the internment centre – difficult and confined, but far less enclosed and repressed than contemporary Australian and off-shore detention centres.

Charlotte Gainsbourg, one of France's leading actresses, plays Alice, who has suffered a breakdown from her high-powered job and is assisting at a clearing centre for the detainees. She accompanies an earnest young woman and interviews Samba. Alice has been warned to keep a distance, not become involved, but Samba is pleasant in the discussions so that she actually gives him her number. It comes in handy, as we might expect, when he needs some further help.

Omar Sy is quite different from his character in *Les Intouchables*. He is a physically big man and can take care of himself when attacked, but has a rather gentle spirit, has been working the years in France and sending home money to his mother and upset when he is detained and can't get work to earn the money. His uncle, a rather stoic old man, works in the kitchen, gives advice to his nephew but thinks it is time for him to return home.

Over the weeks, Samba and Alice cross paths, Alice confiding in Samba the difficulties she has experienced, gaining some confidence again, prepared to go to interviews for getting the job back. Samba has been working on building sites and odd jobs and becomes friendly with Wilson, a cheerful Brazilian worker who thinks that women are attracted to the exuberant Latin American temperament. He doesn't really look Brazilian and has to confess that his real name is one Walid and that he is from Algeria. But he is so cheerful, that nothing stops him and he sets his eyes on Alice's companion from the office.

The film slows down a little in the middle, especially when the main characters turn up at a dance for the staff of the detention interviews, some comedy with several of the interviewers, elderly women who have struggled with foreign languages, accents, yet still try to do their best for the detainees.

There is some drama towards the end when Samba encounters a friend that he made in the detention centre, promising to track down his fiancée, which he does but has a one night stand with her and he cannot face his friend. The police pursue, they hang onto a rail over the river but both fall in – but there is still hope, the audience realising what has happened in terms of coats, but Alice and Samba's uncle do not. Ultimately, Samba makes a decision to do the right thing.

There is a great deal of warmth in the film, a most sympathetic portrait of an illegal worker in France and the continued edge in avoiding police and discovery. With the enormous flow of migrants and refugees, legal and illegal, throughout the world, it is quite important that audiences put faces on these migrants and discover and identify with their stories.

THE SECOND BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL

UK/US, 2015, 122 minutes, Colour.

Dev Patel, Maggie Smith, Judi Dench, Richard Gere, Bill Nighy, Celia Imrie, Ronald Pickup, Diana Hardcastle, Penelope Wilton, Tamsin Greig, Tina Desai, Shazad Latif.

Directed by John Madden.

No, not second best - rather, the accident is on 'second'. Since we all know all about the first Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, and enjoyed the film, liked the characters, appreciated the exotic atmosphere in India, it is fairly obvious that we would like a second.

Most of the team are back again, except Tom Wilkinson whose character died in the first film. Most of them are ensconced comfortably in India, and, in the Hotel, although, it is emphasised, there is a roll call each morning just to make sure that everyone is still there!

Actually, the film opens in the United States, with Mrs Donnelly and Sonny driving through California, he exuberant behind the wheel, she her usual dry-commenting self. Dev Patel and Maggie Smith. They are full of enterprise, wanting to interview the board of a hotel company with the idea of opening the second hotel in Jaipur although the Americans don't share the basic idea of retiring to India for final years and death. But they agree to send an agent to check out how the hotel is run.

Meanwhile, back in Jaipur and the oldies! Ronald Pickup's Norman and Celia Imrie's Madge are at work at the British club (also watering the drinks), Norman, less flirtatious, in a relationship with Carol, and Madge with the dilemma of having two local suitors. Judi Dench's Evelyn is still working, though she mentions in passing that she is 79 – which was her actual age at the time of filming – and is checking out fabrics with local merchants, being offered a job from an international company and going to Mumbai with the local merchant for further development. Bill Nighy's Douglas, separated from his hen-packing wife, Jean (Penelope Wilton) is taking tourists for visits to local shrines, but with his failing memory relies on an ear-piece with a young boy feeding him the information, although at one stage he rushes off to play football with his friends forgetting his duties. Actually Jean does come to India, as she says, to visit the old ruins but also to see how everyone is getting on! She has her own sad story but is happy that her daughter is coming to India to give a talk at a conference.

As for Sonny, he is busy, busy, busy, preparing for the engagement and his wedding, while his fiancée, Saina, is also busy at the hotel reception desk. Then there is his mother whom he rather keeps in check.

There are preparations for the engagement, preparations for the wedding – and, of course, a song-and-dance most colourful wedding ceremony.

But, there is still some intrigue when Richard Gere turns up and is considered the agent for inspection, even though he tells the story that he has come to write a novel. The novel turns into a real life novel as he is attracted to Sonny's mother which does not please Sonny. Most of the staff, however, consider another visitor (Tamsin Greig) who says she has come to look out for a place for mother as the agent. Lots of kowtowing on Sonny's part, visits to prospective hotels, and complications and jealousies when an old friend puts in a bid for a hotel and spends a lot of time coaching Sonny's fiancée in dancing for the celebrations.

All is well, finally, with Mrs Donnelly talking some common sense into Sonny.

This sequel has attracted large audiences and big business – but, the surprise of the first film can never be repeated and watching this film seems something akin to having a large second helping of dessert.

SHAUN THE SHEEP MOVIE

UK, 2015, 85 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Justin Fletcher, John Sparkes, Omid Djalili.

Directed by Mark Burton, Richard Starzac.

This is a holiday film which will entertain young audiences and keep their parents interested and amused, even though the story is very slight and a straightforward adventure of sheep and a dog in the city looking for their farmer who has a concussion, loss of memory, and is in hospital.

The films, both feature-length and short, from Aardman Studios in Bristol, have a very high reputation. A quarter of a century ago they made the short film, A Grand Day Out, following with a number of very entertaining films featuring Wallace and Gromit. Since they have been screened on television many times, most audiences may have seen the films – but repeats will entertain the youngsters who have not seen them. Their feature films include Chicken Run and Curse of the Were-Rabbit?

Shaun the Sheep is not new to television or film. He made his debut in the third Wallace and Gromit film, A Close Shave. Then he had his own television series, a range of short films, which endeared him to audiences. Now he has his own movie!

While there is a lot of music in the background and quite a number of noises, grunts and exclamations from the characters, the film works in the vein of silent films, no spoken dialogue, character and impact relying on visuals, expressions, situations, and quite a bit of slapstick comedy.

Shaun and the small number of sheep on the farm, live their day, day by day, according to the farmer's routine, waking up, breakfast, slamming the door and squashing his dog, getting his list of chores, rounding up the sheep – and one day shearing them including Shaun. But routine is routine, even for the sheep on the farm, and Shaun must have remembered that Aardman Studios started with A Grand Day Out. Why not a day for Shaun and the sheep!

It seems a good plan, with the farmer in his truck, but Shaun and the sheep underestimating a hill, downhill, so that the truck goes hurtling down, the farmer gets hit on the head and has to go to hospital where he loses his memory. This means that the Grand Day Out is one of rectifying the situation, tracking down the farmer, discovering him in hospital, passing a group singing in Baa- Baa's shop, and trying to avoid the machinations the Bif Ciyt's animal hunter. One of the enjoyable jokes, repeated, is having the sheep go round and round jumping over a barrier with the farmer and the hunter watching and gradually nodding off and falling asleep, not exactly counting the sheep, but the equivalent.

This means a lot of humorous situations, parodies of human behaviour, pratfalls and mistakes, the

sheep getting themselves in tangles, and the dog doing his best to help out. Happy to say that when they get the farmer back home, and go into their routines, he gradually gets a sense of their presence, recovers and all is the same, no, better, at the farm with the dog almost always avoiding being crushed by the door.

Perhaps not the most memorable of Aardman Studios films, but certainly a welcome and popular addition.

THE SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS MOVIE, SPONGE OUT OF WATER

US, 2015, 92 minutes, Colour.

Antonio Banderas, Voices of: Paul Tibbitt, Tom Kenny, Bill Fagerbakke, Rodger Bumpass.

Directed by Paul Tibbitt.

The ideal reviewer for this film would be a six year old, girl or boy. The Australian Catholic Film Office does not have this kind of ideal reviewer on its staff, so what is an older reviewer to do! Describe the experience of watching the film with 30 of the ideal reviewers, some parents and teachers.

Actually, it is quite an experience to sit with this kind of audience to watch a film which is squarely, squarepantly, aimed at them and not their parents. Although one needs to add that the Pirate King, Burger Beard, had a face behind his thick beard and a voice that sounded familiar enough. After a minute or two, it was Antonio Banderas, so something for the parents to look forward to see how he handled working the cartoon characters, how he behaved like a villain, how he got his comeuppance and realised that it was not wise to tangle with SpongeBob? and his friends.

The main thing to say about the audience was that they gave no impression of being a captive audience. Rather, they seemed enthralled the whole time, only one little boy going out with his father to the toilet. It was rather surprising that they tended to be quiet rather than rowdy as well as quiet during most of the film, laughing out loud at some of the moments (of the slightly breakwind and trousers down variety) and the number of the pratfalls with people falling over or being hit, that kind of thing. (The reviewer realised that these moments with little kid giggles proliferate in so many American comedies these days, allegedly for adults, getting lots of little kid giggles with the very same incidents.)

Probably most of the young audience come prepared, watching SpongeBob? on television, comparatively long time fans. So, they knew SpongeBob? and his situation beneath the sea, the restaurant selling crab patties and Mr Krabs and its hard times, the star-shaped Patrick, Squidward, Kyle, the issue of a secret formula for making the crab patties and a nasty Plankton, SpongeBobs? old foe (although he does make good, more or less) trying to discover and steal the formula.

Whether the audience guessed it, but the parents and teachers and reviewers probably did, it's the pirate king who has stolen the formula and is making good on it, quite profitably. This means a lot of pursuit by SpongeBob? and his friends, entering into the spirit of the thing, experiencing some strange shapes and sizes with the appearances of their characters, but with great heroics (of the suitable for six-year-old style), and they win the day.

The animation is bright and colourful, the characters clearly shaped and amusing, especially

SpongeBob himself. IMDb research reveals that not only has there been the television series but there have been several previous SpongeBob films, some straight to video: The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie (with such voices as Alec Baldwin, Scarlett Johansson, Jeffrey Tambour and David Hasselhoff), 2004; Sponge Bob SquarePants Spongicus, 2009. And there was a television special, SpongeBob SquarePants Lights, Camera, Pants, 2005, introducing audiences to the animators and how they created the series. Not sure whether this is the kind of information that the six-year-old reviewer would have written, but each of them obviously experienced it with relish.

So, reviewed by an adult, resisting any temptation to write like the ideal young reviewer!

TOP FIVE

US, 2015, 100 minutes, Colour.

Chris Rock, Rosario Dawson, Cedric the Entertainer, Tracy Morgan,.

Directed by Chris Rock.

If you have never heard of, Chris Rock, or never heard of Cedric The Entertainer, or Tracy Morgan..., this is probably not the film for you. As an extra caution, it might be added that even if you had heard them, this still might not be the film for you.

Over the decades, Chris Rock has built a substantial reputation as a stand-up comedian, and has proven himself to be something film star as well. Using the tradition of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy, African-American humour, targeting American politics, the American way of life, often with sexual innuendo – and at other times, quite explicit and crass. There is something of a glimpse of this at one stage in Top Five, but the film is really about a celebrity and how he deals with his life and its pressures.

The film opens with Andre (Chris Rock) walking along the street with a journalist, Chelsea (Rosario Dawson) talking about his life, willingly and unwillingly, some wry comments as well as wisecracks. And then we find out who Andre is. He has become something of a celebrity because of his starring role in three action-hero blockbusters. The trouble is that he plays Hammy the Bear, but concealed in his bear suit, but nonetheless he is recognised, acclaimed, signing autographs.

But he wants to be a serious actor and his new release, Uprise, has just opened with practically nobody going to see it. We are shown a clip, a story about Haitian rebels with Andre as the vigorous leader, and a massacre of white landowners. Not a masterpiece.

So, The New York Times wants an interview with him and assigns Chelsea, one of their top writers. Andre is reluctant to talk to the New York Times because their columnist, James Neilson, has targeted Andre and his performances in past years. Over a day, Chelsea follows Andre to various functions and promotions, with Andre taking the opportunity to reminisce about his life, along with memories of booze and sex early in his career (this flashback with Cedric the Entertainer, replete with some Texas mumbling and some gross behaviour). Andre also goes to see his family, a motley collection, and encounters at one stage Adam Sandler and Whoopi Goldberg and some other friends for conversation.

Are a lot of musicians and singers moving in and out of the film, many of them asked about the top five.

At the same time, Andre is trying to cope with a planned marriage on the following Saturday, his fiancée, Erica (Gabrielle Union) and devotee of Reality Television, is being filmed planning the marriage in great detail in preparation for the filming of the wedding – which seems one of the most unlikely.

Andre has been on the wagon for some years but a crisis comes about the identity of James Neilson which propels him into drinking again, face the failure of his film, question what he is really about.

While Andre is a fictitious character, any film about a stand-up comedian and actor raises the question of how much autobiography there is in it. But that is for Chris Rock fans to fathom.

WHILE WE'RE YOUNG

US, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Ben Stiller, Naomi Watts, Adam Driver, Amanda Seyfried, Maria Dizzia, Adam Horowitz, Charles Grodin, Peter Bogdanovich, Peter Yarrow.

Directed by Noah Baumbach.

It would be very interesting to interview audiences as they came out from the screening of this film.

While the principal focus is on a married couple in their 40s, used to life, regretting that they had no children even though they had tried, would the 40s and overs identify with the couple, criticise them, learn from their experience throughout the film? It is a look at these two in comparison with a couple who is 25. If those coming out of the cinema were in their 20s, how would they react to the couple who are their peers, their attitudes towards life, their attitudes towards their elders, their reaction to living in a world of technology, often avoiding it and liking what is natural and real. And for those who are of older, there is veteran actor, Charles Grodin, playing a documentary filmmaker in his 70s.

For just over ten years, Noah Baumbach has been writing and directing films which try to go beneath their surfaces. He was particularly successful in 2006 with his family study, *The Squid and the Whale*. There was the portrait of people assembling for Margot at the Wedding, then the story of a middle-aged man trying to find his place in life, *Greenburg*, and after that the more light-hearted portrait of a young woman trying to find her place, *Frances Ha*.

He opens the film with quotes from Ibsen, *The Master Builder*, and opening the doors to the younger generation.

Here we are introduced to Josh and Cornelia, very fine performances from Ben Stiller and Naomi Watts. Their peers and friends had become preoccupied with young children, which tends to alienate Josh and Cornelia who have experienced miscarriages. Josh is lecturing on documentary film when he encounters a young couple, Jamie and Darby (Adam Driver and Amanda Seyfried), in their midtwenties, he an enthusiastic documentary maker, she a maker of ice cream. They keep inviting the older couple out, taking Cornelia to Hip-hop lessons, Jamie getting Josh involved in his experimental documentary, and their both agreeing to attend to a New Age mescaline-meditation-

vomiting-out-of-old-attitudes weekend.

The experience has a transforming effect on the older couple, going back almost 20 years to what it was like when they were young, the experience re-invigorating them but puzzling peer friends. The experience also seen seems to transform of the younger couple, with Jamie becoming very involved in his documentary, Josh acting as cameraman, letting Jamie interview the elderly guru from his own film (played by Peter Yarrow, the Peter in Peter, Paul, Mary). There is a particularly strong sequence where an Afghanistan veteran (Brady Corbett) who has attempted to kill himself is interviewed for the documentary.

Just as the audience may be feeling really satisfied, or perhaps wondering, there are shifts in the revelations of characters and audience emotional response, everybody not quite being actually what they seem. But is it all Josh's problem – he is rather paranoid, about his documentary, about his father-in-law, about his reputation. And is Jamie trying to exploit Josh? And how will Cornelia ultimately deal with all the changes and challenges?

x & y

UK, 2014, 111 minutes, Colour.

Asa Butterfield, Sally Hawkins, Rafe Spall, Eddie Marsan, Jo Yang.

Directed by Morgan Matthews.

x & y might remind audiences of chromosome symbols. Others might recognise algebra, mathematics and equations and formulas. And this is correct. This is the focus in this film – but much more.

Morgan Matthews, a prolific documentary filmmaker, directed a documentary in 2007 about the international Mathematics Olympiad and the students involved. The story stayed with him and he decided to experiment with turning the documentary material into a fiction narrative.

The centre of the film is, at first, a little boy, and then his growing into a teenager. The boy is shy, has little relationship with his mother, but bonds strongly with his father who plays with him, affirms him, lovingly encourages him. When the father is suddenly killed in a car accident, the boy seems to withdraw into himself. Audiences familiar with stories of children with autistic behaviour, will recognise that the little boy, Nathan, seems to be autistic but with a great talent for mathematics and solving puzzles.

His devoted mother, Julie (Sally Hawkins) tries to reach out the boy lacks empathy for her. When she approaches the authorities at school, they recommend that special tuition from one of the teachers who had a strong maths academic record, suffers from a form of palsy, but works with special students, Martin (Reith Spall). Nathan works with him for several years, making progress with Martin's care and attention.

When Nathan becomes a teenager, he is played by the talented British, Asa Butterfield (The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, Hugo, Ender's Game). Martin is keen that Nathan participate in the Mathematics Olympiad. Nathan agrees and goes, for the first time in a plane, to Taiwan with the British candidates for the competition. Chaperoning them is Richard (Eddie Marsan, who worked so

effectively with Sally Hawkins in Mike Leigh's Happy-go-lucky). The Chinese official has a niece who is a candidate in the competition and who makes some kind of connection with Nathan. The students are very bright, some genial and friendly, others, possibly autistic, tend to be focused on themselves and communicate arrogantly. This is all very new to Nathan, reticent during the classes, just managing to get himself as one of the chosen ones for the Olympiad.

These aspects of the film will be of interest to parents and teachers, students who are interested, particularly in mathematics, as well as anyone working with autistic children.

While Julie and Martin become very friendly, Julie feeling the need of some affection after the death of her husband and with her son's seeming indifference, and not able to connect by touch, not even telephoning her from Taiwan – something which never occurs to him. But it is the Chinese girl who also comes to England who begins something of an emotional breakthrough for him, teenage interest in girls but autistic reticence and awkwardness in responding.

The ending is not quite what it might have been anticipated, especially as regards the competition. Not every problem is solved but it seems there is some recognition by Nathan of his mother and her love for him, some moments of incipient empathy.

The British know how to make this kind of film, quite modest in scope, a very effective cast, a low-key treatment of emotion. But hopeful.

REVIEWS MAY 2015

AGE OF ADALINE, The
AVENGERS, THE AGE OF ULTRON
BOYCHOIR
CLOUDS OF SILS MARIA
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WHO AM I

THE AGE OF ADALINE

US, 2015, 110 minutes, Colour.

Blake Lively, Michiel Huisman, Harrison Ford, Ellen Burstyn, Kathy Baker, and, narrator: Hugh Ross.

Directed by Lee Toland Krieger.

It would have been more cumbersome, but *The Agelessness of Adaline* would have been a more accurate title.

There is always something intriguing about people who have the gift of longevity, agelessness, never changing, life for years and years – it is intriguing with vampires, but more attractive in a romantic setting.

The film opens on New Year's Eve, 2014, and a young woman called Jenny is celebrating the eve of her birthday, the film goes into flashback, to the early part of the 20th century in San Francisco, where Adaline's parents lived. Jenny is in fact Adaline who has spent decades assuming new identities, escaping before she is found out, and coping with remaining at the age of 29 forever.

Adaline has a job with the library which is digitising old film. She readily agrees to process the film and takes the advantage of looking at it, San Francisco at the time of the earthquake, her mother and father marrying in the Cathedral, her being born in 1908 and growing up, falling in love, her husband intrigued by astronomy, but dying suddenly in an accident on the Golden Gate Bridge.

The voice-over gives an attempt at a scientific, physiological explanation of why Adaline becomes ageless, after a car accident, and it is be fixed in a state of never-changing physically. It may or may not hold water, but the film's emphasis on science, love for astronomy and other sciences, benefit by having a scientific-sounding explanation.

Then Ellen Burstyn appears, the actress herself being over 80 when she did this role, as Adaline's daughter, an ageing woman, needing medical help, but devoted to her mother – sometimes a touch disconcerting when the older actress speaks of the younger actress and calls her Mama. Blake Lively is charming and a very attractive Adaline.

At the New Year's party, a young man (Michiel Huisman) puts his hand in the elevator door to stop it and talks with Adaline, attracted by her, tracking her down in her job. His wealthy and offers his books to the library. Can there be any future? Adaline has avoided this kind of a relationship for decades and refuses him only for him to persist and for her to succumb. In the second part of the film, she goes to visit the young man's parents, played by Harrison Ford and Kathy Baker.

Harrison Ford offers a winning performance, more akin to his age a character with a marriage of 40 years rather than an action adventurer. The plot becomes complicated when Harrison Ford recognises Adaline and, once again, she has to face the consequences – with some flashbacks to encountering him when he was a young student in England.

Audience curiosity has been aroused as to how the film well finally work out, perhaps Adaline and the young man marrying, his knowing the truth or not. Another explanation is offered with the voice-over returning to his deadpan narration of science and physiology.

One of the features of the film is to highlight how much of a single grey hair can mean an extraordinary amount in the drama.

AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON

US, 2015, 141 minutes, Colour.

Robert Downey Jr, Chris Hemsworth, Mark Ruffalo, Chris Evans, Scarlett Johansson, Jeremy Renner, James Spader, Samuel L. Jackson, Don Cheadle,

Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Elizabeth Olsen, Paul Bettany, Cobie Smulders, Anthony Mackie, Hayley Atwell, Idris Elba, Stellan Skarsgård, Linda Cardellini, Claudia Kim, Thomas Kretschman, Aneï Serkis, Julie Delpy, Stan Lee, Henry Goodman.

Directed Joss Whedon.

Some films are issues-driven. Some films are character-driven, out of which conflicts emerge. Some films are conflict-driven, out of which some character qualities emerge. Avengers is the latter kind of film, exceedingly conflict-driven. The characters we already know and there is little character-development – but a bit.

The initial Avengers film took in almost \$2 billion around the world. It seems to be the most financially successful film of all time. Obviously, it has a built-in audience and so there is very little need for publicity or for review or critical comment. If you screen it, they will come! In fact, all the Avengers come and so will large audiences. Part of the enjoyment is to see one's favourite avenger(s), meet them again, see them in action, all-conquering.

Robert Downey Jr is there once again as Tony Stark, Iron Man, working initially in his laboratories to create artificial intelligence, realising that he has created a cyber-monster, Ultron, who wishes to destroy him. He has to don his Iron Man suit to go into combat. In the laboratory he is assisted by Dr Banner (Mark Ruffalo), making every effort not to turn green, not to be angry and become The Hulk (which, of course, he does several times). In one character development, he is attracted to Natasha (Scarlett Johansson), the reformed assassin, and she to him. She is not particularly enamoured of The Hulk, but finally admits that this transformation is necessary if the Avengers are to win their battles.

Captain America (Chris Evans), the all-American, upright character, no swearing allowed, who belonged back in the 1940s before he was frozen enters into the spirit of things. Then there is the family man, Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) who with his arrows is a useful backup to the principal avengers, but he is always wanting to go home to his wife and family.

And, from another time, from another planet, there is Thor. And Chris Hemsworth is a big and brawny warrior but with perfect English articulation, deep voice and precision as if he was speaking the classics. He gives himself over to fight all these earthly battles that the avengers are involved in.

In the initial Eastern European siege, brother and sister with ultra-human powers, (Aaron Johnson-Taylor and Elizabeth Olsen) are linked in with Ultron but ultimately join the Avengers – and so, more fights.

Ultron (voiced by James Spader) immediately goes into hostile action, absorbing Jarvis (voiced by Paul Bettany who, later in the film, is seen in human, well cyber-human, form as yet another

Avenger.

Which means that the screenplay is crowded, or, really, over-crowded, with each of the Avengers looking for screen time as well as finding various opportunities for combat. Which also means that the film is battles and confrontations, with a little spacing between for some human drama.

BOYCHOIR

US, 2014, 103 minutes, Colour.

Dustin Hoffman, Garrett Wareing, Kevin Mc Hale, Eddie Izzard, Kathy Bates, Josh Lucas, Debra Winger, Joe West.

Directed by François Girard.

Remembering a film about a child and music, August Rush, from 2007, I glanced at my review at the time and it struck a chord (so to speak) for the response to Boychoir. Here it is, 'If you are a reader of reviews by the more 'serious' critics, you will find a rather universal dismissal of this film as far too emotional and sentimental. If you are a reader of reviews which try to communicate with the general audience, you will find the film praised for its entertainment and values – and the admission that it is unashamedly emotional and full of sentiment. It was W. Somerset Maugham who remarked that sentimentality is only the sentiment you disapprove of.'

Stet is an 11-year-old living in Texas. He is an angry boy, often smouldering, lashing out physically, problems at school, although the principal of the school (Debra Winger) knows that he has a singing talent and invites the American Boychoir to visit the school so that Stet can audition. He interprets things wrongly and runs out.

Meanwhile at home, his mother is alcoholic, a pill-taker, unmarried, her life is a wreck. Within some minutes, she is literally in a wreck and dies. Stet is emotional at the funeral but can't bring himself to go to the grave. His father (Josh Lucas) turns up, having never seen his son but who has supplied finance for his upkeep and education. Stet is the result of a casual affair.

The father takes his son to the Boychoir school, assuming that he will get in, but the administration is reluctant, especially the Master Conductor (Dustin Hoffman) who remembers Stet running out of the audition. Sometimes a big cheque helps and Stet is accepted to the school.

As might be expected, he does not fit in with many of the boys, or with some of the staff, getting himself into quarrels, lacking discipline which the Conductor interprets as lack of respect. However, everybody recognises that Stet has a special gift in his voice.

The screenplay is more or less predictable, and while there are no great surprises, sympathetic audiences will want to follow Stet's development in the school, relating with the boys, academic studies, sport, music theory, music practice. The audience does get a good idea of what this kind of music education entails.

For music lovers, there is quite a range of music, a range of pieces for individuals and for the choir, from Faure to Benjamin Britten. The choir, with rival eyes on The Vienna Boys Choir, wants to be accepted to sing in New York City. When they get the opportunity, because of Stet and his voice (a

performance that was almost sabotaged by a jealous boy stealing his score), the choice is Handel's Messiah, with his alleluia chorus and the soloist having to reach and sustain a very high note. Will the boy, analytic in his approach to singing, gain the day or will the more instinctive Stet be chosen?

In the background, there is also the situation with Stet's father, his not having told his family the truth, there being some tickets to a concert sent anonymously to the family, the father wanting to send his son to a school in Switzerland, and a solution, happily, for the benefit of Stet.

The film has been directed by Canadian, François Girard, whose films included 32 Variations by Glenn Gould and The Red Violin.

Audiences will enjoy seeing Dustin Hoffman, a touch irascible, as the conductor of the choir, very demanding, with very little back story until a final conversation with Stet, a story of frustration and disappointment. Eddie Vizard is Drake, in waiting to take over from Dustin Hoffman, a perfectionist, sometimes pedantic, with favourites. Kevin Mc Hale is the very young and sympathetic teacher who supports Stet. And, as always, and enjoyable performance from Kathy Bates as the administrator of the school, and she gets a couple of very telling speeches and delivers them with great gusto.

The film introduces a Garrett Wareing as Stet. He is quite persuasive, as the angry boy, not always sympathetic, finding his way in the school, realising his great desire to sing but having to overcome anger and antagonisms.

When the school emphasises that Handel's Messiah is a crowd-please, we realise that this is what this film intends to be, a crowd-pleaser about music, song, boy choir voices (which sooner or later will break) and, as the final song during the credits reminds us, the mystery of the gift.

THE CLOUDS OF SILS MARIA

Friends, 2014, 122 minutes, Colour.

Juliette Binoche, Kristen Stewart, Chloe Grace Moretz, Johnny Flynn, Brady Corbett.

Directed by Oliver Assayas.

This film is a fine opportunity for audiences to see Juliette Binoche and admire her screen presence and acting skills. She has been performing since the mid-1980s, in French films and then internationally. In 1996, she won an Oscar for Best supporting actress in The English Patient. Since then, she has developed her international reputation at home in France and, extensively, abroad. She has also had a stage career on London's West and won a Tony award on Broadway.

This background is relevant because The Clouds of Sils Maria is about an actress and her career, an international star, reaching middle age, challenged in her career, having to make decisions and face the future. As we watch Juliette Binoche in a most persuasive performance as Maria Enders, many audiences will be thinking about her in real life and her on-screen impact.

While Juliette Binoche won a French Cesar award for the performance, Kristen Stewart one who is for Best Supporting Actress. Though she was a child actress, appearing with Jodie Foster in Panic Room, her principal reputation rests on her presence as Bella in the Twilight series. This performance takes her well beyond Twilight. She appears as Maria's personal assistant, the first 20 minutes or so of the film showing her continually on mobile phones, making contacts, making

decisions, arranging dates, doing PR work.

The initial situation is a tribute to a playwright who put Maria on stage and on-screen, launching her career. She has been invited to receive an award on behalf of the playwright who does not wish to go – the information coming very quickly that he has died. Maria is somebody who has an instant negative reaction to things, wanting to refuse, thinking something is impossible – but actually then doing it and forgetting what she thought previously and enjoying the process.

Maria and Val decide to go to the house of the playwright and stay in the Swiss Alps, quietly domestic, walking in the mountains, Maria making a decision to perform and play, playing Helene, the nemesis of her original character, Sigrid. During their walks, Val says the lines of the other characters, almost deadpan, yet the experience of watching these rehearsals makes the audience realise that that some parallels between the characters in the play throw light on the relationship between Maria and Val herself.

The suggestion for casting the young Sigrid in the new play is for an actress, Jo-ann, Chloe Grace Moretz, Val and Maria going to Jo-Ann's latest film, a superhero blockbuster, in a local cinema, Val really liking the film, the characters, the science fiction issues, while Maria mocks them and laughs at them. Nevertheless, there is a meeting between the two actresses and the project is to go ahead.

It is difficult to write any commentary on the latter part of the film because something dramatically happens without explanation. There is also a complication with rehearsals going ahead for the play, a personal scandal around Jo-Ann. But the show must go – with Jo-Ann [?](#) behaving towards Maria in a manner reminiscent of Eve in All About Eve. What is Maria to do? She does have a final interview with an enthusiastic young director who pitches a science-fiction script to her – and the film ends with a close-up of Maria's face, the audience supplying the continuity of her story.

ELSA AND FRED

US, 2014, 103 minutes, Colour.

Shirley Mac Laine, Christopher Plummer, Marcia Gay Harden, Scott Bakula, Chris Noth, George Segal, James Brolin, Erika Alexander, Wendell Pierce, Reg Rogers.

Directed by Michael Radford.

With Hollywood's perspective on film-making, that box office receipts come from younger audiences, there are not too many films made for older audiences. The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel and its sequel, as well as a number of films featuring Maggie Smith new detention, are reminders that grey-haired or silver-haired (and some with the touch of dye!) enjoy a film outing. Elsa and Fred certainly fits the bill.

While it was being film, Shirley Mac Laine was 79 and Christopher Plummer 84. Also in the cast was a younger George Segal, only 81 James Brolin a mere 73.

This is a remake of an Argentinian film of the same name, from 2005, and is directed by Michael Radford, British director who has filmed all over the world, Africa for White Mischief, Chile for Il Postino, and who also directed The Merchant of Venice with Al Pacino.

Christopher Plummer is Fred, getting too old to live alone and manage himself but resenting that he has to go into a unit. His daughter, played by Marcia Gay Harden, fusses about and his son-in-law would like a loan to float a business deal. Fred is something of a curmudgeon, not prone to looking happy. And he is unimpressed by the fact that they have employed a carer for him.

Elsa lives across the way, and in her behaviour and attitudes, chatting and laughing, she resembles the Shirley MacLaine of so many films over the decades. And why not? Audiences have liked her and responded well to her – and, ultimately, so does Fred.

One of Elsa's idiosyncrasies is her love for Fellini's film *La Dolce Vita*, especially the Trevi fountain scene with Anita Ekberg going into the water, watched by Marcello Mastroianni. Elsa has a poster on the wall and watches the film over and over. And she has a dream that one day she will go to Rome, dress up like Anita Ekberg and re-enact the famous scene.

Fred has no such dreams and finds Elsa a little irritating, though he kindly believes some of her wild stories, especially when she pleads and describes needy family so that he will give her back the cheque to pay for the damage she did to his daughter's car. Truth is not her forte and we discover throughout the film that she has told some little white lies as well as whoppers. But she takes a shine to Fred, trying to persuade him to take a little step by step and move outside his room.

She does and gradually Fred comes to life, though his goodwill is sorely tested by Elsa, her behaviour, and her playing with the truth.

But, this is a feel-good film for the older audience and, despite ups and downs, moments of love, moments of exasperation, Elsa and Fred offers an affirmation of life and its possibilities.

THE GUNMAN

US/France, 2015, 115 minutes, Colour.

Sean Penn, Jasmine Trinca, Javier Bardem, Mark Rylance, Ray Winstone, Idris Elba.

Directed by Pierre Morell.

The Gunman is definitely a Sean Penn film. Not only does he star, he has some credits as a producer and as contributing to the screenplay. While this is an action story, there is strong critique of the methods of international corporations, their ruthlessness, the background to their bargaining for contracts and are not being afraid to stoop to murder to achieve their ends and cover all this up. Sean Penn concerns.

The film is based on a novel by French writer, Jean- Patrick Manchette who died in 1995. His novels were action thrillers and his plot is taken here and updated to the 21st century.

The initial action takes place in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a group of expatriates, American, British, Spanish, seem to be an advisers on projects, with links to humanitarian activities in the area. It is 2006, issues of rebel fighting, governments working against corruption and a minister deciding that there will be a veto on international contracts. It is probably inevitable in these circumstances that he is assassinated.

The audience realises early in the piece that the expatriates are not as fun-loving or charming as they might seem. Penn plays Jimmy, the designated assassin, and has to leave the country instantly, even abandoning his girlfriend who works in a clinic in Congo. Her asks his Spanish friend to take care of her.

The action moves to 2014, with Penn again working in Congo, but this time for an NGO, seemingly regretting his actions in the past. When a gang of armed men appears on a worksite intent on killing him, he flees to London where he makes contact with one of his old associates, Cox (Mark Rylance) and tries to get information as to who might be pursuing him. His other London contact is Stanley (Ray Winstone) a tough type, especially in action in a London pub where Jimmy loses his cool, which leads to him being taken to a doctor and found that he has brain damage which threatens his life.

Nevertheless, of he goes to Barcelona to confront his other associate, Felix (Javier Bardem) who has married his girlfriend. All the action that one might have anticipated with such a title, *Gunman*, for a film, certainly takes place – and then some. We have already realised that, at 54, Sean Penn has decided that he also wants to be an action star (and the current director, Pierre Morrell, directed Liam Neeson in *Taken*). There are many, many scenes where Sean Penn has his shirt off giving obvious evidence that he has been many times to the gym and is keeping himself tough (a credit to the man listed in the final credits as his Personal Trainer).

The film also has action sequences in Gibraltar, introducing a CIA contact (Idris Elba).

The final action is symbolic and contrived, taking place in Barcelona and its bullfighting ring, enabling a confrontation between Jimmy and the villain, with bulls accidentally set loose and killing the villain. There is an important note in the final credits saying that Barcelona since 2011 is an anti-bullfighting city.

The description of *The Gunmen* is probably more exciting than the real thing, which has many points of interest, some alarming bloodshed and some goring in the arena, but at the end, with both noble repentance and love, it is not as satisfying as it might have been.

THE LONGEST RIDE

US, 2015, 128 minutes, Colour.

Britt Robertson, Scott Eastwood, Alan Alda, Oona Chaplin, Lolita Davidovich,
Directed by George Tilman Jr.

What could be better than having one Nicholas Sparks' story in a film? The answer is: having two Nicholas Sparks' story in the one film. And that is what happens here.

Once again we are in Nicholas Sparks country, the state of North Carolina. We remember *Message in a Bottle*, *The Notebook*, *Dear John*, *The Last Song*, *Night in Rodanthe*. However, this time we are in from the Atlantic coast, at a college campus and at a centre for bull-riding (it is explained to us that this is not, not, a rodeo).

The second story is set in New England, and begins in 1940, shown in a series of flashbacks throughout the film. While younger audiences would be caught up in the romance in the present,

older audiences would identify with the older couple and be moved by their lives in the stories from the past.

The focus of any Nicholas Sparks' story is the romance. Sophia is a student, an art student, with a scholarship from New Jersey to the North Carolina campus. She has the prospect of an internship with an art dealer in New York City when she graduates. She is dragged, rather unwillingly, by her roommate to go to the bull-riding when she sees Luke, whom we have already seen as a champion with ambitions to top the international list of riders but who has had a serious accident. She picks up his hat – and the sparkle begins. Luke is very much the southern gentleman with manners to match and is handsome and charming. Though she knows she is returning north, she agrees to go out with him and they have a riverside picnic. So far, a potential for a sad story of separation.

On their way home, they see an accident and rescue an elderly man from a burning car. Sophia is asked to go back to the car to rescue a box. When she goes to the hospital to bring the box, she begins to read one of the letters and so begin the flashbacks to 1940, his letters written to the love of his life, later his fiancée, then his wife. The old man (whose age by arithmetic should be at least 90) is played as a bit of a curmudgeon but with charm by Alan Alda.

Sophia is played by Britt Robertson who handles her role very pleasantly. Lucas played by Scott Eastwood, yes, his son – and from some angles he definitely looks like his father, and at many moments he sounds like his father. This is the kind of role that Clint Eastwood might have played at this age of 28, but he was starring in *Rawhide* and the *Spaghetti Westerns* was still to come.

It seems to be going nicely, Sophia in love, Luke in love, taking her home to meet his mother (Lolita Davidovich) and she bringing him to an art exhibition which he does not understand at all.

In this, they are mirroring the older story, where Ira (Jack Huston, grandson of John Huston) works in a local store, enlists in World War II, is injured and returned home. Jewish, he is intrigued by refugees from Austria, especially the daughter, Ruth (Oona Chaplin, granddaughter of Charlie Chaplin and daughter of Geraldine), a lively young woman who has a great appreciation of art.

Sophia returns to the hospital to read his letters to Ira, filling up the background story, their marriage, their inability to have children, Ruth's desperation at not having a family, her coaching a young boy – with a later happy piece of information to cheer both Ira and Ruth).

The *Longest Ride*, by the way, refers to living with art rather than the eight seconds required for success on the bull.

Needless to say, there is a clash, the romance seems to be falling to pieces. But, something wonderful happens to them to do with Ruth's huge collection of art pieces over the years and her eye for successful artists. You will have to see the film to find out what happens – but the happy ending (as if we did not know) actually goes beyond happy...

PAUL BLART, MALL COP 2

US, 2015, 94 minutes, Colour.

Kevin James, Raini Rodriguez, Eduardo Verastegui, Daniella Alonso, Neal McDonagh [?](#).

Directed by Andy Fickman.

If you saw the original film, Paul Blart, Mall Cop and enjoyed it, then this is certainly a film for you. It is not a film for highbrow critics who may consider it below their dignity. In fact, it is a light comedy, for passing enjoyment rather than for posterity, some slapstick, some comic situations and lines, the overcoming of villains and heroism for the little guy (metaphorically, because Kevin James is a rather large!).

Kevin James established himself as a comedian, working in stand-up comedy and clubs, moving to television, moving to movies, especially with Adam Sandler whose company has produced this film. He portrays the large man and his attempts at extroverted ego cover a diffident self-image. However, he has found his place of life, working as security man, mall-cop, ever ready to help, communicating with the mall shoppers, even when he does mess-up a lot of things.

At the opening, he marries again, his wife leaving, divorcing after six days. His mother, a glimpse of Shirley Knight, is almost immediately knocked over by the truck, leaving himself and his daughter at home. She, secretly, wants to go to UCLA to study and has been accepted but can't face telling her father.

So, where is the screenplay to go from here – Las Vegas.

There is a conference of mall-cops and Paul is delighted to go, throwing his weight around when he arrives, with the bus boy, to whom his daughter is immediately attracted, to the man at reception, to the manager of the hotel whom he rather crassly insists is coming on to him. He is advised that he is to give the keynote speech but his colleagues soon disabuse him of that prospect. So, just to be there, with old friends, hang out with them and enjoy the visit.

So, where is the screenplay to go from here – have some arch criminals arrive at the hotel with a plan to steal the paintings, including Van Gogh, some statuary, substituting fakes, and storing everything downstairs to be sold to the highest bidders.

Bring everything together, including the daughter and the bus boy and the criminals, pursued by them and held hostage. In the meantime, the keynote speaker collapses and Paul has to take his place – and, in his earnest speech, he has the ears and tears of all the participants, including the manager standing at the back, and receives thunderous applause.

Back to the criminals, their plans, the crew, the smart execution of stealing, Paul trying to phone his daughter and she him, and then his going into action, the rather hefty man outwitting the arch-criminal and his associates. Of course, this means plenty of comics situations, quite a lot of tasing, people going into swimming pools, and the final confrontation when Paul seems outwitted and outflanked only for his security associates to come and win the day.

And he realises he has been selfish and his daughter is to go to UCLA.

It is mainly a happy ending, although the trailer has a final sequence where Paul flirts with a policewoman on a horse, is given her number, pats the horse who does an enormous back-kick landing Paul across the road. It is that kind of film, geared for a family audience, not a swear word in earshot, something of a slapstick and humorous line comedy.

THE SALT OF THE EARTH

France/ Brazil, 2014, 111 minutes, Colour.

Sebastiao Salgado, Wim Wenders, Juliano Ribeiro Salgado.

Directed by Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, Wim Wenders.

This humane documentary combines the story of the Brazilian photographer, Sebastiao Salgado, with a gallery of his powerful photographs, taken over many decades, and a study of the people and places where he photographed.

The narrative begins with photographs of the silver mine in Brazil, the many gnarled characters scaling rocks, drilling, all eager to find some silver – and the commentary adds that people are the salt of the earth.

Celebrated film director, Wim Wenders, tells us that he came across one of these portraits, a study of a woman, and has had it hanging over his desk for many years. Which means that he was very pleased to be associated with this film, co-directing with the photographer's son, Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, a cinematographer himself.

Introduced to the gallery with black-and-white photographs of the silver mine, the audience will be intrigued as to the background of the photographer himself. He came from a poor family in Brazil, moved to the city for further education, especially in economics, got a job, married, and seemed to have a future in international companies with economic advice. However, he loved photography and decided that would give his full time to this work, supported by his wife who managed his photos, cataloguing, especially when on long trips.

Which he did. In those days, in the 1960s and 70s, he was tall and thin and rugged, wild hair and long beard. As he is interviewed for this film, often with super impositions of his face on locations and photographs, he is older and bald, but intensely serious, a lifetime of concern for his subjects and with profound and moving reflections.

Among the journeys he took was across South America, taking almost a decade. He is also shown visiting West Papua with its jungles and indigenous people. The journey which he found most heart-wrenching was that to Ruanda at the time of the genocide in 1994, observing, photographing, being caught up in the deep distress, finding that he could not go on photography expeditions for several years.

What caused him to be involved again was his awareness of the environment, the depredation of forests in his native Brazil, and his setting up an institute with his wife for the reforestation. Audiences will be amazed at the number of trees and the depth of the forests that have resulted from these initiatives. This also gave fresh impetus to his photography career, starting a Genesis Project, focusing on nature – and people - especially with intriguing photography of his working with the Brazilian jungle native community long hidden from “civilisation”.

By the end of the film, photographed in some detail by his son, co-directed by Wenders, the audience will have had a masterclass in photography but also a masterclass in human compassion,

seeking out the salt of the earth and communicating something of their destinies, lives, hopes.

SUNDAY

New Zealand, 2014, 71 minutes, Colour.

Dustin Clare, Camille Keenan.

Directed by Michelle Joy Lloyd.

Sunday is a small and modest film coming from New Zealand.

It is really a two-hander, played by Dustin Clare and Camille Keenan. The action takes place over 24 hours.

Eve goes to the airport to meet Charlie, who is away most of the year driving army vehicles in war zones. Eve wants to tell Charlie that she is pregnant and that she would like him to stay at home. The drama focuses on her longing for some kind settled life, the preparation for giving birth, her love for Charlie and her sometimes-desperation with him and his attitudes. The drama also focuses on Charlie, his personality, fairly macho, sometimes sensitive, but enjoying his work and his commitment to it.

The setting of the film is Christchurch, after the destruction by the earthquakes. As Eve and Charlie move about the city, visiting the cathedral to talk about a wedding, going for a cup of coffee, playing outdoor chess, going to the water and remembering the lyrical times they had which you have seen during the credits, they continually pass by buildings which have collapsed and other signs of destruction as well as the beginnings of building again.

Sometimes the mood is serious, sometimes humorous – especially when they are at home and there is a knock on the door and a very awkward rap-greeting singer arrives to deliver a message; they discuss baby's names (even Sunday) and whether it is a boy or a girl.

Many audiences will identify with the two characters, the dilemmas, their problems, their hopes – and the uncertainty when employment clashes with settling at home. Some of the dialogue shows great sensitivity and challenges the audience to consider where they stand emotionally and in objective judging of what they think ought to happen.

TESTAMENT OF YOUTH

UK, 2014, 129 minutes, Colour.

Alicia Vikander, Kit Harrington, Taron Egerton, Emily Watson, Dominic West, Miranda Richardson, Joanna Scanlon, Colin Morgan, Anna Chancellor, Hayley Atwell.

Directed by James Kent.

This is the kind of film that admirers of British-making really appreciate. It is beautifully mounted, re-creating its period. It has a fine cast and impressive performances. It dramatises British themes and explores the British character. It is in the tradition of the Merchant-Ivory [?](#) period films of previous decades.

The title comes from a memoir by the central character, Vera Brittain. Like Gertrude Bell, ten years earlier, whose adventurous life was dramatised by Werner Hertzog's *Queen of the Desert*, Vera wanted to go to the University but this was thought of as impossible. A young woman should be considering suitors and marriage. The setting is 1914.

Initially, Vera comes across as a wilful young woman, somewhat tomboyish in an opening swimming scene with her brother and his friends, upset with her father who has bought her a piano which she considers a bribe to stop her going to the University. She stands up to her father who relents and, at least, allows her to sit for the entrance exam. On her way to the exam she meets one of the staff of the College, Miss Lorimer (Miranda Richardson in a somewhat acerbic, blue-stockings presence). Although she does not answer some of the questions properly, her independent way of mind gains her a place at Oxford. Exhilarated, she goes to the college and begins her course.

But, it is 1914 and her brother, Vera pleading with her father to let him go, enlists, as do some of his friends, including Roland, with whom Vera has fallen in love. As more and more young men go to battle for King and Country, the challenge to Vera is whether she should continue her studies or volunteer as a nurse. When she does volunteer, and is belittled as upper-class by some of the matrons, she proves herself, comforting wounded and dying men, exercising skills, and even sent to France where she has to care for some of the dying German soldier patients.

Needless to say, this has a profound effect on her as well as on her brother she later tends and in her relationship with Roland and immediate preparations for their wedding.

In many ways this is very sad film, the fate of the young men going off to war, romanticising some of their war action in poetry (as did a number of the English poets who served in France).

The situation is mystifying to Vera's parents, played effectively by Dominic West and Emily Watson, who obviously belong to a previous generation, a mix of the Victorian and Edwardian era, never contemplating what World War I was to bring to the world and to England itself.

Vera is played by Alicia Vikander, the Swedish actress who is impressed in the Danish film *A Royal Affair* and moved internationally very quickly to such films as the mediaeval *The Seventh Son*, the Australian *Son of a Gun*, and the intriguing science-fiction, *Ex Machina*. She brings both strength and tenderness to her interpretation of Vera Brittain. Kit Harrington, of *Games of Thrones* and *Pompeii*, is very sympathetic as Roland.

Vera Brittain returned to the University, completed her course, became a writer and, in 1933, wrote this memoir, *Testament of Youth*.

TRASH

UK/Brazil, 2014, 114 minutes, Colour.

Wagner Moura, Rickson Tevez, Eduardo Luis, Gabriel Weinstein, Selton Mello, Martin Sheen, Rooney Mara.

Directed by Stephen Daldrey.

Trash has several meanings in this film. First of all, there is the literal huge mountain of garbage, filmed in its trash ugliness, and filled with so many people, adults and children, rummaging through the rubbish to see what they can find. It is into this rubbish that a significant wallet is tossed leading to a surprising change in the lives of three of the boy's who live in the favela.

Another significant meaning for trash is that society considers the people who live in the favela as human trash. This is a film that says they are not

While the story is Brazilian, the film is a co-production between the UK and Brazil. The screenplay, written by Richard Curtis, a surprising choice because he is well known for *Blackadder*, *Mr Bean*, *Four Weddings*, *Love Actually*, who brings an outsider's view to the situations as well as drawing an audience right into the situations. And the director is British Stephen Daldrey, whose reputation was enhanced by *Billy Elliot*, *The Hours* and *The Reader*.

At the centre of the film are three young boys, who had not acted before but their performances are so authentic that they are completely persuasive. One is Raphael, the boy who finds the wallet mysteriously thrown into the trash, who proves himself a boy of integrity, trying to do what is right, strongly believe in God, who puts himself into all kinds of dangerous circumstances, taken by the police, tortured by being bounced around the car boot and threatened with death, but following through on his mission to discover the truth about the contents of the wallet that he has found. His best friend is Gardo, a tough egg of a boy, outgoing, daring, always with a trick up his sleeve in awkward situations. The third boy has Rat as his nickname, a shrewd little boy who can do a deal with anyone.

This review has emphasised the role of the boys, but it is in a political context of Brazilian corruption: a wealthy man who is candidate for mayor but who has taken bribes from many companies, hiding the cash at his home, along with his accounts book. We are also introduced to José Angelo, a mysterious man who is arrested, tortured and killed – not before he has thrown his wallet into the garbage truck. More emerges about him as the film goes on, his association with the candidate, his taking the bribe money, hiding it while trying to get a letter to a lawyer in prison for justice stances who has Bible which can interpret the code to indicate where the money has been hidden.

The film is set in this part of Rio, the depressing shacks, despite videogames and access to the Internet, the poverty of boys, their seeming to have no family, the filthy water in which they swim, and the dirt of the trash.mountain.

One aspect to emphasise is that the film has a strong Catholic background, part of the inherited culture, with a sense of faith and devotion and ability of the boys to pray. Rooney Mara portrays a volunteer who teaches the boys in the local presbytery. And there is Martin Sheen once again playing a priest, older and a touch more grizzled liking a drink, the local hierarchy threatening to transfer him, but his wanting to stay with the people, angry at corruption, fighting for justice, especially when there are refugees flocking to him from the shacks which had been set alight by the police.

Trash has a great deal of realism about it, the actual poverty, the role of the police, police corruption, crowded prisons, political deals, the film also serves has something of a favourable happy ending. It is a moral fable showing that there is a blessing for those who do the right thing.

WHO AM I - KEIN SYSTEM IST SICHER

Germany, 2014, 103 minutes, Colour.

Tom Schilling, Elyas M' Barek, Wotan Wilke Mohring, Antoine Monot Jr, Trine Dyrholm.

Directed by Baran bo Odar.

WHO AM I (on screen and thematically correct as WHOAMI) is a contemporary German film, an interpretation of the phenomenon of hacking in the 21st century. It has been made by film-makers in their 20s and 30s, produced for that age group and its response, especially knowledge of Internet technology and hacking skills, a thriller for a technological age.

The film is well and persuasively made, carrying the audience along with its characters and plot, with the addition of a constant throbbing beat score.

The film opens dramatically with the central character, Benjamin (Tom Schilling) discovering his friends dead and his giving himself up to the government and submitting to an interrogation. This is conducted by Hannah, a government official, played by the Danish actress Trine Dyrholm. Benjamin seems something of a pathetic young man, bowed and somewhat distraught as he begins to answer the questions. What has happened to him is presented in vivid flashbacks.

Benjamin was considered invisible when he was at school, thought of as a freak, which meant that he spent a lot of his time in his room, a computer-nerd, but developing skills for hacking, which are tested when he infiltrates the University exam site on behalf of Marie, whom he has always liked, but has ignored him.

He also explains how he came into contact with three men, also skilled in computer technology, who are impressed by his work and taking him on as part of their team. They are particularly interested in an anonymous virtual person, MRX, who is visualised in a virtual room, masked, with his dialogue printed out in box form. The group try some hacking and Benjamin is successful, wanting to prove himself to his friends, and adopting some of their lifestyle, drinking and the use of cocaine.

When they become more adventurous, they decide to go physically into a government building, penetrate its technology rooms and files and steal information. Benjamin stays back and discovers more information which he does not tell the others about. There are all kinds of repercussions when a hacker is murdered in the woods and is revealed as a government agent. Then Russian government is involved, perhaps MRX being an agent for them.

Benjamin becomes even more daring, infiltrating buildings in The Hague while the conference is going on, only to return back to the apartment which we saw at the beginning with his friends murdered.

At this stage of a review, the reviewer can only say that there are quite a number of twists in the final part of the film, giving more depth to the title of the film, playing with the character of Benjamin and what is going on in his mind and the response to him by his interrogator.

Younger audiences will probably relish this thriller and its dramatisation of hacking. A similar film,

Blackhat, directed by Michael Mann, did not have the good reviews expected nor the distribution expected, it being considered, perhaps, too intricate and involved for mainstream audiences. This may be the case with Who Am I, but it is fast-paced and intriguing.

REVIEWS JUNE 2015

BELOVED SISTERS
DANNY COLLINS
GEMMA BOVARY
KUMIKO: TREASURE HUNTER
MAD MAX: FURY ROAD
ONE EYED GIRL
PARTISAN
PITCH PERFECT 2
ROYAL NIGHT OUT, A
SAN ANDREAS
SPY
TOMORROWLAND
TRASH
UNFRIENDED
WALKING THE CAMINO
WHEN MARNIE WAS THERE
WOMAN IN GOLD

BELOVED SISTERS/ DIE GELEIBTEN SCHWESTERN

Germany, 2014, 138 minutes, Colour.

Hannah Herzprung, Florian Stetter, Henriette Confurius, Claudia Messner, Ronald Zehrfeld.

Directed by Dominik Graf.

Beloved Sisters is a portrait of the writer, Friedrich Schiller, one of the key thinkers of the German Enlightenment, along with such other writers such as Goethe.

This portrait, directed by eminent German director, Dominik Graff, is a blend of romance and biography as well as an attempt to indicate the stature of Schiller in the period. However, the emphasis seems to be more on romance and relationships, Schiller and his link with the two sisters, the menage a trois established with them, rather than an exploration of his literary talent and his thinking.

There is a lot of acclaim about Schiller and his reputation, especially the sequence where he gives the key lecture in history, crowds present, to great acclaim – however, the screenplay gives little indication of the content of his lecture.

Schiller encounters two sisters during a period of ill health. Both of the sisters fall in love with him. The sisters are very close in their own relationship and are comfortable, each of them, having a passionate relationship with Schiller and with the menage a trois. One of the complications is that the older sister is already married, a cold husband, wanting a divorce and finally getting one. The other sister is unmarried and eventually marry Schiller and has a child.

One of the attractions of the film is its recreation of the 18th century in Germany, costumes, decor, design as well is the musical score.

However, the pacing of the material and the less than compelling drama of the relationships means that the film seems very long and the less persuasive for being so. It is a film for those who want to know something about Schiller and some themes from the German Enlightenment.

DANNY COLLINS

US, 2015, 106 minutes, Colour.

Al Pacino, Annette Bening, Jennifer Garner, Christopher Plummer, Bobby Cannavale, Josh Peck, Nick Offerman, Giselle Eisenberg.

Directed by Dan Fogelman.

There is a lot going for Danny Collins, not the character himself until the middle of the film, but for the film itself. It is well written by the director, Dan Fogelman, and it is very well acted by a strong cast, led by Al Pacino. There is quite a bit of sentiment, but sentiment which most audiences will like.

And, of course, the question is who is Danny Collins. He is a singer and a composer. In a sequence set in 1971, we see the young Danny Collins being interviewed for a popular magazine. Then we get some idea of his career as a singer, with a series of posters and album covers (all featuring photos of Al Pacino when he was young or in some of his famous films, including The Godfather).

So, we come to 2014 and he is on tour, singing the songs that have been popular over the decades with a rather wide fan base, but more and more relying on silver-haired ladies (referring to some of them as The Golden Girls in the front row). He is older, has become tired, yet still playing to his fans.

Christopher Plummer, in an engagingly sardonic performance, plays Danny's manager, friend and adviser, who becomes exasperated with Danny's behaviour. When Danny gives up his tour and decides to go to search for his son he has never met, he moves into a New Jersey hotel which is presided over by straightlaced manager, played effectively by Annette Bening. Danny uses his charm, encouraging the young man at the door who does valet parking, with the young woman behind the desk, and develops a patter kind of conversation with Mary, the manager.

One of the important thing is that he takes his tour bus to a suburban street to the home of his son, the son of a one night stand, with the son hating the father has never met but has seen on television. Danny finds his pregnant daughter-in-law, Jennifer Garner, and a precocious granddaughter who has attention deficit behaviour. The son is played very effectively by Bobby Cannavale, who has his own life but has not got over overcome his anger, his rage, towards his father.

Danny becomes more and more involved in the life of the family, sponsoring a trip to New York City to see an expert doctor on attention deficit and offering to pay for his granddaughter's tutoring. He also becomes involved with his son's ill-health, again financing treatment and being supportive when he is to hear the final verdict on prospects for his health.

In the meantime, perhaps with the attraction to Mary, Danny begins to compose a new song. He wants to launch it during a gig arranged at a local club – but, after his attempt to sing, with Mary encouragingly present as well as the family, it is the ageing fans who urge him to go back to sing his most popular song. Danny had been in a relationship with a young woman half his age and she turns up with her boyfriend and persuades him to start drinking and taking cocaine again.

Where can Danny's story go?

The deus ex machina, so to speak, is his manager's finding a letter that John Lennon had written to Danny after reading his article in the magazine in 1971. Danny had never received the letter but is so touched in 2014 that it is the catalyst for him to think about changing his life. In fact, the screenplay is based roughly on a true story about British singer, Steve Tilston, who did receive such a letter from John Lennon, many of whose songs play through the film.

One pleasant thing about the finale of the film is that it has a certain ambiguity, the audience and the characters uncertain as to what is to happen but the smart dialogue just giving a small indication of what will happen either way and audience satisfaction in hearing the final result.

A likeable film, which did not receive a wide release, but would please an adult audience.

GEMMA BOVARY

France/UK,, 2014 99 minutes, Colour.

Fabrice Lucchini, Gemma Arteton, Jason Flemyng, Isabelle Candelier, Neils Schneider, Mel Raido, Elsa Zylberstein, PiP Torrens, Edith Scob.

Directed by Anne Fontaine.

Possibly a lot of people looking at the advertisements of this film will think that publicists and poster designers have made quite a mistake in spelling Bovary as Boverly. But, it is not a mistake, This Bovary is Gemma, rather than Emma. And it is a 21st century story based on a graphic novel – with acknowledgements to Gustave Flaubert and his 19th century classic, Madame Bovary.

All the way through audiences might be wondering how seriously to take this story, with its parallels with the 19th century, similarities and differences.

The focus of attention is on Martin, who has worked with a publishing firm but has retired to take over his father's bakery in a quiet Normandy town. He is married and has a son whom he considers a fool. While he enjoys his work, his dissatisfied in his marriage so that when an English couple move in as neighbours, and his and their dogs become entangled, he is pleased to have made the

acquaintance of Gemma Bovary who is there with her husband, Charlie, a restorer of antiques. Martin lets his eye rove, becomes preoccupied about Gemma, often intervening for her well-being.

This is all rather credible because of the performances. Fabrice Lucchini is Martin. He is one of France's best actors, always worth watching, often performing quite different roles, a subtle interpreter of his roles. Gemma Arterton portrays Gemma and Jason Flemyng is her husband.

The husband has to be back in England at times and Gemma, feeling restless and alone, begins a sensuous affair with a young student, Herve, Neils Schneider, whom she encounters by chance. Of course, this has an extraordinary effect on Martin, who goes to some lengths to stop the affair, writing a letter to her in the name of the student, while copying it from the text of Flaubert's novel. When the couple have broken valuable porcelain owned by the young man's mother, Gemma enlists the help of Martin to write a letter to the lawyer about the damage.

Charlie returns, there is a crisis, with Gemma having to decide whom she really loves – complicated when she goes to visit some friends to do some decorating work and finds a previous lover visiting them.

Feature of the film is a rendezvous in Rouen, with attractive vistas of the Cathedral, exteriors and interiors, when Martin hopes to meet Gemma, imagines her in the Cathedral, but then finds that the car she was travelling in has broken down, and the fantasy dissolves.

There is a climax which combines the tragic with the mundane, including bread, field mice and arsenic – even eliciting titters of laughter from some of the audience, which again somewhat undermines the seriousness of the plot.

And, just when we are accepting what has happened to Gemma, to Charley, to Martin and his wife, the son who is considered a fool plays a very amusing trick on his father, who falls for the trick and will be humiliated.

Someone commented that the end of the film seems rather daft. It does. But, while many audiences will be charmed by the story, by the character of Gemma and her experiences, others might think (as does this reviewer) there is a touch of the ado about very little.

KUMIKO, THE TREASURE HUNTER

US/Japan, 2014, 105 minutes, Colour.

Rinko Kikuchi, David Zellner, Nathan Zellner, Shirley Renard.

Directed by David Zellner.

This is an offbeat film, a mixture of the odd and the exotic. It is a kind of homage to the Brothers Coen, with special reference to the film, Fargo.

The first part of the film takes place in Japan, as might be gathered title, and the name of the heroine, Kumiko. She is a 29-year-old, living alone (and when we hear her conversations with her nagging mother who is desperate for her to get married, we are not surprised that she has moved out). She has a humdrum job in an office, not really communicating with the rest of the staff, having

to bring coffee into the boss who is not always grateful. There are establishing scenes in the city, dialogue in Japanese, and we can experience something of life in Tokyo.

Kumiko finds a VHS copy of the movie, *Fargo*, more than a bit scratchy, which she tries to fix, but the fix, the fixation, is on the money sequences of the plot, especially at the end of the film when the suitcase of money is buried in the snow. Somehow or other, she takes all of this as real and realises that she now has a quest in life, to travel to Minnesota, find the case, claim the money and live happily ever after.

The second half of the film takes place in the United States, in snowbound Minnesota, on the road to *Fargo*. She has only a small travelling bag and we wonder whether she has any money (later explained by her taking cash and credit card from the office). At the airport, she is greeted by two odd men who want to help her with her tourist problems, one an older man, the other a kind of born-again Christian only too ready to help. He is played by the co-writer and producer of the film, Nathan Zellner.

Kumiko has a lot of adventures on the road, getting out and walking in the ice when the bus breaks down, picked up by a kindly elderly lady who takes her home, feeds her, and tells her life story. But Kumiko runs away, taking a blanket and wrapping it round her, an odd sight on the highway. This time she is rescued by a policeman, a kind man, who also gets her a meal and buys some clothes. He is played by the co-writer and director, David Zellner.

As Kumiko wanders through the snow, looking for the fence and fence posts that she saw in the film and has drawn on a kind of map. We wonder where this quest could and will end.

And that is the point – the audience will have to see the film to find out!

Kumiko is well played as a naive innocent by Rinko Kikuchi, who has appeared in a number of American films including *Babel* and *Nobody Wants the Night*.

MAD MAX FURY ROAD

Australia, 2015, 120 minutes, Colour.

Tom Hardy, Charlize Theron, Nicholas Hoult, Hugh Keays-Byrne, Zoe Kravitz, Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, John Howard.

Directed by George Miller.

In 1979, the original *Mad Max* was a small-budget Australian feature, a road movie, a vengeance and violence movie, a chase movie, featuring the up-and-coming star, Mel Gibson as Max Rockatansky. The film was also a breakthrough for the director, Dr George Miller.

Nobody could have predicted how successful the sequel would be, *Mad Max 2*, released in the United States as *The Road Warrior*. It was a great hit, again a road movie, violence and vengeance, but this time with a post-apocalyptic world and the need for a saviour, especially to drive away from the hostile humans and mutants with their strange and exotic features, clothes and vehicles. Max had become a saviour, especially with the children who survive to populate a new and hopeful world.

George Miller then made a third film in the series, in 1985, *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*. The budget was bigger, Mel Gibson had become an international star in the meantime, and singer Tina Turner came to Australia to take a role, ruling over a kind of latter-day Roman Empire town with its own arena and gladiatorial combat. Max was again the saviour who had to suffer. Tina Turner sings 'We don't need another hero...'. But it was very clear that the world certainly did need a hero, a Mad Max figure.

The film was immediately imitated, including a number of films from Italy, kind of spaghetti Mad Max variations. But, there was no Mad Max 4. Until now...

After 30 years and the older films becoming cult classics and part of myth-making, the world is ready for another film – and *Fury Road* has been greeted by very favourable critical response as well as big box-office.

It is not as if we have never seen anything like it, but this is a return, bigger, louder, even better.

George Miller has put all his experience over the last 30 years, including Hollywood films like *The Witches of Eastwick* and *Lorenzo's Oil* as well as his involvement in the *Babe* films and *Happy Feet*. Unfortunately, rain in outback Australia meant that local deserts were unsuitable for filming and so, in 2013, principal photography took place in Namibia, providing impressive deserts, mountains, canyons. They serve well as post-apocalyptic locations. Very impressive is the location of The Citadel, a plain where oppressed inhabitants are in need of water, facing a steep mountain with greenery atop, holding back water which is released as if from a huge dam – but mercilessly limited. Later, there is an extraordinary tornado like an enormous wave in a tsunami.

In the first part of the film Max appears as something of a victim, taken by the powers that be who rule in The Citadel, chained in a cell, brought out and inverted and linked to a young warrior as a blood transfusion supply. We are wondering how this victim Max will become our hero on *Fury Road*.

The other main character in this film is Imperator Furiosa who is commissioned to drive a huge tank in a convoy to transport petrol to a distant community. Furiosa is a fierce woman, initially laconic, with a metallic arm fixture. The young man receiving the blood transfusion, Nux, is desperate to go in pursuit, vying with his friend, driving a souped-up vehicle – but still wanting his blood supply and having Max tied to the front of the vehicle, like an emblem on the prow of a ship, still blood-linked and masked.

Where to go from here? Furiosa has some ideas, veers off the expected path, is pursued by strange porcupine-spiked vehicles from Gastown which fire but explode spectacularly when hit. The almost cult-like leader at The Citadel takes a vehicle-posse in pursuit of Furiosa so that we have vehicles, many of them with quite a bizarre look, in deadly pursuit of the convoy.

Eventually Max frees himself, gets rid of Nux who returns to the leader, becoming something of a celebrity. It takes some time for Furiosa to accept Max. When Nux returns, he becomes infatuated with one of the young women, the cult leader's wives, whom Furiosa is attempting to take to a Green Place and safety.

There are plenty more activities and adventures, especially with a commune of older women who

have survived and are prepared to support Furiosa and to fight back. There are revelations about the Green Place, chases and deaths, Furioso injured, Max able to revive with blood, and a strong decision is made as to a strategy of how to fulfil hopes and find the Green Place.

George Miller has made the film at something of a furious, Furiosa pace, always relying on his technique for chases, not tracking shots as we follow vehicles but making all the action tell in the editing, quick moves from scene to scene, always suggesting movement, a kind of kinetic impact for the audience. The vehicles are as imaginative as in the earlier films with fresh variations. The humans often have the qualities of mutants which makes them intriguingly repugnant, especially the leader played by Hugh Keays-Byrne.

One of the main questions for any sequel was: who could replace Mel Gibson? The answer is the excellent British actor, Tom Hardy (in films and television since the early 2000s but making an impact with the prison film, Bronson, then with such Hollywood films as Inception, Lawless, and the villain in The Dark Knight Rises as well as his tour-de-force, the sole character in the car drama, Locke. He is more than matched by Charlize Theron as Furiosa. Nicholas Hoult is the young driver.

The older mad Max films will now have a new lease of life. And fans will not be disappointed with Fury Road. With the worldwide distribution of films like this, the response to Max will be universal.

ONE EYED GIRL

Australia, 2014, 103 minutes, Colour.

Mark Leonard Winter, Steve Le Marquand, Craig Behenna, Tilda Cobham-Hervey, Matt Crook,
Directed by Nick Matthews.

One Eyed Girl is a film about a cult, set in South Australia, distinctively Australian tone and interesting in comparison with films from overseas about this kind of community.

Mark Leonard Winter is Travis, first seen in a suburban train, earphones on, ignoring the girl offering pamphlets to passengers, asking them to think about their lives and meaning and inviting them to come to a meeting. Travis begins to shuttle his memories, thinking of his work as a psychologist and meeting with his patients, a variety of interviews, their mental health, his response, paying attention but distracted, some of them challenging him. His memories also include a disturbed young woman called Rachel. She comes to his apartment, plays the violin, makes advances affecting his insecurity. He also has memories of his supervisor questioning him about Rachel's death and her advice that he take several weeks off and to deal with his pill addiction.

Travis does go to the meeting, watches the video of a military veteran from Iraq, his speaking about the effect on him of shooting someone, his use of drugs, three years of his life lost and his setting up The Farm, which gathers together people who are in need of therapy. He calls himself Father Jay (Steve Le Marquand), gathering his disciples, trying to heal, wanting their complete loyalty.

Travis takes an overdose and collapses, is rescued by the meeting leader, Tom, and the girl, Grace. He is taken to The Farm, goes through a process of detox, gradually becoming part of the community – though he still has troubles with his self-image (a fearful little boy) and some questions about the way Father Jay operates. When he witnesses a situation of sexual abuse, there are more questions

and doubts, talking with the victim who is in denial, challenging Father Jay who responds with all kinds of rationalisations.

Travis also befriends, Grace who makes advances which he rejects.

As expected, this leads to a crisis Travis wanting to leave Father Jay giving him the keys of a car. But, he returns. Travis is allowed to leave by Tom who seems disillusioned. It is not long before there is violence, confrontations, and drastic behaviour which may remind viewers with long memories of Jim Jones and his hold over his community in Jonestown, Guyana, in the 1970s, which led to mass suicide.

The film does not end easily, an exposé of what had happened, Travis trying to save Grace, Travis having to face himself and what his life means.

The title? “in the land of the blind, the one-eyed girl is queen”.

The film looks good, capitalises on locations, has interesting performances. And it does challenge an audience sympathetic to those with mental health problems but also challenging audiences to be concerned about self-proclaimed leaders, their behaviour, their hold and demands for loyalty, and the exploitation of this loyalty

PARTISAN

Australia, 2015, 98 minutes, Colour.

Vincent Cassell, Jeremy Chabrial, Florence Mezzara

Directed by Ariel Kleiman.

Partisan was made by Melbourne director, 28-year-old Ariel Kleiman. It is an ambitious film which has played in festivals and received acclaim. Specialist audiences will admire it but it may be too specialised for the general public.

The film has the added advantage of the presence of celebrated French actor, Vincent Cassell. He plays an enigmatic character, Gregori, who is seen at the beginning of the film solicitous about children, about a young woman who is to give birth, his fascination with the child. Then time passes and we see Gregori with many children.

What has happened is that Gregori has set up a kind of commune which is more akin to a cult experience with him serving as guru, with some sinister overtones. He is father and father-figure, educating the children, rewarding them for their efforts, giving them gifts, karaoke singing and jollity. But, there is something very sinister about him.

The children are being trained in all kinds of practical matters, mechanics, mathematics. But they are also being educated to be potential assassins, given guns, having target practice, being commended for their efforts.

But it is one boy, Alexander, Gregori's son, who is expert, especially in the use of guns and even a killing which is vividly shown the motivation never explained. But, there seem to be seeds of doubt

in Alexander's mind as he deals with the other boys, the other boys and girls, and Gregori's special tuition.

This explanation of some of the plot lines may be clearer than the experience of actually watching the film itself. At times, it seems quite obscure, the audience having to work hard to listen to the dialogue, observe the performances, to try to work out what is exactly happening in Gregori's mind, in his behaviour, as well as the response of the children and of the women who play a supporting role in the commune.

The other significant element is the location of the commune common – the filming was done in the central Asian country of Georgia, with a war-torn atmosphere, and ordinary towns and suburbs outside, but the commune is partly established in some of the ruins of action.

While one admires the skills and talent of the director, admiration is the keyword rather than personal involvement in the story – despite the intriguing aspects of Gregori's character and the fine performance by the young Jeremy Chabriel as Alexander.

PITCH PERFECT 2

US, 2015, 115 minutes, Colour.

Anna Kendrick, Rebel Wilson, Hailee Steinfeld, Brittany Snow, Skylar Astin, Adam De Vine, Ben Platt, John Michael Higgins, Elizabeth Banks.

Directed by Elizabeth Banks.

Audiences and critics were surprised and many delighted when they saw Pitch Perfect in 2012. In fact, the producers were also more than delighted with the response and decided that a sequel was in order. The sequel doesn't have the surprise of the first film but certainly matches it in entertainment value.

The setting is a college where there are A Capella choirs, a competent male choir but, when you come to think of it and look at the members of the choir, an extraordinarily successful female choir, The Bellas. The film opens with a reminder of their success in the first film, coming from almost nothing, with an eccentric group of characters as singers, to win competitions. And here they are, with President and Michelle Obama edited into the audience!

A good deal of the success of the first film was the presence of Rebel Wilson, keeping her Australian accent as Fat Amy, direct in what she says, caught up in many faux pas, and ruining the gala performance with a garment split while she is suspended high above the stage, causing gasps, instant photos, journalistic scandal, the mockery of the commentary team, the displeasure of the principle of the College and their exclusion from further competitive performing. So, we know where this is all heading.

In the first film, the comperes, John Michael Higgins and Elizabeth Banks (who also directed this film), were very amusing and are here, he an absolute chauvinist, she taunting him without his realising.

Into the mix comes a young enthusiastic girl (Haile Steinfeld) whose mother was a Bella and who is absorbed the atmosphere of the group and wants to audition. She also writes her own songs. With great ease, she fits into the group, even attracting the attention of one of the boys in the other choir.

The main rival to success is a German, particularly Teutonic, group, The Sound Machine, dressed in black, severe and with arrogant comments, athletic and robotic movements, with the leaders staring down and intimidating Beca, one of the inspirers of the Bellas. The screenplay provides several occasions for dance-offs between The Sound Machine and The Bellas, especially when a fan of A Capella groups holds a private competition with five groups, each working off the other.

One of the other realities the women in the group have to face is that they are ending their years of college and have to prepare for life after. Beca is enterprising and has won an internship with a record company, with a hard-driving producer who is impressed when she suggests a way of accompaniment for an album to be made with Snoop Dog and Christmas songs.

The group also goes to a retreat run by one of the former Bellas, a two-day experience of physical training, singing, bonding. Which means that they are then ready go to Copenhagen to vie for the international competition and title – and trying to outdo The Sound Machine.

Several of the cast return, especially Anna Kendrick as Beca and, as mentioned, Rebel Wilson as Fat Amy. The boys are back, and there is and touches of romance – but, especially Fat Amy and her relationship with security guard, Bumper, but she almost spoils it all, The retreat makes her realise that she is in love and paddles, literally, a canoe across the river to be reunited with him.

Not something that will stay all that long in the memory, but with the performances, the humour, the range of music, it is pleasant while it is there on the screen.

POLTERGEIST

US, 2015, 93 minutes, Colour.

Sam Rockwell, Rosemary De Witt, Jared Harris, Jane Adams, Kyle Catlett, Kennedy Clements, Saxon Sharbino, Nicholas Braun.

Directed by Gill Kenan.

Back in 1982, the original Poltergeist was a very popular film with touches of horror, a house haunted not by ghosts, but by spirited beings who went, often very loudly and violently, bump in the night.

in 2015, it is not all that much different. We have the house. We have a family moving in. We have the mysterious sounds, then the brutal noises, with the bangings and the bangings and the bangings. The little girl, Maddy, is attracted by the television set and sees hands appearing from within. Later, it is suggested that she has a special gift and has detected the spirits trapped behind the television set, telling everyone that they are coming, and then that they are here. And then she's not. She was driven into the world behind the television screen.

There is speculation that the house was built on an old cemetery – with the bodies transferred.

Probably not!

The film spends a lot of time establishing the family so that we can identify with them. Sam Rockwell is the father, out of work, sympathetic (except at the beginning when his petulant teenage daughter is demanding a new mobile phone), loving his children and wanting to the best for them. Rosemary de Witt is the sympathetic mother, trying to cope with the moving and settling in. Aside from the teenage daughter and her mobile phone, and the little girl within the mysterious world behind the television screen, there is a sensitive boy (Kyle Catlett who was so good in *The Young and Prodigious T.S. Spivett*), apprehensive, fearful of storms, worried when his sister disappears and feeling that he should take the blame for not caring for and protecting her.

What is the family to do? They consult an expert on these matters – with audiences wondering how they are so readily available in the US! And not only that, the expert and her team try to cleanse the house but are subject to the poltergeists attacks. They have to call in an even stronger expert who combines kind of exorcisms of houses with a TV reality show. So, the whole effort has to focus on getting the little girl back, at one stage all the family holding onto each other and trying to pull her out of the set.

While the film has a happy ending, there are some sad moments, and the family, gather together safely, move away – obviously leaving the house to a new family to come in and experience the poltergeists if there is a demand for a sequel.

A ROYAL NIGHT OUT

UK, 2015, 98 minutes, Colour.

Sarah Gadon, Bel Powley, Jack Reynor, Rupert Everett, Emily Watson, Roger Allam, Ruth Sheen.
Directed by Julian Jarrold.

Released to coincide with the 70th anniversary of VE Day, the end of the war in Europe, *A Royal Night Out* tells the story (allegedly based on fact or two) of Elizabeth and Margaret persuading their regal parents to allow them to go out for the evening to join the celebrations in London.

It was not long into the screening before this reviewer thought, “Republicans, beware”. For audiences, much like the character, the soldier Jack, who unknowingly encounters Princess Elizabeth in the pub as everyone wants to listen to the King’s speech, there will be enjoyment reservations. He is anti-establishment, is irritated by the King and by royalty, and is told to pipe down by the awed listeners. Although, by the end, Jack has come to like Lizzie, and so have we. He has spent a lot of the film helping to (or being pressurised to) search with her for Margaret who has wafted off into the night to enjoy herself (including learning how to signal for the bus to stop as well as falling out on top of a soldier), often unwittingly in very dubious company.

But that is probably to take the film far too seriously. It is meant to be a lark. The girls have been sheltered, Elizabeth 19, Margaret 14, not really having had any of this kind of ordinary experience for themselves, except Elizabeth and her work with vehicles during the war, posh style, posh accents (referred to several times throughout the film), and a propensity to order, even make presumptuous demands on the people around without realising it. Actually, Elizabeth has had a night of experiences, learning about people, appreciating that she is mixing with people she doesn’t usually

meet, with Jack taking her to the home of his working-class mother with some awareness of what he had experienced as a pilot during the war.

Margaret is flighty, gets tangled with some military types who were letting loose (to put it mildly) with drink and women as they celebrate, but also finds herself accompanying a number of ladies of the night as well as the manager of the Soho “club” to Chelsea barracks. Another military type puts something into her drink so that she becomes quite dippy when she is tipsy.

The King is of a rather stern demeanour but has let his daughters go out. The Queen is far more wary, far more prim than her image as the Queen Mother over the decades.

The recreation of the period and of VE night, sometimes with the help of newsreel footage, certainly captures the atmosphere. The performances are strong, Sarah Gadon bringing some intensity to her portrait of Princess Elizabeth, Bel Powley indicates the kind of reputation Princess Margaret would have in the future. It is a surprise to see Rupert Everett as the George VI. Emily Watson fits easily into the role of Queen Elizabeth. Jack Reynor is Jack who is surprised to find himself at breakfast in Buckingham Palace and driven back to barracks, with aplomb and rapidity by Lizzie. Roger Allam is good as the Soho boss and Ruth Sheen as Jack’s mother.

A Royal Night Out is probably best for older audiences and those who admire the Royal family, but might have a touch of much ado about very little for younger audiences who don’t have an affinity for Queen Elizabeth and her family.

SAN ANDREAS

US, 2015, 114 minutes, Colour.

Dwayne Johnson, Carla Gugino, Alexandra Daddario, Ioan Gruffudd, Archie Panjabi, Paul Giamatti, Hugo Johnstone-Burt, Heart Parkinson, Kylie Minogue.

Directed by Brad Peyton.

Yes, all the reviews and conversation have made cracks (!) about faults (!) in this earthquake disaster movie. But, that is what it set out to be, and that is what it does - reminding the oldies in the audience of the 70s, Towering Infernos on fire and collapsing, underwater swimming in the Poseidon Adventure, Earthquake.

If you are in any way apprehensive about earthquakes and being trapped in one, this is definitely the film not to see. There is no let-up throughout almost two hours of action – a moment or two every now and then for some of the human interactions but then it is into more quakes, more after-shocks, more buildings collapsing, more fires starting, a great tsunami on San Francisco Bay, then flooding...

One would suppose that San Andreas will have an Oscar nomination for Special Effects (rather than for screenplay and dialogue, some of which is more in the line of the Razzie nominations). The point is that they look particularly realistic, with scenes of Los Angeles collapsing, with scenes of San Francisco collapsing, comparatively lesser destruction in Bakersfield – and a huge canyon opening along the San Andreas fault itself. And there is a pounding score to match.

One of the main surprises for those who read the final credits is to discover that the bulk of the film was made at the Gold Coast Studios in Queensland, with the special effects work and editing done in the United States.

With other disaster films in this vein, the human story tends to be fairly predictable. In this one, we own are introduced to some veterans of helicopter rescues in Afghanistan showing their skills in quite a predicament as a car goes over a cliff above the San Fernando Valley. But with Dwayne Johnson at the controls, there are only momentary doubts, if any, that all will not succeed. The human story focuses on him, his grief after the accidental death of his daughter some years earlier, his inability to communicate, his wife leaving him in frustration, his older daughter still keeping in touch with him.

On the other hand, for the scientific part of the film, which is more credible, there is the always-reliable Paul Giamatti at Caltech, working with his staff for models of gauging the predictability of earthquakes from tremors, especially in California and along the famous fault. His assistant goes to the Hoover Dam when suddenly, only 15 minutes into the film, there is the first of the huge quakes and the extraordinary destruction of the famous Dam. Then ominous readings are found and news of further quakes. The Professor is able to hack into television channels to warn the country and, especially, the state and its two major cities, that they are to expect the worst.

Audiences would not be expecting to find that Dwayne Johnson is able to rescue his former wife, Carla Gugino, so immediately from the top of an LA restaurant and together, first by helicopter, then by car, then by plane, and eventually by boat on San Francisco Bay, they go in search of their daughter (a lively Alexandra Daddario), who is in the company of the young British engineer (Australian Hugo Johnstone- Burt) who is to be interviewed for a job and his teenage brother (Art Parkinson).

So, we follow the younger trio through all kinds of adventures, risks, the daughter using her father's experience and ingenuity to make contact and to keep them going to the highest point available.

It goes without saying there are some final dramatic, melodramatic tense moments before the final rescue and Dwayne Johnson utters words about: re-building.

Yes, the screenwriter might have made a more imaginative fist of the human story and the dialogue, but it certainly takes a second place to two hours of extraordinary effects which persuade the audience that they are right there experiencing tremors, quakes and after-shocks.

SPY

US, 2015, 120 minutes, Colour.

Melissa Mc Carthy, Jude Law, Rose Byrne, Jason Statham, Miranda Hart, Bobby Cannavale, Peter Serafinowicz, Morena Baccarin, Alison Janney, 50 Cent Jackson.

Directed by Paul Feig.

Definitely for those who enjoy Melissa Mc Carthy comedies. Perhaps not for those who do not enjoy raucous comedies with more than a touch of the silly!

Over the last few years, a new genre of films has emerged from Hollywood, the Melissa Mc Carthy

comedy. While she had been appearing on television and in films for many years, it was her supporting role in *Bridesmaids* that brought her to wide attention. Since then she has appeared in a number of comedies including *Identity Thief*, *The Heat* with Sandra Bullock, *Tammy* (and an effective serious role in *St Vincent*).

So, what are the conventions of the genre? First of all there is the presence of the Melissa Mc Carthy herself, a physically large and extroverted self, getting tangled in all kinds of situations, her being generally in control; she has a way with words, is not embarrassed by crassness, can argue her way out of most situations, a mixture of clown and comedienne. This served her well in her scenes in *Bridesmaids* and her policewoman in *The Heat*, both directed by Paul Feig.

Perhaps it is every star's dream to be in a James Bond film. And this is what *Spy* is, some serious espionage sequences as well as a sendup. Jude Law gets his opportunity early in the film to do the James Bond thing – and resume it later in the film. However, unlike Bond, he is able to have an earpiece which connects him directly to his CIA monitor, Susan Cooper (Mc Carthy in her more demure moments) who also has on screen, images of his presence (this time in Bulgaria) and she is able to guide him, warn him about attackers. And, in her heart of hearts, she is in love with him, helped at first by his taking her to dinner on return, then, despite his saying she is the best, his presenting her with a comedy necklace.

The comedy starts when Law, confronting a villain, sneezes and shoots him unintentionally. When the continued case goes awry, Susan, who is acknowledged as very knowledgeable with background information, offers to go into the field as an agent, at first reluctantly considered by her supervisor, Alison Janney yet again giving one of her sardonic performances, who then decides to let her go because she is not known to the target. The target is the daughter of the dead criminal, played with haughty pretensions to being an aristocrat by Rose Byrne.

Into the mix comes Jason Statham, right out of his many, many action shows, but this time being spoofed himself by himself, an extreme chauvinist who thinks of Susan as a tea lady, boastful about his own progress but proving himself as the film goes on to be a bit dumb and dumber.

Also into the mix comes British television comedian, Miranda Hart, very tall to Susan's lack of height, which means they are a bit of an enjoyable Laurel and Hardy act in their various exploits, which also includes the surprising presence of rapper 50 Cents Jackson..

With different disguises and with different identities, Susan shows herself to be adept as an agent, yet giving herself away at times so that a bomb can be diffused, but then ingratiating herself into Rose Byrne's attention, even claiming to be a bodyguard appointed secretly by her father. The thing is that Rose Byrne knows the location of a nuclear bomb and is ready to sell it to the highest bidder, through the agency of a high-flying gambler, played by Bobby Cannavale.

All the major players get into the final mix on the estate of a luxurious Hungarian mansion – after a lot of mixups, double agents, serious situations, especially Susan being able to land an out-of-control plane, and some farcical tangles. Some very funny moments and characterisations but, as might be expected from past Melissa Mc Carthy comedies, it is both raucous and raunchy.

TOMORROWLAND

US, 2015, 130 minutes, Colour.

George Clooney, Hugh Laurie, Britt Robertson, Raffey Cassidy, Tim Mc Graw, Kathryn Hahn, Keegan-Michael Key, Judy Greer.

Directed by Brad Bird.

Tomorrowland is an ambitious production, large in imaginative scope, a visual delight in its re-creation of the world that is called Tomorrowland. On the other hand, it also tantalises the mind as well is the imagination, but is not always clear in its elaboration of its plot.

The film was directed and co-written by Brad Bird, who impressed people several decades ago with his animated fable, *The Iron Giant*. He was also responsible for two Disney animation features, *The Incredibles* and *Ratatouille*. A few years ago he moved into live action fantasy with the fourth instalment of the *Mission Impossible* series.

This is a Disney production and the Disney imagination, especially of Walt Disney himself, is behind Tomorrowland. The initial setting is The World Fair in New York City in 1964, Disney being one of the sponsors and creating a feature of the Fair, inviting visitors to imagine what the future might be like. For those who like this film, the suggestion is to go to You Tube and click on the short Tomorrowland video featuring Walt Disney himself and his enthusiasm and imagination for the future.

This is also a George Clooney film which gives the film some status. He first appears, talking to camera, explaining what has happened to him, with some interjections by and some banter with a young woman called Casey. As we wonder what he is talking about and to whom he is speaking, we go into flashback, back to the world of the Fair, where his character, Frank, is bringing an invention, a jet pack, to the supervisor of entries, Nix, played by a stern Hugh Laurie (who gets sterner as the story goes on). There is also a young girl, Athena, a very effective Raffey Cassidy, who is sympathetic to Frank and takes him into the Tomorrowland.

Then we move to Casey's story in the present. Her father is a NASA scientist and Casey is upset that powers that be are dismantling projects and she tries sabotage, only to be arrested, and finds in the possessions returned to her by the police a badge, a medal, which she touches and is immediately transported into the fantasy world which is Tomorrowland.

Casey, obviously, wants to keep going into Tomorrowland but the badge battery goes flat. Fortunately, Athena turns up, still the same young age, and takes her on a journey which includes a visit to two aggressively fanatical storekeepers of memorabilia, Kathryn Hahn and Keegan-Michael Key. Sinisterly smiling robot agents also turn up and cause mayhem.

Which brings Casey, at last, to adult Frank's house and a series of adventures in Tomorrowland, meeting Nix again and realise that he has taken a pessimistic view of the future – which Frank has been looking at on television screens, the range of world disasters, wars, epidemics. The point is, and the message is rather hammered home, that human beings have been overwhelmed by these pessimistic perspectives and do not have the energy to pick themselves up and do something to better the world.

Frank and Casey want to do something about it, Athena not being with them any more having sacrificed herself for others, and the two go about our world, scanning every continent, all peoples,

and ethnic groups, to discover and inspire agents who will create a better world, Tomorrowland in our world.

With the central characters, the film is geared to a younger audience, especially those with an enthusiasm for both science and fantasy.

UNFRIENDED/ CYBERNATURAL

US, 2015, 83 minutes, Colour.

Shelley Hennig, Moses Storm, Renée Olstead, Will Peltz, Jacob Wysocki, Courtney Halverson, Heather Sossaman.

Directed by Leo Gabriadze.

In Poltergeist, the evil powers are inside a television set or, at least behind a television screen. This time they are in the worldwide web, operating through the Internet, through chat rooms and through Skype.

The title has literal as the young people communicating on their computers have an experience of being unfriended. But, the working title of the film was Cybernatural which rather appeals as a play on cyberspace and supernatural influences.

Who would have thought that we would have a film where the camera focused entirely on a computer screen? This is the experience of those who spend hours in front of their computer, looking at, staring at, becoming involved... However, there is quite some action in the film, but always within the computer screen, Skype images of each of the young people, You Tube and video clips, so that the film keeps up its pace.

At the opening, the young woman is flirting with her boyfriend, but soon a number of friends are introduced. The context is the suicide of another young woman, after a party, with the suggestion that she was bullied and took her life.

Each of the friends has an association with the dead woman but plead innocence. As the film progresses, a mysterious member starts to contact them all, entering via chat rooms, with the Internet address of the dead woman.

As we might imagine as the film goes on, each of the friends is going to be eliminated. The malevolence makes its way through the Internet and dramatically takes its toll. The drama is in finding out what the connection with each victim was to the dead woman, who will be next and whether anyone will survive. To that extent, the film follows a not unusual pattern of elimination deaths.

Gradually, the characters of the participants are revealed, not very likeable at all.

The mysterious communicator invites them all to play a game, that they have to answer a question truthfully within a fixed time otherwise they are the loser. They have to hold up their hands to camera, putting down a finger each time they fail with their answer. The question is a very personal,

revealing a nasty side to each of the characters, including the two flirting at the opening.

The film also shows on the You Tube clips what actually happened to the girl, how she was sick, defecated, with everybody laughing at her, humiliating her. Obviously, she is going to have the last laugh.

The film is contemporary in its preoccupation with information technology, young people and social media, the amount of time and energy invested in being online, the emotional consequences.

And the other message of the film is a warning against bullying and its devastating consequences – this time not only to the victim but also for the victimisers.

WALKING THE CAMINO: SIX WAYS TO SANTIAGO

US, 2013, 86 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Lydia Smith.

Many people, Catholics, Christians, people of other faiths, or professing no faith, have toyed with the idea of walking the Camino. For those who saw Emilio Estevez's film with his father, Martin Sheen, *The Way*, a group of fictitious characters walking the period pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, the idea might have been reinforced. There is every possibility that those who watch this documentary will be fascinated, again wondering if they should...

On the other hand, audiences who watch the film, in the comfort of the cinema or in a lounge chair at home, might well feel that they have actually made the Camino and now they won't have to leave home, but, maybe, will watch the documentary again.

The director, Lydia Smith, joined a number of pilgrims at the starting point at St Jean Pied de Port in France, approaching the Pyrenees. It is by chance, or by providence, that these individuals start their walk at the same time, progress over 30 or more days, meeting each other, talking or sharing silence, reflecting on their lives, their prayer and God's role in their lives, enjoying the mixture of accommodations along the way, becoming friends – allowing themselves to be photographed, at their best as well as in some of their pain, and sharing many of their views to camera.

In this way, the audience in those comfortable chairs, shares in the experience of what happens in the Camino, meeting the different pilgrims, getting to know them, to like them, like some very much, enjoying their company, anxious for them at times, but eager to learn more and more about what the experience of the pilgrimage means to them.

One of the main attractions is that the photography of quite a range of terrains, mountains and plains (with somebody even mentioning where the rain in Spain stays), villages with the touch of the mediaeval, cities with magnificent cathedrals, the gamut of vistas along the top of northern Spain. Somebody mentions that it is like walking through postcards.

Some of the pilgrims include a young articulate man from Portugal, very genial, always a pleasure to hear what he has to say and how he is found the Camino. On the other hand, there is a mother with her three-year-old son, who confides to camera that the reason he is on the Camino is that he had

no choice! She is travelling with her brother, who enjoys company and partying and has no faith and who does not seem to benefit much from the experience. It should be said that the mother walks these hundreds of kilometres, mostly pushing her son in his pram. There is an elderly American widower and an elderly friend from Canada (who gives the impression that he could be a priest). There is a girl from Denmark who is befriended by William from America. They help each other and it is they, for the purpose of the film, who travel the extra 80 km west to the Atlantic, to Finisterre, where in those days it was a fitting conclusion to the Camino because it was considered to be the end of the flat world.

The film is not heavy on ecclesiastical interventions. Throughout the film, several clerics do give explanations about St James, Santiago, the discovery of his tomb, the centuries-old pilgrimage, prayer, faith, the scrutiny of one's life, one of the pilgrims even referring to the experience as an internal Camino. Some of the pilgrims remark that they are confused by what may be beyond the visible, that there may actually be something beyond, but simply walking this day as best they can is the best they can do. Life and spirituality are intertwined.

In case anybody is still toying with the idea of actually going, there are scenes of the Alburges, the hotels, or hostels, available the pilgrims after they have had their documents stamped and can get a meal, have a sleep in close, very close dormitory style, helped by a number of volunteers who are of great assistance to the pilgrims. Somebody mentions snoring! And, there are many sore feet, and we see a range of blisters.

There are rituals on the way, including some of the pilgrims experiencing a washing of the feet, in the vein of the Last Supper.

Some of the remarks by the pilgrims including those nuggets of wisdom: the Camino is a simple existence which is somewhat addictive; being close with the pilgrims is a kind of cohabitation, without any competitiveness; it is walking and the people you meet, with happiness meant to be shared.

This is not an overlong documentary, is audience-friendly, communicates a great deal of what the Camino is about and a great deal of what happens and what can happen along the way. While the theme is spiritual, the film communicates a great deal of ordinary and welcome humanity.

WHEN MARNIE WAS THERE

Japan, 2014, 103 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Hiromasa Yonebayashi.

Japanese animated films from Ghibli Studios have been popular since the 1980s, especially with the films of Hayao Miyazaki (the Oscar-winning *Spirited Away*, *Ponyo by the Sea*, *The Wind Rises*). They are generally available in the original Japanese language as well as in expertly dubbed versions, produced in the United States.

The present director, Hiromasa Yonebayashi, previously made the interesting and entertaining *Arrietty*.

This is also a film about a young girl, Anna, who has been adopted. At school, she is something of a

loner, not relating well to the other girls, keeping to herself with her sketching. She is 12. Her adoptive mother decides that it would be best to send Anna into the country during the summer holidays and she travels by train to a country town to be met by a genial, solid couple who give her room in their house which has a beautiful view of a lake.

When Anna goes to the post office to send a postcard, she notices a mansion across the water and detects a figure in the window. She is drawn into the house, investigates and finds a young girl there. When she is stranded by the rising tide, a kindly old man rows her back to her home. As the summer goes on, Anna returns to the mansion, becomes a great friend of the young girl there, Marnie.

Marnie is mysterious, and people comment that the mansion is haunted. Anna also makes a friend of a little girl in the town and they discover a diary with Marnie's story.

Most of the film is about Anna and the friendship with Marnie, especially at the the large silo at the edge of the town, during a storm, with mysterious consequences.

The last part of the film seems rather hurried with a great deal of plot explanation, going back to tell the story of Marnie and her parents, her marriage and her daughter, the daughter's rebellion against her mother and giving her own daughter to the orphanage. So, by the end of the film, the mystery is explained to Anna's satisfaction and to our own.

The animation style is that of the Ghibli Studios, sketch and watercolour wash, all with a kind of naturalism – which suits the story which could have been told, almost with the same screenplay, in realistic life-action.

The Ghibli films have quite some attractive simplicity and humanity.

WOMAN IN GOLD

UK, 2015, 109 minutes, Colour.

Helen Mirren, Ryan Reynolds, Daniel Bruhl, Katie Holmes, Tatiana Maslany, Max Irons, Charles Dance, Antje Trauer, Elizabeth Mc Govern, Frances Fisher, Moritz Bleibtreu, Tom Schilling, Allan Corduner, Henry Goodman.

Directed by Simon Curtis.

Woman in Gold is both interesting and entertaining.

In fact, this could be called two films in one, the first in the present, the story of Maria Altman and the painting, Woman in Gold, by Klimt, and the issue of restitution to families of stolen art which was stolen by the Nazis. The second story is in the flashbacks to the 1930s and 1940s, to Maria Altman's family, the painting of Adele Bloch Bauer by Gustave Klimt and its confiscation by the Nazis.

While the story has its own drama and tensions, one of the principal drawing powers is the presence of Helen Mirren in the central role. It is almost 50 years since she began her career, an early appearance in the Australian film Age of Consent, the story of Norman Lindsay. Since then she has been a constant presence on stage, on television (particularly in the Prime Suspect series) and in many films, with a climax and her many awards, including the Oscar, for the 2006 portrait of

Elizabeth, The Queen. Since then she has drawn audiences in such films as The Hundred Foot Journey as well as the spoof action films, Red and Red 2.

Maria Altman is certainly one of her most persuasive roles, an Austrian Jew, a child in the 1920s, marrying in the late 30s, experiencing, with her parents, the Nazi attacks and fleeing with her husband (in a quite dramatic and tense section of the film), settling in the United States, in Los Angeles and living there for many decades.

The film opens with the death of Maria's sister and the discovery of the will of Adele and her wishes about the portrait by Klimt and its going to the Austrian gallery, Belvedere. In 1998, Maria wonders whether there is some claim to the painting and consults the son of a friend (who is, in fact, the grandson of the composer, Schoenberg, who had fled to the United States). He is played, unexpectedly, by Ryan Reynolds, starting with some diffidence, mixed motivation for helping, a change of heart, especially when he visits the Holocaust Memorial in Vienna and finally realises his Jewish heritage and his ancestors having to flee, committed to the cause despite setbacks over the years and finally acting on the courage of his convictions.

This makes the story in the present very interesting, with visits to Austria and an application to the specially constituted Committee for the Restitution of Art, Maria breaking a promise to herself never to return to Vienna and going to a conference and making an appeal for the Klimt portrait and other paintings which were stolen.

When the application is refused, there seems to be nothing else to do, but Randy Schoenberg discovers a catalogue for The Belvedere, printed in America, which gives a legal opportunity for the case to be heard, not only in a local court but all the way to the Supreme Court (with entertaining cameos by Elizabeth McGovern as the first judge and Jonathan Pryce as the Chief Justice).

There is great antagonism for representatives of the Belvedere, but support from a young Austrian journalist, who discovered his father was a Nazi, Hubertus (Daniel Bruhl).

The flashbacks are very well integrated into the story, the focus on Maria (with Helen Mirren's powerful ability to indicate what her character is thinking and feeling, in close-up, without any words) and her remembering her past. The cumulative effect is that we are taken back into the heart of the family, the painting of the portrait, the character of Adele, her love for her nieces, Maria and the close bond with her parents, the joy of her wedding, her parents realising that they would have to stay, Maria's escape with her husband.

This is a film that can be widely recommended to audiences who like a good story, some drama and fine performances.

REVIEWS JULY 2015

13 MINUTES/ ELSE

ALOHA

AMY

ANT-MAN

COMING HOME/ GAU LAI

ENTOURAGE
FACE OF AN ANGEL, The
FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD
FREEDOM STORIES
GOOD LIE, The
HOT PURSUIT
INSIDE OUT
JURASSIC WORLD
MADAME BOVARY
MAGIC MIKE XXL
MARSHLAND
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NIGHTINGALE, The
RUBEN GUTHRIE
SLOW WEST
STRANGERLAND
TANGERINES
TED 2
TERMINATOR: GENISYS
WOMEN HE'S UNDRESSED, The
ZERO MOTIVATION

13 MINUTES/ELSER

Germany, 2015, 110 minutes, Colour.
Christian Friedel, Katharina Schüttler, Johan Von Bulow, Burghardt Klaussner.
Directed by Oliver Hirschbirlgel.

Oliver Hirschbirlgel's, Downfall, showing the last days of Hitler, was a great international success though causing some controversy in Germany with its picture of Hitler, indicating some more humane aspects of his behaviour. Hirschbirlgel had already made quite an impression with his feature debut, The Experiment.

After several years making films abroad, The Invasion and the portrait of Princess Diana, Diana, both of which were received, he returned to Germany to make this film about the era of National Socialism.

The subject is Georg Elser, a man in his 30s, seemingly quiet, interested in folk music, a touch of the womaniser and his work in the town in the Jura Mountains. The film opens with his setting up a bomb in a hall in Munich, timed to assassinate Hitler as he made an address. It is 1938.

However, the attempt to kill Hitler was a failure, with Hitler leaving the room 13 minutes earlier than anticipated. Elser is caught, interrogated with torture, threatened by bringing his lover into the interrogation, but his never giving up any information. Hitler thought that it was a conspiracy and would not believe that it was the work of one man – with Elser spending some time explaining the

bomb and his skills to the interrogators.

The film offers flashbacks to his character, his mother, life in the town, his music, the clashes with National Socialists, the birth of the child and its death. Elser was condemned to Dachau and was executed just before the liberation of the camp.

Christian Friedel gives a convincing performance and the film makes the point that while attention is given to Von Stauffenberg and his attempt to kill Hitler, and people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer are held in high regard, with films made about Sophie Scholl and others who resisted, Elser was often considered something of an eccentric loner. This film rehabilitates his memory.

ALOHA

US, 2015, 105 minutes, Colour.

Bradley Cooper, Emma Stone, Rachel Mc Adams, Bill Murray, John Krasinski, Danny McBride, Alec Baldwin, Bill Camp, Danielle Rose Russell.

Directed Cameron Crowe.

With a title like Aloha, it is obvious that this is going to be a Hawaiian story. But, not quite in the way that might have been anticipated.

This is a film written and directed by Cameron Crowe, a former journalist for Rolling Stone magazine, specialising in popular music – and the film version, somewhat autobiographical, was in Crowe's film, *Almost Famous*. Other films by Crowe include his most famous, *Jerry Maguire*, as well as *The Vanilla Sky* and *Elizabethtown*.

Crowe is interested in relationships and these are to the fore in *Aloha*. However, he includes a more contemporary theme, space exploration – and the exploitation of space for communications as well as for military defence.

The film has a very good cast, led by Bradley Cooper as Frank who has emerged as a significant actor with such films as *Limitless*, *American Heist*, *The Silver Linings Playbook*, *American Sniper*. The leading lady is Emma Stone, *Magic in the Moonlight*, *Birdman*. He plays a scientist with a knowledge of technology and who has served on being wounded in Afghanistan. She plays a captain, a fighter pilot, Allison Ng, who reminds everyone that she is one quarter Hawaiian.

Their paths cross when he is invited to Hawaii by a billionaire entrepreneur, played by Bill Murray, who wants to send up a satellite, privately financed, but in collaboration with the American military, but needs permission from local Polynesians, especially from the King and his kingdom, for a blessing of a bridge and permission for the satellite to go up into the Hawaiian sky.

The personal story is complicated because Frank encounters his girlfriend of 13 years earlier, a woman who was in love with him but whom he stood up. She is Tracy, played by Rachel Mc Adams, who is now married to a rather taciturn pilot, Woody, John Krasinski. The past lovers renew acquaintance, Tracy having the need to vocalise her feelings of the last 13 years, Frank being forced to acknowledge what he did in the past, with Allison witness to this. Tracy has two children, Grace and Mitch, who contribute to the plot complications.

Allison herself has become involved with Frank and believes that his work is to help the entrepreneur put a satellite in space which has nothing to do with military or defence. She experiences some disillusionment with him, but the situation makes emotional and loyalty demands on Frank as to what he really believes in and whom he loves.

And In the background are military officials played by Danny Mc Bride and Bill Camp, liaisons with the general, a crusty character, played by Alec Baldwin.

Cameron Crowe is a liberal at heart and this is the perspective that pervades the final part of the film.

A blend of the light and the serious with attractive Hawaiian and locations and an interesting cast.

AMY

UK, 2015, 128 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Asif Kapadia

Amy Winehouse made her mark on the world, the world of popular music, having a career that spanned ten years, winning several Grammy awards, including Best Song with Rehab, an award for Best young British talent of the year, praised as having a strong voice for jazz.

That may mean that while she did have a large following, there are a lot of people who knew her only from headlines or from tabloid stories. And she certainly had a tabloid kind of life, a celebrity who rose high and certainly fell low.

Asif Kapadia has made a number of documentaries as well as some feature films, especially *The Warrior*, set in India, and the documentary biography of racing driver Ayrton Senna. He received quite some praise for that documentary and already has won critical praise for this film about Amy Winehouse.

Anyone, musical or not, who is interested in the contemporary cult of celebrity will find this portrait and this study quite interesting. What the director and his researchers have done is to assemble a great deal of footage from her initial auditions to her death, 2001 – 2011. There is plenty of visual material to draw on, auditions, rehearsals, recordings, concerts, home movies with friends, television footage. As well, there is quite an amount of audio material. And there are many, many interviews with her mother, with her father, with her close friends, and managers, promoters, bodyguards...

The director has been skilful in assembling his material, sometimes having voice-over of Amy with different pieces of footage or photos from other times, making the impact of his images and sound more complex.

The film is put together in chronological order, with some flashbacks to Amy's life as a child and growing up. it is a picture of a Jewish girl from North London - and images of Barbra Streisand come to mind as we see her, her looks, her forthright manner, her strong voice and singing style. Her father was absent during a lot of her childhood but emerged later and undertook her management,

criticising this present film for not doing justice to his daughter and putting him in a bad light – and his wanting to make his own film, something of which he did during his daughter's lifetime.

Audiences interested in the music industry will find that there is meticulous detail about and interviews from those involved with her career, as they worked with her and helped her, the difficulties they experienced, especially in her final years, the successful concerts, records, the Grammys. The range of people interviewed gives an overall picture of Amy Whitehouse's career.

On the personal level, it is said that she was shy even though she came across publicly as one of those forthright Jewish personalities. She did smoke pot in her early years, but eventually was introduced to cocaine, which led to heroin – and the comment made by her during the film that life without drugs was boring. It also emerges that what looked like to be a hearty appetite was, in fact, bulimia.

She had many boyfriends, friends commenting on some promiscuity in her life, marrying a boyfriend who may have been instrumental in the drug use, supporting him when he was arrested and imprisoned for impeding the course of justice, the marriage ending after two years in divorce.

The other point that the film wants to make is that she had celebrity thrust upon her very early, like many a child actor, performer, sports man or woman, which means that they were still developing their personality while expected to be competent in coping with the wider world – and being cut off more and more from the difficulties of real life, being pampered and spoilt, people responding to their whims, paparazzi pursuing them, and not enough time to be by themselves, to think, to appreciate what was happening to them.

This is significant for Amy Whitehouse's songs. She is praised by many, by a singer she greatly admired, Tony Bennett, with whom she did a duet, filmed and shown here. She appreciated singers like Sarah Vaughan and was considered to have a wonderful sense of jazz, rhythms and timing. The lyrics which appear during the film, often literally on screen, help the audience realise that they were all about her, her life, her feelings, her relationships, not exactly narcissistic, but self-preoccupied, using the lyrics and the rhythms to express a lot of her troubled personality and what was happening in her inner and her out of life.

Some have complained that the film does not include everything – but, after all, it runs just over two hours and there will be necessary omissions from the point of view of the selection of the director. While it does serve as a basic biography, it is, more importantly, a cinema portrait.

ANT-MAN

US, 2015, 117 minutes, Colour.

Paul Rudd, Michael Douglas, Evangeline Lilly, Corey Stoll, Bobby Cannavale, Judy Greer, Abby Ryder Fortson, Michael Pena, David Dastmalchian, T.I., Wood Harris, Hayley Atwell, John Slattery, Martin Donovan, Anthony Mackie.

Directed by Peyton Reed.

A full confession! This is a realisation that early into Ant-man, this reviewer was believing all the science, accepting that living creatures could be shrunk, that this kind of activity could be credible!

Which leads to say that Ant-man is a very entertaining and enjoyable film.

Marvel comics have a long reputation for their comic strips and comic books in print. In fact, Ant-man was first released in 1963. However, it was the other superheroes who made it earlier to the screen, stories of The Hulk, of Captain America, of Iron Man, of Thor, episodes for all the heroes, many sequels and, of course, The Avengers films.

With due respect to the last Avengers film, The Age of Ultron, Ant-man is far more enjoyable.

In the late 1980s, scientific researcher, Dr Pym, was developing techniques for reducing living creatures. But, it was the time of the Cold War and he was being looked on with some hostility by CIA authorities. He then retired but continued his work, even after his protégé, Darren Cross, took over his company and laboratories.

Present day. Darren Cross has almost succeeded in his shrinking techniques and experiments on creatures, including lambs, until he has success. While he is brilliant at science, he is also a greedy man in love with power and plans to sell his research to the highest bidders, irrespective of their motives and their plans for domination. Dr Pym does not approve. But his daughter, Hope, works with Dr Cross.

Also present day. pleasant burglar, Scott Lang is about to be released from prison, gets fired from his fast food job because of his past, shares an apartment with Luis, a motor-mouth when it comes to telling a story with excessive detail, and two of his friends. Scott is being prevented from seeing his daughter by his ex-wife and her new partner who is a police officer.

These two present-day scenarios then connect, with Scott doing a burglary job in Dr Pym's house, then becoming a candidate for the experiment for a shrinking man. Dr Pym's motives are good, wanting to stop Dr Cross and deciding to use his Ant-man to infiltrate and destroy Dr Cross's experiments – including Cross shrinking himself as Yellowjacket.

Some of the most entertaining scenes are Scott's training to be an Ant-man, experiencing what it is to be so small and in danger from ordinary situations, like water in the bath becoming a deluge, like exercising mind control over ants and their activities, finding Anthony, a giant ant on whom he could ride to battle. Dr Pym's daughter had hoped to do battle for her father but he wants to protect her, especially when she learns the story of her mother who was a partner with her husband and gave her life for experiments.

So, this leads to a set up for confrontation between the two Ant-men, Goody and Baddy.

This film is certainly not predictable like the other action hero stories. While Scott, Ant-man, as a criminal background he is something of a hero, but very small, and, while his activities will contribute to saving the world, they are not cataclysmic and apocalyptic like the battles in other Marvel films. And there is a great deal of humour, in the characters, the mannerisms, the deadpan remarks, and the frustrations that Scott experiences during his training.

Often, the film is quite funny.

Of course, there is action in the final confrontations, not always going as might be foreseen, which makes them very enjoyable, a good blend of action and special effects.

The cast should be mentioned by name and praised. Paul Rudd has appeared in many a comedy, with touches of romance. The part of Scott Lang suits him and he makes the most of it with self-deprecation, funny lines, attempts at heroics, motivated by possibilities for seeing his daughter, and rising (no matter how miniature) to the dangerous occasions.

Dr Pym is a very good role for Michael Douglas who carries it off with great aplomb and credibility. Evangeline Lily plays his daughter. Corey Stoll is both smooth and smarmy as well as corporation-evil personified as Dr Cross. Michael Pena has most of the comedy as Luis, his comic reactions to everything (although some solid punches when necessary) along with his two friends, seeming slackers, who nevertheless are essential for the final success.

There is a guest appearance by Anthony Mackie as The Falcon – and, of course, the advice is to remain till the end of the credits to see where this is all leading.

COMING HOME

China, 2014, 103 minutes, Colour.

Gong Li, Chen Daoming, Zhang Huiwen.

Directed by Zhang Yimou.

A word about the director and his career helps give context to this fine but small film.

In the 1980s and, especially, in the 1990s, Chinese director Zhang Yimou made a number of rather small films with contemporary settings, sometimes going back to the more immediate past. In many of them, his leading lady was the actress Gong Li, the star of this film. If any audiences have ever seen *Ju Dou*, *The Story of Qiu Ju*, or, especially, *Raise the Red Lantern*, they would look forward to seeing *Coming Home*. At the turn of the millennium, Zhang Yimou made two very fine films, *Not One Less* and *The Road Home*. But then he turned his attention to Chinese history, heroics, martial arts – often in the fantasy vein of *Hidden Dragon*. *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers* were amongst those films. And then he was designer for the Beijing Olympic Games.

With this film, he has returned to his earlier simplicity and audiences will appreciate it, a small film, perhaps emotional and moving for many audiences, but a fine film and humane film.

The plot is quite straightforward. It is the time of the Cultural Revolution and life in the Chinese town like the one presented here is fairly colourless and drab. A school teacher lives with her daughter, shunned by many because her husband, a professor, has been imprisoned 10 years earlier. But news comes that he has escaped. His daughter, training for ballet (a particularly patriotic and militaristic ballet it is) has completely rejected her father.

The wife, played by Gong Li (who is now in her late 40s), is faced with the dilemma, to welcome her husband or denounce him.

In a very dramatic sequence, the husband is recaptured and imprisoned again. His wife and his daughter both see what happens. There are consequences for both, the wife so traumatised that she has what a psychologist describes as psychogenic amnesia, not forgetting everything, though she seems to be moving into a state of dementia, but an inability to recognise her husband.

In fact, the latter part of the film shows the end of the Cultural Revolution, with the husband returning home a free man, but his wife unable to recognise him. One of the good things is a reconciliation with his daughter who tries to help him. There are many moving, emotional moments in this part of the film when the husband tries many ways to help his wife recognise him, explaining things to her but she is still afraid; tuning her piano and delighting her in playing again, but she does not recognise him; then sending her all the letters that he wrote in prison on scraps of paper and offering to read them to her while she listens entranced.

Over the years, she always goes to the railway station, expecting her husband to be among those returning from the prison camps, always failing, always watching, always waiting.

The film has no easy answers but immerses its audience in the experience of the wife who desperately loves her husband and wants him to return but does not recognise him and the husband who has suffered so much and longs to be with his wife as they were together in their loving past.

Those who relish older films, especially from the golden years of Hollywood, may remember Greer Garson in *Random Harvest*, finding that her husband, Ronald Colman, suffers from amnesia, and her standing by his side for years without his recognising her, helping him in his life and career. This one does not have the final comfort that *Random Harvest* does. This is expert and small Chinese cinema at its best.

ENTOURAGE

US, 2015, 104 minutes, Colour.

Adrian Grenier, Jeremy Piven, Kevin Connolly, Kevin Dillon, Jerry Ferrara, Emmanuelle Chriqui, Rex Lee, Debbie Maza, Billy Bob Thornton, Haley Joel Osment, Greg Kinnear, Alice Eve, Judy Greer, Richard Schiff, Emily Ratajkowski, Piers Morgan, Martin Landau. Cameos: TI, David Arquette, Gary Busey, Jon Favreau, Andrew Dice Clay, Mike Tyson, Pharrell Williams, Liam Neeson, Ed O'Neil, Kelsey Grammar, Chad Lowe, Nora Dunn, Mark Wahlberg, Common, David Spade, Warren Buffett, Jessica Alba, Armie Hammer.

In many ways, it depends whether the audience have been fans of the long-running television series, *Entourage*, or whether they are coming to it, so to speak, cold. This review comes from the "cold" perspective.

We are told that the movie version begins nine days after the last episode in the series ended in 2011. Which means that the characters may only be nine days older but look four years older. Be that as it may, it seems that the principal characters are all back again. There is Vincent, Adrian Grenier, the film star, having his marriage of nine days dissolved and his machinations not only to star in a blockbuster (which, when we see the opening credits, does not seem to be all that blockbusting) but to direct as well. He is dark and handsome. Then there is his producer, Eric, Kevin Connolly, usually with a rather beatific and youthful smile on his face, which rather belies his ability

as a movie producer to deal with agents and money men, and definitely covers over his rather promiscuous attitude towards women, especially his pregnant ex-girlfriend, which seems not only exploitative but misogynistic. There is Turtle, Jerry Ferrara, rather scruffy-looking but wealthy enough, who serves as a friend and chauffeur in the entourage. The last of the group is Jack, Kevin Dillon, Vincent's older half-brother, an obtuse and crass type, putting his foot in it, continually auditioning to try to get better parts – and not always succeeding.

The powerhouse of the film is fast-talking, wheeler-dealer agent, Ari, played with both infectious and antagonising exuberance by Jeremy Piven. He is certainly the best thing in Entourage.

One of the features of the television series, apparently, is the number of cameos from real stars and celebrities – and it is certainly the case here, some turning up only in passing, but usually in something of a huff or antagonistic. However, more striking in support is Billy Bob Thornton as a rich Texan who is investing in films and, a surprise to those who still remember him only from his child role in *The Sixth Sense*, a rather roly-poli Haley Joel Osment as Fulton's rather stupid and over self-confident son who interferes with Vincent's film.

It is all bright and colourful, with Hollywood sunshine, shows the Entourage's men about town, using women rather than befriending them, and showing a lot of the uglier aspects of Hollywood high life and the exploitative aspects of filmmaking. Some of it is amusing, much of it less so.

THE FACE OF AN ANGEL

UK, 2015, 98 minutes, Colour.

Daniel Bruehl, Kate Beckinsale, Carla Delevingne.

Directed by Michael Winterbottom.

We all know of people who confronted by a television programme have no inhibitions about yelling back at the screen, venting their displeasure, challenging the film makers or the characters... It doesn't usually happen in cinemas. But, *The Face of an Angel* is one of those films where audiences might feel that they would like to stop the film, talk with the director, getting him to clarify what he is on about and why he has made the film as he has. Since this can happen only at a Q&A session, audiences watching this film will have to have the debate within their own minds and feelings as the film goes on.

Michael Winterbottom has been making films for over 20 years, sometimes focusing on crime stories, *Butterfly Kiss*, *The Killer Inside Me*, sometimes doing realistic documentaries like *The Road to Guantánamo* or, more recently, supporting Russell Brand in his protest and indictment documentary against capitalism, especially in the UK and the banks, *The Emperor's New Clothes*.

Why the desire to discuss with the director, to challenge, to tease out...? Because he has made a film about a widely known murder case in Italy, the death of Meredith Kercher, the trial of Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito, their being found guilty, then, on appeal, the judgement being quashed and their being set free. More recently, an appeal has upheld their guilt. There has been a television movie about the case.

While Michael Winterbottom is going back over the case, he takes the point of view that it was so

much in the public eye, that there was so much sensationalism, tabloid headlines, all kinds of rumours flying about, that he preferred to look on the case from the outside, even though he has some brief reconstruction sequences, some brief looking at the accused during the trial, and a focus in retrospect on the victim.

This means that a lot of the film is about a filmmaker who has an ambition to make a film about the case but does not quite know how to do it. He is played by Daniel Bruehl, usually a convincing actor, but this time made to play a complicated and even contradictory character, creative with his filmmaking, friendly, separated from his wife, Skyping his daughter whenever possible, yet suddenly doing lines and lines and lines of cocaine, not scrupulous about sexual liaisons, sometimes writing bits of the screenplay, most times observing other people, writers, journalists, disapproving of their tabloid approach. So, one would like to ask the director, is it about him, fictionalised or real, his puzzles about how to make the film, his opting to make the film about a director and his problems, which may or may not be interesting, and he may or may not be sympathetic.

Kate Beckinsale plays an author, based on Barbie Latza Nadeau who wrote about the trial and contributed to the screenplay. She is American, and in Rome, unhappily married, with children whom she looks after, going up to Siena each week to sit through the trial, helping the would-be filmmaker.

After, perhaps clarifying, some of these questions with Michael Winterbottom, audiences might like to pause the film again and ask him about his reliance on Dante, even a visit to his tomb, and his using *The Divine Comedy* as well as *Documenti di Amore*, for his interpretation about the young people, their coming together, the *Inferno* that the murder produced, the trial and its purging – and with the father of the victim giving a final eulogy talking about her going to heaven.

All that said, there are a number of interesting features of the film, with sequences mainly in Rome and Siena but also in London where the film director is based, going home, talking with his producers, planning the film. The question is: what is the audience left with as regards the characters, the drama, the would-be film that fails, (except that here it is), a perspective on the characters of the victim and the accused. Given the victim with the face of an angel, and visually beatified in her, this film is certainly very sympathetic towards Meredith Kercher and her family.

A puzzlement.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Greece/Australia, 2015, 82 minutes , Colour.

The Xyloouris Family: Antonis, Georgis, Shelagh, Nikos, Antonis and Appolonia.

Directed by Angeliki Aristopoulomenou.

There will not be too many people around Australia, let alone the world, who have not been hearing about and thinking about Greece in recent months, even years. And that is all about finance, debts, repayments, currencies and the European Union. And divisions between yes votes and no votes.

This is a film, however, A Greek- Australian co-production that will have everyone saying yes.

The settings for the film are Crete with its long historical traditions, especially its music traditions, and Australia where many Greeks have settled and brought the music with them. Which means that this is a multi-cultural film experience, a pleasure for Greek audiences, especially in Crete, and a pleasure for multi-cultural Australian audiences who appreciate different styles of music, different instruments and skill in playing them.

As for the title, this is definitely a family affair. The Xylouris family has developed a very strong tradition, the music and performance techniques being handed on from generation to generation. The film focuses particularly on Georgis Xylouris, well respected in Greece, a musician who has toured the world (and there are scenes from his playing in several Western European countries). He has also visited Australia, and in this film, there are scenes from 2012, the Womadelaide Festival as well as concerts in the Forum Theatre in Melbourne and some rehearsals and radio interviews. Accompanying Georgis is his father, a strong patriarch, an expert player from George inherited his talent.

But, the film, veering between mountainous landscapes at home and the vast open terrain of Australia, the film has quite a number of Australian connections. George is married to his Australian wife, Shelagh, who lives in Crete and has brought up three children. But, the two boys, talented musicians in themselves, have come to Australia for university studies and, as the film opens, the younger sister, Apollonia, is moving also to Australia, for study but also for performances. She is a touch nervous as she practises, especially in the presence of her grandfather.

Any documentary about a close family has its attractions, as does this one. When there are loving bonds which are lived every day through music, strings and lute, the bonds are even stronger.

The film serves as a positive reminder of the best in Australian multiculturalism.

FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

UK, 2015, 119 minutes, Colour.

Carey Mulligan, Matthias Schoenaerts, Michael Sheen, Tom Sturridge, Juno Temple, Jessica Barden.
Directed by Thomas Vinterberg.

Over the last 50 years, the novels of 19th-century author, Thomas Hardy, have been popular sources for many films. A memorable film from 1967 was made of his novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, with Julie Christie, Peter Finch, Alan Bates, Terence Stamp. There have been versions of his *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, including Roman Polanski's *Tess*, of *Jude the Obscure*, of *The Woodlanders* and *The Return of the Native*, and a version of *The Mayor of Castor Bridge*, *The Claim*.

Now comes another version of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, a very satisfying version in itself.

The setting is Dorset 1870, a village, the fields and cliffs near the sea, small farms, barns and mansions, the local town and markets. While the photography is quite striking, the locations are not presented merely as touristic scenery but part of the plot and the development of the plot.

Hardy's novels have very strong heroines, with the spirit of independence that often transcended their times. This is true Bathsheba Everdene, a young woman who inherits a farm, decides to

manage it herself, is full of energy, not hesitating to get out with the sheep or bringing in crops. Carey Mulligan offers a strong and emotional performance. She has encountered an upstanding farmer, symbolically called Gabriel Oak, the shepherd experiencing tragedy when his sheepdog loosens the fences and drives the flock over a cliff. Bathsheba employs him. He is devoted to her and has proposed but has been rejected. Bathsheba cannot see herself as married.

And Gabriel Oak (Matthias Schoenaets) is not the only suitor. A local landowner, Mr Boldwood (Michael Sheen), a rather solitary man, also proposes, thinking he has a chance because of a thoughtless Valentine's Day prank that Bathsheba had played. And then there is the dashing soldier, Frank Troy (Tom Sturridge), who has been infatuated with one of the workers on the property, Fanny Robin, but has given up on her when she did not turn up at the church for the wedding (she had mistaken the name of the church). Bathsheba, despite her attitude towards suitors and her strong control of herself, becomes infatuated with the soldier with dire results.

The film immerses its audience in the life of this England, the hard work, the seasons, the socials.

And, all the time, there is Gabriel Oak, working hard, supporting Bathsheba, listening to her, and quietly regretful that she does not love him in return.

There has to be a climax. Mr Boldwood asks Bathsheba to reconsider, comes out of his shell to organise a Christmas celebration, detailed in its preparations, inviting everyone and hoping that Bathsheba will accept his proposal. There is an unexpected turn of events, which becomes highly melodramatic, Mr Boldwood going into action that he never dreamt he would. Gabriel, still supportive, realising that he has no future in Dorset, tells Bathsheba that he has decided to migrate to America.

There is something grim about the writings of Thomas Hardy, something of a hardness in his presentation of human nature, in emotional conflicts. And his heroines are strong women who suffer.

Far from the Madding Crowd is definitely in this vein, but with more glimmers of hope than in other novels. Danish director, Thomas Vinterberg who had made rather austere films early in his career but was able to interpret British stories with insight and skill, including his film version of John Le Carré's Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy, has made a very persuasive version of Far from the Madding Crowd.

FREEDOM STORIES

Australia, 2015, 99 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Steve Thomas.

The recommendation comes first. This is a documentary which all Australian should see.

We often say that we shouldn't categorise people in any way, especially which with prejudicial epithets. In the last almost 20 years in Australia, advocates for migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, have insisted that the only way to appreciate these men, women and children, is to get to know some of them. Several years ago there was a fine film, Mary and Mohammed, set in Tasmania, about

a local group of women who made quilts for those kept in the local detention centre, who got to know actual people, who overcame fears and prejudices and were greatly supportive of these newcomers to the country. Filmmaker, migrant Hong Kong director, Clara Law, became involved with those in detention in Baxter and corresponded with some of the men, eventually visiting and producing the film *Letters To Ali*. Robyn Hughs, had experiences of Afghan refugees and discovered Sister Carmel Wauchop and her visits to the detention centre at Woomera and made *A Nuns New Habit*.

Steve Thomas has been making similar films over the last 15 years. In this project, he contacted a number of migrants, principally from Afghanistan but also from Iran and Iraq. He went to visit them, got to know them, through interviews and sharing their lives with them and made brief films about them. They are gathered together in this film, examples of *Freedom Stories*. And what is pleasing about the film is that as we, the audience, get to know this group of people, ranging from Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, to Adelaide, and go back to visit them and are able to share in the follow-up to the stories and the good things that happened since the first interviews.

Steve Thomas himself does not intrude but often we see him carrying his camera, see him in the mirror reflections or window reflections, as well as the sound engineers he brought along for the filming. This anchors the stories in reality.

The first person to be introduced is Mustafa, a refugee with his family at the age of ten, the boat capsizing after catching fire, and the group rescued by the Australian Navy. He spent three years in Nauru and then three years on a temporary visa. We find him working in a garage in Canberra, doing an apprenticeship, talking with his younger brother who was born on Nauru, and, finally, see him get his diploma and the support of the owner of the garage, Ned, who gave Mustafa his chance. Mustafa had also become engaged to a young woman from Finland – with the dilemma as to where they should settle, in Finland or in Australia.

Then we see Shafiq Moniz, who is painting his house, meticulously, because he says his perfectionist. He spent almost a year in Woomera, then three years with a temporary visa. But, he is an artist and we are shown many of his paintings. We also see the now-abandoned huts at Woomera and the outside walls which were painted, many of them with his paintings. Eventually, he was able to bring his wife and daughters to Australia and build a house (painted, meticulously). In his more recent paintings, he uses the motif of an umbrella, indications of climate change, indication of protection from outside dangers...

By way of contrast we see Sheri Shoari, who carried her children to the refugee boat, settling in Australia, in Adelaide, after three years of detention in Curtin and Baxter. She is more than robust woman, especially when we see her caring for her 26-year-old son, Ali, who has cerebral palsy and needs constant care. Her older son, Mohamad, explains how he was traumatised by his time in the detention centre and tends to be introverted, a reader and thinker, not yet able to mix comfortably. Whereas the youngest son, Hamid, ten at the time of arrival, joined the army, plays soccer locally and has ambitions to become a coach. One of the important things is that Sheri has some ambitions as well – to become a truck driver and, when we return to the story, we see her in action with her supervisor, going up the 18 grades for her licence.

Reyhana also spent several years in Woomera. Her daughter wants her to be interviewed and Reyhana, working at home, but on the Internet, became an advocate of women's rights. We later

see her working in the office of the Migrants Resource Centre, meeting migrants and refugees, caring for their needs.

Ahoam came from Iraq, a primary school teacher, emigrated with her father and husband, and has tried to develop her teaching skills and her work with IT, making many applications for teaching in education at large in Australia but not accepted. She now works at an Islamic school, but she is still studying and hopes to make some progress, making a huge decision to change her name to a more acceptable Australian name.

Amir Javan is a particularly friendly man, a diamond dealer back home but, after 4 ½ years in detention, being rejected and his case finally going to the High Court. He is now a real estate broker in Sydney, but he is seen coming to Melbourne, to help a young friend, Parviz, also from Iran, move, someone he had befriended in the detention centre.

Other stories include that of Jamilah, arriving as a girl, now studying, and, a surprise when Molly Meldrum appears in the film, supporting a skilled worker in tiling who did all the work at Meldrum's Melbourne home, especially with all the antiques, statues et cetera that Meldrum brought back from Egypt.

The film is released in cinemas but would be available for groups, for example parish groups, to see and discuss. There are more stories than are in the feature film. There are two websites and the stories will be adapted to brief the television screenings as well as on-site viewing.

From a Catholic point of view, the film can definitely be recommended, and, amongst the advisory Advisory Committee is Sister Brigid Arthur, Brigidine sister, long committed to social action and social justice.

THE GOOD LIE

US, 2014, 110 minutes, Colour.

Reese Witherspoon, Arnold Oceng, Ger Duany, Emmanuel Jal, Kuoth Wiel, Corey Stoll.

Directed by Philippe Falardeau.

The Good Lie did not receive much cinema exhibition, but became available on DVD. It is the kind of film that could be recommended to serious audiences, especially those with a concern for justice, and those who are interested in the turmoil in African countries, especially sub-Sahara countries like Sudan.

The meaning of the title? At some stage, some of the characters feel the need to tell some untruths in order to achieve a greater good.

While Reese Witherspoon gets prominent billing, she does not appear in the early part of the film, so is on posters for marketing purposes, as well as for her interest in being in this film and promoting it.

In fact, the first half of the film takes place in the South of Sudan, in the underprivileged area which became in recent years the new country of South Sudan. In the 1980s, there were many raids on villages by militant groups, nicknamed "the devils on horseback". A great number of people were

killed and many fled. Perhaps, the story of the “lost boys” is known to some audiences, the group of boys who were urged to leave their villages, leaving behind their families and loved ones, and trekking thousands of kilometres from Sudan to Kenya. When they arrived in that country, they were put into refugee camps, remaining there for several years, many of them growing up into adulthood in the camps.

The drama early in the film is that of the attacks of the militants on horseback, the cruelty and viciousness, the killings, and the long walk by the children, not all surviving, but helping one another to move further away from their dangerous country.

The second part of the film shows us some of the boys, now adults, and the possibilities of their being transferred to other countries – not possible for everyone, some spending many more years interned in the camps. But, many were fortunate enough to be able to go to the United States or countries like Australia, refuges for political refugees.

While the boys learn to speak English in Kenya, they were not educated in the ways of the world, let alone the ways of an affluent first world nation like the United States. We follow a group of them as they are transferred to Kansas City, Missouri, with bureaucrats bungling the transfer and separating one of the men from his sister who is sent on to Boston. Reese Witherspoon plays one of the contacts, herself not particularly well-prepared to understand the young men from Africa, but making efforts to get them accommodation and to get jobs.

The younger men themselves have varied experiences in their work, some of them being pressed into joining groups, something the equivalent of gangs. Others get steady jobs. One enterprising young man devotes himself to study, improving himself, with the hope of training to be a doctor.

The Good Lie could be something of an eye-opening film for those who have not had contact with refugees, who are not aware of how important cultural differences are, or the strain of the newcomers in their learning of a new language, getting used to manners, different food, expectations in the workplace...

To that extent, the film is interesting, entertaining in its way – and a good way of enabling its audiences to have their horizons widened.

The film was directed by Canadian director, Philippe Falardeau, who treated something of the same themes in a French-Canadian setting, with a teacher who came from northern Africa, Monsieur Lazar, which is also a very fine film.

HOT PURSUIT

US, 2015, 87 minutes, Colour.

Reese Witherspoon, Sofia Vergara, Matthew Del Negro, Michael Mosley, Robert Kazinsky, Richard T. Jones, John Carroll Lynch, Jim Gaffigan.

Directed by Anne Fletcher.

It is almost a genre in itself, the odd couple comedy. But, habit usually makes us think of a male odd couple. It is much the same when somebody describes a film as a ‘Buddy’ comedy. It would seem

that buddies are male also. However, this film offers us two female buddies, a female odd couple.

Obviously, they are not going to be buddies at the beginning. Reese Witherspoon, relaxing after her serious films, plays a dedicated Texan cop, following in the footsteps of her father whom she assisted when she was a little girl. But, she is a by-the-book officer, knowing every regulation possible and its application. She is mocked by several of the police officers at the station (though there are some dramatic developments which means that she has the last laugh). One day, she is given a mission to accompany a witness to a trial in Dallas. What could be simpler?

Well, the first complication is that the witness is a self-important Hispanic wealthy woman whose husband is about to give testimony at the trial of a cartel boss. Before you can say drugs, the home of the witness is attacked by two separate groups with a shootout, the two women, like each other or not, have to go on the run, with the criminals in hot pursuit.

Which means that this is a road movie, along the lines of the 1980s classic with Robert De Niro and Charles Grodin, *Midnight Run*. The two women get into all kinds of adventures, all kinds of comic situations, each rescuing the other when the going gets tough. It would be nice to say that they form bonds – well, they do, but not without a great deal of to-ing and fro-ing, some confrontations with the cartel lord, and a shooting climax. (And a few plot twists.)

This means that the comedy depends on the two actresses, Reese Witherspoon righteous and uptight, gradually, very gradually, mellowing, and Sofia Vergara, trading on her glamour and know-how. There is an amusing running joke with television reports continually making Witherspoon shorter and shorter and Vergara older and older. Audiences will get, more or less, what they expect.

INSIDE OUT

US, 2015, 94 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Amy Poehler, Phyllis Smith, Bill Hader, Mindy Kaling, Lewis Black, Diane Lane, Rashida Jones, Kyle McLachlan, Frank Oz, John Ratzenberger.

Directed by Pete Docter, Ronaldo del Carmen.

Over the past 15 years or so, the Pixar Studios, now associated with Disney, have stood out as the go-to studio for fine animation films. While they made their mark with the *Toy Story* series, they had a series of successes, and Oscar wins and nominations, with films like *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Cars*, *Ratatouille*, *Wall-E*, *Up*. Some of their productions have been slighter in recent years, especially *Cars 2*, but *Inside Out* should put them up there on top again.

The idea is rather original. What if we went inside the characters heads, identified some of the chief emotions, imagine what they might look like in cartoon form, how they operate in harmony with and in conflict with each other, determining the reactions of the character? In this case it is a young baby, Riley, whom we look out from the outside but then go inside her mind, discovering Joy, the most exuberant and exhilarating emotion.

But then babies cry! The emotion which emerges is Sadness, again a feminine voice, something of a sad sack, low on self-image and esteem, prone to blame herself for making the child unhappy. The screenwriters have decided on three other emotions, Fear (a really nervous type who wants to be

over-protective, a male voice), Anger, a squashed looking character, also male, and, Disgust, a somewhat petulant and arrogant female voice.

Each of the emotions has its own special colour. Joy is a bright yellow while Sadness is blue. Disgust is green, while Anger is definitely red!

As Riley grows up, we see each of the emotions influencing the young girl. When her loving parents move house, she gets upset, Joy and Sadness becoming lost, as if on another planet, while Fear, Anger and Disgust are in turmoil within her, even leading her to run away from, and catch a bus, petulant and angry with her parents.

In the meantime, the audience sees that Joy and Sadness are lost, trying to find their way back into Riley's mind, and accompanied by her invisible childhood friend, Bingbang.

Joy has to come to realise that she just simply can't eliminate Sadness from every human experience. Sadness is a necessary part of life and, when Joy is able to acknowledge this, trusting Sadness to have her influence, there is a possibility of some kind of recovery and harmony.

Which means that the film is a very nice allegory about human emotions, visualised entertainingly, all at work on a kind of inner computer to try to help the child's growth but, squabbles arising, envy sometime prevailing, leading to enormous confusion.

The end of the film as well as the initial parts of the final credits are well worth seeing for laugh-aloud responses, seeing the emotions within the minds of Riley's parents as, faces-painted, they go to support her at a hockey match. One of the funniest scenes is momentarily inside the mind of a very gawky boy who encounters Riley with the emotions running riot in his mind. There is also a school teacher, a frustrated bus driver – and then, the emotions within a dog and within a cat.

Obviously, plenty of room for an imaginative sequel, even a series.

JURASSIC WORLD

US, 2015, 124 minutes, Colour.

Chris Pratt, Bryce Dallas Howard, Ty Simpkins, Nick Robinson, Vincent D' Onofrio, Irrfan Khan, Jake Johnson, Omar Sy, B D Wong, Judy Greer.

Directed by Colin Trevorrow.

Jurassic used to be a word that scientists used to describe prehistoric stages in Earth's evolution. Ask anyone over the last quarter of a century, after readers had devoured Michael Crichton's novel and moviegoers had stormed the box office for Stephen Spielberg's film version, and Jurassic meant Jurassic Park. The dinosaurs were there, cared for by earnest scientists, getting out of control through aberrations of science, but giving the audiences lots of thrills for their money.

There were two sequels, not quite as startling as the original, to say the least. Surely it was something of a risk to make another Jurassic film decades after the original. Not that filmmakers are usually risk-takers, but Universal Studios must be very happy with the present producers who risked making Jurassic World: an enormous opening weekend in the United States, throughout the world,

and half a billion at the box office before a month was over.

Worth it? This question applies only to the fans, not to those who would not be seen dead, let alone alive, watching a Jurassic movie. And the answer seems to be yes. This sequel moves us back to Jurassic Park with explicit references to the personalities and what had happened before the disaster, re-opening 20 years after the previous collapse. Everything is now under control, under the control of technology and surveillance, under the control of the officer in charge, a rather humourless and uptight Bryce Dallas Howard. Her sister and brother-in-law, covering difficulties, sending their sons to their aunty who is to look after them and show them the sites. She is very busy, promoting Jurassic World, getting contracts, doing deals. She hasn't noticed that there are some strange types around, especially some with military background, led by Vincent D' Onofrio, obvious, well at least two us if not to her, that there will be dangers with the dinosaurs.

Some of the dinosaurs are being trained by a genial young man, Chris Pratt, who knows them by name, and has a way of bringing them under control. His assistant is played by Omar Sy (The Intouchables).

So far, so good, the boys going on all kinds of rides, the visitors seeing all the dinosaurs in their created habitats, tourists galore. Needless to say, there are some scientists who are experimenting with the dinosaurs, introducing all kinds of genes into their system, giving them characteristics of some of the more menacing creatures, and an ability to camouflage, raptor aggressiveness...

While we guess the rest, it is the experience of watching the rest that is important. The mutant dinosaur goes on a rampage, the military try to control but end up decimated, our hero, the trainer, who has had a bad relationship with the manager of Jurassic World in the past, has to join up with her, first of all to save the boys, then to save the park – if possible, with tourists fleeing, dinosaurs pursuing, pterodactyls let loose and swooping, lots of chases, just what the audience needed when they decided to buy their tickets to Jurassic World.

This is a “what if...?” imagining of a world out of control. Interestingly, while we all talk of progress and experts encourage us to venture into all kinds of developments, the classic stories and so many of the movies are actually quite cautious, the Frankenstein Syndrome, where humans exceed their powers, arrogantly manipulating nature, creating monsters.

And, since this is a popular approach to disaster films and apocalyptic scenarios, they will always be welcomed – especially if the action sequences and special effects are well worked into the screenplay as they are in Jurassic World.

MADAME BOVARY

Belgium/US, 2015, 118 minutes, Colour.

Mia Wakowska, Rhys Ifans, Paul Giamatti, Henry Lloyd- Hughes, Logan Marshall- Green, Ezra Miller, Laura Carmichael, Richard Cordery, Olivier Gourmet, Luke Tittensor.

Directed by Sophie Barthes.

Gustave Flaubert was not a prolific novelist. But his Madame Bovary became something of a classic, still highly regarded, still considered an opening into France in the 19th century, manners and

morals.

There have been several film versions of his novel, a 1949 Hollywood version with Jennifer Jones, a French version in 1989 with Isabelle Huppert. This time, it is an international co-production, with Sophie Barthes as the co-writer and the director was born in France and educated in South America and the Middle East, an Australian star, Mia Wasikowska, as Emma Bovary. The merchant Lhereux is played by Welsh Rhys Ifans. Charles Bovary is the British Henry Lloyd- Hughes, the Marquis is American Logan Marshall- Green, and Charles Bovary's friend and adviser, Monsieur Hamois, is American Paul Giamatti.

One of the difficulties for this international co-production is the mixture of accents, especially Mia Wasikowska with something of an American accent which the director thought was the neutral accent. It jars throughout the film.

But, that criticism aside, this is a most impressive production, immersing the audience in the 19th century, costumes and decor, wealth and ordinary life in a provincial country town with visits to the society world, the world of business, and the cathedral in Rouen.

But, the focus has to be on Emma Bovary herself. There is very little dialogue in the first ten to fifteen minutes of the film, rather communication by visuals and body language, Emma as a young girl along with other students in an enclosed school, supervised by nuns, learning to go through all the manners and styles of cultivated young ladies. As she lights a candle in the chapel before she leaves, she prays that she will find a good husband.

As her story unfolds, the audience realises with her, that she was quite inexperienced, sheltered, and had imagined a life that was not to be. She later confides that life has been a disappointment. It seems to begin well with a celebration of her marriage, a meal outside event, with a fond farewell from her doting father. As she leaves the party with her husband, with a horse and cart, she hopes that life as the wife of a country doctor will fulfil her dreams.

It is not that Charles Bovary is a bad man. Rather, he is duty-bound, conscious of his role as a doctor and his responsibilities, a doctor by day, a husband by night, rather unimaginative and without a clue as to his wife's feelings. The village is small, her husband walking her briefly to the edge of the town - and that is it. She feels confined to the house, becomes bored, leaps at the opportunity when the local Marquis invites her to ride to hounds where she witnesses the brutal slaying of the stag.

Temptation comes to her in the form of the local merchant, Lhereux, very well played by Rhys Ifans. He tempts her with luxury, with beautiful fabrics, the possibility of fine dresses, curtains, rugs, and she indulges her love fine things with reckless extravagance, beguiled by seemingly unlimited credit.

It seems inevitable that she will be looking outside the house for some kind of fulfilment, for relationship, for sexual experience – which she finds for a brief time with the Marquis, and also a brief time with a lawyer in Rouen. But, there is gossip, which her husband does not seem to have heard but, passing the local peasant women in the town, she knows that she is the object of the gossip.

There might be some hope in an incident where she urges her husband to operate on the clubfoot of his friend's apprentice, thinking that this might be some kind of achievement and that the doctor will

be happy to move to the city. She is frustrated by the result.

Whether it is fate, whether it is her disillusionment, whether it is a result of her impetuous nature and self-indulgence, she is on the path to tragedy.

The director stages every scene with impressive visual craft, with fine performances, with a sense of French society at the time, differences in class, wealthy aspirations, the role of duty and its suffocating consequences on those who want more from life.

This is a fine film showing how significant literature can be well dramatised on screen.

MAGIC MIKE XXL

US, 2015, 115 minutes, Colour.

Channing Tatum, Joe Manganiello, Matt Bomer, Adam Rodriguez, Kevin Nash, Gabriel Iglesias, Jada Pinkett Smith, Donald Glover, Andie Mc Dowell, Amber Heard, Elizabeth Banks.

Directed by Gregory Jacobs.

Big audiences hurried to Magic Mike back in 2012, eager to participate in the lives of a group of male strippers, their characters, their routines, their emotional tangles, the phenomenon of performing at club nights for women to come to ogle the dancers, throw money at them and shriek at the experience.

In many ways, much the same this time. It is explained to the audience and characters that Dallas, the manager, played by Matthew Mc Conaughey, has gone out on his own. Mike himself, Channing Tatum, has not been dancing for three years and has been trying to run a furniture business, trying to make ends meet, trying to provide pay for his one employee. Then he gets a call from one of his old associates, Tarzan, who seems to indicate that Dallas has died, so off goes Mike to a wake – which is anything but! And, before you can say magic, Mike decides that he wants to join the group and go on one last trip and gig to the strippers' convention in Myrtle Beach.

This reviewer didn't find the first film particularly interesting though it had a certain verve. While there is some verve here, it is not enough to make the film really interesting unless you are an avid devotee of the strippers who like to call themselves male entertainers.

On the road, they have a car accident, lose the MC, while Mike has a brainwave to look up an old flame who runs a strip club for African-American [women](#), Domina. As the troupe call in, there are quite a number of acts in her club, plenty of shrieking women again, and a seemingly endless pile of dollar notes to throw at the men. Of course, the acts are lewd and suggestive and the whole thing is pretty raucous, run by Rome, Jada Pinkett Smith. The next stop is at the home of a young woman, Amber Heard, whom they met on their travels, to a group of wealthy white Southern women, led by Andie Mc Dowell, who shriek less, but who have many more dollars, and more of the suggestiveness.

While lewd and suggestive are words that seem to have moralistic tone, and they do, some of the ordinary bloggers on the Internet Movie Database, bring up a word which means the same thing but it is more ethically neutral. It is the word classy – and commenting that Magic Mike XXL and the performances are certainly not classy at all.

There are a lot of scenes of bonding between the men, some rehearsals when they get to Myrtle Beach, though how the staging and the performances that follow could be prepared in such a short time only Hollywood could tell. Each of the entertainers gets his own act, but since it is a convention, there are many more women to shriek, and we are shown the cash machines doling out dollars and dollars for eager responses.

Magic Mike XXL will find its audience – but it may well be much smaller than the first film (though Channing Tatum seems more alive to than usual!).

MARSHLAND

Spain, 2014, 105 minutes, Colour.

Javier Gutierrez, Raul Arevalo.

Directed by Alberto Rodríguez.

Marshland was the winner of several awards, especially in Spain, its country of origin.

Audiences always enjoy a solid detective investigation as well as an interesting murder mystery. Marshland provides these – and, with its setting in Andalusia and the marsh country, many audiences who appreciated the television series, True Detective, make some links.

The setting is very important, the strange marshlands and the people who live and work there, something of an isolated community. The time setting is also very important. It is 1980, four years after the end of the Franco regime which dominated Spain for four decades, the period of repression under fascist government. At this stage, the people are not used to the new freedoms and the film makes explicit allusions to police activity in the past, putting down protests, shooting people, torturing them and the cover-ups. It emerges that one of the detective sent to solve the current mystery had been a vigorous police torturer, something he denies, but proof is given that the accusation is true.

The film opens with overhead shots of the marshlands, looking like artificial diagrams, but with the camera slowly descending to the waterways, the fields, the intersections. And, on one of the roads, the detectives experiencing a car breakdown, and taken into the town.

The murder mystery concerns two teenage girls who disappeared, but their bodies, violated and mutilated, are soon found. It soon emerges that other girls have disappeared, parents upset and distraught.

The film shows the two detectives, quite different in personality, the older one more assured with a touch of humour and enjoying life, the other one in his 30s, much more serious, concerned about possible promotion to Madrid and phoning his pregnant wife.

Parents are interviewed. Other school students are also interviewed. Various characters in the town come under suspicion, and detection leads to a hunting lodge and an abandoned hut on the property. Some negatives of photos are found, indicating sexual behaviour. Brochures are also found from a company which is soliciting responses from young girls for better jobs in the city.

One of the characters in the town is a writer, imagining that he might become a Truman Capote, writing a 'real life' book about the crimes and investigations. He is particularly helpful in collaborating with the police, developing photos, giving information about the town.

The film is in delineating the characters of the two men, their capacity for working together, the differences in their temperaments. The local authorities want the crimes solved. Some of the people in the town become more suspicious as the investigation goes on, including a dangerous car pursuit at the night on the marshes.

Ultimately, the further victim is rescued, the mystery solved, the police are acclaimed and become famous in the newspapers.

But, along with the detection and the solved mystery, the film is most interesting in its re-creation of the place, the period, the people and the aftermath of the Franco regime.

MINIONS

US, 2015, 91 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Sandra Bullock, Jon Hamm, Michael Keaton, Alison Janney, Steve Coogan, Jennifer Saunders, Geoffrey Rush, Steve Carell, Pierre Coffin.

Directed by Kyle Balda, Pierre Coffin.

Everything that you didn't know that you would need to know, and it didn't occur to you to ask, about Minions.

Children's audiences could tell you that the minions were those funny little yellow creatures, with names like Kevin and Steve, some with one eye, some with two, with little mouths that were prone to be uttering gibberish in excited tones, communicating in their own language which had dashes of words of English, Spanish, French and who knows what other languages! They made a great impact in Despicable Me and enjoyed their comeback in Despicable Me 2. And here they are again, all courtesy of Pierre Coffin, who codirected the film, co-wrote the film and provides all those conversations which we do understand despite the fact of scarcely recognising a word.

It may not have occurred to us to wonder where the Minions came from but the prologue to the film gives us the answer. They are a result of evolution, from little specks to fully grown (well that is, perhaps, an exaggeration so small are they), timid little community out of which emerged Kevin, a natural-evolved leader, who wants to take the Minions out of their comfort zone. He doesn't get many volunteers, mainly Stuart and, then, little Bob.

We know from the earlier films that they have a propensity for seeking out villains, and a natural evil-bent, that drew them to the character Gru. But how did this instinct develop? We have a very funny, collage of their attempts to find villains that they can follow – but fail. When they arrive in the United States, it is 1968, a huge poster of Richard Nixon for his campaign, a time of flower power and a range of popular songs that recur throughout the film.

But, they are rewarded, by discovering an arch-villain, Scarlet Overkill, and find that she is due to be

the star of the villains' convention. Off they go, hitchhiking, and being picked up by a really nice-seeming American family, mom and pop and the two kids – who suddenly put on masks and rush in to rob a bank. Just the right family for the Minions. And they are off to the conference as well.

It is one of those very American conventions, loads of stalls, loads of spruiking, villains galore – though most of them are quite inept, including Prof Flux who travelled back and forth from the future and had a different professor each time he returned – with their deciding that they should get rid of the superfluous ones, only, of course, killing off the original!

And there is Scarlet Overkill, voiced by Sandra Bullock, a larger than life presence, highly theatrical in her presentation, supported by her husband, voiced by Jon Hamm with some humorous remarks. Scarlet defies everyone to defeat her – with, in some mixups, Kevin and his friends outwitting her. She takes them on, and off they go to adventures in the United Kingdom, to London of the young Queen Elizabeth, to the Tower of London, security guards, and a deadly plot to steal the Crown from the Queen and for Scarlet herself to be installed and crowned in Westminster Abbey.

So, plenty for the British audience as well as the Americans – and it will be interesting to know what the Queen actually thought about how she was presented, robbed of the Crown, cavorting with the public in a bar, rather raucously voiced by Jennifer Saunders.

Whether Scarlet is successful in stealing the Crown and keeping it, you'll have to go and see Minions. The nice American family is there at every turn cheering on the Minions. and, if enough audiences round the world cheer them on at the box office, there is plenty of scope for them to return.

MR. HOLMES

UK, 2015, 105 minutes, Colour.

Ian Mc Kellen, Milo Parker, Laura Linney, Hattie Morahan, Patrick Kennedy, Hiroyuki Sanada, Roger Allam, Colin Starkey, Philip Davies, Nicholas Rowe, Frances de la Tour.

Directed by Bill Condon.

This very entertaining film has a lot going for it, a lot of fine ingredients and all fitting together perfectly.

In a press conference, Ian Mc Kellen stated that Sherlock Holmes was the greatest Englishman who never lived. Fans of Sherlock Holmes will appreciate this film, a story of Mr Holmes who gave up his investigations 35 years earlier, regretting that he did not understand the case that he was dealing with, the personalities involved, and the sad ending to the case. He has retired to Sussex, as was mentioned in some of the stories and some of the film versions, to keep bees.

Ian Mc Kellen is a very good choice to portray Holmes. He has the opportunity to play him at age 93, in that retirement in Sussex, keeping the bees, living quietly and unobtrusively, cared for by his stern housekeeper, Mrs Munro (played plainly but subtly by Laura Linney), a war widow, with a young son, Tom (a lively Milo Parker), who sees Holmes as something of a father or grandfather-figure. It is 1947.

We learn, however, that Holmes has made a visit to Japan, searching for a herb, Prickly Ash, that, with Royal Jelly, could be a means of healing for the ailments of old age. And Holmes is not without his ailments. We do see scenes of Holmes in Japan, especially visiting Hiroshima, and some visuals of local people who had been effected by the radiation. His host, who helps him to find the Prickly Ash, also has his own story which Holmes uncovers and, rather uncharacteristically, writes a letter at the end to this Japanese man, a letter of comfort about his father who disappeared long since to work with the British.

And, there are also flashbacks to the story, in 1912, where a man comes to ask Holmes advice about his wife who is deeply disturbed after two miscarriages. Speaking of flashbacks, there are also flashbacks within this story, to illustrate and traumatise it. It also means that we see Holmes at 58, investigating the case, indulging in some of his propensity for disguises, having an emotional discussion with the distraught mother, but quite misreading the situation, something which has haunted him and is now compelling him, at age 93, to write the story. As he writes, at different stages during the film, he has discussions with young Tom who is an alert lad and offers some clues and indications of how the story might be written.

In the scenes in 1947, Mrs Munro feels that Holmes is alienating the affections of her son (and with our 21st century alertness, noticing that Laura Linney plays Mrs Munro as looking at Holmes with a look of a mother who is apprehensive that the man is a paedophile). Rather, Holmes is very supportive of Mrs Munro, teaches Tom a great deal about bees, though there is some melodrama towards the end when Tom is stung.

This is a fine Sherlock Holmes story, a portrayal of his character, and indications of mellowing as he grows older, a touch of the old investigation style, his conversation which is always strong on facts and deductive reasoning, a film that happily shows us the best of Sherlock Holmes.

THE NIGHTINGALE/ YE YING - LE PROMENEUR D'OISEAU

China/France, 2014, 100 minutes, Colour.

Baotian Li, Xioran Li, Hao Qin, Xin Yi Yang.

Directed by Philippe Muyl.

While there are a number of Chinese domestic stories and comedies in film, many western audiences are more used to historical dramas and martial arts action films.

The Nightingale is a film with universal appeal, written and directed by a Frenchman, Philippe Muyl, interpreting a Chinese story with a Chinese cast. It could have been the screenplay for filming in any country but, here it is, leading its audience into contemporary relationship stories.

At the centre of the film is a little girl, Ren Xing, whose parents are highflyers in Beijing, he a rising star architect, his wife involved in business. The jobs require both of them to travel internationally, he to Tokyo and Hong Kong, she to Paris. Ren Xing is the product of a one-child family policy, terribly spoiled, whose main companion seems to be her iPad. When the couple have to be away at the same time, and their madi has to go on long journey to her son's wedding, the mother decides that it would be best if her husband's father minded her. The son has not spoken to his father for years because the grandfather had taken the little girl to a huge bird market and let go of her hand and,

for some time, lost her. Her father seems to be completely unforgiving.

This means that also at the centre of the film is the grandfather who wants to return to his home town in the countryside, moving to Beijing after his wife's death 18 years earlier. He had promised to return.

But, also at the centre of the film, is his Nightingale. He has tended the bird for the 18 years, enjoying it singing, it being his constant companion. The Nightingale accompanies grandfather and granddaughter on their journey to the town.

The film is a variation on a road movie, although the old man and the little girl travel by train, where she prefers to look at the iPad instead of out the window, refuses to eat when they go to the dining car, wakes up in the middle of the night declaring she is hungry, then pretends to be sick. At this stage, many audiences will feel that she would have benefited by some confiscation like that during the Cultural Revolution where there were no such things as iPads. Some discipline and manners would not have hurt either, an indictment of children who are both self-centred and iPad-centred.

We know that the two will bond, but it takes travel by train, bus and breakdown, car and boat before they arrive in the town and the little girl's eyes have been opened to a world outside herself. When she arrives at the town, she finds friends, plays with children, works in the rice field, experiences hospitality and learns to respect and love her grandfather.

It is the little girl who, towards the end of the film, sits with her grandfather and explains the allegory of the Nightingale, its being confined, its love of singing, yet its need to be free.

When her parents arrive, she is oblivious of their anxiety because she has been happy with other people, with her grandfather, being active and outgoing. For those who are anti-iPad-preoccupation amongst children, there is a scene that they will relish towards the end where she is challenged about the iPod – but from a little boy younger than she, out in the countryside, who is absolutely up to date on the latest models.

While the focus is on the little girl, there is also a wonderful scene of reconciliation between father and son, genuine talking and listening, happy reminiscences, the healing of hurts – and this happens also between husband and wife.

The film has a great deal of charm, despite the brattiness of the little girl at the beginning, and ends with a great deal of hope.

RUBEN GUTHRIE

Australia, 2015, 95 minutes, Colour.

Patrick Brammall, Alex Dimitriades, Abbey Lee, Harriet Dyer, Jeremy Sims, Brenton Thwaites, Robyn Nevin, Jack Thompson, Aaron Bertram.

Directed by Brendan Cowell.

Ruben Guthrie proudly and facetiously states his claim at his first AA Meeting, "My Name Is Ruben

Guthrie and I'm in Advertising". He also acknowledges his mother who has brought him long. Prior to this, we have seen him alcohol and drug-high, not the type that most of us would want to meet, even if we were in advertising. During a party at his lavish waterside home, he goes up onto the roof and jumps into his swimming pool – defiance, stupidity, death wish? Or all three?

When you come to think of it, Ruben Guthrie, when sober, is a more acceptable but not all that attractive, character.

What has happened is that Ruben, an acclaimed advertising personality, winner of international awards, hail-fellow-well-met, is challenged by his girlfriend of six years, Czech-born model, Zoya, is so exasperated with his behaviour that, despite loving him, she tells him she is going back home and will return after a year and that he has to stay off the drink and the drugs for that period. Actually, he does.

The screenplay emphasises this by placing the particular number of days sober on the screen.

The screenplay was written by Brendan Cowell, based on his own drinking experiences (and the influence of his mother), and was based on a successful play for the theatre. Patrick Brammall (Upper Middle Bogan, Glitch) is Cowell's alter ego and does quite a successful job of interpreting his character, making him quite interesting at times while not particularly likeable. Robyn Nevin plays his mother and Jack Thompson his easy-going father. Abbey Lee plays Zoya. And Alex Dimitriades is his gay best friend, 'If you can't drink one, then why not ten'.

At work, Ruben is pressurised by his boss, Jeremy Sims, to go back on the drink and to regain his mojo, to improve the quality of his campaigns. At the office is a kind of whizzkid, oblivious of what anybody else thinks about him, all cheeky hail-fellow-well-met much more than he realises – a very humorous cameo from rising star, Brenton Thwaites.

Ruben does gain some friends during the year, especially the big and burly Ken (Aaron Bertram) from the meetings who offers good advice and Virginia (Harriet Dyer), also from the group, but preoccupied with trends and what is politically correct, who entangles herself in Ruben's emotions, building up to the encounter with Zoya on her return.

As with so many Australian films, the reviewers have been fairly severe, more so than if it were the equivalent story from Britain or the United States – it is not meant to be a profound character analysis, the Brendan Cowell would hope that it does offer an image of a highflier, overconfident, not prone to have regard for others, challenged to do something different with his life, trying to go through some means to achieve this, but putting his foot in it, socially, emotionally, along the way.

(And Brendan Cowell got over his lapses to become a successful playwright and to continue his successful acting career.)

SELF/LESS

US, 2015, 117 minutes, Colour.

Ryan Reynolds, Natalie Martinez, Matthew Goode, Ben Kingsley, Victor Garber, Derek Luke, Michelle Dockery.

Directed by Tarsem Singh.

The premise of this drama which, perhaps unfortunately for the very serious-minded, becomes something of an action and shootout film towards the end rather than staying with the implications of the drama, is very interesting. Some films explore cryogenics in which the person pays a company to freeze their body, to be thawed later so that the person might have a new life – later. The premise of this one is that a scientist has worked out a process by which an ageing and ill person can have a soul or a self-transfer from the debilitated body to a healthy body and come alive, younger, stronger. The limit, however, is that the transferee should not have any contact with their past.

In the early moments of this film, billionaire Ben Kingsley, a sometimes ruthless head of business, who is alienated from his social-minded protester daughter, Michelle Dockery of *Downton Abbey*, decides that he will make the transfer. He is in the power of a young, rather cool and calculating scientist played by Matthew Goode.

If you have read the credits on the advertising and seen Ryan Reynolds as the star of the film, you will quickly realise that he is the one who provides the body for the transfer.

Were this a documentary, that might be the end of it as the new person lived happily ever after this breakthrough process. But this is never the case in science-fiction. Writers and audiences seem to prefer the Frankenstein mythology, that the scientist or the doctor usurps their human capacities with hubris that makes them want to “play God” and they create a monster.

It is slightly more subtle here, with reminiscences of people who believe in reincarnation and have memories from their past. The billionaire in his new body, initially wants to live the high life of self-gratification, but images surface, images from the past, from the character of the body they now inhabit. Here is a moral dilemma. Does the new inhabitant suppress the memories of the past or encourage them, follow them through, search out the story of the original person in the body.

Since this is a science-fiction film, it is obvious that the billionaire is going to try to find out what happens, discovering the truth, discovering the motivation of the man for surrendering his body, the repercussions for his wife and daughter.

And, of course, the scientist will be none too pleased (and there is an interesting twist on his identity as well) and repercussions for a close friend of the billionaire and his sickly son.

The writers of this film are in fact Spaniards, the Pastor Brothers, who have written some horror stories in the past. It means then that their road towards culmination will draw from action and horror rather than from psychological resolution, which will not only involve guns but also a flamethrower.

While this means that what might have been something of an art-house science-fiction exploration of identity, the nature of the self, the self becoming less than it was, and the potential for selflessness in the altruistic sense (and all those meanings are included in the title of the film), it goes to a more multiplexed mentality culminating in action, melodrama, but not without romantic hope.

STRANGERLAND

Australia, 2015, 112 minutes, Colour.

Nicole Kidman, Joseph Fiennes, Hugo Weaving, Madison Brown, Nicholas Hamilton, Meine Wyatt, Lisa Flanagan.

Directed by Kim Farrant.

Strangerland was filmed around Broken Hill, a location that may seem familiar to many Australian audiences but, in fact, is rather remote. The town in the film resembles many country towns, especially those in the outback, small towns, for instance, in north-western Queensland. Which means that this is a strangerland to most audiences.

We are introduced to the Parker family who have moved to this town from another not so far away – although the reason is not made clear until later in the film and is key to understanding the tensions within the family. The mother, Catherine, is played with quite some intensity by Nicole Kidman. Her husband, Matthew, played by Joseph Fiennes, is the local pharmacist. They have two children, Lily, a rather precocious and sexually curious teenager, and Tommy, younger, intense, who tends to brood.

The film is beautifully photographed, catching both the dreariness of living in this town as well as the beautiful desert and mountain scenery that surrounds it.

Many audiences could identify with the seeming ordinariness of the Parker family, the tensions with the children, the mother and her concern, the father and his strictness, the daughter and her wanting to, rebel, going down to the local skateboard rink and flirting with the teenagers – and more, using her brother as a cover.

The key element of the film is the disappearance of the children and the search for them in the desert and the hills, led by the local policeman, played by Hugo Weaving. Early in the search, it is impeded by an enormous sand storm enveloping the town, the locals having to clean up before they can go to search.

While the policeman is quite phlegmatic, Catherine and Matthew are highly emotional, Catherine sometimes going, over the top, especially in some sexual advance sequences as well as her going out into the desert, stripping, and walking through the main street. Matthew is too often restrained in his emotions, but bursting out in anger, against a teacher who had a relationship with his daughter, against a young aboriginal man who works at his house, suddenly breaking loose and bashing him.

The cross-section of people in the town is familiar enough, the tendency to redneck attitudes, the idle teenagers, the aborigines who are part of the town and yet not quite.

While the film does come to some kind of resolution, it is not quite... Which leaves the audience identifying with the situation, if not the exact feelings, of the parents, realising that this kind of disappearance can easily happen, happens quite often, leaving a hole in the lives of the parents.

With interesting performances, with fine photography, there are many things to commend about Strangerland – but, while watching it, there is the feeling that for many, situations, performances are sometimes too melodramatic to be satisfying.

SLOW WEST

UK/New Zealand, 2015, 84 minutes, Colour.

Kodi Smit-McPhee, Michael Fassbender, Ben Mendelsohn, Caren Pistorius.

Directed by John Maclean.

The title is descriptive – but it also serves as a warning for those who might be expecting a lively Western, fast-pace, instead of a slow West.

The film is also brief, the first film by Scottish director John Maclean, and winner of the Grand Jury prize at the Sundance Festival in 2015.

The main feature that makes this Western distinctive is that it was filmed in New Zealand, the terrain not looking exactly like the familiar West or even Colorado where the film is set, but the mountains and planes, often bare, that audiences know from their seeing scenes of Peter Jackson's Middle Earth sagas. In some ways, this distances the action from the familiar West, but also involves us more in the characters who pass through these landscapes.

Some of the film was made in Scotland, especially the establishing sequences and some flashbacks where we learn the story of the teenager whom we find riding through Colorado on a quest to find Rose, the young woman with whom he was infatuated back home, and whom he has idealised, but who has fled to America with her father after the death of the young man's father. The young man is wealthy and so is able to afford this trip even though he is completely inexperienced and soon finds himself in trouble.

The young man, Jay, is played by Australian actor Kodi Smit-McPhee, who is been appearing in Australian films like *Romulus*, *My Father and Matching Jack* as well as international film is like *Let Me In* and *The Road*. A tall thin figure, dressed rather properly, he seems completely out of place as he rides his horse through the West.

Michael Fassbender, becoming well known as a leading man and character actor, *Prometheus*, *Shame*, *12 Years a Slave*, is Silas who has been a member of a gang riding the West (led by Australia's Ben Mendelsohn), but has gone out on his own. He saves Jay, accompanies him something like a chaperone, helping him out in difficult circumstances. Jay encounters some Native American Indians fleeing from the military who are shooting them down. He also encounters the gang and its leader. And he finds a man in the desert, studying Indian customs and writing up their extinction, who welcomes him but then takes his goods, leaving him only a note with an arrow pointing west (which he picks up as it blows away and, of course, has no idea where West is).

The film highlights the isolation when Silas and Jay find a store in the middle of nowhere, only to have a desperate man and his wife hold up the store, leading to deaths, and two young orphans stranded. There is also a strange looking cleric – and we know he could not be in any way a cleric.

The quest leads to the house where Rose and her father live, but there is a bounty of \$2000 on them, dead or alive. This means that the alleged cleric arrives and sets up his rifle. The gang arrives, also after the bounty. And Jay walks into the middle of things, happy at last to have finished his quest, to have found Rose.

But this is not a Hollywood picture, rather, an independent small-budget film, so that, while there is something of a happy ending, there is something of a very unhappy ending as well.

Fine to look at, interesting performances, tantalising interpretation of loners in the West, gunfighters and bounty hunters, it is a well-made film that will appeal more to an arthouse audience.

TANGERINES/ MANDARLINID

Georgia/Estonia, 2014, 87 minutes, Colour.

Lembit Ulfak, Elmo Nuganen, Girogi Nakashidze, Misha Keshkhi.

Directed by Zaza Urushadze.

A fine film.

Tangerines is translated in the subtitle as clementines, while listening to the dialogue and looking at the fruit in the orchards, there is reference to mandarins. No matter what the actual translation, the abundant fruit in the orchard, its fruitfulness, the fact that it needs to be picked and collected, offering food for nourishment, and the fear that if it is not picked, it will perish, means that tangerines is an evocative symbol for this film.

Audiences may wonder about the connection between Estonia and Georgia and the film as a co-production. As we wonder about this, the pre-credits inform us that there were colonies of Estonians in the Caucasus, in Georgia, living and working in peace. But, at the outbreak of war between Georgia and Akhbasia in 1992, most of the Estonians went back to their homeland leaving empty villages and houses.

We immediately see an old man, a grandfather, Ivo, working with wood in his workshop, making crates that can be used for the collection of the tangerines. Almost immediately, he is visited by two Chechen mercenaries, Russian-backed mercenaries who are fighting against the Georgians. They want food, treat Ivo well, but warn him of the dangers of the war and that others will not be so kind.

Ivo has an Estonian friend, Margus, who tends the tangerine trees. When a skirmish between Chechens and Georgians leads to deaths outside Ivo's house, Ivo tends the wounds of Ahmed who had just visited him. As they bury the dead, they discover that one of the Georgians, Nika, is still alive and Ivo and Margus rescue him, calling on an Estonian doctor who treats each soldier equally.

What the film offers is an opportunity to appreciate the people who get caught up in the war, not be any part of its making, who live a simple life, only in indirect contact with the battles, but suffering the consequences, uncertain of what is happening, the times of war when each side is dominant and then overcome. In the uncertainty, what the two Estonian men have to offer is sympathy, healing, some understanding, and the pledge that the two enemies, despite their rivalry, will not kill each other in the house. Gradually, the kindness and dignified bearing of Ivo and his saving the lives of each of the men has quite an impact as they begin to treat each other as human beings rather than as enemies. Ivo hears their stories, as the audience hears them and appreciates the common humanity of each of the men, despite one being a mercenary and the other an actor who has felt an obligation to defend his country.

The cast is small in number, but the key characters are well-delineated, well-written, excellently acted. In fact, the film is beautifully crafted, and, despite some scenes of shooting deaths, a film that pleads for peace.

Audiences, for whom the Caucasus countries may seem remote, will begin to understand traditional communities, the local wars can break out, civil wars – which has happened at various times with different states of Georgia wanting to secede, relying on Russian backing. The film also throws light on what life in the countryside of eastern Ukraine is like with fights for secession, independence.

TED 2

US, 2015, 115 minutes, Colour.

Mark Wahlberg, Seth Mac Farlane, Amanda Seyfried, Jessica Barth, Giovanni Ribisi, Morgan Freeman, Sam J. Jones, Patrick Warburton, Michael Dorn, Bill Smitrovich, John Slattery, John Carroll Lynch, Ron Canada, Liam Neeson, Jay Leno, Dennis Hayesbert,.

Directed by Seth Mac Farlane.

Fastidious is the word that comes to mind while watching Ted and Ted 2. Not that the Ted and the films are fastidious in any aspect. Rather, it is the warning that comes to mind that any potential audiences which see themselves as fastidious should not go to see Ted.

That being said, it also has to be said that the two films are very funny. And it is somewhat embarrassing to admit this, given the nature and subject of many of the jokes as well as the continued crass language that comes from the mouths of Ted (voiced by writer and director, Seth MacFarlane) and his great friend, John (Mark Wahlberg).

Ted made a great impact in 2012, with a modern urban fairytale (with grit and with attitude) where a little boy, John, wishes that his teddy bear could come alive – and his wish is granted. Ted seems a nice cuddly companion to a little boy – but, then he grows up, and takes on some of the less ingratiating aspects of the culture, no limits on his language, few limits on his blunt expressions, and a preoccupation with aspects of sex and his not being a stranger to drugs.

We all have our areas of reservation and this reviewer wishes that there wasn't such a constant emphasis on casual drugtaking and its consequences – making it look too easy, too irresponsible.

At the opening of this sequel, after a couple of minutes of an extraordinary prologue, song and dance routine to Irving Berlin's Steppin' out with my Baby, filmed in Busby Berkeley 1930s musical style, quite lavish and entertaining – and with Ted joining in with the dancers, it is Ted's wedding to his girlfriend Tammy – and everybody, including the audience, takes it for granted that Tammy and Ted will make a happy couple. Not always. Clashes, some fights – and they even have some rivalry at the local supermarket where they both work as cashiers.

One way to save the marriage is to have a child. There are some extraordinarily un-fastidious comedy sequences in the attempt to get a sperm donation. And then Tammy, this time quite seriously, is told that her drugtaking has ruined her reproductive system. And when they try to adopt, it emerges that Ted cannot be registered as a person but simply as property.

This leads the film in another direction, court cases to establish Ted's identity and his rights as a person. John and Ted employ a young lawyer, Amanda Seyfried, as Samantha L Jackson (with jokes accordingly proving that Sam has little knowledge of popular culture). She is also into drugs, quite extensively, though allegedly to soothe her migraines. Needless to say, Ted and John think she is the ideal lawyer – and, it provides an opportunity for the touch of romantic comedy.

Court cases – and Ted losing his case, and the possibility of going to New York City to enlist the help of a very serious and senior lawyer, Morgan Freeman – who does give Ted quite a lecture, very serious in tone, about his wayward lifestyle.

But, before everything can be solved, Ted encounters his nemesis, Donnie (Giovanni Ribesi), who was obsessed with Ted in the first film and tries to do a deal with Hasbro to make the Ted bear as marketable. This finale happens at the huge Comic Con show in New York City, loads of fans (and fanatics) all dressed as characters from Star Wars, Star Trek, Mutant Turtles...

There is happy ending – but, in case you're wondering what actually happens and whether Ted could be a person, there are two solutions: one is to see the film, the other, for the fastidious, is to ask someone who has gone and enjoyed the comedy to reveal what happened.

(The joke with Liam Neeson continues after the final credits.)

TERMINATOR: GENISYS

US, 2015, 126 minutes, Colour.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jason Clarke, Emelia Clark, Jai Courtney, J.K. Simmons, Courtney B. Vance, Byung-hun Lee, Sandrine Holt.

Directed by Alan Taylor.

Somebody replied that they would never see a film which could not spell Genesis correctly in its title. Well, it is not that Genesis – rather, it is her world conspiracy for machines taking over power, a new beginning, so why use the traditional name? This is a new Genisys.

But, that is getting ahead of things.

The original Terminator films became classics soon after the release, James Cameron (pre-Titanic and pre-Avatar) directed them to quite some critical acclaim as well as huge box office. There was another Terminator film, Terminator: Salvation, with Christian Bale but, it soon became lost to memory. So, why another? Why not?

Arnold Schwarzenegger has finished his time as Governor of California and has returned to his screen career. Since The Terminator films were some of his biggest successes, time to capitalise on him. But, isn't he too old? That is a question that recurs in the screenplay – with the wonderful response, consoling to those who are not as young as we used to be, "old but not obsolete".

In fact, Schwarzenegger is not obsolete – and has an opportunity to appear in several incarnations of the Terminator. There is some footage from the first film with his coming back from the future to menace the young woman, Sarah Connor, who is to be the mother of the future saviour, John

Connor. That was The Terminator. The character in Terminator 2: Judgement Day was much more benign, sent as a protector. It is he who is still around, vanquishes the killer machine and continues with his duties. Since these are all time-travel films, this terminator has survived from 1984 to 2017, becoming a little more wrinkled, and much greyer... But not obsolete!

To get us in the mood, with the touch of the post-apocalyptic, there is a pre-credit sequence where San Francisco is spectacularly destroyed. Then to the future, a grim place, where the machines have practically taken over and the rebellion against them is led by John Connor (Jason Clarke). There are to be two raids on the machine centres, in Colorado and at the core factory in San Francisco. But, John wants to send a loyal lieutenant back into the past to care for his mother because time can be altered and San Francisco could escape destruction. The earnest young time traveller is Kyle, Jai Courtney.

While the Terminator films are meant to be rather escapist, you have to try to keep your wits about you as you time travel with the characters, try to work out what has changed and what has not, The time travel takes Kyle back to 1984 (with some flashbacks to Sarah Connor and her childhood to remind us of her story in case we had forgotten) and the period before the destruction of San Francisco. Can Kyle and Sarah travel forward to 2017 and prevent the destruction?

The answer is obviously yes, but much more easily said than done. Off they go, pursued by the police, pursued by disguised machines, melting and recovering as they did in the previous films, hoping to find the old terminator, affectionately called Pops, who does eventually turn up but has been delayed by the traffic! There is a further complication as they find John Connor in 2017, not exactly the John that Kyle had known before he was sent back to the past.

At this point, it is best to surrender the mind and just respond to the visuals and the emotions, the split-second timing, helicopter flights, Pops doing all he can to help – and reassuring Sarah, “I’ll be back”, getting into the centre, the attempts with weapons and explosives to destroy Skynet (the name given to the machines’ plan for domination) and a whole lot of mano a mano fights.

So, it is more or less as expected, despite the time and plot complications, an entertainment for the fans – and the final credits evaders will miss the throbbing clue to indicate, of course, that Skynet still lives.

THE WOMEN HE’S UNDRESSED

Australia, 2015, 99 minutes, Colour.
Darren Gilshennen, Deborah Kennedy, Louis Alexander.
Directed by Gillian Armstrong.

To be told that this very interesting documentary is about costume designer, Orry- Kelly, may not ring many bells with contemporary audiences – with an exception for those who avidly read all the credits on the films from the golden years of Hollywood, especially those from Warner Brothers. His name occurs regularly during the 1930s and 1940s.

This means that he is of particular interest to film buffs. But, director Gillian Armstrong has opened up Orry- Kelly’s career for Australian audiences. He was from the coastal town of Kiama, south of

Sydney, growing there at the beginning of the 20th century, was awkward at sport yet skilled in following his father's tradition as a tailor, but more interested in women's clothes. Off he went to Sydney, to King's Cross where he started to work as a painter, living in Woolloomooloo and aware of this seedier side of life in Sydney, while working in a bank. He was keen on theatre and was to appear with one line in a show starring Roy Rene, Mo.

However, off he then went to the United States, living in New York City, becoming involved in musical theatre but, after dropping some of the chorus girls, literally, he felt that he was better suited to stage work and costume design. People began to take notice and he eventually went out to Hollywood, made an impression on Jack Warner, and became, for many years, the top costume designer at Warner Brothers, not without clashes with the boss.

On a personal level, he lived in a relationship with Cary Grant for many years, rather more open about his sexuality than Cary Grant was, or Randolph Scott with whom Cary Grant lived.

Where the film is telling for movie buffs is in the information about the stars that Orry- Kelly dressed with many sequences from the films, especially those of Bette Davis, with explanations of why a particular costume and design, colours, were chosen to contribute to the drama and its cinematic impact. This continued into the 1940s when he was fired by Warner Brothers, found some work at MGM, including sharing an Oscar for the costume designs for *An American in Paris*, 1951.

Orry- Kelly had relationship problems, as well as drinking problems, but worked to overcome the latter. And, generally every year, he would go home to visit Australia and his mother. One of the devices the film uses is to have an actor, Darren Gilshennen, playing Orry- Kelly, mainly sitting in a rowing boat, sometimes on the water, sometimes on a studio stage with sea background, using the image of his sailing, paddling, going in circles, venturing out, to dramatise the developments in his life. Actress Deborah Kennedy plays his mother, talking to camera while hanging out the washing in Kiama in his early years, then dressed rather fashionably, sitting at a table, still talking to camera, explaining her son's success.

In his later years, in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, he won Oscars for costumes for *Some Like it Hot*, 1959, and *Irma La Douce*, 1963.

Gillian Armstrong is in no way intrusive as a director. She illustrates Orry-Kelly's [biography](#). She includes many interviews, from contemporary costume designers like Catherine Martin, Baz Luhrman's Oscar-winning wife, some Hollywood designers and some of the stars, like Jane Fonda, whom Orry- Kelly dressed in several films. *Women He's Undressed* is quite lavish in the many, many clips which illustrate not only his design, but his intuitions and intelligence behind designs – for the many Hollywood women that he dressed.

ZERO MOTIVATION

Israel, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Dana Igvy, Nelly Tagar, Shani Klein.

Directed by Talya Lavie.

Some commentators have suggested that while motivation is appropriate the title of the film in

translation, the original Hebrew is better translated as “people skills”. This describes the three central characters. People skills are not their forte.

This is an Israeli multi-award-winning film, was written and directed by a woman and has women as the main characters, a film about women, their personalities, interactions, and how the Israeli Army deals with women, especially in administrative roles.

This may make the film sound much more serious than it is. In fact, it is a comedy, with an ironic, very often sardonic treatment, with some slapstick moments – and with quite some pathos.

The film consists of three stories: the first is called The Replacement, the second is The Virgin and the third, The Commander. The first story is about a young woman who arrives at the base and is seen by Daffi, who works in the office, in charge of shredding papers, as the replacement she has been writing to officials about, for her anxiously-sought move to Tel Aviv. In fact, the new girl is an impostor, not detected by any of the guards or the authorities, who is really coming to the base to make contact with the soldier that she had met earlier and with whom she is infatuated. Quite a lot of complications, rather to the detriment of the soldier in the film’s criticism men and the exploitation of women.

Another key character is Rama, the female officer who heads the administrative bureau, demanding, lacking people skills, impossibly bossy, who imposes her moods and commands on the girls who spend a lot of time trying to avoid her or defy her.

The second story focuses on Zohar, tough girl, with more than a touch of what people call “attitude”. She doesn’t want to be in the army, while a lot of time away, is friendly with Daffi but has impeded the request for her transfer to Tel Aviv. With Daffi moved to officer training, Zohar is left alone to think about herself, especially sexual relationships – with a rather sobering experience with a visiting paratrooper who turns out to be certainly not the man of her dreams, but who is completely humiliated by Irena, who takes up Zohar’s support. There is a climactic moment when she is commanded by Rama to tidy the office – and does so in a shredding spree.

The third story has Daffi back after her officer training, still dreaming of Tel Aviv but transferred back to the base to take Rama’s place. The tension between Zohar and Daffi reaches a height, including a battle in the office with each having a staple gun and firing and Daffi making quite a mess with the computers.

Obviously, this film will make an impact on Israeli audiences, especially with their experience of military national service and its consequences – audiences around the world will observe with a mixture of humour and wondering what the long-term consequences will be for the characters caught up in this military service.

REVIEWS AUGUST 2015

ANOTHER COUNTRY

FAREWELL PARTY, The
FAR FROM MEN
GALLOWS, The
GETT: THE TRIAL OF VIVIANNE AMSALAM
GOING CLEAR
HOLDING THE MAN
I AM BIG BIRD
LAST CAB TO DARWIN
MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: ROGUE NATION
PAPER TOWNS
TRAINWRECK

ANOTHER COUNTRY

Australia, 2015, 90 minutes, Colour.
David Gulpilil.
Directed by Molly Reynolds.

Another Country is part of a series of films for cinema, television, on line, on aborigines in the Northern Territory, a collaboration between actor David Gulpilil, director and producer, Rolf de Heer, and director Molly Reynolds.

Over the years, Rolf de Heer has directed David Gulpilil in The Tracker, 10 Canoes and Charlie's Country. They have built up an understanding together and have been able to communicate aboriginal stories in a spirit of collaboration.

This is a documentary about the North Australian town of Ramingining, several hundred kilometres south-west of Katherine, not really close to any major town, a community decided upon by government authorities without consultation with local people, not being able to communicate in any local language and not appreciating their customs.

To get to Ramingining, one has to travel over dirt roads – or travel by boat to a wharf where supplies are unloaded. There is no particular work except at the local store. There are men, women and children of all ages.

The screenplay, worked on by Rold de Heer, is addressed to a white audience, spoken by David Gulpilil, offering people his credentials as an iconic character on screen, as a dancer, someone who has met celebrities including Queen Elizabeth, and who has also spent some time in jail.

What he does is to alert the white audience to the reality of Ramingining and the limits of its future. We are introduced to a number of characters, we see young men dancing to a kind of disco beat in aboriginal style, later seeing traditional dancing, two old painters who live in the community, and, surprisingly, a lengthy sequence on Good Friday where one of the men is dressed in vestments to become the figure of Jesus who has to carry his cross around the town, followed by the crowds, some of them enacting the jeering and Jesus' condemnation by Pilate, and the crucifixion. David Gulpilil, who tells us that early settlers exploited and poisoned the aborigines while the missionaries did some service in building and teaching people to read and write. David Gulpilil explains that the

Jesus for this community is not someone who came from out there but who is someone like them, sharing their lives.

One of the other things that is talked about is the concept of time, something that white people value and expect of others in terms of punctuality and accuracy but does not have that kind of meaning in the old traditions. Another concept is out of rubbish, again not part of the culture which was is able to survive for the thousands of years without accumulating waste as contemporary society does – for instance, in the buying of cars, running them, running them down and then discarding them anywhere in the bush.

Another instance of rubbish in many senses is the local store where the people of Ramingining have their cards, have government grants, go to the store to buy food, clothing, American DVDs, and lots of takeaway foods which are full of sugar, especially soft drinks and Coca-Cola² – and then discarding the rubbish. One of the features of the film is a card-playing sequence which is used to reveal that money is to be shared, not hoarded, and one way of sharing it out is by playing cards.

David Gulpilil speaks quite benignly in his voice-over but is continually challenging his audience, whether they know much about aborigines, whether they know anything of the customs and what the last 200 years or more have done to those customs, whether they have an empathy for an aboriginal way of life which is not absolutely dependent on government handouts, lack of employment opportunities. What is the hope for the children growing up in places like Ramingining?

This is a very worthwhile 90 minutes for Australians whose ancestors came later to the land, who themselves have come more lately to the land, to get to know something about the aborigines and to reflect on what the indigenous people of Australia experience now and something of why.

THE FAREWELL PARTY

Israel, 2014, 95 minutes, Colour.

Ze'ev Revach, Lavana Finkelstein.

Directed by Tal Granit, Sharon Maymon.

A Farewell Party seems to light a title for this rather serious film. Some of the advertising and reviews emphasise comedy touches – and it does begin with an old man telephoning an older lady with dementia, pretending to be God, asking after her health and promising her a place in heaven (with his wife then rebuking him for playing tricks on susceptible people). But, the themes of the film are quite serious.

This is an Israeli film, set in a home for the aged. After the initial joke, we are introduced to a very elderly man in a great deal of pain, dying, his wife upset, ranting at the nurses on the ward for not attending to her husband as she wished. Immediately, the issue of pain, palliative care, assisted suicide and euthanasia come to the fore.

The man who played pranks is something of an inventor and decides to make a machine that can administer something lethal to those in pain. The doctor they consult is certainly not in favour of euthanising patients. But they do get some advice from a vet, information about drugs administered

to animals, and that gives the inventor as well as the dying man's wife and other friends an incentive to go ahead.

This means that the screenplay challenges the audience: do they share the pain, the unbearable pain, of those who are dying, especially of the elderly? And the screenplay also raises the expected questions, the ethical questions, the moral questions, the religious questions, especially in the context of Israel.

When the machine is a success, there are various requests, as well as headlines of pacts between spouses who kills the other spouse and then kill themselves. One of the things that the group of the elderly do, apart from attending funerals, singing together, is making videos of those who are about to be euthanised, their final message, their consent.

Things come to a head when the wife of the inventor is sinking into dementia. She has been opposed to the machine and its applications but now...

All the characters all have their eccentricities – and touches of humour – but, the underlying themes of pain, age, suffering and death pervade every aspect of the film.

FAR FROM MEN/ LOINS DES HOMMES

France, 2014, 97 minutes, Colour.

Viggo Mortensen, Reda Kateb.

Directed by David Oelhoffen.

Circumstances.

Choices.

Cowardice and honour.

Camus.

It is 1954 in Algeria, and Camus country. The French have colonised Algeria. The French Legion has kept order. Now is the time for the rebels to rise and fight for independence – something, which at this stage of the action in this film, is still some time to come. This film is based on a short story by Albert Camus.

Algeria, and its interiors, may well seem far from men. At the opening, Daru (Viggo Mortensen) is teaching a small group of children on a plateau in the Atlas Mountains, playing, teaching them to read. He is something of a mysterious character, especially when a man accused of killing his cousin is entrusted to his care. Then the tone of the film changes, the teacher leaving a note on his board that there will be no classes that day.

The accused man, Mohammed (Reda Kateb), asks to be taken to a nearby town. Instead, Daru ousts him, accusing him of lack of honour and of cowardice. Daru himself is a man of honour, and decides that he will accompany his prisoner, packing bags and provisions to walk for a day through the desert. The man's relatives have attacked the school, with their revenge code, and, to avoid them, the two men have to scale the mountains. It is a difficult, if spectacular, trek, a rider confronting them with a shootout and burial, Mohammed, devoutly Muslim, praying for the dead man.

Eventually, they come across a group of rebels and Daru's back story is provided, son of Spanish settlers, growing up in Algeria, serving in the military, earning loyalties from his men, but now, on opposite sides, enmities will assert themselves. The French also catch up with the rebels, releasing the hostages but firing indiscriminately on men who think they are surrendering. Daru, the man of honour, rebukes the French for this violence.

The story is one of growing respect between the two men, of incipient friendship, of arriving in the town, of Mohammed having his first sexual experience, and his having to make a decision whether he will go into the desert into anonymity or go to give himself up to the police. Daru also has to make a decision whether to return to the school or to become more active in the emerging civil war.

The two leads give strong performances and it is admirable to see Viggo Mortensen in so many international productions, with his command of many languages, here French and also speaking some Arabic.

SIGNIS (World Catholic Association for Communication) award winner at the 2014 Venice Film Festival.

THE GALLOWES

US, 2015, 81 minutes, Colour.

Reese Mishler, Pfeifer Brown, Ryan Shoos, Cassidy Gifford.

Directed by Travis Cluff, Chris Lofing.

While this is a horror film for audiences of all ages, the adult audience will be interested in the old devices used for a ghost story and hauntings as well as the elimination, step-by-step, of the cast.

On the other hand, the teenage audiences for The Gallows will be more into the characters and the story, senior high school students of their own age.

One of the co-writers, co-directors, Travis Cluff, was not much older than his characters when he worked on the film, assisted by an older collaborator, Chris Lofing, who bring some film directing experience to bear on the project.

As with so many of these films, there is an important prologue, the performance of the play, The Gallows, with a historical setting and a thee and thou dialogue, where the main actor ascends the gallows – and, through an accident, is actually hanged.

We are moved on 20 years and introduced to some footage of the Nebraska police. So, this is a “found-footage” film, replete with hand held camera work, video cameras as well as phone cameras. (Though, on closer examination, it is very difficult to work out how all these cameras could have taken all the shots – probably a more objective camera capturing a lot of the moments.) One of the consequences of this kind of filming, inaugurated by The Blair Which Project and fostered by its many imitations as well as series like the Paranormal Activity thrillers, is that anyone who gets nauseous with this kind of continued camera movement and jerking may well be advised to give The Gallows a miss.

The footballer is called Reese and the would-be actress is called Pfeifer (the given names, in fact, of the performers). The friends are called Ryan and Cassidy (also the names of the performers).

The plan is to get into the school at night and destroy the set for the play. They get in, Ryan having a or compulsion to film absolutely everything. Ryan is definitely an obnoxious character, rather self-inflated, self-absorbed, and busily masterminding the mayhem. Many of the audience might be hoping that he would be the first to go... Actually, Cassidy is not all that much better.

Things begin to go bump in the night, many doors are locked so no frantic escapes, the lights do not work, there are eerie presences, moments of apparitions, which seem to be the vengeful ghost of the poor young fellow who was hanged in the Gallows in 1993.

The running time is not particularly long, just enough to have the setting of the characters, home life, sports activities in the school, rehearsals for the play, and the time in the dark and in the school, in the darkened theatre, in the dark on stage, in the darkened set framework, in darkened corridors...

The two survivors decide that while they are there in the theatre, they might as well rehearse their performance, repeating the lines that we saw earlier in the film, the actor ascending the Gallows and...

Probably best recommended for high schoolers indulging in a screening for a Scream Night.

GETT: THE TRIAL OF VIVIANNE AMSALEM

Israel, 2014, 115 minutes, Colour.

Ronit Elkabetz, Simon Abkarian.

Directed by Ronit Elkabetz, Shlomi Alkabetz.

This is a very challenging film from Israel, for people in Israel itself as well as Jewish people around the world and all those interested in Jewish traditions or may be puzzled by some of them.

Ronit Elkabetz is a distinguished Israeli actress who is made quite a number of striking Israeli films and has appeared in some French films. She has written and co-directed this film with her husband, and takes the central role.

It is a film about divorce in Israel, Get, and the processes whereby a woman applies to be divorced, to a tribunal of religious leaders, with her defence lawyer, but all the time dependent on the consent of the husband or no divorce is granted. This is a civil-religious situation, drawing on traditions, very much mail-oriented, expecting husband and wife to live out traditional marriage, and often ignoring the experiences of the wife in terms of the dominance, physical or psychological, religious and moral, of the husband.

Perhaps it is necessary to give a warning that audiences will experience the situation of a wife who is trapped by her husband's non-consent, appearing in court over several years, with gaps of some months where she tries to obey what the tribunal orders her, to live with her husband. The only

locations on screen are the courtroom and the anti-room where people wait. It is particularly cut claustrophobic for the audience as they are confined to the limited and small locations.

The couple in question have been married for many decades, the wife, married in her teenage years, subservient to her husband, bearing children and rearing them, but finding her husband's superior attitudes and his domination so taxing that she feels she needs to get away and for him to grant her a divorce. In the meantime, she has moved from the house to live with her sisters, yet still cooking every day for her husband and children, with herself or her sisters delivering the meals. When the tribunal, despite her pleas, insists that she still fulfils her home duties before they will consider hearing her case again, we are told, rather than seeing, that she complies with the wishes. What we see is the toll that it takes on her.

The husband is a significant character, of course, well played, unsympathetic to the audience, by Simon act barrier. Not only does he refused to grant a divorce but he often refuses even to come to the court. He is commanded to appear, even sentenced to a time in prison for his non-compliance, but one of the most stubborn men one could encounter. Is respectable, a community leader, leader of music in the Temple. He demands that his wife fulfil our obligations.

To help us understand the situation, two of the central characters are the lawyer for Vivian's defence, a reputable lawyer whose father had a strong reputation and who argues his case with some emotion. defence lawyer for the husband, is his brother, a shrewd and rather smooth-tongued lawyer, able to take advantage of any looseness in remarks.

Then there are the witnesses over the several years, neighbours who think the husband is respectable, and neighbouring wife who, as her testimony goes on, is clearly under the same often insensitive dominance from her husband. There are people from the choir who can testify that the husband can give people a hostile silent treatment, and for many years. The wife's two sisters also give testimony, when giving the rabbis the rounds of the court in her vigorous defence of her sister.

And, the tribunal itself is very interesting, a very dominating Rabbi overseeing proceedings, and his two assistance, trying to get into the developments of the trial, as well as the clerk of the court.

Ronit Elkabetz portrays Vivian with great bearing in dignity, holding up under very difficult circumstances, month by month, year by year, living the frustration of her husband's continued refusal to consent to her divorce.

Anyone in the audience has been involved in an Australian divorce situation will be caught up, moved, and frustrated by their sharing in this is rarely experience.

GOING CLEAR: SCIENTOLOGY AND THE PRISON OF BELIEF

US, 2015, 119 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Alex Gibney.

How much do we know about Scientology? Is it a religion? Is it a church? What does it have to do with personality and psychology? What about L.Ron Hubbard and his science-fiction writings? What about Tom Cruise and his promotion of Scientology? John Travolta and other celebrities? And have

we ever heard of David Miscavige?

There is a limit to what can be offered as answers to these questions in 120 minutes of a documentary film. However, there are quite a lot of answers, and quite a few leads.

The film is based on an investigation by Lawrence Wright, and his book which is an expose of Scientology. Wright appears as one of the major talking heads in this film. And there are a lot of talking heads, especially from officials of Scientology who have left and are critical as they look at themselves and their experience in Scientology.

One great recommendation is that this is a documentary by Alex Gibney, who has become more and more prolific in recent years. He made the film, Enron, the Smartest Guys in the Room, as well as winning an Oscar for his film about prisons in Afghanistan, Taxi to the Darkside. His powerful investigation into cases of clerical sexual abuse in the United States was Silence in the House of God. And, more recently, he made an exposé of Lance Armstrong.

The film builds up something of the history of Scientology, the career of Hubbard (who falsified some aspects of his war service, glorifying it, as well as his history of ill health). We hear of his science-fiction writings in the late 1940s and, further, his development of the mythology which says that 75 million years ago, there was a planet with similar characteristics to those of Earth in the US in the 1950s, but many of the Thetans were sent to earth, in a volcano, and Scientologists have to rid themselves of their presence. Odd stuff!

Hubbard had difficulty with the American authorities, especially concerning tax, and kept out of the limelight. But he also had a fascination for celebrities and built headquarters in Los Angeles and buildings in Florida. He is hailed as a great hero – with a sequence on the anniversary of his birthday with crowds assembled and Tom Cruise giving him salute and birthday greetings.

The most interesting interviews are those with the officials who worked with Hubbard and with his successor, the quite charismatic David Miscavige, who is still the leader. Senior officials, who spied on others, followed them, reported, left the organisation after quite a number of years. These include both women and men. While there are no interviews for the film from Tom Cruise or John Travolta, there is quite a lot of public footage inserted, Travolta and his testimonies over the decades, Cruise and his enthusiasm. Not so enthusiastic is the Oscar-winning writer-director Paul Haggis who spent 30 years in Scientology but became disillusioned with the condemnation of his daughters when they came out as gay. It made him re-examine his whole life, his beliefs and activities, which led to some disillusionment.

There was quite some controversy about the IRS and the demands made on Scientology and the attempts to have it declared as a religion and tax exempt – which did happen with some deals in the 1990s.

Some Scientologists have declared the film a hatchet job, and in many ways it is. But it offers substantial backing to the claims against Scientology in the film never less than interesting.

HOLDING THE MAN

Australia, 2015, 125 minutes, Colour.

Ryan Corr, Craig Stott, Anthony La Paglia, Kerry Fox, Guy Pearce, Camilla Ah Kin, Geoffrey Rush, Jane Menelaus, Sarah Snook.

Directed by Neil Armfield.

Holding the Man is a widely-read Australian biography by Tim Conigrave, published in the mid-1990s and soon afterwards developed into a play by Tommy Murphy. Murphy has now written a screenplay from the book which has been directed by Neil Armfield who has a strong reputation as a theatre director.

This is a story of a relationship which began when two senior students were studying at the Jesuit Xavier College in Melbourne. (The football matches were filmed at the college itself.) Tim Conigrave is something of a flamboyant student at school, involved in theatricals, but becoming more and more infatuated with a top soccer player, John Caleo. John came from a strong Catholic, Italian-Australian family, one of four siblings. Tim made his affections known, a young man more sexually aware, John being rather more hesitant. Eventually, they made a commitment to each other, known to some of the other boys, eventually known to the parents with hostile reactions, especially from John's father.

The film is very well made, very well-acted, topical in many ways with discussions about same-sex relationships and commitment, acceptance in Australian society or not, understanding of homosexual orientation, and discussions, for instance, in the Catholic church, in connection with the Synod on the Family in Rome in 2014 in 2015.

Because the relationship between the two boys and developed in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the issue of HIV also becomes significant, especially towards the beginning of the 1990s when both of the men tested positive.

Ryan Corr as Tim Conigrave and Craig Stott as John Caleo give quite persuasive performances, Ryan Corr having the showier character much more extroverted, and Craig Stott having to communicate the character of John Caleo more subtly and quietly. We see them change over a period of 15 years, the relationship at school with a scene of discussion with one of the Jesuit teachers at Xavier College. The screenplay moves to the mid 1980s, with Tim auditioning for NIDA and doing the course for an acting career, going to Sydney, while John stays in Melbourne and becomes a chiropractor.

The film then goes back to the late 1970s, early 1980s, with the two men as students at Monash University, coming out more explicitly, members of the gay club at the University, finding a home and friends within the gay community as well as experiencing prejudice and bashings. It is in this context that both men have to face the issue of committed relationships, of the possibilities other partners and relationships, Tim being much more of an experimenter, John not.

The last part of the film is set in the 1990s with John becoming seriously ill, Tim becoming involved in AIDS care, committed to helping John in his illness and in his death.

The parents of each man have been mentioned, but they are central to the film and the producers have chosen strong screen presences to dramatise the parents. Guy Pearce and Kerry Fox are the Conigraves, and Anthony La Paglia and Camilla Ah Kin are the Caleos. (Quite a number of Australian character actors have small cameos, sometimes walk on parts, like Kerry Walker and Julie Forsyth,

Sarah Snook as a close friend, while Geoffrey Rush has some scenes as the drama lecturer at NIDA.) It is Anthony La Paglia who has the most significant scenes, discovering the reality of the relationship, mightily disapproving, ousting his son, having to face up to the reality of the relationship, having to cope with his son's illness and death.

The film is of Catholic interest because of the two boys and their Catholic families, their schooling at Xavier College, the discussion about the relationship with the Jesuit teacher, Mary Conigrave, Tim's sister, having a Catholic wedding with the priest at the reception and, the priest who conducted the Requiem Mass and the funeral for John Caleo, Father Woods, played by Paul Goddard, seen making comments about how he would refer to the relationship during the mass, describing them as friends, not mentioning AIDS, given the sensibilities and family and friends' awareness and non-awareness of the situations in 1994.

Holding the Man takes its place as a significant Australian film and one which gives significant opportunity for reflection and discussion, wherever one stands on the issues.

I AM BIG BIRD: THE CAROL SPINNEY STORY

US, 2014, 90 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Dave La Mattina, Chad N.Walker.

The last words before the final credits of this documentary are 'unconditional love'. They are spoken about the subject of the film, Caroll Spinney. But they also indicate the tone of the film, the perspective of the directors, unconditional love for Spinney, a documentary that it is your eulogistic, emotional, even affectionate.

And who is Caroll Spinney? And a big percentage of the answer is: Big Bird.

So many audiences will remember Big Bird as a part of their lives. Older people might remember their children sitting in front of Sesame Street. Others, who are not as young as they used to be, will remember sitting in front of the television themselves watching Sesame Street. and, that will apply to many of the younger generations. Big Bird will be remembered is that eight feet high, yellow-feathered, gawky looking, childlike-sounding, huge puppet with the stranger red striped trousers.

While the voice had its squeaky tone, inside Big Bird was a puppeteer, Caroll Spinney, who spent more than 40 years as Bird – and was still doing is at age 79 don't.

We are taken through the biography of Spinney, his early interest in puppets, in puppeteering, going to a convention in Salt Lake City in the late 1960s, encountering Jim Henson, the celebrated puppeteer who establish the Muppets, being invited by Henson to participate in bringing his puppets alive, movements of hesitation and doubt, then finally finding his stride, so to speak, as big Bird (and the contrast with his voice of Oscar the Grouch).

Spinney is an engaging character on screen – not without some difficulties with fellow-workers. But, he is a veteran puppeteer, his right arm extended high as he manipulates Big Bird's head and mouth, but also a clown, Big Bird's movements, antics, voice, comedy routines. As the decades have gone on, Spinney has developed character of Big Bird, endearing him to his children's audience.

On the personal level, Spinney was married and his co-workers confirmed that his wife did not understand or appreciate his puppeteering work. After a divorce, he was to marry Debra, his wife of many decades, mother of his children, and his manager, sharing a wide range of life experiences with him, including a visit to China, for a television special, Big Bird in China, where a local Chinese girl participated in the program, whom they lost sight over many years but with whom they are reunited at the end of the 30th anniversary of the show.

One of the interests is the changing appearance of Carroll over the 40+ years of Big Bird, young, middle-aged, older.

We meet a lot of the people who worked with Jim Henson, including archival footage of Henson himself, well appreciated by fans of Sesame Street and, of course, the Muppets, especially Kermit – and, at his funeral service after his unexpected death at 53, Big Bird's singing one of the songs, about being green. There are a lot of talking heads in the film, especially one of the best-known puppeteers and film directors, Frank Oz. While there is a great deal of admiration, there are many insights into the development of Sesame Street and the demands made on all those who contributed.

By and large, there is a great deal of sweetness and light – even in an unexpected situation where a woman was murdered on a property owned by Carroll and Debra, by someone that they had employed. The murdered woman sister and husband are interviewed, talk about the grief and the anger, even directed towards Carroll and Debra, but a reconciliation that is quite moving. The other big reconciliation is Carroll's bonding with his father in his final years, a man who was a hard taskmaster when the boy was young which led to a great deal of resentment but, ultimately, to some love.

This documentary is not essential viewing, but will appeal to the Sesame Street admirers over the years – and will be of interest in tracing a significant aspect of American television in the last decades of the 20th century – and continues -, Carroll 79 and still going at the time of the making of the film - into the 21st century.

LAST CAB TO DARWIN

Australia, 2015, 125 minutes, Colour.

Michael Caton, Ningali Lawford, Mark Coles Smith, Emma Hamilton, Leah Purcell, Alan Dukes, John Howard, David Field, Brendan Cowell.

Directed by Jeremy Sims.

Publicity in discussions about this film indicate that the main theme is euthanasia. Actually, the focus is on assisted suicide. But the buzz about the film does not indicate the other very significant theme, aborigines in Australian society, especially in the outback towns like Broken Hill and on the road between Broken Hill, Oodnadatta, Alice Springs, Darwin.

The theme of assisted suicide has had quite some significance in Australian discussions, and still has, especially past projected legislation in the Northern Territory and the work of advocate, Philip Nitskie – and audiences will probably think that the character of Dr Nicole Farmer, played by Jacki Weaver, is based on him and his advocacies.

Prospective audiences for the film will often have strong and fixed views, for and against, assisted suicide. This drama offers a great deal to think about, a great deal to feel about.

The driver of the last cab to Darwin is Rex, an old taxi driver in Broken Hill who has never really been outside the city, never seen the sea. Now in his 70s, he has a terminal cancer and is given about three months to live. Michael Caton has been something of an icon in Australian film and television, especially his role as the dad in *The Castle*. His performance as Rex will also be iconic, an imposing figure in his way, old, grizzled, alone, sardonic, driving his taxi and knowing most people, fond of a beer, fond of his pet dog, Dog, in something of a relationship with Polly (Ningali Lawford) who lives across the street.

Last Cab has a lot of shots of Broken Hill, the centre of the city, the surroundings, the mining atmosphere, the desert. And, of course, there are a lot of characters, the types you might expect working on the roads, builders, congregating at the pub, some sly winks to the barmaid – and more – a group of ocker men. These are Rex's friends. He relates well to them, but does not share a great deal of his inner self with them.

When Rex comes upon a news item about the possibilities of a machine to help with suicide being developed in Darwin, he phones in – and everybody in the city hears it on talkback radio. He decides then to drive his taxi to Darwin, to meet with Dr Farmer and put an end to his life.

A great deal of the film, perhaps most of the film, takes place on the road, giving audiences at home and internationally, a close-up of the Australian outback, the variety of landscapes, the desert, the lone tree with the skeletons of feral cats hanging, the isolated pubs, the road trains – knocking up pebbles which break windscreens, the tourism at Daily Waters, the isolated whites, the individuals and groups of aborigines...

The themes of black and white Australians is to the fore in the relationship between Rex and Polly, Polly's bringing all her relatives down to stay in her house and causing some mayhem with Rex's possessions, a young man on the road, Tilly (Mark Coles Smith), a lively lad with football potential, married with children, but reckless, drinking, in trouble, who helps Rex and decides to travel with him to Darwin. Rex intervenes in Darwin to persuade a local coach to give Tilly a chance for a tryout for playing in the Australian rules team.

There are some poignant moments for Rex when he visits Daily Waters and sees a photo of his parents on the wall, his mother and father who met there, his father working on the air strip. When he collapses, being very weak from the exertion of the trip and the anxieties in going to Darwin, a young barmaid from England, Julie (Emma Hamilton) trained as a nurse, volunteers to look after him.

in Darwin, Rex finds that going through with the procedure is not easy at all. There are issues of legislation. There are issues of consent – the machine asking the person who wants to die to signal consent on a computer, and simmering three questions, then releasing the lethal dose. Consent is also required from a psychiatrist as well as a specialist in the terminal cancer.

While this leads to complications about the death, it also offers an opportunity for Rex to reflect on his life, break through something of his isolation, especially encouraged by Julie, acknowledge his love for Polly, realise something in a zest for life, his hopes for Tilly's success, that dying and

consenting to die is certainly not easy for most people.

With such significant themes – although the original play, written by Reg Cribb who collaborated with the screenplay with director Jeremy Sims – was written almost a decade earlier, there are no pat answers either way about the challenge of assisted suicide. The film asks for principled reflection, and it offers a great deal of possibility for empathy. Many audiences will still not be certain as to their final opinion.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: ROGUE NATION

US, 2015, 131 minutes, Colour.

Tom Cruise, Rebecca Ferguson, Simon Pegg, Jeremy Renner, Alec Baldwin, Ving Rhames, Sean Harris, Simon Mc Burney.

Directed by Christopher Mc Quarrie.

‘Romp’ might not be the word expected to head a review of the newest Mission Impossible venture. But, that is what it is, an action-adventure-romp.

The tone is immediately clear in the prologue, a plane taking off in Minsk, Belarus, with Benji (Simon Pegg) lifting his camouflaged head from an open field, communicating with William at the IMF headquarters in Washington DC as well as with Luther (Ving Rhames) in Thailand, worried about the deadly cargo in the plane hold, wondering where Ethan Hunt could be – when suddenly he emerges, races towards the plane, grabs on to a door handle, Benji making all kinds of mistakes in trying to open the door electronically, even the wrong door, with Hunt hanging on as the plane takes off, the door finally open, and his being projected into the plane, confronting the armed guards – and then pushing the cargo out backwards and parachuting down... That’s Tom Cruise for you.

And then we have the credits! And, of course, the immediately recognisable theme music by Lalo Schifrin.

Someone remarked afterwards about the realism or lack of realism in the film! Realism is one of the last things to be expected from this action-packed series. After all, the title is Impossible, and that is the point. Ethan and his colleagues spend over two hours doing the impossible in the face of extraordinary dangers, need for extraordinary stunts (which Tom Cruise and Rebecca Ferguson mainly do themselves), split-second timing, everyone in peril at some stage, athletic feats of endurance – and winning at the end. If that is not what we were expecting, then better to give it a miss for something more ‘realistic’.

As the subtitle suggests, there is a sinister organisation, called The Syndicate, operating around the world very secretly – even Alec Baldwin, the rather dyspeptic head of the CIA, does not believe that it exists, thinks it is a ploy by the IMF and is not impressed by Ethan Hunt who seems an outsider, avoiding accountability. But, Ethan has been pursuing The Syndicate, but is suddenly caught by the ex-British military head, played by Sean Harris. Will he escape being tortured – no, not escaping the torture, plenty of that, but eventually escaping the cell and going underground until he has a firm lead to find the villain.

By this stage, the action has been in Belarus, and in a rather detailed central London, then in Havana, hiding in Paris, which leads Ethan and Benjito Vienna.

For those who enjoy travelogue aspects of these thrillers, there is plenty to see in Vienna, especially at the Opera House (interiors, stage, and action on the roof) and, as a distraction from an assassination attempt on the Austrian head of state, a performance of Puccini's *Turandot*. And then we are off to Morocco, to Casablanca seen in a great deal of detail, out into the deserts of Morocco and into the mountains. It all climaxes in London, focusing on the British Prime Minister, again with a great deal of touristic detail, though that is much more familiar.

A new ambiguous woman is introduced in the form of Rebecca Ferguson, attractive, athletic, lethal in some of her fights, with the audience hoping that despite appearances she really is a goodie. Simon Pegg is back as the technical whiz, involved in a lot of the action as well as the comic aspects. And Jeremy Renner is also back, the liaison with the CIA, as well as Ving Rhames as Luther, no mean activist with technology as well.

If you want 'romp-action', and an entertaining night out, plenty of adventure, quite a few twists, often a tongue-in-cheek turn, with quite some stunts, then this episode of *Mission Impossible*, written and directed by Christopher Mc Quarrrie, best known for *The Usual Suspects*, but clearly a friend of Tom Cruise, writing screenplays for him for *Valkyrie*, *Jack Reacher*, *Edge of Tomorrow*, will fit the bill.

PAPER TOWNS

US, 2015, 109 minutes, Colour.

Nat Wolff, Cara Delevingne, Austin Abrams, Justice Smith, Halston Sage, Jaz Sinclair, Cara Buono.
Directed by Jake Schreier.

This will not be an easy film for adults to sit through. It is very much a niche film, targeting teenagers, possibly some older young adults, but very much the audience which could identify with the central characters, in their last months at high school.

The film is based on a novel by John Green, novelist for young adults, who had great success with the film adaptation of his *The Fault in our Stars*. This one is even more teen-focused.

The setting is Florida and the central character, Quentin (Nat Wolff who has done this kind of role in *Palo Alto* and *Behaving Badly*), Q to his friends, provides voice-over, telling us about himself and his lifelong devotion to, infatuation with, eventually love for, his neighbour Margo (British model, Cara Delevingne). She is a strong-minded little girl, easily able to exercise her influence over Q and his willing submission to her.

The first part of the film shows Margo in mean-minded form, now having moved away from Q, infatuated with one of the jocks at school, relying on the popular kids for her friendship. Then she thinks they have betrayed her. On a whim, she summons Q to help her get some vengeance, ringing up the parents of her girlfriend who is having sex with her former boyfriend and watching the confusion, lifting the eyebrow from another associate while he sleeps... Q is completely manipulated

by Margo and her whims but finds the whole experience exhilarating.

Q also has two friends from school, who hang out together, discuss everything, Ben and Radar.

When Margo disappears from her disapproving parents, Q decides he knows where she has gone because, after the whims, they have gone to a tall building and looked out over the city with Margo talking about paper towns, towns that exist but with no one in them. And she will make the analogy with paper people and herself.

The rest of the film is a road trip, Q taking his mother's car, following Margo's clues to New York State, Ben and Radar coming along as well as their girlfriends. There are a couple of adventures on the road, skidding after almost hitting a cow, Radar and his girlfriend having a sexual encounter to the eager curiosity of the others.

So, will Q find Margo? Had she gone to a paper town? If he finds her, what will he say about his love for her? And what about the Prom that the other friends want to go to but in which Q shows no interest?

Teen audiences may well want to see how these questions are answered – parents and adults may prefer to ask the teens afterwards what happened.

TRAINWRECK

US, 2015, 125 minutes, Colour.

Amy Schumer, Bill Hader, Tilda Swinton, Brie Larson, John Cena, Norman Lloyd, Daniel Radcliffe, Marisa Tomei. Le Bron James, Method Man.

Directed by Judd Apatow.

There are two kinds of train wreck. There is the devastation when the train goes off the rails, ploughing into the countryside, destroying the carriages and the environment. Then there is the crash on the rails, devastating as carriages plough into each other, causing destruction, injury and death.

Probably best to keep these two aspects in mind in considering the title of this film and how it applies to Amy Schumer's life. Amy Schumer is in her mid-30s, has had a successful career on television and with stand-up comedy. Now, she has written a screenplay loosely based on her life and her family, her difficulties in relationships, her work. And she stars in this alter-ego version of herself.

But, she has put the direction into the hands of veteran Judd Apatow (The 40 Year Old Virgin, Knocked Up, This is 40), who brings his considerable comedy talent to the film, though this is a rare outing for him where he has not written the screenplay. What usually happens in an Apatow comedy is that things start out pretty raucously, even with some devastation for the characters, touches of train wreck, but, after a while, with interactions, they begin to change, even becoming more human, employing a bit more common sense, yet not losing their sense of humour, and finally some kind of rather moralising ending: The Judd Apatow Syndrome.

The film opens with Amy's father talking to his two little daughters, an extensive ramble, rant at times, about how monogamy is impossible. This seems to have different effects on his two daughters, Amy growing up, rather loose-living, having many one night stands (shown in successive glimpses) with a wariness about falling in love, a seeming inability to love. Yet the younger daughter, played by Brie Larson, is the opposite, marrying a man she loves, becoming a loving stepmother to a precocious little boy, baffling Amy as to how two daughters could end up so differently.

Amy works for a magazine, one of those magazines that likes to dig up some dirt on celebrities. Her immediate editor is Dianna – played by an at first unrecognisable Tilda Swinton, different hair, different look, certainly different voice, very English, dominating, insensitive, demanding – quite a funny performance. Amy has to take on an assignment to interview a doctor responsible for sports medicine. He is played by Bill Hader, a regular in stand-up comedy (excellent in *The Skeleton Twins*, as well as one of the voices in *Inside Out*, *Fear*). Is involved with basketballers – and some of the key basketballers in the US play themselves, showing quite a flair for screen presence and comedy, especially LeBron James.

The doctor, Aaron, is a pleasant man, not pushing himself, but somehow rather attracted to Amy, moving into a relationship and love. This is not what she imagined for herself and puts up quite some resistance, yet bonds with Aaron, undergoes something of a crisis, especially with the influence of her father who is now in a home, visited by his two daughters. This is a real challenge for her, her feelings, admitting that she could love, breaking with Aaron, but finding some kind of reconciliation – the Judd Apatow ending.

Amy Schumer is certainly an impactful screen presence and audiences have responded well to her, as well as to her styles of frank and earthy humour, her sardonically satirical approach to comedy, with clever lines, humorous situations. She is beginning to salvage her early trainwreck life and get back on some kind of rails.

REVIEWS SEPTEMBER 2015

5 FLIGHTS UP
BEST OF ENEMIES, The
BLUE ROOM, The
DOPE
FANTASTIC FOUR, The
GAYBY BABY
GIFT, The
HITMAN AGENT 47
IRIS
IRRATIONAL MAN
LIFE
LITTLE BOY
MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E., The
ME AND EARL AND THE DYING GIRL

PLAY IT SAFE
RICKI AND THE FLASH
SHE'S FUNNY THAT WAY
SOUTHPAW
STALKHER
VACATION
WHEN WE WERE FRIENDS
WOLFPACK

5 FLIGHTS UP

US, 2014, 92 minutes, Colour.

Morgan Freeman, Diane Keaton, Cynthia Nixon, Clare van der Boom, Korey Jackson, Josh Pais.

Directed by Richard Loncraine.

When we see that the stars are Morgan Freeman (who will be 80 in 2017) and Diane Keaton (70 in 2016), we know who the demographic is for this light comedy drama. It is for those who are at home in the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel or saw and enjoyed Shirley MacLaine? and Christopher Plummer in Elsa and Fred. It is somewhat slighter than these films but it is definitely geared for that older audience. (For those who want to be dismayed by attitudes of younger audiences, have a glance at the blog entries on the Internet Movie Database and see how there is a low frustration tolerance for this kind of story of "oldies" - boring - with the worry that this might apply not only to the movies but also to responses in real life!)

The title indicates some strain and effort on staircases, especially when we discover that there is no elevator in the apartment block where our married couple, married for 40 years, have lived all that time. Morgan Freeman's Alex is a painter but is finding getting up the steps rather demanding – as does the couple's dog, Dorothy, who is in more of a state of collapse than Alex. Diane Keaton's Ruth is sympathetic to Alex and the stress and has decided that it would be better if they moved, sold their apartment, search for somewhere else to live which would be more convenient and congenial. Alex is not so sure.

In fact, Alex is less sure when Ruth's niece, Lily (Cynthia Nixon) a real estate agent, with incessant patter, is enthusiastic about having a day when people will come to view the apartment. Anybody who has had to sell a house or buy a house and experienced people coming in to inspect places will respond with laughter and with exasperation at the range of people who come to have a look – some with no intention of buying but just to see how the other half live. And all the time, the niece is playing up to the potential clients, repeating her spiel, with incessant enthusiasm. Ruth manages while Alex gets rather sick of it all, except for little girl with whom he has an enjoyable chat.

It is hoped that dog-lovers will excuse talking about Dorothy's crisis only now but the apartment sale seems to have priority. Alex and Ruth hurry her to the vet, and they (and us) will be gobsmacked at the price of treating a dog in New York City let alone the thousands of dollars required for surgery. Dorothy has the surgery and there are continually anxious phone calls to the vet to find out whether there is any progress. Dog-lovers will find this all much more's suspenseful than whether the couple are able to sell their apartment or not!

While in the taxi, there is gridlock in the city, a tanker lodged on a bridge and the driver escaping, of Middle-Eastern appearance, with rapid conclusions that he is a terrorist, compounded by the chatter of the TV hosts which serves as a thread throughout the film, illustrating New Yorker phobias, suspicions and wariness (as one girl in a shop says “I don’t speak Muslim”), and a great concern that this kind of terrorism will have a detrimental effect on property prices in the area – so, some ironic touches of satire throughout the film.

The other aspect is that Ruth decides they should look up advertisements, go to scout out a few places themselves, find an apartment that they really like, hear the crankiness of the owners, the spiel of the agent – and the niece turning up and intervening, threatening the law, eager to get her percentage...

Since this is a film for the elderly audience, it is certainly no good having a sad ending and everybody going glumly back out of the cinema, so, without spoiling what happens, audiences will leave the cinema after 5 Flights Up feeling happy and even relieved.

THE BEST OF ENEMIES

US, 2015, 87 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Robert Gordon and Morgan Neville.

The Best of Enemies are Conservative William Buckley Jr and Liberal Gore Vidal. With the focus on these two, and their television debates at the time of the 1968 Republican and Democratic conventions, the film is an entertaining presentation of quite different points of view, personal animosities, debating techniques and invective.

The film, however, is of interest in reminding audiences how much television news footage as well as commentary have changed in the almost half-century since the conventions of 1968. While CBS and NBC were the leaders in television news at the period, with ABC third, the ABC management had the bright idea of inviting two quite bitter antagonists to make comment each night on the ideas behind each of the parties at their conventions. And high ratings were achieved.

William F. Buckley Jr was a Conservative celebrity at the time, editing the National Review, a very conservative magazine of ideas and politics, appearing on the media, a good-looking and pleasant personality who felt self-confidently at home before the cameras. He is vehemently opposed towards everything that Gore Vidal stood for. Gore Vidal came from a rather patrician East Coast American family, his grandfather in Congress, from a wealthy background, his being educated at a boarding school, naval service during World War II, writing bestselling and provocative novels, moving into the media, writing screenplays, continuing to write novels, standing for Congress in 1960 but losing, not afraid of stating his opinions on the state of America, American culture, politics and politicians, issues of sexuality, especially homosexuality.

While the film does focus on the debates and shows excerpts from all of them, it also fills in the background of Buckley and Vidal, with Buckley the less obviously flamboyant character, flamboyant nonetheless, but capitalising on the reputation of Vidal and his controversies, especially with Myra Breckenridge (and included are scenes from the film with Raquel Welch) and his political play and screenplay, The Best Man, and scenes from Ben Hur for

whose screenplay he had made contributions. The film also highlights the range of novels that he wrote, covering the period from the 18th to the 20th century situations in the US, a chronicler of the United States.

The film also fills in some of the political background, the 1964 convention with Barry Goldwater, Buckley and his being at home with Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, the two rivals in 1968. It shows Vidal's connection with the Kennedys, relationship by marriage to Jacqueline Kennedy, and his growing antagonism towards Robert Kennedy.

There are quite a number of talking heads, all of them interesting, commenting on the background of the politics, of each of the characters, and of the changing ways of television with this introduction of debate, commentary, which has since become a staple of television programming.

On the Buckley side there is his biographer as well as some astute and pleasant comments from his older brother, as well are some scenes from Buckley himself in the 1980s with president Reagan, in the 1990s on his television interview programmes and his final interview with Koppell and his refusing to answer questions about how he felt during his dramatic moment in the debates. On the Vidal side, there is a friend and biographer, a study of linguistics and a commentator from the left. And, from the political point of view, one of the significant talking heads is the Conservative Christopher Hitchens. There are also many executives from ABC television.

For those who enjoy wars of words, insinuations and invective, the film is very entertaining, each of the contestants having a way with words and expression. However, the film highlights the key moment when the Vidal called Buckley a crypto-Nazi and Buckley lost his temper, threatening to punch Vidal, and referring to him as queer. While Vidal took it in his calm stride at the time, each wrote lengthy articles about the situation for Esquire magazine. Buckley then sued the Vidal, with Vidal countersuing, a case which spent three years in the courts until suddenly Buckley withdrew, stranding Vidal.

For many of the quotations from Buckley and Vidal, the film has Kelsey Grammer voicing Buckley and John Lithgow voicing Vidal.

The film, in its comparatively brief running time, has a great deal to offer, especially on American politics, culture and media. For those interested in Vidal and his life and career, there is a documentary The United States of Amnesia which is an extensive study of and portrait of Vidal.

This film shows the value of revisiting these controversies of the past, interpreting them within the context of the time, highlighting how politics in the media have changed over the decades.

THE BLUE ROOM/ LA CHAMBRE BLEUE

France, 2014, 76 minutes, Colour.
Mathieu Amalric, Lea Drucker, Stephanie Cleaut.

Directed by Mathieu Amalric.

The Blue Room is based on a story by crime writer George Simenon, very popular with his series of Inspector Maigret stories. This is not one of them, though it involves crime.

One of the reasons the film is interesting is that it stars much Mathieu Amalric who was also co-screenwriter as well as director.

The film has brief running time and, in fact, a lot of the action takes place off-screen with the audience having to supply through imagination and response to clues as to what has actually happened.

It is clear from the outset that an affair is going on, in a blue room, Julien (Amalric) and Esther (Stephanie Cleaut) are both married, she not concerned about the affair because her husband is seriously ill, he somewhat edgy because he has a wife and child.

There are some scenes showing the domestic arrangements, especially for Julien, including a scene at the beach. But, very quickly, he is being interrogated by the police. During this interrogation there are many flashbacks. It emerges – but is not seen – that as Esther's husband is dead, that Julien's wife is dead. Have they murdered their partners?

Then, rather quickly, we are in court, where quite a number of witnesses give their opinions, character opinions, hypotheses and speculation, some factual testimony, not the kind of thing English-speaking audiences are used to in court proceedings, Julien and Esther come together in the courtroom – and then a verdict is given and sentence.

The audience does not have all that much time to deal with what is going on, their response to the characters and situations, moral judgements and assessments, which means that the effect of the drama is tantalising rather than satisfying, making a demand on the audience as the film is ending and after the film is over to make sense of what it has just experienced.

DOPE

US, 2015, 103 minutes, Colour.

Shameik Moore, Tony Revolori, Keirsey Clemons, Kimberly Elise, Blake Anderson, Bruce Beatty, Roger Guenver Smith.

Directed by Rick Famuyiwa.

At the beginning of this film, three definitions of Dope are offered: there is the obvious one about drugs; there is the obvious one about a fool; but there is also a meaning which offers dope as slang for something exuberant and exciting.

The central character of this film, Malcolm (Shameik Moore in a pleasant and ingratiating performance) lives with his mother at home in the black neighbourhood, dangerous neighbourhood, of Los Angeles, Inglewood. He is an intelligent young man, good at studies, smart with words and ideas, loving music from the 1990s which he and his friends like to play – in fact, they hold the 1990s (which was before their time!) in great regard, especially the music, the songs and the groups. Older audiences may remember that the 1990s saw the emergence of many of the African- American street films and gangster films – and stories of Boyz in the Hood. This is a 2015 version of Boyz in the Good Hood.

There is a narration by Forest Whitaker who is also a producer of the film. He explains Malcolm and his background, his best friend Jib, played by Tony Revolori, so effective as the bellboy in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, as well as Diggy, who looks like a boy, but is explained as a young lesbian. The three are inseparable, played music together, are good friends.

The three do well at school, although looked down on by some of the tougher types, and bullied – but with Malcolm giving them their comeuppance later in the film, pulling a gun on them and their cowering away.

One afternoon they have to drive through difficult streets, are set upon, and a drug dealer suddenly wants Malcolm to be a go-between with him and the girl to whom he is attracted. This leads to Malcolm and his friends, not without difficulties with the bouncers at the door, getting into a club to celebrate the dealer's birthday. When the place is raided, the dealer puts the drugs in Malcolm's schoolbag and, when he escapes, Malcolm discovers the drugs. Another dealer phones to make an appointment to collect them, when suddenly the actual dealer, now in prison, rings for them to be delivered to a wealthy mansion.

This leads, of course, to all kinds of complications, with Malcolm using his wits, making contact with a white dealer who is able to dispose of the drugs, get the money, set up secret accounts – which Malcolm can hold over the respectable boss dealing in drugs.

There are comic touches, serious and dramatic touches, Malcolm rather unwilling to be caught up in this kind of world when his heart is set on his studies, in going to Harvard, his thesis on Ice Cube, and using his wits to survive in the Hood.

The film is very local, made for an American audience, a local Los Angeles audience – which may mean, though an audience outside Los Angeles is invited in to participate and observe, that non-Americans might find that being on the outside makes it less easy to be involved.

FANTASTIC FOUR

US, 2015, 100 minutes, Colour.

Miles Teller, Michael B. Jordan, Kate Mara, Jamie Bell, Toby Kebbell, Reg E. Cathey, Tim Blake Nelson.

Directed by Josh Trank.

For a while, this seems to be a rather low key adaptation of a Marvel comic. The principal characters seem rather ordinary, except for their knowledge of science and technology. They certainly don't seem to be like any superheroes or seem likely to become superheroes.

However, just before halfway through the film, there is quite a transformation, travelling into other dimensions, finding a planet with extraordinary energies, their being transformed and, yes, becoming superheroes.

In the last decade, there were two *Fantastic Four* films, pleasantly successful in their way. However, for this particular outing, the decision has been made to go back to the origins of

the four, even back to the childhood of Reed and Ben. Reed is a technology nerd, creating experiments as a little boy, but ridiculed at school by his teacher. Ben lives in a machine dump and read befriends him, finding a motor, and inviting him to share in experiments. Seven years pass and, straining credibility, the actors portraying these teenagers are well in their 20s!, Miles Teller and Jamie Bell. They have an exhibit at a Science Fair and are again ridiculed by their schoolteacher. But, Dr Franklin Storm (Reg E.Cathey) and his protégé, Sue (Kate Mara), approach the two who are offered scholarships working at a laboratory in New York.

The equipment in the laboratory is extensive which gives Reed the opportunity to keep working on his interdimensional travel, especially with animals, hoping for transporting humans. While it is rather dramatic when it happens, the success of the experiment seems to happen too easily, but it gives the young people a chance to reflect on how those who walked on the moon got more recognition than the technicians – so, of course, what better than to quietly sneak into the machine and transport themselves, even to planting an American flag on the other planet?

Which they do, but not before encountering the extraordinary energy on the planet – and it is here that they are transformed into the Fantastic Four while one of them, Victor (Toby Kebbel), is swallowed up by the energy only to emerge as energy and evil personified, wanting world domination and world destruction, for the earth to be swallowed up in a black hole!

Those familiar with the comics will know that Ben turns into a rock giant, Reed has extended limbs, Johnny (Michael B.Jordan) is consumed by fire and Sue can appear and disappear while floating in her own bubble.

The military potential of the Four is developed but Reed runs away, to be sought out again so that he can fix the machine for further transporting and the possibilities of everything returning to normal.

Normal is not the normal in this kind of story, so there has to be a confrontation with Victor, a combat between good and evil, the exercise of the particular gifts of the fantastic four.

And, so, that's it. Plenty of stunts and special effects, reasonably sympathetic characters, but, as was said, rather low-key compared with other Marvel extravaganzas.

GAYBY BABY

Australia, 2015, 83 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Maya Newell.

As the title indicates, the focus of the film is on children of same-sex coupled families. The opening credits display many photos of traditional nuclear families, then move to the same-sex parents and their families with underlying quotations critical of same-sex families as well as supportive.

One of the important sayings for understanding others is that we should walk in their shoes for some time. Probably, a great number of potential audiences for this film would be quite unwilling to walk in the shoes of the same-sex parents, feeling uncomfortable, disapproving – or both. But, the aim of the film is to tell stories, invite audiences to identify with the

characters and their situations, experience something of the reality of the partnerships as well as the parenting, the normal problems and day-by-day situations and challenges and, especially, the way that the children handle the situation, their understanding, the way they communicate this.

The documentary focuses on four families, three with same-sex mothers, one with same-sex fathers. While the parents are a strong presence, the film says its importance is focusing on the children, their voices, their experiences, the type of family living that they have, the influence of the same-sex parents, the absence of an opposite sex parent.

The film interweaves the four stories.

At the time of the filming, Gus was 11, with two mothers, and younger sister, Rory. Gus is a rather rowdy boy, with a great passion for wrestling, often wrestling in the house with his younger sister, who sometimes encouraged him, but got the worse of the bouts which led to tears. This is of concern to the main parenting mother, who has some confrontations with her son, who can be particularly wilful, storming off in the middle of a conversation, his mother trying to get him to participate in music classes as well as in debating. Many of the ordinary problems in any household and family come to the surface. While reluctant earlier, the mother takes Gus to the world wrestling exhibition.

Matt is 12 and has an older brother. There are two mothers in the house, one previously married, now divorced, with her sons and her new partner who is supportive and tends to stay more in the background, leaving the parenting to the birth mother. The mother is quite religious, explaining that she was brought up with bible stories, wanting her son to go to church on Sunday (when he wants to play Australian rules), the boy upset that the priest has condemned his mothers as sinful. He is very bright boy, a strong presence. The family was invited to have a meal with Julia Gillard, her opposition to same-sex marriage being clearly stated. They watch the program on television – and there is a scene where Matt faces the media, saying what he felt and explaining his words to the Prime Minister, a plea for partnerships where people love each other. Ultimately, his mothers do go to the football to support him, Matt not particularly wanting to go to church but explaining that his mother has not lost her faith.

Graham has two fathers. They have fostered him and now have adopted him, one of them taking the role of the father and the other being supportive. Graham is also 12. They move to Fiji, settling in, with scenes of Graham going to school, in class, the local children, the teacher, and his having to write an essay about himself to be read to the class. There are scenes at home with his writing his essay with the help of his father. The issue comes up about whether to let people know about the same-sex family, the father indicating that there is a time and place for revealing things and for not revealing things, Graham speculating on good lies which have a good outcome.

The girl in the film is called Ebony-Rose², from the outer western suburbs of Sydney, again with two mothers. They make a visual impact, with many facial rings and piercings and elaborate tattoos. Ebony wants to be a singer, is interested in going to a high school of the arts in Newtown in inner Sydney, prepares a song, goes for an audition, but does not get in, later, rather ruefully, saying that she had given up her ambitions to be a singer. Ebony gets a new uniform and accepts the fact that she is going to the local high school. The mothers are concerned with the problems of daily life but, especially for a son who is severely epileptic, needs medication, needs constant watching.

By way of climax, there are newsreel footage scenes of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in Sydney, 2014, the flamboyance of the participants, the floats, the marching in the Sydney streets, but with a number of parents and the participation of the children.

In view of the social and political debates of 2014-2015, the film is a timely contribution to perspectives and to discussion.

THE GIFT

US, 2015, 108 minutes, Colour.

Jason Bateman, Rebecca Hall, Joel Edgerton.

Directed by Joel Edgerton.

This is one of those stories that it is best to know very little about before seeing the film, wondering, as the film starts, where it could be going, and becoming more suspicious, more questioning, as the film proceeds.

The film was actually written and directed by Australian Joel Edgerton, who has written a number of screenplays, including *Felony*, and who has been very successful in his screen career both at home in Australia and internationally. The screenplay is very well written, relying on some of the tried and true conventions of this kind of drama as well as some surprises, establishing characters, and gradual revelation of depths in characters and bringing it to a surprisingly edge in the ending.

It all seems very familiar at the opening, an affluent young couple moving to Los Angeles, buying an attractive home in the hills, settling in, she with some business work at home, he a successful salesman with prospects of promotion. So far, so expected. Except that the salesman, Simon, is played by Jason Bateman, best-known for his comedies, his succession of put-upon characters, with characteristic deadpan response, in films like *Identity Theft*, the *Horrible Bosses* series... But, it must be said, he plays this very serious role with great skill, an ability to seem ordinary, and ability to mask what is really going on, yet gradually revealing that there is quite a different character underneath his surface.

His wife, Robyn, is played by Rebecca Hall, a versatile actress in such films as *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, *The Town*. She plays her role with great charm, loyal to her husband, yet very sympathetic to the stranger who accosts them as they are at a cash register in a shop. The stranger, Gordo, is played by Edgerton himself, who reveals himself as having been in the same class at school with Simon.

It is Gordo who first leaves a gift at the door, with a card in a red envelope, as a welcome to the couple. Later, he turns up with some more gifts and happily accepts an invitation to stay for a meal, Simon revealing that he remembers Gordo ("Weirdo Gordo") and would rather have nothing to do with him. Robyn can't quite understand this.

As Robyn tries to understand better, while sympathetic to Gordo, step by step she uncovers a story that she had not been expecting, traits in her husband that she may have suspected but would have repressed. And, while she is in hospital for the delivery of her baby, Gordo sends three gifts to Simon, reminding him that bygones sometimes cannot be left as bygones.

This means that the film ends with the audience as well as the characters on edge, with quite some unpleasant feelings, unsettling, giving audiences something to reflect on. (Some advertising and comments might lead audiences to expect a somewhat demonic and shock thriller in the vein of the Ingenious series but it is better to think of it more straightforwardly as a domestic drama, delving into the past and experiencing consequences.)

HITMAN AGENT 47

Germany/UK, 2015, 95 minutes, colour.

Rupert Friend, Hannah Ware, Zachary Quinto, Ciaran Hinds, Thomas Kretschmann.

Directed by Aleksander Bach.

Hitman Agent 47 is based on the computer game, Hitman. The film unfolds just like a computer game, quest, pursuit, hero, obstacles, deaths, final confrontation.

The film has the added advantage of some sequences in Salzburg, most in Berlin, capitalising on the scenes of the city, and the same in Singapore, once again with the atmosphere and views of the city.

An explanation is given that in the 1960s, the United States developed a plan for the creation of his men, assassins, geared to have no emotions. The assassins went into action but the decision was made to close down the program. In the meantime, the head of the company, The Syndicate, Thomas Kretschmann, wants to re-open the program. Through quite a complicated set of technical means, which might leave the ordinary audience puzzled, it is determined that the possibilities for development centre on a young girl who has grown up in Berlin. The syndicate sends its agents to find her and bring her back to start the program again.

In the meantime, she is poring over documents in a Berlin library to find a mysterious man. Ultimately, he is revealed as her father, Ciaran Hinds.

In the meantime, Agent 47, Rupert Friend, ruthless and unemotional, has been sent by his superior to save the girl, Hannah Ware – the ulterior motive, revealed at the end, being to infiltrate the Syndicate Office in Singapore and destroy the director.

This leads to quite an amount of activity and chases in Berlin, at Alexanderplatz, in the underground and in the streets. It sets up a confrontation between the special agent from The Syndicate, Zachary Quinto, who wants to take the girl to the headquarters and tries to preserve her at any costs, fighting Agent 47 who, he says, is after the girl and her death. There are some computer game confrontations, fights, especially on the electrified railway lines in the Berlin underground.

The father is discovered, an elderly man, and once again there are many chases and pursuits.

The action and the characters transfer to Singapore for a final confrontation, the head of The Syndicate remaining under guard and never coming out of his office, but persuaded to do so to confront the girl and find out the truth. In the meantime, his agent, Zachary Quinto, has taken the father and tortures him with serums.

A whole lot of chasing, a whole lot of shooting, of a whole lot of deaths, the head taking off in a helicopter with the father. This means that in the building, Agent 47 and the girl have to up to the roof, confront a lot of guards, the Agent fighting with Quinto, and the culmination where the father, for love of his daughter, explodes the helicopter. Which seems an ending except that suddenly, Agent 47 is confronted by his lookalike agent – who shows no emotion a motion except to confront Agent 47.

LITTLE BOY

US, 2015, 96 minutes, Colour.

Jakob Salvati, Emily Watson, Michael Rapaport, David Henrie Tom Wilkinson, Cary-Hirojuki Tagawa, Ted Levine, Ben Chaplin, Eduardo Verastegui.

Directed by Alejandro Monteverde.

Little boy is a nickname for the central character in this family-oriented film, a film of values with touches of religion. It is set in the town of O' Hare in California in the first half of the 1940s, the time of the US involvement in World War II, post-Pearl Harbor, the hostility towards Japanese rounded up and interned. Little Boy is also the Nickname for one of the atomic bombs that was dropped on Hiroshima in order to end the war.

This is very traditional filmmaking, the kind of filmmaking that was very popular in past decades, pleasing and accessible filmmaking, which critics and many in younger generations dismiss as “uninventive”. Be that as it may, this is a film which will appeal to audiences who are looking for a warm and interesting story, sympathetic characters, an acknowledgement of conflict, who want some kind of hope, even prayer and miracles. Since the popularity of *The Passion of the Christ* in the United States in 2004, American companies have been far more confident in making films geared to the middle American audience, offering films of faith. While some of them may seem too American and their style of sentiment for audiences outside the US, this one will probably have more general appeal.

Audiences in 2007 were charmed by small-budget film with Hispanic characters, *Bella*. This film is from the same director, Alejandro Monteverde. He brings the same sentiment to this film, a touch of the fanciful, a touch of the romantic, more than a touch of the hopeful.

It is well served by the young Jakob Salvati playing the eight-year-old boy in the town of O' Hare, Pepper. Salvati is one of those screen presences who is often described as cute and appealing. And he is, able to sustain the whole drama. He is very short, Little Boy, bullied by the big kids in the town. But, he has a very close relationship with his father, shared imagination storytelling, delighting in the comic books of Black Eagle, especially enjoying a live performance at the local cinema when Black Eagle comes to town and Pepper is invited on stage and invited to will the movement of a bottle.

He does, and this leads to a religious theme, the quotation from the gospel about having faith the size of a mustard seed and being able to move mountains. There are two priests in the parish and the parish priest, Father Oliver (a sympathetic Tom Wilkinson) reflects on faith and prayer with Pepper, giving him a list of good things to do, Gospel-based, visiting the sick, feeding hungry, clothing the naked (and his being involved in a knitting bee for those without clothes). It is a pity that there is not more explicit explanation of where these

injunctions come from, from the Gospel of St Matthew, but they are general enough to appeal to any person of good faith who is not necessarily Christian.

Not sharing this faith is an elderly Japanese man, Mr Hashimoto, released from internment, returning to O' Hare but the subject of disdain, enmity and, often, violence. The parish priest adds visiting Mr Hashimoto to Peppers list, not something easy because Pepper has been involved with his angry older brother and pelting the Japanese man's house with stones. But, gradually, they form a bond.

There are flashes to the involvement of Pepper's father in battles in the Philippines, and his being a prisoner of war, with the Japanese guards shooting at the Americans at the time of the dropping of the bomb, Little Boy, on Hiroshima, something which Pepper sees on the newsreels and dreams about, wandering about the ruins of the city.

While Jacob Salvati is very effective as Pepper, Emily Watson brings her warmth to the role of the mother and comedian Kevin James has a small role as the local doctor. Michael Rapaport is the father and Ben Chaplin is Black Eagle.

Of course, there is a great deal of sentiment in the film, but, unfortunately, this often gives rise to a certain cynical response to such human warmth, which is a pity.

A pleasing, traditional, pleasant and sometimes challenging re-visiting of California during World War II.

IRRATIONAL MAN

US, 2015, 95 minutes, Colour.

Joaquin Phoenix, Emma Stone, Parker Posey, Jamie Blackley, Betsy Aidem, Ethan Phillips.
Directed by Woody Allen.

A word of warning before the review. If you have not seen the film and don't know anything about the plot, don't continue reading here but go and see the film and be surprised. This is a review for those who have seen the film.

Released some months before Woody Allen turns 80, Irrational Man does not seem to be the work of an elderly director or writer. Certainly, it will remind audiences at a number of films from Allen's CV, something which has annoyed critics who accuse him of repeating himself, but for those who appreciate his films, why not rework themes?

And one of the criticisms that Woody Allen has had to face over the years is that some of his films are funny and some people think that they are all supposed to be funny and, if not, there is something wrong with them. And, Irrational Man, is a case in point. Allen is not trying to be funny.

Another complaint is that the film has too much philosophy in it – as if that could really be a problem. Yes, there are philosophical questions because the leading character is a Professor of philosophy in an American college and we see him quite a number of times in the classroom, specifically mentioning philosophers like Conte, Kierkegaard, Edmund Husserl, phenomenology and existentialism, Jean-Paul [Sartre](#), Simone de Beauvoir, Martin

Heidegger. Allen certainly remembers his history of philosophy. Which indicates tones of depth in the exploration of philosophical questions.

In recent years Joaquin Phoenix has been playing offbeat roles, *Inherent Vice*, *Her*, *The Master*, and here Allen provides him with another one. He is Abe, arriving at a college, subject of curiosity, middle-aged with a very evident paunch, a reputation for relationships with his students, and eager do-gooder and traveller to countries in distress in his younger days, but now a touch dissipated and a touch world-weary as well is impotent.

He first attracts the attention of another lecturer, Parker Posey, dissatisfied in her marriage and eager to ingratiate herself with Abe. That doesn't quite work out, though she tries hard.

More satisfying is the admiration of a young student, Jill, Emma Stone, who appeared in Woody Allen's previous film, *Magic in the Moonlight*. She seems a sensible young woman, an eager philosophy student, flattered when the professor praises her assignment – but then preoccupied with him, talking about nothing else but him, more than infatuated with him, enjoying his company, discussions, and falling in love.

In an innocent incident, listening in to a conversation amongst a group in a diner, leads to consequences that Jill certainly did not anticipate, nor did Abe, as he gets angry with the judge who is partial, refusing custody of children to a deserving mother, and, reading Dostoevsky and *Crime and Punishment*, with annotations, he sets out to rectify the situation, finding what he thinks is a moral freedom but which is an amoral freedom, which not only has an effect on himself but also on Jill and her integrity.

Which means that audiences for and against the film will be going back to Woody Allen's 1989 classic, *Crimes and Misdemeanours*, as well as thinking about his 2004 *Match Point*, issues of principle, issues of responsibility, issues of conscience, and deviation in conscience.

So, not a funny Woody Allen film, but very well-written, well-acted, an evocative jazz score as well as classical excerpts, and, for this reviewer, one of Woody Allen's best.

IRIS

US, 2015, 83 minutes, Colour.

Iris Apfel, Carl Apfel.

Directed by Albert Maysles.

Some commentators have remarked that if one is heavily into fashion, this is a documentary for them. Then others have remarked that if one is not heavily into fashion, this is a documentary for them. Both commentators are right.

The film is a celebration of life, the portrait of a quite striking woman, aged 90 at the time of filming, also celebrating the hundredth birthday of her devoted husband, Carl. And the director himself, the celebrated Albert Maysles, of the Maysels documentary-maker brothers, was 88 and died in March 2015. Not only is this a celebration of life, it is a celebration of age and creative ageing.

Somebody also remarked about Iris Apfel, born of Jewish parents, growing up in New York

City during the Depression, marrying in the 1940s, that she could serve as a role model. For zest, yes, but probably not for her style and taste in fashion. It is extraordinary to look at, but not many women would probably want to be so flamboyant – nor men wanting to wear the range of colourful trousers that she designed for her husband, which he quietly wears. Nevertheless, she is always fascinating to look at and, perhaps a comment on her style would be that Dame Edna Everage would probably be very jealous!

Iris has spent a lifetime buying clothes, principally for herself, and wearing them, but with her delight in design, colour, fabrics, and extraordinary finished products. Her expeditions to Europe twice each year meant that she went to many auctions for all kinds of articles and artifices for home design and decoration. These are kept in her and her husband's storage space in Long Ireland, now a museum kind of space with all kinds of objects which may – or may not – appeal to the viewer.

As Iris reached her late 80s, she made the decision to part with most of her fashion possessions, arranging for the transferred to the Peabody Museum, a singular collection and heritage that she has bequeathed to the people of New York and to international visitors. She is an exemplar of the detachment that is required in old age.

Every time she appears, Iris is dressed in the most colourful clothes – and large lensed and framed glasses. And her comments match her clothes, or go beyond. She is articulate, has a way with words, is very direct in her expressions, not concealing her feelings and attitudes. And there is Carl, often accompanying her, short of breath, sometimes feeling his age, but celebrating his hundredth birthday with his wife making his speech for him. After all, she is only 90.

This is a very likeable portrait, Iris being an interesting woman, uninhibited but with good manners, reminiscing about her long life, her passion for fashion, her status as a fashion icon. She is very strong at times on the fact that she is not pretty, that she does not do pretty, and noting that after prettiness vanishes, what is left...? With her celebrity status, she does remark that she has become a geriatric starlet!

For an observer, especially one who may not feel much empathy for this world of Iris, it is still an interesting, enjoyable, very entertaining documentary and portrait, find last contribution to the work over so many decades of our Albert Maysles and the indefatigable energy of Iris Apfel.

LIFE

US, 2015, 111 minutes, Colour.

Robert Pattinson, Dane De Hahn, Ben Kingsley, Joel Edgerton.

Directed by Anton Corbijn.

September 30, 2015 is the 50th anniversary of the death of emerging actor, James Dean, in a road accident. This film moves into his early career and serves as an effective memorial for his life and death.

The Life of the title is a reference to Life Magazine which devoted a story published in February 1955 to Dean. It also refers to the short life of Dean himself.

This is actually a photography story. While the object of the photography is Dean, this is the story of Dennis Stock, the freelance photographer who discovered his fascination with Dean would be shared by the public and who worked on Dean to agree to a photostory for Life Magazine.

It should be mentioned that the director, Anton Corbijn, has been a photographer for many decades, still photos, documentaries, music videos as well as several films including Control (the story of Ian Curtis and Joy Division), a story of an ageing agent played by George Clooney, The American, and a version of a John Le Carre novel with Philip Seymour Hoffman, A Most Wanted Man, all very interesting in their way. Corbijn knows what he is doing and has quite an intense empathy with his portrayal of Dennis Stock.

For movie buffs, the film also offers an interesting glimpse into Hollywood at the beginning of 1955, with the film narrative taking place over a few months, from the promotion of James Dean's first starring role, East of Eden, to his audition for his next role, Rebel Without a Cause, and Dean's having to make a decision about his ambitions and what was necessary to fulfil them and the issue of studio control, not just of his career but also of his personal life, especially for the promotion of his movies.

Again, film buffs will appreciate the sequences with Warner Brothers mogul, Jack L. Warner, and his ruthlessness, which he had been exercising for decades, and his egotistic decision-making over every aspect of his films and of his stars' careers. Although he appears in only three sequences, Ben Kingsley's cameo as Jack L. Warner is one of his best performances.

For the modern generation, there will be a lot of identification with Dennis Stock, his back story of being in the Navy at 16, with a pregnant wife at 17, leaving his wife and child, wanting to pursue a photography career, going to galas and premieres, taking on-set photos, being published in magazines, but always looking for the breakthrough story. He is played by Robert Pattinson (who has been getting more and more significant dramatic roles since his Twilight years).

The narrative of the film is quite angst-ridden because persuading James Dean to agree to the photo-shoot is a prolonged, quite prolonged, process and Stock, making every effort, phone calls, visits, conversations, following Dean to New York City, notes under the door, living with frustration, is a thread of this drama.

And James Dean himself? He has been the subject of several telemovies and documentaries and audiences who know his films will be expecting not just an impersonation but a dramatisation of his character. Audiences may not be familiar with the actor Dane De Haan, who has been very effective in quite different roles in such films as Lawless (a slow-witted, crippled young man involved in bootlegging), the young hero in Chronicle, playing a wilful, hedonistic character in Kill Your Darlings, and the Green Goblin in The Amazing Spiderman 2).

He makes James Dean an interesting character, seemingly nonchalant, casual in the face of Hollywood, cheeky during press conferences, in a relationship with actress Pier Angeli, hoping for better roles, the touch of the rebel especially against the control by studio heads and agents, with his mumbling communication and moodiness. It is something of a shock to find that at this stage of his life, he has just turned 24, his character still being moulded and a

life before him.

While Stock tries to influence Dean, Dean invites him to go to Indiana to meet his family, with a powerful scene on a train as, quietly, Dean tells the story of his family, the death of his mother, her funeral, revealing something of the personal intensity behind the facade. It is something of the same in the scenes in Indiana, on the farm, Dean reading stories with his nephew, agreeing to attend the local school dance and making a hesitant speech (saying he did better with scripts).

A good word for Joel Edgerton as Stock's agent, John Morris.

Most audiences may know that *East of Eden* was a success, as was *Rebel Without a Cause* and, Deans last film was *Giant*. But, six months later, Dean was dead at 24, the life that was before him gone.

The final credits are worth watching because the actual Stock photos are shown – and we realise how carefully the director had established this context for each of the photos and how skilfully he had set up the action of his film exactly like the photos.

This is a fine contribution to American cinema history.

THE MAN FROM UNCLE

US, 2015, 116 minutes, Colour.

Henry Cavill, Armie Hammer, Alicia Vikander, Elizabeth Debicki, Hugh Grant, Jared Harris.
Directed by Guy Ritchie.

Way back when, or way way back when, depending on how old you are or how old you admit to being, there were many Bondish spy stories on the big screen and on television, including Napoleon Solo and his Russian ally, Ilya Kuriakin, in the forms of Robert Vaughn and David McCallum². It is half a century later and, of course, in this age of superheroes, we have their new incarnations, Henry Cavill who was the new Superman and Armie Hammer who was the Lone Ranger.

The film was directed by Guy Ritchie who has a flair for action, with his initial *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, his gangster films like *Revolver* and *Rock'n rolla*, and with his breakthrough films about Sherlock Holmes, with Robert Downey Jr and Jude Law. He brings something of this flair for action, verve and colour to this re-booting of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*

The initial television series setting is retained. We are in the early 1960s. There is quite an elaborate collage during the initial credits giving something of a history lesson visually, clips and glimpses of the war, post-war Europe, the Iron Curtain, the Cold War, nuclear fears, President John F. Kennedy. And, in the middle of the film, there is another collage taking us back to Nazi Germany, the development of weapons, the development of torture.

Napoleon Solo and Ilya Kuriakin are presented as agent icons. And it will depend on your opinion of them as screen presences, good-looking heroes – and, as a reviewer smartly noticed, different in ideologies but united in square jaws! Henry Cavill portrays Napoleon

Solo as something of a Christopher Reeve-Clark? Kent, his performance in the 2012 *Man of Steel*. His humour is very dry, and his emotional display is kept very much under control (or is not there in the first place). He seems tall by himself at six feet one, but is rather dwarfed by Armie Hammer at six feet four! And Hammer has the showier role, single-minded in his loyalties, prone to anger at having to pretend to be calm as he poses as the fiancé of Gabby, (Alicia Vikander, *A Royal Wedding*, *Ex Machina*, *Son of a Gun*, *Testament of Youth*) who is the daughter of a nuclear scientist, used by the Nazis, at work in the US, abducted by a powerful wealthy Italian couple who are getting him to develop a nuclear bomb for their clients.

There are all kinds of action sequences, the two getting into all kinds of trouble, even Napoleon experiencing torture, but each emerging relatively unscathed.

Elizabeth Debicki (Australian actor from *The Great Gatsby*) is a tall, slinky, arrogant villain. But there is counterbalance in the perennial stiff-upper-lip British controller, played by Hugh Grant in his ineffable way, still in the *For Weddings and a Funeral* mode two decades later!

This is a reasonably enjoyable show, good to look at, not particularly memorable, but an insertion into the Cold War past – and with the prospect of a sequel!

ME AND GIRL AND THE AND DYING GIRL

US, 2015, 103 minutes, Colour.

Thomas Mann, RJ Cyler, Olivia Cooke, Nick Offerman, Connie Britton, Molly Shannon, Jon Bernthal, Katherine C. Hughes.

Directed by Alphonso Gomez-Rejon?.

This is a very likeable film and won the audience award at the Sundance Film Festival. It also won an ecumenical award.

It is also a very film-friendly story and treatment, the director, Alphonso Gomez-Rejon?, having acted as a personal assistant to a number of directors including Martin Scorsese. The author of the original novel, Jeff, is also a film lover and his two central characters who are shown to have been making their own movies for many years, in childhood and adolescence, parodying well-known films and their posters (and there is a very long funny list in the final credits), for example, *Sockwork Orange* (with sock puppets), *2.48 p.m. Cowboy*, and *Vere'd he go!* And there are quite a few entertaining snippets. And another enjoyable feature is the action going into animation at various times, amusing as well as concentrating the audience attention onto the characters and what is happening to them.

Perhaps this review has been a bit remiss in focusing on the film and cinema buff aspects of the screenplay instead of indicating what the title has highlighted, that the hero is Greg (Me), along with his good friend, Earl, and the dying girl, yes, she is dying of leukaemia, Rachel. These characters are very well played, especially by Thomas Mann as Greg. RJ Cyler is the African-American? Earl, from a neighbourhood that seems on the wrong side of the tracks. And Olivia Cooke is charming as Rachel.

The film has many of the characteristics of the teen movie, especially the high school movie, since the three central characters are still at school, specialise in film studies, hoping to get

good results to go to college. They are especially friendly with their history teacher (with clips and quotes from Werner Herzog and Klaus Kinski), played by Jon Bernthal. And, they are pushed around by the local bullies.

Greg's mother has a phone call from Rachel's mother (Connie Britton and Molly Shannon) and Greg's mother thinks he ought to go to visit the sick Rachel. He eventually does and finds himself in a rather awkward situation, but perseveres, a lot of silences initially, but Rachel liking him, he becoming more talkative and listening, and friendship is established – to her amusement with those funny little films, and his deciding to make a film especially for her. Reassuring us that Rachel is to recover...

One of the charms of the film is also the fact that each section is captioned, from Greg's point of view, indicating his feelings for this particular part of the story, and enumerating the number of days into his 'doomed relationship' with Rachel.

While the story is that of Greg, and secondly that of Earl who also becomes a good friend to Rachel, falls out at one stage with Greg, the two are reconciled through Rachel's good graces.

In the meantime, Rachel's leukaemia is becoming more threatening, her head shaved, she becomes a more gaunt, is growing weaker. Greg spends much of his time with Rachel, to the neglect of his studies, and, while he was accepted into College, his increasingly poor results mean that he may not be accepted – and there is a fine, sympathetic intervention by Rachel, highlighting how important Greg support of her really was.

While the school scenes are familiar in a way, the whole story and the setting of terminal leukaemia gives the film a quite different impetus and emotional impact. The central characters perform well and there are interesting performances from Connie Britton as the pressurising mother, Nick Offerman as Greg's academic father (with a lot of free time without bothering to get dressed) and Molly Shannon as the Jewish mother, emotional and demonstrably affectionate.

This is one of the best films about young people with terminal illness, a comparison would be the young adult novel and film by John Green, *The Fault in our Stars*. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* has a much broader appeal and dramatic effect.

PLAY IT SAFE

Australia, 2015, 91 minutes, Black and white.

Nicholas Kato, Maya Aleksandra, Christine Lui, Alasdair Tremblay- Birchall, Clayton Jacobson, Christina Kato, Spencer Gigacz, Kane Felsinger.

Directed by Chris Pahlow.

Play it Safe is a micro-budget film, made locally in Melbourne, utilising suburban locations as well as sequences in the city. It has also been filmed in black and white, to advantage in presenting the perspective on characters in the city.

The principal appeal of the film will be to the under-30s, the young adults trying to begin a career, especially in music, performance and composition. There is a variety of music, some rap songs, touches of jazz, some personal, moving towards classical composition in

sequences of playing simply at home or in performance in clubs.

Nicholas Kato plays Jamie, in his mid-20s, part of a band who have been on tour but people have not gone out to see and hear them. They are still rehearsing, but squabble and the band disbands.

Jamie plays quietly at home, an introspective character, put upon by his room mate, Jeff (Alasdair Tremblay- Birchall, actor and writer for such TV programs as Sean Micallef's *Mad as Hell*), unable to respond to playing at a girlfriend's exhibition opening, criticised by his father (Clayton Jacobson) who is urging him to do something worthwhile.

The film picks up as it moves along, audiences becoming used to Jamie, understanding him better, liking him more. This is especially the case when he does an interview with a rather I-am, Alpha-male founder of a small college for teaching music, with strict instructions to keep to his absolutely worked out curriculum. There is an amusing collage where we see Jamie meeting a variety of students, an enthusiastic older woman, a little girl, a seemingly indifferent boy, and Spencer, who really does not want to be there and how much he prefers to play with his Rubik cube and to read out the fantasy stories that his parents do not approve of.

There is some brightness in Jamie's life when he is attracted to the secretary of the college, Chloe (Christine Lui) and they date for a while – although she is put off when he invites her home and they have a conversation with Jeff, and she is upset that Jamie doesn't intervene to defend her.

Obviously, things will not go too well at the college and Jamie has to look further employment, the relationship with Chloe lapses, he meets the former girlfriend again, gets a new and seemingly worthwhile job, using his personalised methods of interacting with the students rather than an imposed curriculum, and, he is still moving towards 30...

RICKY AND THE FLASH

US, 2015, 103 minutes, Colour.

Meryl Streep, Kevin Klein, Mamie Gummer, Audra Mc Donald, Rick Springfield, Sebastian Stan, Ben Platt, Hailey Gates.

Directed by Jonathan Demme.

So, what were we expecting? Rock 'n' roll? Meryl Streep as a rocker? Another performance where Meryl Streep completely immerses herself in her character? Yes to all of the above. And that is definitely what we get.

It is not as if Meryl Streep had not sung in films before. She had many songs in *Postcards from the Edge*, some comic singing in *Death Becomes Her*, singing the role of the Witch in *Sondheim's Into the Woods* – and, of course, *Mamma Mia*. It is not as if Meryl Streep can't sing – but for this role, as with all her roles, she did her homework and training, the range of songs by a number of songwriters from Tom Petty to Bruce Springsteen, and learning to play the guitar as well. There are quite a number of songs, most of them in the California club where she and her band, Ricky and The Flash, have been entertaining the locals, generally a rough and ready but enthusiastic audience, for years. And, as might be hoped for, Ricky and

the Flash perform a grand finale at the family wedding.

We are introduced to Ricky, braids and heavy make-up, rock 'n' roll costumes, belting out the songs, playing with her band and with Greg, Rick Springfield able to play his music and in a sympathetic role. Then, we see her the next day, working the supermarket at the checkout, with the young enthusiastic floor manager continually urging her to smile, something which he continually demonstrates.

Then a phone call, to come home to the family she had abandoned decades earlier, with her daughter, Julie, in crisis after being abandoned by her husband. Now, she is Linda, her ordinary name, and she decides to travel to Indianapolis, and the mansion, clean and orderly and luxurious, where her former husband, Pete, Kevin Kline, has lived with their children, Julie and two sons, married to Maureen, whom we don't see at first and perhaps judge her a bit too superciliously because of Linda's reaction to the almost-perfect house, but in fact, as we get to know her, she is probably the most sympathetic character in the film, played by Audra Mc Donald – and, interestingly, it is an inter-racial marriage which is taken for granted, never even commented on.

Julie is played by Mamie Gummer, Meryl Streep's daughter who has appeared with her in other films. They play well together, Julie on medication and somewhat out of it, gradually mellowing with her mother's exuberant presence, which includes going out to eat doughnuts and a hair and make-up makeover – and also her mother telling off the ex-husband and his girlfriend when they happen to see them in restaurant. Julie is depressed and is in therapy, helped by her mother – who later glimpses and realises just how much influence Maureen has had for the good and the better during her long absence.

The other crisis is the forthcoming wedding of one of the sons and his rather snobbish fiancée. The son has kept in touch with his mother, but the influence of his fiancée and family means that she is not invited to his wedding, just as she was not invited to Julie's. The other son is gay and is critical of his mother, accusing her of homophobia. And this is mainly at a dinner sequence in a restaurant, one of those exceedingly loud and embarrassing dinners with aggression.

The film is a story of sadness and regrets, a story of dreams, career and selfish decisions, but it is also a story of hope, finishing on a happily dancing ending, courtesy of bringing Bruce Springsteen's music, and the realisation that, although it is late, it is not too late to make some kind of reparation and, even within the limits of circumstances that cannot be changed, to bring some love and hopeful expectations.

The director, Jonathan Demme, has made a number of documentaries about musicians and concerts, as well as such films as *Silence of the Lambs*, *Rachel at the Wedding*. The writer, Diablo Cody, has been responsible for *Juno*, *Young Adult* and episodes of *The United States of Tara*. It is not great, but it is very enjoyable – and, once again, as for almost four decades, admiration for Meryl Streep.

SHE'S FUNNY THAT WAY

US, 2014, 93 minutes, Colour.

Imogen Poots, Owen Wilson, Rhys Ifans, Kathryn Hahn, Will Forte, Jennifer Aniston, Illeana

Douglas, Cybil Shepherd, Richard Lewis, Austin Pendleton, George Morfogen, Debi Mazar, Colleen Camp, Tatum O' Neal, Jennifer Esposito, Lucy Punch, Joanna Lumley, Quentin Tarantino.

Directed by Peter Bogdanovich.

She's Funny That Way is an amusing comedy geared to an older audience. It was directed by Peter Bogdanovich, now himself so much older than in his heyday of the 1970s. He had his ups and downs as a director, but his ups were mainly in the first half of the 1970s with his American classic, *The Last Picture Show*, then one of the funniest comedies of all time, *What's Up Doc* and the nostalgic piece, *Paper Moon*. It is 13 years since his last film, *The Cat's Meow*.

This is a comic farce, a whole lot of coincidences, people turning up at the same place at the same time unexpectedly, people turning up in the wrong place, and then more people turning up... And it has a theatre background, which enables the whole story and characters to be quite theatrical. A lot of visual tumour, verbal humour, situation humour.

The cast is particularly strong, contemporary comic stars and quite a number of cameos from favourites from Bogdanovich's earlier films, including Austin Pendleton as an obsessed judge, Tatum O'Neal as a waitress, Colleen Camp, and Cybill Shepherd, Bogdanovich's partner from way back when, as the rather frumpy mother of the central character. And there is another cameo at the end of the film – but it would be spoilsportish to anticipate the pleasant surprise of discovering who it is...

The she of the title is a New York escort, Izzy, looking attractive and glamorous, telling her life story to Judy, Illeana Douglas, who is taking notes and trying to understand what has happened to Izzy. The rest of the film is made up of flashbacks, but returning all the time to Izzy and her interview.

Izzy is played by English Imogen Poots, immersing herself in the atmosphere of Brooklyn and New York City, carrying off an ambiguous role with some charm and aplomb.

She remembers going to a hotel room of a man calling himself Derek (Owen Wilson) who is charming and finally offers her \$30,000 to make a new life. She lives at home, with her parents, Cybill Shepherd and Richard Lewis, who are not enthusiastic about her acting career. But she goes to the audition, only to find that the director is Derek, whose real name is Arnold, who finds it really awkward that she has turned up for the role – and she auditions, perfectly and quite movingly, with Arnold's wife, Delta (Kathryn Hahn). Also present is the leading man, Seth, who had spied on Arnold the night before and seen Izzy.

And also present is the playwright, Joshua, played by Will Forte. The audience has already seen him walking a New York Street with his peremptory girlfriend and her dog, dismissed by her as she goes to her office, vacated by her alcoholic mother (another humorous cameo appearance by a British actress at the end of the film, a blink and you might miss it). Jane, the younger psychologist, is played by Jennifer Aniston in one of her best, blunt and dominating and domineering, performances.

So, there are all the ingredients for all kinds of mixups, especially since Seth and Delta have appeared on the London stage and formed something of a bond. And, before you know it, several other women are approaching Arnold to thank him profusely (and loudly) for their

\$30,000 and how it enabled them to make a new life.

The main scene in the first part of the film, apart from the audition, is set in an Italian restaurant with the playwright taking Izzy for a meal, so impressed is he by her audition. And then, the rest of the cast all turn up, including Jane taking the obsessed judge out and, at another table, the private detective that the judge has hired to follow Izzy! Needless to say, a fine mess.

The other fine mess occurs towards the end, in the hotel where Arnold and Seth are staying, Delta turning up for a rendezvous, Arnold summoning Izzy for a discussion, another escort who doesn't speak English well (Lucy Punch) causing revelations as she is discovered hiding in the bath, only to find that she went to the wrong room! Confusion and attacks all round.

And then we finally go back to Izzy and her interview with Judy, and her explanation of what happened to everyone.

Very light, but quite entertaining.

SOUTHPAW

US, 2015, 124 minutes, Colour.

Jake Gyllenhaal, Rachel Mc Adams, Forest Whitaker, Oona Laurence, 50 Cent Jackson, Skylar Brooks, Naomie Harris, Beau Knapp.

Directed by Antoine Fuqua.

This is a surprisingly good film, even for those were not keen on boxing. It is definitely is a boxing film, two long championship fights, one opening the film, the other bringing it to a climax, as well as a charity demonstration bout, some fistfights and a great deal of attention given to details of training.

But, there is a great deal more to the film. In fact, several times the screenplay refers to redemption.

The central character is Billy, a middle-aged boxer, a world champion, with the significant surname of Hope. He is seen in the initial fight, fierce-looking, challenging his opponent, bloodied, determined and angry, but winning. He is played by Jake Gyllenhaal in a completely convincing way, his physical appearance making his performance as a boxer credible, the choreography of his fighting in the ring, the details of training. This is to the credit of Jake Gyllenhaal who, in recent years, has given extraordinarily different and fine performances in Prisoners as well as Nightcrawler.

He is encouraged in his career and in his life by his devoted wife, Mo, played very attractively by Rachel Mc Adams. Billy and Mo were both orphans and grew up in orphanages in Hells Kitchen, not far from Madison Square Garden where the first fight takes place. It is she who is the support, the strength in the family, the adviser about his career and contracts. It is an emotional shock when the situation changes. The young daughter, convincingly played by Oona Laurence, devoted to her parents but suffering the consequences of the shock.

Billy goes into freefall, falling lower and lower, ultimately losing everything, being banned from boxing, losing his house, family, on the streets and looking for some kind of employment – and redemption.

He wanders into a gym managed by Tick, Forest Whitaker, a sympathetic wisdom-figure, who runs a gym for training young men, especially black men, from the tough neighbourhood. But Billy is still particularly angry, is ordered by the judge to have anger management sessions, not to drink, not to take drugs, and make himself a proper guardian for his daughter. At first, he is so angry that he cannot bring himself to take on a menial job at the gym but realises that he must.

As might be expected, this is the first step on the road to some kind of redemption, of moving out of the depths.

An opportunity does come for him to fight again, to challenge the new champion, from Columbia, with the significant name of Escobar, whose defiance has been the trigger for Billy's downfall. He trains, with Tick being supportive and giving good advice. Which means that the climax of the film is a long fight in Las Vegas, 12 rounds, with Escobar asserting himself, Billy fighting back, only a matter of points difference in the final decision. Whatever the outcome, Billy has controlled himself, has given his all to his boxing skills, has won the admiration of his daughter, guaranteed the loyalty of his supporters.

The film is well written by Kurt Sutter, who wrote many of the episodes four television of The Shield and Sons of Anarchy. Everything comes together well in terms of the story, the performances, the drama, the possibilities for some kind of hope and redemption despite the deepest of failures.

STALKHER

Australia, 2015, 90 minutes, Colour.
John Jarrett, Kaarin Fairfax, Robert Colby.
Directed by John Jarrett and Kaarin Fairfax.

The play on words in the title seems obvious but it is surprising that this has not been used so much more in the past. It sums up of the action of this film – but not quite because there is a twist that might become more and more apparent as the action goes on.

This is a joint project by the two actors, John Jarrett and Kaarin Fairfax, with the screenplay, performances and co-directing.

There are some scenes in a hospital and, towards the end, in a supermarket, but this is basically a two-hander, the action taking place within the confines of a suburban house. Two-handers are always a challenge for the audience, accepting that the action and dialogue would be confined to the two characters, requiring concentration, offering little relief. Attention requires strong and dramatic dialogue as well as powerful performances.

This time the performances are forceful in their way. We have seen John Jarrett do this kind of tough and rough and many audiences will remember his performances In the Wolf Creek

films. Kaarin Fairfax has the more nuanced role. One of the difficulties for concentration is that the dialogue is expletive-filled, tiresome at the best of times, but too easy a copout for more dramatic and intense writing.

It is established that Kaarin Fairfax is a nurse in a hospital and John Jarrett's character is a pharmacist. There are some flashbacks reinforcing this. But, of course, the question is are the characters what they seem. When a masked man intrudes into a house seemingly to terrorise the occupant, and the occupant overcomes the intruder, we have a set up for cross-interrogation, explorations of character – and further revelations.

In some ways, the toing and froing (both realistic and, sometimes, in the imaginations of the characters) has some fascination – but the danger is that becomes repetitious, and repetitious.

There is a twist but, with insinuations, invective and physical violence, many audiences will see is coming before the revelation. This twist has been used in other stories, most particularly and more effectively in the film version of Neil LaBute's [2](#), *Some Velvet Morning*.

Which means that the film does have some interesting aspects but, as for both the central characters, it is something of an ordeal.

VACATION

US, 2015, 99 minutes, Colour.

Ed Helms, Christina Applegate, Skyler Gisondo, Steel Stebbins, Chris Hemsworth, Leslie Mann, Chevy Chase, Beverly D' Angelo, Charlie Day, Catherine Missal, Ron Livingston, Norman Reedus, Keegan-Michael [2](#) Key, Regina Hall, Michael Pena, David Clennon, Colin Hanks.

Directed by John Francis Daley and Jonathan M. Goldstein.

If you are looking for intelligent comedy, this is not the place!

Back then, there was the humorous and satiric magazine, *National Lampoon*, probably best known for the film version of *Animal House* in the late 1970s. Then there were all kinds of *Lampoon's* at the movies. One of the areas was vacation, both in the good old US, and at Christmas, as well as to Europe. And in those films, *National Lampoon's Vacation*, the central characters were Mr and Mrs Griswold and their two children. The Griswold were played by Chevy Chase and Beverly D' Angelo. The films were amusing in their way, lots of pratfalls, lots of awkward situations, touches of the vulgar, but acceptable enough for audiences in the 1980s and 1990s.

Vacation is not exactly a sequel or a remake – rather, this is the younger generation, the young boy of the old *Vacation* is now 40ish and has an idea that he should get his family to share in a nostalgic trip in his memory of his parents' taking him and his sister to the theme park, Wally World. So far, so good.

The film is full of reminders of the past, this time with Ed Helms and Christina Applegate as the parents, with photos of the old parents – and, lo and behold, the new generation coming to San Francisco to stay with Rusty's mother and father. It must be a long time since Chevy

Chase was on screen because he is surprisingly older-looking than what we might have expected, larger, white hair (what the result it) but Beverley D' Angelo looking an older version of what she used to look like.

Once again, there are all kinds of awkward situations, slapstick, pratfalls, misunderstandings and misinterpretations – but!!! This is 2015 so no-holds-barred for four letter interventions, even from the younger Griswold boy. There is no inhibition on sex language, sex talk, sex jokes – a step beyond the risque. Admittedly, some of this is funny, depending on your sex joke tolerance. And bodily functions are not left out – and seeing is believing when the family skip a queue lining up for hot springs in Arkansas, only to be maliciously advised to go on the back road, where the mud in the hot spring is not what we or the family expected because it is... (supply four letters).

Rusty is a pilot on an economy air company, Economair, with some comic touches that remind us of Aeroplane/Flying High. Debbie is at home trying to manage the two boys, the younger is murderably precocious, bullies his sensitive older brother who writes diaries and poetry, is not into fighting, and is at the stage of eyeing girls and becoming romantically infatuated.

Rusty hires an Albanian they had – which gives rise to a lot of slapstick jokes. There is an ominous truck driver with the final confrontation in the Arizona desert. They stop off in Missouri to go to Debbie's old college where she finds she has a reputation for rather wild days – with some slapstick disasters as she tries to relive her past. There is an occasion where they sneak out to make love on the corner where four states meet, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, Arizona – only to find a long queue already there and police representatives from each of the State who start to assert their authority and draw their guns. And the jokey guide at the Grand Canyon goes suicidal during the white water rafting.

After they are robbed at the hot springs, they drive to Rusty's sister's place. The sister's husband, is Stone Crandall, is played by Thor himself, obviously relishing the opportunity to do something American, something comic, something dumb, something which highlights macho prowess (and a large prosthetic appendage). The couple are played by Lesley Mann and Chris Hemsworth.

Yes, there is a lot of soul-searching, the younger brother put in his place, the older brother experiences the touch of romance, a reconciliation between husband and wife who appreciate better what they have – and a visit to Wally World and the biggest and longest rollercoasters (and amusing pratfalls).

There are cameos from Colin Hanks, Ron Livingston, Norman Reedus, Michael Pena and Charlie Day – all getting a bit of extra pocket money!

Perhaps it is best to say that this is American comedy, for the multiplex audience, and its status in 2015, styles of comedy, visual and verbal, raucous and coarse, – and the memory that the earlier Griswold's also had a European vacation, so...

WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS

US, 2015, 96 minutes, Colour.

Zac Efron, Wes Bentley, Emily Ratajkowski, Jonny Weston, Shiloh Fernandez, Alex Shaffer, John Bernthal.
Directed by Max Joseph.

This is a film for a generation in its 20s. Older audiences might find it difficult to identify with, some remembering their past and realising they have well moved on, others not finding the characters or the situation congenial. The screenplay has lines such as a description of those who participated in the parties, with the music, drugs, drink, sexual behaviour, as “gyrating tweens”. One of the characters, in his early 40s, also remarks that at 23 a person has not lived long enough to learn the meaning of ‘irreparable’! And also asserts that a person has not become themselves until age 27.

The central characters of this film, the four friends, a not yet 27!

For some times, there have been many fifth a reference to the Valley Girls from the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. While there are some Valley Girls here, this is a story about four Valley Boys. At this stage of their life, they don’t have any full-time jobs, are on the lookout - sometimes, but more involved in promoting music and parties and, one or other of them, dealing drugs.

The central character is Cole, a young DJ, or with ambitions to become a DJ, played by Zac Efron, who, after his High School Musical escapades, has had the opportunity to appear in quite a number of serious films. This one is in between.

His other friends include Mason (Jonny Weston), a carefree type, helping with some building work, enthusiastic about party promotions. Then there is Ollie (Shiloh Fernandez) wanting to be an actor, but more interested in dealing drugs. Then there is Squirrel (Alex Shaffer), the rather put-upon member of the group. At one stage, there might be an improvement with work in the office of one of the drug clients, a company which allegedly helps those in difficulty with home finances but is really exploitative, wants to get homes for a cut-price and then selling them off while promising to rent them to the previous tenants. The four work in the company but, eventually, it gets to Cole, especially as he visits a woman with her child and realises that she is the victim of a scam.

The other track of the story is Cole’s encounter with James, Wes Bentley, a 40 something DJ who has a strong international reputation, who takes a shine to Cole, gives him a lot of advice, helps him with his tracks, advises him to listen and hear rather than just simply rely on possibilities from his laptop. But, there is no plain sailing, because Cole is attracted to James’s girlfriend and Personal Assistant, Sophie (Emily Ratajkowski).

There are some grim moments in the film, especially a drug overdose death which challenges the group. And, after the first hour or so of seeming indulgence in hedonism, the screenplay starts to take a moralising tone, which means that by the end, Cole has to make some decisions about life, what he wants, positive aims, and capitalising on his musical talent.

Perhaps this review makes the film sound more interesting than it is except for its target audience.

THE WOLFPACK

US, 2015, 90 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Crystal Moselle.

As we watch this film, it is something with something of disbelief. How could the situation be? And how could it be on the Lower East Side of Manhattan? Is it real? Did this really happen? Could it have happened? This is a New York story, but a story with a great difference.

And the opening of the film rather compounds the disbelief. Here we see half a dozen young men, dressed like the characters from Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, re-enacting some of the key scenes, doing role-plays of the violence – allotted each of the characters of Mr... And dressed in those black suits. And it continues, with one of the young men transcribing all the dialogue from *Pulp Fiction*, and re-enacting the car wash scene. And who are these young man – quite obviously brothers, with strong facial resemblances.

And, how could they possibly have allowed the film makers into their apartment to photograph everyone in such detail?

Actually, the answer doesn't come in the film but rather in the press notes. The film's director, Crystal Moselle, says she was walking down a New York Street when she saw the six men on the sidewalk, was fascinated by the way that they were dressed and how they walked. She spoke to them, listened to what they had to say and asked could she photograph them – and they agreed.

The father, Oscar Angulo, came from Latin America, married an American, and always planned to move his family to Scandinavia where he thought they would be much safer than in New York City. But, they never had the money and so they stayed. He was fascinated by Indian Vedic religious traditions and gave his children Indian names. But, he kept them all inside the apartment, six boys and a girl, home-schooling, making them wary about going outside (although they could see so much of the city, the lanes of cars on the road outside their window) and finding that they could live their lives within their apartment. His main concession was allowing them to watch the movies, which they did avidly, discussing their preferences in the film, showing their reenactments – making us realise that they had absorbed a lot of the expletive-dialogue that they heard in the movies.

We contemplate this for quite a while and there is very little seen of the father until almost halfway through, an interview with him, his explaining his philosophy of life, his fear of the violence of the city, his protectiveness. We see a great deal more of the children's mother, a friendly kind of woman, loving her husband, going along with his plans, but now coming to the realisation that perhaps they were too over-protective and that the young men need to venture out into the world. Which one would think would be easy, given their familiarity from the films, but as they go out, they are quite tentative, travelling on the subway, walking along the sidewalks, going to the first film in an actual cinema. The sequence where they go out into the countryside and breathe the air, experience the sunshine, pick fruit from an actual tree reminds us of how limited their life had been.

At this stage, there are moments of rebellion, criticism of the father – but a certain generalisation about what they had experienced with him, although the film is dispersed with home movies of their childhood and growing up.

So, the filmmakers observe life within the house, some of the venturing outside – but there is very little given by way of explanation (the director not intruding with questions or voice-over) of their growing up, the tensions within the family (they are never shown clashing with one another), emotional development, psychosexual development.

The story seems very bizarre at times and we are somewhat relieved that the young men are venturing outside – but it would be very interesting to do a follow-up, to see how they cope, and hear how they begin to articulate their experience of what happened to them, their growth, and their criticisms of what was, in many ways, an imprisonment.

REVIEWS OCTOBER 2015

AMERICAN ULTRA
BLACK MASS
BLINKY BILL
BRIDGE OF SPIES
CUT SNAKE
DIARY OF A TEENAGE GIRL
EVEREST
FORCE OF DESTINY
GIRLHOOD
INTERN, The
LEARNING TO DRIVE
LEGEND
LONDON ROAD
MACBETH
MARTIAN, The
MAZE RUNNER: THE SCORCH TRIALS
ODDBALL
PAN
PEOPLE, PLACES
PIXELS
SICARIO
STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON
TRANSPORTER REFUELLED, The
UMRIKA
unIndian
VISIT, The
WALK, The
WALK IN THE WOODS, A

AMERICAN ULTRA

US, 2015, 96 minutes, Colour.

Jesse Eisenberg, Kristen Stewart, Connie Britton, Topher Grace, Bill Pullman, Walter Goggins, Tony Hale, John Leguizamo.

Directed by Nima Nourizadeh.

Somebody in Hollywood may have made a bet that it would be impossible to write a screenplay for Jesse Eisenberg (always on edge and nerdy), when he would play an action hero. This could be the result of the bet - and everyone has their cake as well as eating it because Jesse Eisenberg plays a slacker-stoner as well as an action hero, all in one character! Another famous use of the word ultra is by droog, Alex, the clockwork thug of A Clockwork Orange, indulging in a little bit of the “ultra-violence”. We may not think that this would be true of this film in the first part, but, once Eisenberg’s character, Mike, is seen like one of the killers elite, it is a bit full-on - amazing what he can do with a simple spoon as well as the technique of holding up a frying pan to deflect a bullet and its ricocheting into the attacker!

Michael lives in a small town in West Virginia, enjoys getting high, works at a store with specials on Monday (and is taking out on mon and putting intues for Tuesday). He lives with his stoner girlfriend, Phoebe, who works in a bail bond office, Phoebe, Kristin Stewart.

Then we are introduced to Langley, spy satellites, agents, program of mind altering and character ordering, placing sleepers in a community, taking mentally ill characters and transforming them into “assets”. When agent Victoria Lasseter (Connie Britton) comes to town to see Mike, so does her rival, Topher Grace, and his squad of agents and assets.

Poor Mike doesn’t know what is going on, finds he has no memories of his past, and wonders whether he is a robot. Even when the armed agents attack and Mike dispatches them, he is still bewildered, is taken to prison, handcuffed, in a cell with Phoebe only to discover that the whole town is sealed off and everyone is after him.

So, what begins as a slacker comedy, with poor Mike subject to panic attacks, even about getting on a plane to go to Hawaii with Phoebe, becomes a high-powered action show, to borrow a phrase from another series, “Kick-ass”.

Absurd and weird are two words that do come to mind as we watch all these goings on and the ultimately triumphant Mike and Phoebe, his kneeling to propose to her in the middle of all the chaos...

Mike also indulges in creating a graphic comic himself, the Astronaut Monkey (who appears in great detail during the final credits). So, what we have is a kind of pleasant backwoods story turning into a graphic novel and indulging in plenty of the conspiracy theories and activities.

BLACK MASS

US, 2015, 122 minutes, Colour.

Jonny Depp, Joel Edgerton, Dakota Johnson, Kevin Bacon, Peter Sarsgaard, Jesse Plemons, Rory Cochrane, David Harbour, Adam Scott, Corey Stoll, Julianne Nicholson, Bill Camp, Juno Temple.

Directed by Scott Cooper.

Anyone expecting the dramatisation of religious sacrilege or of demonic rituals will be quite disappointed. This is an urban crime story, a portrait of a ruthless gang leader and the role of

the FBI. A Black Mass involves the worship of Satan – and this may serve as a metaphor for the central relationship of the film, and a deal with the devil, in the form of Jimmy “Whitey” Bulger of Boston and his school friend, John Connolly, an FBI agent, who makes a deal with Bulger to bring down the Italian Mafia in the city.

Many audiences will find that they are observing the characters and the action rather than becoming involved. While the central character is completely sinister and brutal, there is no identification with him – unless one is something of a psychopath. The film opens with one of his drivers being interrogated by the FBI and giving up information about his boss, so the audience knows that it is a portrait of a loathsome criminal, becoming even more loathsome as we see him as a personality and in action. Throughout the film, other members of his gang are interrogated by the FBI offering further information about him.

He is played by Johnny Depp, in almost the opposite extreme from his Captain Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean*. He looks older, pasty-faced, sometimes hooded eyes, bad teeth when he sometimes smiles, receding hairline, quietly spoken but intensely single-minded and ruthless. Joel Edgerton plays John Connolly, a more complex character, who had grown up with the Bulger brothers in South Boston, Irish background, antagonistic towards the Italians, and determined to bring down the Italian Mafia. His deal with the devil, with Bulger, is getting information for the FBI about the Italians from Bulger himself, while protecting him in his empire building.

Actually, Bulger had spent 10 years in prison before the film opens but has a group of reliable henchmen around him, gets rid of those he considers disloyal, and is involved in all kinds of rackets, drug-dealing, extortion. He ruled in Boston from 1975 to 1995.

Also in the picture is Bulger’s younger brother, Billy Bulger, who is a Massachusetts Senator – and a strange piece of casting with Benedict Cumberbatch as Billy Bulger, who has an ambiguous attitude towards his brother. Also in the picture is Kevin Bacon as the officer in charge of the FBI in Boston who becomes impatient when Bulger doesn’t supply sufficient information for attacks on the Italian Mafia.

For a moment, we think that Bulger might be a nice kind of person underneath as he is very kind to an old lady in the neighbourhood but this is soon dispelled. His child develops a fever, illness taken to hospital, put on life support which his partner wants to switch off but elicits an eruption of anger from Bulger who cannot bear to think of his dead child.

For those who have seen films like *The Departed*, Martin Scorsese’s film about racketeers in Boston and undercover agents (on both sides), a lot of the action will seem familiar. There are visits to Florida, business deals which go sour and end in murders, minor vicious criminals, like one played by Peter Sarsgaard, who is brutally murdered on screen. There is a good cameo by Juno Temple as a young prostitute, sure that she has not yet given any information to the police, but nevertheless to be got rid of.

This couldn’t last. Dissatisfied henchmen are prepared to open up to the FBI. A new, straight-down-the-line FBI head, played by Corey Stoll, comes to Boston and targets John Connolly as well as Bulger.

There is a lot of detail in the film, performances, crisp dialogue, action sequences that are worthwhile – but, on the whole, we are observing rather than becoming involved.

BLINKY BILL

Australia, 2015, 95 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Ryan Kwanten, Robin McLeavey², Richard Roxburgh, Deborah Mailman, Barry Humphries, Tony Collette, David Wenham, Rufus Sewell, Barry Otto.

Directed by Deane Taylor, Noel Cleary.

It was interesting to realise that Blinky Bill sprang into life as early as 1933. Illustrator of the first book, New Zealand born Dorothy Wall, continued to write Blinky Bill stories into the 1940s. Bill has also had a life on various television series and a feature film in 1992, produced by top animator, Yoram Gross. Nothing like Wikipedia to furnish a few details like the fact that Bill appeared on a stamp in 1985 – and, with the permission of the Wall estate, Blinky Bill is the official mascot of the Republican Movement.

Bill and his family and friends have been stable entertainment for youngsters and his new animation film is designed especially for the littlies. Littlies who have grown up a little may still have fond memories and so enjoy this film as well. And well-meaning parents, especially taking young children to see the film, will probably enjoy it as well.

The animation repeats the illustrations of the earlier times, a recognisable Blinky, his mother and father, his friend Nutsy, all the inhabitants of Greenpatch and more besides.

The children will enjoy the voices, and adults, especially if they recognise the voices as they watch the characters, double enjoyment. Popular star, Ryan Kwanten, voices Bill. And Richard Roxburgh and Deborah Mailman the voices of mum and dad. The large wombat with trousers at half mast is Barry Humphries. The villain of Greenpatch, the goanna Cranklepot is Barry Otto. The principal villain is the feral cat, a British immigrant, Sir Cedric, is voiced by Rufus Sewell. And, as Bill and Nutsy (Robin McLeavey) go to rescue Bill's Dad, they are accompanied by a very Australian-accented lizard, David Wenham, and, very amusingly, two emus, Cheryl and Beryl, both voiced by Toni Collette as if the two emus were auditioning for roles in Kath and Kim.

There is an open cricket match with two kookaburras commenting, one sounding like Richie Benaud (and the sequence is dedicated to him in the least cricketer, Phillip Hughes). All live happily in Greenpatch, but then decides to go on a quest and doesn't return for a year, with Cranklepot taking over, so that Bill decides to go to find his Dad. He discovers roads, trucks, advertisements for tea which he thinks thinking that they are real. Defines a supermarket, aisles, sweets... And fights with Sir Cedric. Finds a caged koala, Nazi who accompanies him through the desert, encountering dangers, giant crocodiles, he is finally trapped in the zoo where, of course, he finds his Dad. Mum is in pursuit with Wombo and Cheryl and Beryl.

It Is a blend of adventures, not too scary, even with the evil cat, lots of very Australian comic touches, a little bit of romance, and a happy ending.

Blinky Bill still lives.

BRIDGE OF SPIES

US, 2015, 135 minutes, Colour.

Tom Hanks, Mark Rylance, Amy Ryan, Alan Alda, Peter Mc Robbie, Austin Stowell, Jesse Plemons, Sebastien Koch.

Directed by Steven Spielberg.

Here is a film that will satisfy an audience looking for intelligent and interesting entertainment. It takes us back to the late 1950s, the period of the Cold War, the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union.

It has been directed by Steven Spielberg. 2015 sees the 40th anniversary of his classic, *Jaws*. While Spielberg is universally remembered for the broadly popular films like the *Indiana Jones* series, *ET*, *Jurassic Park*, he won an Oscar in 1993 for his very serious film, *Schindler's List*. Since then he has made a number of dramas for adult audiences including *Saving Private Ryan* and, more recently, *Lincoln*.

Many of his films have a distinctly patriotic American tone as does *Bridge of Spies*. But it is not jingoistic. Rather, there is a deep humanism and respect underlying Spielberg's films. And, in this film, he is aided by the presence of Tom Hanks who over the years has become something of an icon of an American character who is motivated by a sense of decency.

The film sets its scene by the introduction of a spy, Abel, played with calm self-possession by British actor, Mark Rylance. He is a loner, a loyal Russian, a painter, adept at eluding followers, shrewd in his way of communicating messages – but the FBI are aware of him and take him in. While the American authorities and public opinion want him condemned, even executed, they think that there should be a show of American justice and Jim Donovan, Hanks, an insurance lawyer who had been present at the Nuremberg prosecutions, is the person to defend him.

When Jim Donovan meets Abel, he offers him a proper defence, discusses the situation, suggests to listeners, and to his upset family, that Abel is not a traitor but a loyal soldier to his cause. Nevertheless, the presiding judge does not see it that way and, very quickly, Abel is found guilty.

But one of the points of the film is that with growing espionage during the 1950s, if the Soviet Union interrogates a captured American spy, there will be a parallel condemnation. Donovan makes the case for a prison sentence so that a Russian spy could be available when the Americans are in need for an exchange.

Older audiences may remember the Francis Gary Powers case where an American air force man flying photography missions over Soviet space is shot down, captured and interrogated. The Americans don't want Powers giving information to the Soviets and the Soviets don't want Abel giving information to the Americans. An exchange of Spies becomes an important factor in American-Soviet relations, especially under the CIA leadership of Alan Dulles.

All this makes the first part of the film very interesting, an exploration of American values at the time, given the context of paranoia about possible nuclear terror attacks, children being indoctrinated at school, becoming afraid at home, and the way of coping with the bomb, Duck and Cover.

The latter part of the film finds Jim Donovan asked by Dulles to negotiate the exchange, but without any authority from the American government. He goes to Berlin, warned about East Germany and its totalitarian regime, and Berlin as a divided city. This is the period of the building of the Berlin Wall and the film shows this in some detail as well as the case of an American student who wants to bring his girlfriend and her professor father from the East into West Berlin but is captured and interned.

There is a great deal of suspense, and some very good dialogue as Donovan has to meet with the Soviet authorities, the head of the KGB in Eastern Europe, with an East German lawyer and an East German official, trying diplomatic shrewdness in order to achieve the exchange. Donovan includes the freeing of the young student as well as Powers.

The film is continually interesting, especially for those who remember some of these years and this history. Perhaps audiences not so familiar with this era may find it something of a history lesson – but that is not a bad thing.

Steven Spielberg will soon be 70 with many years of filmmaking ahead of him, a very good thing in light of his success with *Bridge of Spies*.

CUT SNAKE

Australia, 2015, 94 minutes, Colour.

Sullivan Stapleton, Alex Russell, Jessica de Gouw, Kerry Walker.
Directed by Tony Ayres.

Cut Snake is a psychological crime thriller, opening in New South Wales but most of the action taking place in Victoria. It was directed by Tony Ayres, who directed a number of interesting films including the semi-autobiographical *Home Song Stories* and the film on homosexuality, *Walking on Water*. In later times, he has worked on television, especially in production and direction of *The Slap*.

The initial focus of the film is an ex-convict, Jimmy (Sullivan Stapleton), nickname Pommy, walking along the streets, hitching a ride, trying to track down a friend from prison days, visiting friend's mother, getting the address, finding his friend, Merv, working in a factory. At first, it just seems to be making re-acquaintance – but there is a certain look and expression on Jimmy's face.

In the meantime, Merv (Alex Russell), has settled down after his prison sentence, working in a factory, engaged to an attractive young woman, Paula (Jessica De Gouw). At which stage, audiences become wary of Jimmy and his presence in the house, seemingly friendly, doing the washing up, yet with something of a sense of menace.

Which seems to be a catalyst for some kind of action is the fact that Paula and her friend, Yvonne, take Merv and Jimmy to a club, with performances by drag queens, which seems to upset Jimmy. In fact, he still has robberies on his mind and really wants Merv to take part in the jobs.

While there is some activity, especially some bashings, and Merv, losing his cool as a

reformed X-prisoner, indulges in the brutality, the film becomes more of a psychological drama, the conflict escalating between Jimmy and Merv, Paula learning more about her fiancé's past which, of course, upsets her.

As might be expected, there is a buildup to a showdown, the crisis between Merv and Paula and her shock and his taste and whether it will be resolved, and how will Jimmy fare in his persuading Merv to go on a job with the but also to continue a relationship that began in prison.

This kind of psychological interaction, with crime background, always has some interest but, on the whole, this is something of an average entertainment.

EVEREST

US, 2015, 121 minutes, Colour.

Jason Clarke, Josh Brolin, Emily Watson, Jake Gyllenhaal, John Hawkes, Ciaran Knightley, Martin Henderson, Sam Worthington, Elizabeth Debicki, Robin Wright, Michael Kelly, Ingvar Eggert Baltasarsson.

Directed by Baltazar Komakur.

One of the questions this film raises is, of course, why would people want to put themselves in such danger and such physical exertion, demands on mental stability, to climb Mount Everest. The screenplay does mention the obvious ones, because it's there, and because someone can. But that is not enough to explain the exertions of Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing in 1953, the success of individuals and groups who have worked their way to the summit, and the guided climbs of the 1990s – of which this true story is one.

Sources for the film include a book by journalist John Krakauer, *Into Thin Area*, which became a television film in 1997, *Into Thin Air: Death on Everest*. Krakauer himself did reach the top as he observed those were climbing, those were guiding, those who were the supports both on the mountain and at base camp. Another source is by Beck Weathers, *Left for Dead: My Journey Home from Everest*. Preparatory filming was done in the Himalayas some years before production and photography in the Alps supplied for snow, ice and avalanche sequences.

Interestingly, the director, Baltazar Kormakur, is a native of Iceland.

Rob Hall, a New Zealander, had a company in the 1990s which arranged for clients to go to the summit. Here, he is played by Jason Clarke, a sympathetic guide, concerned about individuals and groups going up the mountain, in contact with his pregnant wife (Keira Knightley with a Kiwi accent). There are some glimpses of his American counterpart, Scott Fischer, played by Jake Gyllenhaal, rather devil-may-care climber, with his support team who shunned the use of oxygen high up.

The audience leaves New Zealand with Hall and with Helen Winton, the person in charge for the base camp, played by Emily Watson, something of a strange experience hearing her also speaking with the New Zealand accent. She is the mother-figure at base camp, sympathetic but also resourceful.

Then the audience arrives in Nepal with the group, travels through the countryside, reaches the Himalayas, goes across gorges on precipitous bridges, arrives at base camp, where they relax, prepare psychologically and physically, with the help of the company doctor, Elizabeth Debicki.

Hall's group includes a Texan, Beck Weathers, played by Josh Brolin, seemingly full of confidence, but prone to depression which disappears when he is climbing mountains. He keeps in touch with his wife (Robin Wright) and his children back home. Then there is Doug (John Hawkes), a postman who has made several attempts and has promised the children in his home town that he, just an ordinary man, will plant a flag on the summit. There is a Japanese climber, a woman who has succeeded on six challenging peaks, Everest being her seventh. Amongst the support group are Sam Worthington and Martin Henderson.

The film presents the Himalayas in all their beauty, their ruggedness, not underestimating in any way the physical and psychological challenge, the realities of some people dropping out, unable to continue, and some reaching the top, almost exhausted, planting a flag, being photographed, a lifetime achievement no matter what happens afterwards.

Perhaps there are too many characters to deal with within the running time, and the film spreads itself amongst all, But, the focus is on Hall, Fischer, Weathers and Doug, Helen and the support team.

Maybe there are a couple in the audience who would be so moved by watching this vigorous film that they would opt for a trip to Everest – but most of us will appreciate seeing this visualising of the story, its achievement as well as its tragedy, will be quite willing to stay home.

FORCE OF DESTINY

Australia, 2015, 109 minutes, Colour.

David Wenham, Shahana Goswami, Jacqueline Mc Kenzie, Hannah Friedrichsen, Terry Norris, Genevieve Picot, Kim Gyngell, Deidre Rubenstein.

Directed by Paul Cox.

Paul Cox is one of Australia's most celebrated film directors. He has been making films since the 1960s, quite prolific, sometimes a film each year, working on small budgets – but a man who was often cranky, critical of the government, eccentric in his presentation of his stories, yet provocative and evocative storyteller nonetheless, an explorer of human nature.

Some years ago, Paul Cox was diagnosed with liver cancer and given a short time to live. However, he was approved to be placed on a donor list, and ready for the possibility of a transplant if a liver became available. In fact, a liver did become available and Cox experienced the transplant, resuming his career but devoting much of it to appreciation of what had happened to him and an appeal to the general public to be organ donors.

This is his fictional story.

The central character, Paul Cox's alter ego, is a sculptor called Robert, played with his usual strength and charm by David Wenham. Wenham is younger in age than Cox was at the time

of his illness. Cox has always been interested in a variety of arts as well as his cinema work and this is evident in this film, not only in Robert's sculpting work and the camera's eye for detail about his work and exhibition, but also introducing a great deal of music, and also dance.

The other central character in the story is an Indian woman, Maya, Shahana Goswami, an attractive personality, who is introduced to Robert and they become friends. Robert has been married but is separated from his wife, Hannah, Jacqueline Mc Kenzie, and they have a daughter who is devoted to him, Poppy, Hannah Friedrichsen. These characters move in and out of Robert's life, his ex-wife wanting to be a support but his finding her sometimes intrusive, but he always has time for his loving daughter. The friendship with Maya increases, her taking him to a concert, experiencing Indian songs and dancing, the visit to her dying uncle, a wise figure in her life, and her returning to India at the time of his death.

The friendship moves into love and sexual companionship, especially important for Robert as he thinks he is about to die.

Other characters, in Cox fashion, include cameos from longtime friends including Kim Gyngell as a doctor, Terry Norris as Robert's father, Deidre Rubenstein as a gallery director.

Most of Cox's films are also characterised by a particular visual style, the inclusion of home movie material, sometimes blurred in movement, but challenging the audience to think about the characters in a different way – and there is quite a deal of footage like this in this film.

The audience knows that ultimately there is happy ending, that Robert will receive a transplant and that it will be successful, as happened to Cox and his experience in making this film. The writing, Robert's voice-over reflections, and empathy with Robert and his situation, mean that the audience identifies with the character and the situation, sharing it, its alarm, its psychological and physical pain, the emotional repercussions, the need for independence yet the sometimes desperate in the for support.

On interest in itself and its theme of organ donation, it is, of course, a must for those who have been following Paul Cox's life and career.

GIRLHOOD/ BANDE DES FILLES

France, 2014, 113 minutes, Colour.

Karidja Toure, Assa Sylla, Lindsay Karamoh, Idriss Diabate, Djibril Gueye.

Directed by Celine Sciamma.

Director's Celine Sciamma has made a number of interesting films with female themes, *Water Lilies* and *Tomboy*. She continues with this film, somewhat more ambitious than her previous films, a wider scope.

The setting is France, the outer rim of Paris, the neighbourhood with many migrants, especially from Africa. Most of the girls in the film are black with this background. The central character is first seen playing football in the mud, audiences probably expecting to see boys, but the girls are celebrating their play and their victory, then walking home through the housing estate.

The principal focus is on the teenage girl, Marieme (Karidja Toure). She seems an agreeable young girl, but audiences will begin to understand the complexity of her life, at home with younger sisters, caring for a little one, bonding with the other, but generally intimidated by their brother and his strict injunctions. Marieme wants to go to high school but is already repeating a year and the careers' adviser suggests she go to a training school rather than high school.

But, it is the summer vacation, Marieme decides to join with a group of girls, mixing with the boys, but she is really attracted to a young man, Ismael.

After some severity from her brother, Marieme is sitting alone in a restaurant and is approached by a local leader, Abou, who invites her to become one of his girls. At first reluctant, she decides to accept his invitation, packs up and leaves home. Abou is involved in local crime, especially drugs, and uses Marieme as a deliverer, bright red dress, white wig, moving sleekly among younger society and doing her job. However, she still values some independence and when Abou tries to kiss her, she reacts hostilely and decides to leave.

And, of course, this is where the film ends, leaving her future open. Audiences have got to know her but will continue wondering about what will happen, hoping for the best for her. But, in this kind of world...

THE DIARY OF A TEENAGE GIRL

US, 2015, 103 minutes, Colour.

Bel Powley, Kristen Wiig, Alexander Skarsgaard, Christopher Meloni, Abby Wait, Madeleine Waters.

Directed by Marielle Heller.

Despite publicity highlighting comic aspects of this story, it is a rather depressing film to watch. There are many films where the central characters go down into their depths, experiencing the worst and their accepting the fact that there is some need for change and for redemption. In this case, this is the journey down of 15-year-old girl.

The setting is post-hippie San Francisco in 1976. There is a permissive atmosphere around in the adult generation and also to be found in the teenage generation. British actress, Bel Powley (Princess Margaret in *A Royal Night Out*), plays the teenage girl of the title, Minnie, who announces right at the beginning of the film with some glee that she has just had sex. Then back we go as she tells the story – and then again to her present situation, her emotional tangles, her relationship with her mother and sister, her moral recklessness.

Minnie comes across as very strongly self-willed. However, she keeps communicating that she has a very low self-image, a poor bodily image of herself (which she does her best to rectify), feels that she is loved, and feels the need for some kind of touch, bodily contact, to prove to her that she exists and has some worth.

The target of her sexual sights is the boyfriend of her mother, whose husband has walked out on her and who is let herself go – played rather quietly by Kristin Wiig. The boyfriend, Monroe, is something of a slacker though he has commercial ambitions. He responds to

Minnie sexual proposal and then continues the relationship, realising after a while that she has been seductive and manipulating him.

In the meantime, she has begun a diary, recorded diary as she talks into a tape recorder, feeling the need to confide in someone or something, speaking out her desires, her experiences, her exhilaration – something which she also shares on the phone with her best friend.

The film traces the changes in Minnie's character and perspective, the effect of the affair and its being prolonged, her desires which at some moments are insatiable, her response to a young student and sexual exploitation of him, as he of her. Throughout the film there are a number of sketches and animated sequences because one of Minnie's skills is sketching. After the relationship with the student, there is an animated version of the giant Minnie, stomping through the city, the boy in her hand and her just throwing him away. With her best friend, as well as a drug addicted girl who comes on to her, Minnie, may be just 16, but pretending at one stage to be a prostitute, indulges in some gross sexual behaviour – which, she ultimately regrets.

Ultimately, this is a film with some kind of hope, in her beginning to realise what she has done, the effect she has had on others, and some realisation that she has to have some love for herself, some kind basis for others to love her.

The setting is 1976 but, with social media and a selfie culture and instant rapid communication amongst teenagers in these times, the film could have contemporary setting. But, with the contemporary setting, the character of Monroe could be charged with sex abuse and sexual relationships with a minor. Many things have changed, but many things have not.

THE INTERN

US, 2015, 110 minutes, Colour.

Robert De Niro, Anne Hathaway, Anders Holm, Jo Jo Kushner.

Directed by Nancy Meyers.

If only....

That was the thought continually coming up while watching this very nice film. If only life were a little more pleasant and like the characters and situations in this film, not that everything is perfect, but there is a great wish as well as efforts that life could be as perfect as possible.

One hopes that a younger audience will enjoy it, identifying with the charming Anne Hathaway as well as the young men who work in her company, an online fashion sales company, A Good Fit, that she founded and has prospered enormously in 18 months. Plenty to encourage enterprise in the younger generation.

But, this is a film mainly for the over 60s and, especially, the 70s and over. It is optimistic towards the older generation, wants to offer them possibilities for creative retirement, shows how they can draw on experience, and contribute on a business level and, especially, on a personal level at this stage of their lives.

An intern?

Robert De Niro as Ben Whitaker has never been more genial, showing a good sense of humour as well as indicating that under the at times stern exterior, there is a heart of, as he says, mush! He explains himself, aged 70, widower after more than 40 years of marriage, having taken all the opportunities for travel, sport and golf, new languages, hobbies, still has a great deal of energy and wants to fill that hole in his life. He also finds himself going to a lot of funerals. He notices an advertisement for senior interns, makes a video interview and is accepted.

Anne Hathaway portrays Jules Ostin, who had been very enterprising and started from scratch this online company, something of a workaholic, not remembering that she had approved the Seniors experiment and finding herself allotted Ben in order to be example for the rest of the company. Initially, she is not impressed.

There is quite a deal of plot: at the company, especially with Jules wondering whether she should employ a CEO because she is flat out with the work and it is having a toll on her health. We discover that she is married and has a little daughter of school age. She doesn't give Ben much to do. The audience can enjoy the range of characters working around the office and Ben's finding that the company's massage expert, played by Renée Rosso, is a most congenial friend.

We know that there is going to be a rapport between Jules and Ben but we don't quite know how. As the screenplay gradually breaks down something of the barriers, there is a lot of interesting, mostly genial, sometimes humorous interchanges between the two. And Ben is welcome in the house, bonding well with the little daughter (though with her dictating car routes, he realises that she is something of a clone!), and befriending the father who is the home carer.

There is a family plot development that we didn't quite see coming – but that is nature of this kind of plot development. It means that Jules has to open herself up more personally to Ben and he serves as a kindly guide and wisdom figure.

There are also some episodes which are added to the plot, often enjoyably, especially with a special mission led by Ben with his co-workers trying to break into Jules's mother's house to delete an email that Jules has sent her by mistake, an entertaining split-timing episode.

The film does have a great deal to say about the place of women in society, in business, with opportunities, as well as opportunities for the older generation, men and women.

As has been suggested, the screenplay, by Nancy Meyers, is nicely optimistic, even in troubles and challenges – and only one expletive to be heard and a written suggestion of one and hardly a situation where an expletive would be required.

Nice entertainment. If only...

LEARNING TO DRIVE

US, 2014, 91 minutes, Colour.

Patricia Clarkson, Ben Kingsley, Grace Gummer, Sarita Choudhury, Jake Weber, Matt Salinger.

Directed by Isabel Coixet.

Perhaps before we even go into see the film, but certainly after the initial sequences, we are in no doubt as to the meaning of the title and its metaphor and its meaning. While Wendy, Patricia Clarkson, does take driving lessons under the guidance of Darwan, Ben Kingsley, Wendy is not just trained how to manage a car, but is being guided as to how to reflect on her life and change its meaning. And the same is true of Darwan's life, although he seems in command, but has to deal with personal relationships.

This is the kind of film that is popular with older audiences, who can identify with the characters and their situations, may share some of their experiences, and want to see how they deal with them – and with some hope.

It is at this point that it is probably best to introduce the word 'raunchy', because many audiences attracted by the film and the publicity may think that this will be an enjoyable PG portrait of adult characters. and, by and large it is. Just a warning for the unsuspecting that there is some raunchy verbal humour as well as a sex scene that might be more explicit than they are anticipating.

That said, there is much to commend the film to its target audience.

Patricia Clarkson, over the years, has given some very fine performances, able to bring to life on screen a middle-aged woman, life problems, emotional tensions. She appeared in a somewhat similar-themed film some years earlier, Cairo Time. This time she comes on screen full-blast, her husband of 21 years having just announced in public that he is leaving her. She is shocked, emotionally devastated, and going through a desperate tantrum in a cab on the way home, being driven by Darwan who has two jobs, one as a driving instructor during the day, the other as a New York cab driver at night.

Wendy has a daughter, played by Grace Gummer (one of Meryl Streep's actress daughters) whom she is putting through college and who is working on the land in Vermont. Wendy goes into depression, wants her husband to return, finds that he has proceeded with separation papers, comes to collect his books and she finds that she is ousted from her own house and has to find somewhere else to live. She would like to go to visit her daughter but has never found the time or the will to learn to drive. She has, upset, left a manuscript (she is a writer and reviewer of books) in Darwan's cab and he courteously returns it.

As expected, she contacts him to take driving lessons.

We would all we should all be so lucky to have such a competent, calm, focused driving instructor like Ddarwan. Ben Kingsley has gone back to his roots, his Indian roots. Darwan is a Sikh, our Prof, imprisoned in India, accepted as a refugee in the United States, a calm man, a man of principle, training Wendy to be calm, conscious of the rules of the road, focused and not committing to distractions. She is prone to distraction, and it is no surprise that she has a crash, fails her first test.

The film also shows a lot of Darwan's background, his living in digs with quite a number of

Indian workers, not always possessing papers as we see when they are rounded up. He cares for his nephew, while his nephew's mother, Darwan's sister, is busy trying to arrange a marriage. His prospective wife arrives in New York City, Jasleen (Sarita Choudhury), a middle-aged woman who cannot read, does not speak much English, is fearful of going out, and is not a good cook. There is a beautiful ceremony in the Sikh tradition but then comes the hardships of daily life.

So, Wendy has to learn how to cope with her new life, without her husband, taken unwillingly on a double date by her sister (and going home with the prospective husband), but learning a great deal from Darwan and quietly discussing the meaning of his marriage with him so that he might do something positive to encourage Jasleen.

Well, the metaphor is obvious – but, nonetheless, it is interesting and entertaining to see how it works out.

LEGEND

UK, 2015, 131 minutes, Colour.

Tom Hardy, Emily Browning, Paul Bettany, Taron Egerton, Christopher Eccleston, David Thewlis, Colin Morgan, Aneurin Barnard, Tara Fitzgerald, Kevin Mc Nally, Chaz Palminteri, Sam Spruell.

Directed by Brian Helgeland.

Interesting that the title for this film about the infamous Kray brothers settles for “legend”. It has been said in the past that Americans making gangster films, Francis Ford Coppola for The Godfather series, Martin Scorsese for Goodfellas, go beyond legend into the area of “myth”, not just a history of the exploits of these gangsters but creating tales that, while not necessarily glorifying them, puts them on some kind of higher plane.

During Legend, the characters have quite a number of cups of tea. Frances, Reggie Kray's wife, does the voice-over commentary, a means for getting the audience to identify with her and her perspective on the Krays. It is she who makes the comments about locals always relying on a cup of tea to solve everything. So, it might be said, that the Krays were very cup of tea gangsters and so, the stuff of legend rather than myth.

It is half a century since the Kray brothers dominated London, from the East End where they grew up and began their criminal activities (while being very kind and neighbourly, with pleasant words and donations to the locals), getting money from protection extortion, trying to go somewhat legitimate by having clever accountants work for them, buying up clubs, sponsoring gambling, going more up-market as time went on, attracting a great number of celebrities who traded on the reputation of the Krays. They became gangster celebrities in their own world and a little beyond (the Mafia becoming interested in them with London as a possible English Las Vegas but a bit bewildered by the British style, less flamboyant than Italian gangsters, their heightened self-image and their families and mamas).

There was a film, The Krays, in 1990 with the twins, Gary and Martin Kemp in the central roles, but with a very strong focus on their mother, Violet, played by Billie Whitelaw. While Violet does appear briefly in this film, especially providing cups of tea and plates of cake, the focus is definitely on the twin brothers. And the key arresting aspect is Tom Hardy, always an

excellent actor, who plays both brothers. We recognise him as he plays Reggie Kray, the brains behind the duo, the leader, decision-maker. It is far more difficult to recognise him as Ronnie Kray, different head, chubby face, spectacles, and a certified psychopath. Hardy gives two tour-de-force performances.

The London 1966 world is well recreated, streets and facades of old homes, local shops, restaurants and, then, the clubs. There is quite a range of songs from the period, strongly reinforcing the atmosphere.

The film traces the career of the Krays, their self-image, their ambitions, their being in love with the idea of the gangster, putting it into practice in their rather limited world, building up a group of thugs around them, moving somewhat into the big time, even with political connections. Yet, Reggie agreeably goes to jail for six months, they indulge in intimidation of witnesses in court cases, and Reggie sees himself as just another character, or rather a dominating character, around the East End.

Ronnie, on the other hand, finds himself very early in a mental institution, his brother intimidating a psychiatrist, who privately acknowledges Ronnie's madness, to declare him fit for release – surviving as long as he takes his tablets. The other complication is that Ronnie is unembarrassedly homosexual, two young men always in tow, wanting to build a village in Nigeria for helping the locals, trying to get political endorsement and finance but only linking himself with Lord Boothby and homosexual orgies. This is brought to the attention of Harold Wilson, trying to deal with scandals and political motivations before an election.

And, in the meantime, Scotland Yard tails Reggie Kray who chats with them, offers the officers cups of tea, taunts them. Inspector Read is played with single-minded determination by Christopher Eccleston.

As has been mentioned, the voice-over is by Frances, Emily Browning. Her brother works for the Kray, she marries him, but fails in her ambitions to reform him and she takes an overdose.

For those who do not know the ending, they might expect gangsters to go out in a blaze of the ending gun glory, something like the American gangsters. On the contrary, Ronnie after an attempted murder is confined to a psychiatric institution for almost three decades. Reggie Kray, after a brutal murder, spends more than thirty years in prison. But, they caught the British imagination, and here they are still living as cinema legends.

MACBETH

UK, 2015, 113 minutes, Colour.

Michael Fassbender, Marion Cotillard, Sean Harris, David Thewlis, Paddy Considine, Elizabeth Debicki, Jack Raynor, David Hayman.

Directed by Justin Kurtzell.

When there is a theatrical production of Macbeth, the cast and staff usually have a tradition/superstition of not mentioning the play by name. Rather, they call it “the Scottish Play”.

The Scottish aspect of this film version, directed by Australian Justin Kurtzell, is very much

to the fore. For a start, most of the actors speak with the Scottish accent, or a Scottish burr, which doesn't make it necessarily easier to understand for the wider audience – but it does give it that feel of authenticity. There is even more authenticity in the locations where the film was made, the Scottish Highlands, the mountains and crags, the rather desolate looking plains, primitive-looking dwellings and church, a large castle, and some scenes by the sea. It is, to say the least, very atmospheric.

Irish actor, Michael Fassbender, is a physically imposing Macbeth, seen early in the film in full battle mode, wielding his broad sword. But he is a man of intense complications, sometimes pausing before lines, within lines, thinking, reflecting, even brooding. He is certainly influenced by the three witches who are not terrifying hags but rather ordinary looking women, one with a child standing by her, the other holding a baby – who reappear at crucial times, especially in the finale, when their prophecy that Macbeth will be killed by someone who is not human born and Macduff's premature birth is explained to him - they stand and then walk away, to do some prophesying elsewhere.

This means that we are constantly re-assessing Macbeth, perceiving his ambitions, the influence of Lady Macbeth (even with sexual impetus and persuasion), the truly bloodthirsty killing and repeated stabbings of Duncan, Macbeth's hypocritical pretences after the murder, and his mental deterioration, especially at the banquet scene, and seeing Banquo's ghost. His madness and cruelty assert themselves, especially with the alarming murder of Lady Macduff and her children, tied to the stake to be burnt. With Lady Macbeth's death, his soliloquy, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow is delivered so quietly, almost with a whisper, and deep interiority.

Audiences may well be surprised at the interpretation of Birnam Wood's coming to Dunsinane and not in the way that has been traditionally presented but this time in apocalyptic fire. This certainly gives a dramatic turn to the finale, the confrontation and fight with Macduff, the arrival of Malcolm through the flames – and Macbeth still kneeling, dead, on the battlefield.

It is surprising to see French Marion Cotillard as Lady Macbeth, ruthless in a more subtle way, more feminine than is usual (rather than her cry of "unsex me"). She is very much complicit in the murders, devoted to her husband, but having to take control when Macbeth appears more and more berserk at the banquet. Her final soliloquy is very impressive, all in close up, the camera not moving to her hands and her awareness of the blood on them.

Veteran British character actors are in support: Duncan, David Thewlis, Banquo, Paddy Considine, and a very effective Sean Harris as Macduff.

The text has been significantly abridged, the film running under two hours, and there is no Porter's scene, for instance. Rather, this adaptation focuses on Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Macduff and the restoration of the damaged kingdom under Malcolm. There are many vistas of the bleak Scottish landscapes, but a great deal of the drama is communicated by intense close-ups, individuals, two people speaking to one another. Mostly it is dark but there are some surprising sequences in the light.

There are complaints when the film is re-made, many critics comment on the value of the original (even when it is decades since they have seen it). With Shakespeare's plays, audiences do not worry about having seen many versions, learning something different from

each, enjoying making comparisons. This version is a significant contribution to the impact of Shakespeare's tragedies and of the Scottish play.

THE MARTIAN

US, 2015, 141 minutes, Colour.

Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain, Kristen Wiig, Jeff Daniels, Michael Pena, Sean Bean, Kate Mara, Sebastian Stan, Aksel Hennie, Chiwitel Ejiofor, Mackenzie Davis, Donald Glover.
Directed by Ridley Scott.

Most audiences will find *The Martian* very interesting and, with its blend of serious and comic touches, satisfying entertainment.

It is based on a novel by Andy Wier and the screenwriter, Drew Goddard, best known for a number of television series (*Lost*, *Alias*, *Buffy*), offers a very intelligent interpretation of the material, the work of NASA, space exploration, the possibilities for assessment of Mars, space technology, travel, and responding to crises.

Every reviewer has already said it but it is worth noting the impact that *Gravity* had several years ago and the impact of *Interstellar*. *Interstellar* was futuristic and took us into the exploration of what might be and its scientific implications as well as its transcendent cosmological implications. *Gravity* had a small focus, Sandra Bullock as an astronaut trying to deal with malfunction for survival, inviting the audience to share a dangerous and heroic space experience.

There was some sense of realism in *Gravity*, but the sense of realism, even naturalism, is the strength of *The Martian*. It is written and it is all presented as if this could be happening right now and in this way. There was something mythic about *Interstellar* and *Gravity*. This is realism that audiences can identify with, certainly the vastness of space and the enormous distances through space, the role of Mars in our consciousness, the skills and work of astronauts and their coping with crises. The dialogue is realistic, lots of (or not quite appropriately phrased) down-to-earth language, including some earthy expletives, and a background of popular songs including *Starman* by David Bowie, *Abba's Waterloo* and, in part of the final credits, very appropriately, Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive*.

British Ridley Scott has been making films for almost four decades, with one of his earliest films being the space drama with touches of horror, *Alien*. He has had an interest in the future, *Blade Runner* as well as returning to science-fiction-fantasy with *Prometheus* (and the promise of a further *Prometheus* episode). This time, his material and treatment is much more assured, consistent, audience-friendly as well as audience-challenging.

We all have some idea of what Mars could look like, the red planet. Jordan was chosen as one of the locations for Martian-like scenery. As the film opens, a team is collecting samples when, suddenly, an enormous storm looms up and the decision has to be made to return to earth. Botanist, Mark Watney, is knocked over by debris and thought to be dead. The team, with great reluctance, leaves Mars and returns to Earth. Mark is not dead and is faced with the options of succumbing and dying or to find ways of surviving and even communicating. (Memories of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Cast Away* - and even the 1960s *Robinson Crusoe* on Mars.)

Matt Damon is completely at home in the role, is always popular with audiences, and this serves him very well in getting audience sympathy and understanding as he confides to his in-space-suit camera and to cameras within the centre, how he is dealing with a stranded situation.

Two things to note. The film is highly optimistic in its perspective: that it is possible for the astronaut to survive for a long time, using his intelligence and wits, drawing on skills in improvising; and, secondly, that science is most important for survival. Advocates for the study of science will find this film a huge morale-booster and those who are not skilled in science will find that they have a greater appreciation of the need for scientific knowledge, investigation, and collaboration between nations (and collaboration with Chinese experts in this film is topical for the relationship between the US and China).

The film is quite long and great deal of it is devoted to Mark's survival, saving machinery, making oxygen, sowing potatoes and using tarpaulins and engines to produce moisture, getting space vehicles going in order to rendezvous with the next Mars mission in several years time.

The film also has many sequences on earth, with the different NASA officials dealing with the situation, how much the public should be told, even whether to tell the homecoming astronauts of Mark's survival, but all the time using expertise and lateral thinking to make communication with Mark, to find ways of landing supplies, of an ultimate rescue.

Everything does not go according to plan (although Mark is lucky not to have any major health and medical problems during his stay on Mars), there are some crises, differences of opinion between the experts, some individual decisions with touches of rebellion, and the use of common sense, practical expertise and deep knowledge.

On earth, the authorities include Jeff Daniels as the head of NASA, Chiwetel Ejiofor as the supervisor for the missions, Sean Bean as an expert, Kristen Wiig (moving to more serious roles lately although she stands out more in comedies). Jessica Chastain is the commander on the returning spaceship.

Because the film seems so topical, contemporary realistic, it does not come across as futuristic or as science-fiction. But it is most interesting and entertaining on these themes, building its tension and suspense in the final moments of the rescue mission.

THE MAZE RUNNER: THE SCORCH TRIALS

US, 2015, 132 minutes, Colour.

Dylan O' Brien, Ki Hong Lee, Kaya Scodelario, Thomas Brodie-Sangster², Dexter Darden, Alexander Flores, Jacob Lofland, Rosa Salazar, Giancarlo Esposito, Patricia Clarkson, Aidan Gillan, Barry Pepper, Lili Taylor.

Directed by Wes Ball.

It is probably best to have seen the original film before seeing this sequel (which will also lead to a third part of the trilogy). Some recapitulation information is offered right at the beginning, but it goes straight into the new action, the group of young people who have escaped from the Maze, who have entered into a post-apocalyptic world, and have little idea

where this is going to lead.

We have also been introduced to the organisation, WCKD, presided over by Patricia Clarkson, which is involved in experiments to find a serum to counterbalance the infection that has pervaded survivors of the catastrophe. Hence, the important of young people, like the group from the Maze, who can be used in experiments – which are shown to be rather dire and destructive.

They are welcomed into a centre for young people by the smiling Mr Janson (Aidan Gillen) but we are immediately suspicious that his smiles are not as pleasant as they are cracked up to be. When another young boy alerts the leader of the group from the Maze, Tom (Dylan O’ Brien), about the nature of the experiments, they organise an escape which leads them into the outer world. In terms of set design and production, the picture of the destroyed city, the wrecked tall buildings, the imminent danger of collapse, is quite striking.

The rest of the film consists of trials that they experience out in the world which is called The Scorch, involves them meeting up with some strange characters, some ready to exploit them, some willing to help, voyage out into the desert to reach the refuge of the mountains and further, into a rebel stronghold, where they come under attack, and experience betrayal, but surviving nonetheless for a future episode. Younger audiences would identify with the characters, their age, their experiences, the dangers, the quest, the hope for some kind of overcoming of the tyrannical and experimenting regime.

And then the film ends, everyone looking at Tom and asking what his plan is... To be answered in the next episode.

ODDBALL

Australia, 2015, 90 minutes, Colour.

Shane Jacobson, Sarah’s Luke, Alan Tudyk, Deborah Mailman,

Directed by Stuart Mc Donald.

Oddball is a very easy film to watch – especially if you love dogs and, an added bonus would be a love for the fairy penguins. This is mostly what the film is about.

The setting is the Victorian southern coast, along the Great Ocean Road, the coastal town of Warrnambool. Since much of the film was made there, along with a great deal of added footage of the 12 Apostles (or however many there are these days) which should do wonders for the Victorian Tourist Commission, with the backing behind the final credits continuous helicopter turns around the cliffs and the Apostles.

And, again, this is a true story, with a comment at the end that it served as an example for other organisations and local councils for protection of endangered creatures.

On the human side, the main star is Shane Jacobson, as Swampy Marsh, big and cuddly in many ways, memorable, of course, for being Kenny, but appearing in quite a number of films, including the Jack Irish television movies. This time he is the, scruffy, bearded, a local organic egg producer – with a large pet dog, a Mareeba, who is also cuddly - if one could get one’s arms around him. But when they go into town, Oddball inevitably causes all kinds of

rumpus and destruction. We see him at a rehearsal for the opening of a model village, with all kinds of technical equipment, all up-ended and a lot of it in smithereens. At a local council meeting, Oddball is roundly condemned and confined to Swampy's farm. But there is sympathy from the Mayor, who has a soft spot for Swampy (Deborah Mailman).

And as if acting with an animal and with penguins was not enough, Swampy also has one of those screen-cute granddaughters, Olivia (Coco Jack Gillies), living with her single mother who is the local officer on Middle Island, a walk through the tide from the beach, for the preservation of the Penguin Colony. The famous W. C. Fields' dictum of not acting with animals or children does not seem to phase Shane Jacobson. In fact, when they find an injured penguin, he and his granddaughter discover that Oddball is attracted to the Penguin in a most protective kind of way.

Since the penguin population is going down on the island and there is a threat of funding being stopped, Swampy's daughter, Emily (Sarah Snook), who has inherited the job and interest from her late mother, the penguins have to be protected from a marauding fox.

And, there is a little bit of romance, as Emily is attracted to a visiting American (Alan Tudyk) who works for tourism, responsible for the creation of the historical village, and interested in whale-sighting, suggests that the family might move to the United States if the penguin colony fails.

The screenplay indulges in a little bit of anti-Americanism, especially when someone fires a relaxant dart at Oddball and introduces a fox. Actually, we were all a bit anticipatory in thinking about the American.

All in all, this is the kind of film that we would watch comfortably in the cinema and families would enjoy watching on DVD and television, a nice Australian film, emphasising Australian characteristics and accents, which, one might say, is in something of the tradition of films like *Storm Boy* and *Red Dog*.

PAN

US, 2015, 111 minutes, Colour.

Hugh Jackman, Levi Miller, Rooney Mara, Garrett Hedlund, Amanda Seyfried.

Directed by Joe Wright.

There must be some producers and audiences out there who like this film but it did not appeal at all to this reviewer. And there have been quite a lot of films about Peter Pan, including the classic Disney film 1953, the story of J.M.Barrie with Johnny Depp, *Finding Neverland*, 2004, a live action remake of the basic story by Australia's P.J.Hogan, *Peter Pan*, 2003, and a British miniseries, *Neverland*, 2011, with a plot that he is very similar to the present one.

The action is updated to World War II, with the Peter dropped at an orphanage by his mother, Mary, who actually comes from Neverland. The dreadful orphanage is borrowed from Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, including the need for more porridge. Many will find these sequences obnoxious especially Catholic audiences. The orphanage of the Sisters of the Eternal Prudence, looking like Daughters Charity in the past, ruled by large tyrannical superior, Mother Barnabas, who and bearing woman beating the children, hiding an enormous amount

of gold coins in the basement along with a huge supply of food, despite wartime rationing. There also secret files on all the orphans.

There is a particularly distasteful scene where Peter sees the traditional statue of the Virgin Mary and tweaks her nose - which opens the door into the basement. This aspect seems unnecessarily offensive. And the film returns at the end to the orphanage and the comeuppance of Mother Barnabas.

Hoping that the scenes in Neverland its would overcome some of these memories, this reviewer was very disappointed to find that the action was a conglomeration of hodgepodge, magic galleons sailing out of reach from British artillery during the Blitz, to find Neverland when Captain Blackbeard the pirate rules tyrannically, boys captured from orphanages working in mines to discover fairy dust. He puts scapegoats to the plank, including Peter who survives by being able to fly. It would be nice to say the Blackbeard was a good part for Hugh Jackman but he performs with dastardly bombast.

There are various tribes in Neverland, with rather absurd costumes, ceremonials and rituals, especially for Rooney Mara as Tiger Lily – until she takes off an odd headdress and seems more normal, a cheerful point in the film. James Hook, later to become an enemy, is an ally of Peter, with Garrett Hedlund and his abroad American accent and his eye firmly on the exploits of Indiana Jones.

Later there are battles with the magical little fairies.

Not sure who the film was intended for – some children's audiences may find the adventures enjoyable, but for parents and adult audiences, it is a rather trying experience, all the more disappointing for the talent behind the scenes, the cast, including young Levi Miller, quite creditable as Peter, special effects and stunts, huge budget for costumes and design, and director Joe Wright (Pride and Prejudice, Atonement, The List, and Karenina).

PEOPLE, PLACES, THINGS

US, 2015, 85 minutes, Colour.

Jemaine Clement, Regina Hall, Jessica Williams, Stephanie Allynne, Michael Chernus, Aundrea Gadsby, Gia Gadsby.

Directed by James C.Strouse.

This is quite a pleasant film to watch, brief, some serious themes, but with the light and comic touch. It is a New York story.

Over the years, New Zealand actor and comic style, Jemaine Clement has made something of an international impact, especially with the television series Flight of the Conchords. But he has had something of a Hollywood career as well, evil in Men in Black 3, and dastardly comic villain, Chevalier, in Gentleman Bronco. And a sinister voice character in the Rio films. More recently, he was Vladislav, one of the several funny Wellington vampires in their flat in What We Do in the Shadows.

This time he is a rather simple soul, Will, always trying to do his best, an artist, working on cartoon panels as well as a graphic novel. It is his twin daughters' fifth birthday and,

suddenly, he discovers his partner being unfaithful and accusing him of being to blame. He is both flabbergasted and dismayed, not understanding how the relationship could have collapsed, with still loving his partner.

Move forward a year, the twins' sixth birthday party, a very modest episode compared with the year before. Will has the girls for a party but they are living with their mother and her new partner, a seemingly inoffensive comedian, specialising as a monologist. In the meantime, Will is making very slow progress with his book, sketching rather sad cartoons, with him as a bewildered victim. He also lectures at a college, explaining to his students how cartoons work in terms of storytelling.

One of the students invites him home to meet her mother, a professor of literature at Columbia, and, after some pleasant moments, they begin to argue, she never having read a graphic novel, thinking that they did not belong to literature – and feeling somewhat guilty because she does not approve of her daughter's study course.

The film shows some of the ups and downs in Will's life, taking his daughters at weekends, wanting to have more time with them and experiencing a whole lot of tangles in getting them to school on time, finding one day that there is a bomb alarm and relying on his student to babysit them for the day – leading to more complications, and something of a reconciliation between himself and the Columbia professor.

His ex-partner tells him that she is going to marry the monologist. He is rather dismayed, but is still hoping for a reconciliation. But, as so often, he has misread the situation but does go to the wedding ceremony.

Is there hope for Will? Can he once again make contact with the professor? how will he relate to his daughters? There are indications of the end of the film but no answers – it leaves it all up to our own hopes and imaginations.

Nicely watchable.

PIXELS

US, 2015, 106 minutes, Colour.

Adam Sandler, Kevin James, Michelle Monaghan, Peter Dinklage, Josh Gadd, Matt Lintz, Brian Cox, Sean Bean, Fiona Shaw, Jane Krakowski, Dan Aykroyd, Lainie Kazan, Tom Mc Carthy, Serena Williams, Martha Stewart.

Directed by Chris Columbus.

This is definitely a film to exercise the imagination.

And one of the exercises for a wild imagination is the application of the premise that every American could become president - it is seen that the President in this film is played by Kevin James! How he ever got there is a minor miracle of the imagination – but, once he is there, we take it for granted, especially since he has to save the world. And even more exercising the imagination, the saviour of the world is Adam Sandler.

This is a film for those who love computer games, who think and imagine computer games,

who play and are fiercely competitive – and the film reminds us that this has been the case for a long time, opening with competitions in 1982, when arcades were the place where the groupies played and there were no such things as personal Play Stations. In 1982, there are three young friends, Brenner, Cooper and Ludlow and their arch-rival, Eddie, who nicknames himself The Fireblaster and who wins the competition, especially Donkey Kong.

Over 30 years later. Brenner (Adam Sandler as per usual) has a company called NE RD, for installation of televisions and other technical work. Ludlow (Josh Gadd in a now familiar kind of role) is a conspiracy theorist, living in a kind of nerd isolation. And Cooper is the President of the United States.

This is where we really have to work hard with our imagination. Earth is being invaded by aliens. They have collected the time capsule sent into space in 1982 with all kinds of computer game data and the aliens have decided that this is a challenge to their authority and they intend to play, win and take over and/or destroy Earth.

Brenner has had a bad encounter with a mother (Michelle Monaghan) whose husband has left her, but then discovers that she is high-powered military at the Pentagon and amazed that Brenner should be arriving at the White House at the same time as she – and one ups him as she goes towards the War Room, while he then one ups her, smugly invited to speak with the President.

Now, we see where this is all going. The military chief, Brian Cox, is not particularly impressed, especially when Brenner and Ludlow have to train Navy seals to play computer games, discover patterns, fire their weapons to destroy the aliens. In a move that will please British audiences, the first confrontation is to occur in London, in Hyde Park, with the President conferring with British authorities, especially the Prime Minister, Fiona Shaw, who is doing an extreme parody of Margaret Thatcher. The British forces are led by a very aggressive Sean Bean.

Needless to say...

The next encounter is to happen in New York City, a Pacman confrontation – which means they have to track down Eddie, who is in jail for fraud, still extraordinary self-assertive but the Pacman champion. He is played with aggressive vigour, taking time off from Game of Thrones, by Peter Dinklage. There is even a scene with the Japanese inventor of Pacman. Needless to say...

Many in the audience may have thought that this was the grand climax and finale of the film – big mistake. The last game is donkey Kong, a chance for Brenner to beat Eddie who had defeated him 30 years earlier. And, by this time, there is a thing going between the military lady and Brenner, cheered on by her young son. Eddie has been promised a reward, a choice between a date with at the White House ball with either Serena Williams or Martha Stewart. We all know the Serena Williams is definitely a good sport and she enjoys herself with this cameo appearance, with a supplementary moment by Martha Stewart.

Those not in the know about pixels and computer games and play stations will find that the screenplay (written by Tim Herlihy who had written ten of Adam Sandler's films) conveys enough information so that they do not feel quite out of it.

Nonsense (we hope) but enjoyable nonsense nonetheless.

SICARIO

US, 2015, 121 minutes, Colour.

Emily Blunt, Benicio Del Toro, Josh Brolin, Jon Bernthal, Victor Garber, Jeffrey Donovan, Daniel Kaluuya.

Directed by Denis Villeneuve.

Sicario is strong stuff, in a good, if dismaying, sense.

In 2014, there were reports from Mexico about the murder of over 40 students and the disappearance of their bodies. Blame has since been laid on the authorities in the town where they were killed, the Mayor as well as some police. It seemed like a headline at the time: how could 40 students just disappear? The opening sequence of this film shows how it could be alarmingly true.

Sicario is the word used in Mexico for hitman. The film has the advantage of having been co-written and directed by Canadian, Denis Villeneuve. He was nominated for an Oscar for his powerful French-language film, *Incendies* in 2011, a story of Palestine and Canada at the end of the 20th century. He also made a powerful police investigation film, *Prisoners* with Hugh Jackman and Jake Gyllenhaal (whom he also directed in an enigmatic short feature in which Gyllenhaal two characters who became interchangeable, *Enemies*). This is his first Hollywood film but he does not seem to have been restricted in any way by interfering producers.

And the central character is female, an FBI agent, Kate, played with a blend of steel and vulnerability by Emily Blunt. She is involved in the opening sequence, an FBI raid on a suspected dealer's house only to find no one at home except a man who seemed to be guarding a wall – and when the wall was broken down, bodies were found as were many others concealed in corridors throughout the house. Information is given that this was the work of a respected Hispanic-American businessman who was linked to a major cartel.

Enter some mysterious agents, especially Josh Brolin as a rather laid-back, cheerful agent who is combining in operations with a lawyer from Columbia whose wife and daughter have been killed by the cartels, Benicio Del Toro, to go from El Paso into neighbouring Juarez to capture a suspect and interrogate him (not without pressure and touches of torture) to reveal information about the cartel bosses. Kate is invited to come along, observing, somewhat alarmed at the personalities and the tactics, but a successful mission although it leads to an ambush and day huge shootout on the freeway before the border controls back into the US.

But that is only the beginning. There are plans to entice the Hispanic-American back into Mexico by creating trouble that he has to handle and then confronting him and getting him to lead them to the overall boss. It is no spoiler to say that this mission is achieved – but the interest of the film is in how it is achieved, the role of the seemingly quiet, eyes-shaded, Benicio Del Toro, with touches of revenge. The film also shows how Kate is involved, disregarding some warnings from the agents, who are CIA, of course, which leads to dangers for herself, especially in the final action within a tunnel under the Mexican-American border.

Nor is there an easy ending, especially with pressures on Kate's conscience about the mission

and how it was carried out.

Those who like action features will find plenty to draw them in, strong, well-paced, sometimes disturbingly violent. But, all the time, there is much to provoke the moral conscience of the audience, questioning the role of the agencies and their methods, questioning the role of American agencies and their interventions in other countries, and personal moral dilemmas for those who become involved.

STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON

US, 2015, 147 minutes, Colour.

O' Shea Jackson, Corey Hawkins, Jason Mitchell, Paul Giamatti, Neill Brown Jr, Aldis Hodge, R. Marcos Taylor.

Directed by F. Gary Gray.

It would help a great deal to have some knowledge of the ghetto music of the 1980s and 1990s, the development of rap music, especially the lyrics of the gangster rap which emerged in Los Angeles, much of it as an anti-authoritarian reaction, especially to the treatment of African- Americans by the police. The Rodney King incident occurs in the middle of this story, giving a great deal of objective criticism to the implications in the rap lyrics.

Straight Outta Compton has been very successful at the American box office. The guess would be that it is extremely popular with African-American? audiences. Which means that it plays well to its target audience. Audiences outside the United States will find that they are observers to this culture, to this music, to the social crises – although, with the release in 2015 of the film, there have been so many headlines in the US, read about outside the US, of police violence towards African- Americans, and a number of police shootings of unarmed black men.

There is a prologue in a house in Compton, and the clash between drug dealers and the police, invading the house and destroying it with the tank like vehicle. Later, the musicians themselves are harassed by the police, made to lie down on the sidewalk – and then Rodney King incident, the riots, the charges against the police, the heightened feelings and rioting, the police officers being found it not guilty. We, the audience are now caught up in this atmosphere of injustice.

There are also the musicians who soon became, especially Ice Cube, Dr Dre, Eazy E... These men came from the streets, with a love of music, way a with words, who developed what became known as gangster rap, with its frank lyrics, the accusations against the police, the taunts. With the help of the producer, a white man, Jerry Heller (Paul Giamatti), a businessman but ambiguous in his deals, they record the songs, producing a record, Straight Outta Compton, and go on a national tour with enormous audiences identifying with the musicians and the songs, enthusiastically embracing lyrics. the policing threatening the singers. In Detroit, a shot rings out, panic, chases, arrests – and still defiant musicians during their press conferences.

The cast is quite convincing in its representing the different singers, and audiences who are not familiar, may be surprised to find O' Shea Jackson Jr in the role of ice Cube, bearing quite a physical resemblance to the original. He ought to. Ice Cube's actual name is O' Shea

Jackson and this is his son playing him.

Cinema buffs amongst the audience may remember the films about the gangster clashes between recording studios and personalities from the East Coast and the West Coast, especially the stories of Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur, ending with murders. This is reflected here as the original group NFW breaks up, Ice Cube going out on his own, successful as a singer, and beginning a career as a screenwriter and film star. Dr Dre was also a success as a musician and moved on from his Death Row Records which was being controlled by thugs. Eazy E died early, having contracted AIDS.

The film is long, almost two and a half hours, but it creates its atmosphere, shows the personalities involved in the movement, the music and the lyrics and the popular repercussions as well as the social repercussions. Perhaps it is not surprising to find in the final credits that two of the producers for this film were Ice Cube and Dr Dre.

This film contributes to the popular musical history of the US in the late 20th century.

THE TRANSPORTER REFUELLED

France, 2015, 96 minutes, Colour.
Ed Skrein, Ray Stevenson, Loan Chabanol.
Directed by Camille Delamarre.

Well, that's not a bad title for a rebooting of the Transporter franchise. And, at least given the car chases in this one, the re-fuelling title is quite fitting.

The new transporter is Frank Martin, played by British actor Ed Skrein, tall, a bit gaunt though muscular, fashionable stubble, taking his dark glasses on and off... And his accent is a bit more upmarket than that of his predecessor, Jason Statham. One of the things with Jason Statham is that he could play everything straight but, with slight tongue in cheek and, often, more than a touch of irony. The new transporter is not so much into irony but into a relationship with his father who keeps calling him Junior.

For those who like car chases, there are two big ones – and in the first, it is the police who need better stunt drivers because all of their cars crash quite spectacularly. So that when the time comes for the second chase, this time on the tarmac at Nice Airport, a pilotless plane moving towards crashing, when we see the cars with the label Gendarmes, we know that the worst will happen, that is for the police and their cars. And so it happens. For those who enjoy the chases, lots of glimpses of the French coast, the Riviera, the beaches and mountains. And for those who do not enjoy the chases, lots of glimpses of the French coast, the Riviera, the beaches and mountains – which may bring back memories of visiting these locations. But nothing like the potential crash at Nice airport!

The new transporter, looking like a model in an advertisement on a billboard, has been something of a mercenary and eventually falls foul of fellow soldiers from Eastern Europe who are now controlling prostitution on the Riviera, having promptly massacred the previous African pimps. One of the girls sold into prostitution has decided to get revenge and involves Frank in driving her associates but, to make sure, she abducts his father who, on retiring from being a spy, is living a life of luxury. He is liberated but very soon after he is abducted

again - by the pimps.

Which means a lot of action, the girls getting Frank into all kinds of trouble, Anna, the ringleader setting up a scheme to transfer all the pimp's finances and causing trouble amongst the men which leads, of course, to a shootout. Except for the main villain who makes a run to escape, to the top of the cliff, the venue, of course, for a spectacular fall after he is shot!

But there is a fair deal of plot, quick editing and pace, a touch of romance, Frank still needing to develop some more humane acting skills to be a romantic lead. And there are some comic touches in the repartee between dad (a genial Ray Stevenson) and Junior.

The film was directed by Camille Delamarre who directed the third of the transporter films as well as Taken 3. The Transporter Refuelled is designed for transporter fans – and, apart from getting over the loss of Jason Statham, they probably won't be disappointed.

UMRIKA

India, 2015, 98 minutes, Colour.
Suraj Sharma, Tony Revelori.
Directed by Prashant Nair.

Umrika.. as in America, the United States. It is the way that villagers in India pronounce this dream country, Umrika?

This is a film for Indian audiences, but is also a film that has a wide reach to audiences outside India. It offers the possibility for outsiders to enter into India, into a country village and its way of life, the simplicities of tradition, changes for a new life. It also has sequences in the city, the enormous contrast to the village, the busy streets and population, the difficulty in getting jobs, the possibilities for getting entangled in debt, in criminal activities – and all with the dream of getting away to the United States.

The film opens with scenes of the village, and the farewell to Udai on his way to America, fulfilling his mother's dream when her uncle came back from United States with wealth, and this is what she has wished for her beloved son. There is voice-over, from Udai's younger brother, Rama, not so well loved by his mother, but devoted to his father, having his brother on a pedestal. For some months there is a crisis as there is no letter from Udai as he has promised. And then, letters arrive regularly, full of news, details of life in the United States, with pictures accompanying the letters.

By this time, Rama (Suraj Sharma, an engaging screen presence) has grown up. When his father dies, he discovers some surprising truths about the letters and decides that he will go to Umrika to track down his brother. What happens is that he is trapped in the city, given accommodation by a cousin and making friends, getting a job delivering sweets, but also stealing a bicycle to help him on his way. His friend Lalu (Tony Revelori, from The Grand Budapest Hotel and Dope) arrives in the city, a blunter and more direct personality, yet support for Rama.

Rama might imagine that he could be a Slumdog Millionaire, but there is no television competition here, no easy money, on the contrary, some surprises, some disillusionment,

some indebtedness to shady entrepreneurs.

The film ends just as we have reinvigorated our hopes that there will be a future for Rama, and an audience desire to know what will happen to him, whether he really will get to Umrika and what he will do there.

This is a very humane and genial film, with plenty of the flavour of India, and a pleasing invitation for the audience to immerse itself in Indian life.

unIndian

Australia, 2015, 102 minutes, Colour.

Tanishta Chatterjee, Brett Lee, Arka Das, Maya Sathi, Sarah Roberts, Adam Dunn, Nicholas Brown, John Howard, Tiriela Mora, Anupam Sharma.

Directed by Anupam Sharma.

Local audiences may not know that there is an Australian Indian film foundation. It is Australian-based and, the company hopes that this film will be popular with Australian audiences, and, of course, with Indians who have settled in Australia. It is to be hoped that it will be popular in India but it does tackle some social problems that may be too much sometimes for Indian censorship.

Not that the film needs much censorship. Rather, it is a very cheerful film which provides quite a number of laughs, quite a number of emotional moments, does send up some of the stereotypes of Indian in-laws as well of Ocker Australians.

One of the key publicity aspects for both Australia and India is the fact that it stars veteran test cricketer, Brett Lee. While Lee has his done a number of commercials, he is not generally thought of as a movie leading man. Actually, he is quite a pleasant screen presence, cheerful, genial, and his romancing is quite credible.

The film spends a lot of time with Meera () and her 10-year-old daughter, Smitha. Meera has settled well in Australia, works as an executive for the firm Cochlera which promotes cochlear implants for hearing impaired people – and Cochlear is one of the sponsors of the film (with Brett Lee, in fact, as its international ambassador). Meera's parents are of the old school, her mother busy ritually incensing a new house, planning to marry her daughter off to a surgeon (Indian background of course) and interfering in a stereotypical way. Her father is low key, less prone to action.

Brett Lee teaches a course at the University of New South Wales (well promoted in the film – for prospective students – and also a sponsor of the movie.). His course is a specialty, on Australian culture, training the overseas students to immerse themselves in Australian culture, vocabulary, accents and pronunciations – and quite a few funny scenes concerning Australian slang and, especially, the pronunciation of the word mate with its difficult vowel for newcomers to the country. There is a little drama of the department wants to axe the course – and the media comes to the rescue in the form of coverage by SBS.

It's one of those love at first sight stories, at least on Brett Lee's part. He seems to be meeting Meera all over the place, at an Indian celebration with people blowing paint all over each

other, at some cricket practice, and then doing camera work for his close friends, TK and Mitch, for a TV series on cooking.

So, this is a film about courting, about parental disapproval, about coffee and romance.

Towards the end, there are some more serious themes, especially about Meera's ex-husband and the fact that he is gay and the issue of his coming out, of his wanting to abduct his daughter and take her back to India – and there is some apprehension on the part of the film makers that this may not be too welcome in India and might damage the film's distribution.

Be that as it may, this is a film that for audiences wanting an easy night out will be easy to enjoy and get some laughs. And, maybe, Brett Lee will get to do another film!

THE VISIT

US, 2015, 94 minutes, Colour.

Olivia De Jonge, Ed Oxenbould, Kathryn Hahn, Peter Mc Robbie, Deanna Dunagan.

Directed by M. Night Shayamalan.

M. Night Shayamalan, born in India, reared in the Philadelphia, has become something of a sign of contradiction in film critical circles. He was critically lauded for his first film, *The Sixth Sense*, an intriguing psychological drama with something of a supernatural twist. It has been the “something of a supernatural twist” which has been at the core of all the directors of films, including this one.

By 2006, especially with his *Lady in the Water*, Shayamalan had become a critical target, compounded with his successive, rather than successful, films, *The Happening*, the fantasy, *Last Airbender* and a rather doomed interplanetary adventure *After Earth*, with Will Smith and his son, Jaden. *The Visit* will probably not fare any better.

On the other hand, there is a public that goes to see his films, quite enjoys them without raving about them. They probably say that they didn't mind seeing the films – which is the perspective of this reviewer. No great claims for the films, but not minding seeing them.

The film's title is fairly straightforward. Two teenagers, wanting to give their mother, whose husband had abandoned her and the children several years earlier, some space to make something of her life. They decide to go to visit their grandparents, their mother's parents, who had cut her off when she left home at the age of 19 and whom she has not seen since. So far, so ordinary.

However, the director has immediately introduced the making of a documentary, the daughter, aged 15, interviewing her mother and planning, quite efficiently at times, to film all that happens to her and to her brother, during the visit to the grandparents. The brother is younger and has quite a way with words, knowing his film vocabulary – and priding himself on his capacity for rap words and singing (twice during the film and once during the final credits).

What the director is also doing is following in the line of the “found footage” films, the seemingly amateur footage that is discovered, edited together, with some eerie scenes and

some eerie results. This makes more sense in this film because the hand-held camera footage as well as the fixed camera are all part of the documentary which the audience more readily accepts.

One doesn't have to be Sherlock Holmes to suspect that there will be some strange happenings during the visit. While the grandparents are welcoming, the grandfather seems somewhat aloof, a farmer who seems a bit old for his work, and the surprising news that he and his wife act as counsellors at the local hospital. Nana is more welcoming and is a dab hand at cooking. But, Nana also exhibits quite some odd behaviour, especially after lights out at 9:30 pm. However, the children take it more or less in their stride but documenting it all in their film.

The days go by. They Skype their mother who is enjoying her time off. They go to town where the grandfather suddenly turns on a young man violently accusing him of stalking them. Some characters turn up at the door with information. Clues and strange events compound the eeriness of the household and the visit.

Of course, it has to build up to a more than eerie climax, the audience realising that the grandparents went off the deep end long since and are more than menacing (with a nice Hansel and Gretel episode with Nana enticing the daughter to get into the oven to clean it, twice, but this is just a distraction).

Deanna Dunagan's Nana is a combination of the charming and nice with sudden mood changes. Peter McRobbie is just suspiciously sinister. Kathryn Hahn is the mother, quite effective in her scenes talking straight to camera about her life and the conclusions at the end of the visit. Surprisingly, the teenagers are played by Australian actors, believable as American children, Olivia De Jonge as the daughter and Ed Oxenbould as the brother (so effective in *Paper Planes* as well as *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, Not Good, Very Bad Day*).

This reviewer didn't mind it.

THE WALK

US, 2015, 122 minutes, Colour.

Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Ben Kingsley, Charlotte Le Bon, Clement Sibony, James Badge Dale, Cesar Domboy, Steve Valentine, Benedict Samuel.

Directed by Robert Zemeckis.

The title seems rather innocuous, but the actual walk, and its repetitions, are far from simple. This is no walk in the woods but rather, a wire walk from one of the Twin Towers in New York City to the other, 101 stories above Manhattan.

Movie audiences may be familiar with the story from the excellent documentary made by James Marsh, *Man on Wire*. It relied on the walker himself, Philippe Petit, as does this film, based on his book, *To Reach the Clouds*, as he himself served not only as adviser but as coach for the walking on wire sequences.

A warning that this film is not for the vertiginously-challenged, especially the 3D version

which is very vivid. Audiences are invited to identify with Philippe and the walks, especially those on high buildings like the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris as well as the Twin Towers. He spent a lot of his time on the sides of buildings, on roofs, with practically nothing between himself and thin air. For those of a more adventurous sensibility, the film will probably be very exciting.

It comes as something of a shock at the beginning to find Joseph Gordon- Levitt, portraying Frenchman, Philippe, standing on the lamp on the Statue of Liberty – where he remains throughout the film narrating his story with the action in flashbacks. He speaks his English with a broken-French accent.

Philippe's father was not very impressed with his little son's delight in going to circuses, watching the wire acts, trying to emulate them – his father dismissing him as a circus clown. While trying his feet on the wire in the big top, he is caught by a master wire walker, Papa Rudy (Ben Kingsley), who eventually reveals to him many of the secrets of his trade. Which makes the audience aware that is not simply a matter of balance but there is much technical work to be done, the setting up of a wire safely, testing it, testing whatever holds it on each side of the space, and the engineering feats required for the higher the walk and the longer the walk. Philippe just simply didn't get the bright idea of walking between the Twin Towers (well, perhaps he did) but it required a great deal of preparation, planning and meticulous execution.

Philippe is a Frenchman, works as an entertainer in the streets of Paris, initially clashes with a young woman, Annie, singing and playing in the same square where he was writing on a minor cycle – but, they do click, and she becomes one of his staunchest allies. Then there is a photographer, Jean-Louis, who admires Philippe and becomes his photographer and his assistant.

They take all their equipment, especially the wire and tools, and are let into the US by a customs officer who is slightly amused at their bravado, not believing it for a minute. They spend a lot of time scouting the Twin Towers which were in 1974 in a state of near-completion, which helps and impedes access to the buildings. But, a businessman who works in the towers and had seen Philippe in his Notre Dame feat, also becomes an ally giving him access to the building. And when they go to buy communications, the American who is trying to sell them wire-less, is revealed also as a Frenchman and he becomes an enthusiastic helper. There are two others, one of them perpetually high, who decide to do some of the drudge work, carrying the big box with all the materials into the towers but running away, especially when the police begin to make their presence felt.

For dramatic effect (and probably happened in real life) there are a number of difficulties in getting the box up to the floor, in security guards being present, in the arrow shot from one building to the other almost not landing – and all the preparation done during the night, especially the cable going from one building to the other.

As might be expected, the film builds up a lot of tension before the walk and there is some shared exhilaration with Philippe not only as he walks but as he goes back and forth, explaining the exhilaration of his being one with the wire, and that this being his vocation in life.

The film has been directed by Robert Zemeckis, who has shown versatility of interest over

many decades: *Romance in the Stone*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *Forest Gump*, *Beowulf*, *Flight*...

Philippe's feat was not simply a walk in the clouds but the work of a single-minded artist/athlete, working without permissions..., who achieved his dream, quite a spectacular dream.

A WALK IN THE WOODS

US, 2015, 104 minutes, Colour.

Robert Redford, Nick Nolte, Emma Thompson, Mary Steenburgen, Nick Offerman, Kristin Schaal.

Directed by Ken Kwapis.

A lot of people have read Bill Bryson's books, his travel, his observations of nature and history, his sense of humour as he encounters people, especially in the United Kingdom where he lived for many years, his return to his roots in the United States, other travels including Australia. Fans of his books may be interested to see how well they translate on to the screen. Of course, opinion is divided, some happy to share in Bryson's experiences, others highlighting the limitations of a 104 minutes adaptation.

Many will appreciate Robert Redford's presence as Bill Bryson. Again, on the other hand, Redford is decades older than the real Bryson. In fact, Robert Redford at 78 when he made this film and, despite the dyed hair, generally looks his age or a touch beyond. But, he looks reasonably good in comparison with his companion on the Trail, Stephen Katz, the fictitious name for a real character from Bryson's past who accepts invitation to do the walk (after so many friends him turned down, reasonably, especially one who had died sometime earlier!). Katz is played by Nick Nolte, looking larger than life, unkempt, lumbering around, certainly not a likely candidate to do this long hike.

As with *Wild*, the 2014 film about walking the Pacific Trail with Reese Witherspoon, there is activity, a long hike, expending energy, and looking at a lot of attractive scenery – perhaps enticing sitting-down audiences to venture out to see more of the US.

There is a great deal of humour in the repartee between the two (and more than a touch of compensation as they reminisce about sexual experiences and enjoy quite a bit of innuendo). It is inevitable that there are funny sequences as two old men, at times with the touch of the grumpies, pitch their tents, are enveloped in a snowstorm, fall into a river, gingerly walk along a ledge to little avail is over they go, try to frighten away huge bears...

There are also the people they meet along the way, generally friendly and helpful, although there is single-minded hiker called Mary Ellen (Kristen Schaal) who is absolutely full of herself, talks incessantly, is critical of the old men, praises herself for her achievement and is not plagued for a second by self-doubt. While irritating to them and to us, she stands out as one of the livelier characters of the film.

This is an opportunity to see something of the countryside of the United States, along the eastern rim, the Appalachian Trail. But, as maybe with the book, it is really a series of anecdotes any one of which could be eliminated, and any other one substituted in its place.

While this does make the film enjoyable in its way, the anecdotal overcomes any of the more serious possible themes.

A great plus for the film, at the beginning and at the end, is the presence of Emma Thompson as Catherine Bryson.

A film night out rather than any deeper exploration of characters and their motivations.

REVIEWS NOVEMBER 2015

99 HOMES

ALEX AND EVE

BURNT

CRIMSON PEAK

DRESSMAKER, The

LAST WITCH HUNTER

LOBSTER

MISS YOU ALREADY

NO ESCAPE

NOW ADD HONEY

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 5: THE GHOST DIMENSION

SLEEPING WITH OTHER PEOPLE

SPECTRE

99 HOMES

US, 2014, 112 minutes, Colour.

Andrew Garfield, Michael Shannon, Laura Dern, Clancy Brown, Noah Lomax, Tim Guinee.
Directed by Ramin Bahrani.

One of the dire consequences of the global financial crisis of 2008 was the foreclosure on many homes, owners who had borrowed from banks but were unable to pay, the debts sold on to other companies who made merciless demands with a great number of evictions.

This is the setting of 99 Homes, in 2010.

Dennis Nash is a builder, living in his home, with his young son and with Dennis' mother. They are played well by Andrew Garfield, Noah Lomax as, Connor, and Laura Dern. Dennis is on a building job when the finance collapses and he is not paid. Suddenly, the real estate agent, Rick Carver, Michael Shannon always so convincing as a villain, is at the door with police from the sheriff's department and a group of labourers, demanding that Dennis and his family leave the house, are trespassing, because the bank owns the house and has delegated the eviction to Carver and his group – and the family is given two minutes grace to hurriedly pack what they need while the rest of their possessions are removed from the house onto the footpath.

The sequence is quite powerful, disturbing the audience emotionally as they identify with Dennis and his family, their shock, desperation, anger, resignation. They then have to move into a motel where they find families in similar situations.

When Dennis goes back to find his tools which seemed to have been stolen by some of the group, Carver is faced with a crisis in another house and offers Dennis the job, to fix it for ready cash. Dennis agrees, does the job well, and is offered quite a number of jobs, once again cash in hand, by Carver.

The film becomes one of those parables on the Gospel text, “what does it profit to gain the whole world and to lose one’s soul?”. Not only is Dennis effective at his jobs, he impresses Carver and they form a kind of friendship and partnership, with Dennis called on to do further jobs, especially stealing air conditioning units and swimming pool pumps so that Carver can offer to supply replacements and so gain contracts for selling the houses. Eventually, Dennis becomes an agent of eviction, confronting, especially, a neighbour who had met him in court when the decision went against Dennis and who is now in a similar situation.

Meanwhile, Carver thrives, owns a mansion, and another house lodging a mistress, is involved in million-dollar deals to own further houses and evict more people, a substantial cut going to Dennis who buys a better home for his family. When his mother realises what is going on, especially when, during his son’s birthday party, another family arrive at the motel and confront Dennis, she moves out with Connor.

The culmination of the film is, of course, conscience-time, with the neighbour going to court, a forged document submitted, a siege at the house with the rifle, and Dennis having to decide whether his career path has been worthwhile, and whether he has lost his integrity.

Many audiences will identify with the characters and situations, share the feelings of anger and desperation, be torn by the moral dilemmas that face Dennis (but which don’t seem to affect Carver). 99 Homes won an award in Venice 2014 from SIGNIS, the World Association for Communication.

ALEX AND EVE

Australia, 2015, 95 minutes, Colour.

Richard Brancatisano, Andrea Demetriades, Ryan O’Kane, Tony Nikolakopoulos, Zoe Carides, Simon Elrahi, Millie Samuels, Alex Lykos.

Directed by Peter Andrikidis.

As with all fiction films, there is a statement at the end declaring that any similarity to actual persons is merely coincidental. For this film, with its characters and caricatures, as if...

Yes, we are supposed to think of Adam and Eve, but this is an Australian story, Sydney settings (which should do a lot for Sydney tourism, especially for the Harbour Bridge and climb and the magnificent views from the top). But Sydney is no Garden of Eden.

Alex comes from a Greek family, a Greek Orthodox family, the father, now a big boisterous

man, self-made and comfortable, the mother patiently supportive, who sailed under Sydney Harbour Bridge 40 years earlier as migrants to make their lives in a new world. One of the main ambitions for the family is for Alex to have a Big Fat Greek Wedding, continually taunting him about it. He is a schoolteacher, maths (and explaining that Pythagoras and other Greeks invented mathematics). They are churchgoing but faith is not a strong suit for any of the men.

Eve comes from a Lebanese Muslim family, and, at the beginning, there is a Modest Fat Lebanese Wedding, for Eve's brother, giving us the tone of Muslim customs and ceremonies in a Sydney backyard. She is a very successful lawyer.

It is not exactly love at first sight, he being dragged along by his friend to a harbourside club, she accompanied her assistant at work, each looking the other way and pulling on a stool at the bar, Alex pulling harder and Eve falling not exactly for him but because of him and he spilling beer on her dress as he helps her up. They talk, becoming calmer, go for something to eat, and feel something of an attraction.

Alex invites Eve to come to his class, a rowdy multicultural group with Chris, a footballing and swearing type, leading the pack, urging Sir to get a girlfriend. Eve asks them who wants to have a career helping people – and there are no takers. When they are asked if they want to make a lot of money, all hands go up.

The couple goes out, enjoys each other's company, climb the Harbour Bridge, though Alex is a touch vertiginous, but makes it to the top and they kiss.

Which, of course, is putting off the evil day, when they have to tell their families. In the meantime there are lots of Greek scenes, lots of yelling and screaming. And, in the meantime, there are lots of Lebanese scenes, and a fair amount of yelling and screaming as well. There is a possible fiancée in Beirut with whom they often Skype and who will turn up soon in Australia.

Multicultural? The Greeks abhor the Lebanese and vice versa, their memories of hundreds of years of pride and animosity, and differences of religion, it being unthinkable that anyone should marry outside the religion, either orthodox or Muslim. Greek dad and Lebanese mother are particularly vocal.

There is a scene where the two families meet – disaster.

Of course, what are they to do? Will Alex rebel and move out? Continue to see Eve? Will Eve defy her parents, agree to a marriage with the fiancée? Well, yes and no – which means then that we have to see the film to find out how true love will conquer (as, of course, we know that it will – and if we have memories of the end of *The Graduate*, we might make a wager as to how it will turn out).

Lots of characters, lots of caricature is, but Alex and Eve are a very pleasant couple, rather picture book and each good-looking, played by Richard Brancatisano and Andrea Demetriades. The screenplay, adapted from his play *Alex Lykis* (who plays Alex's brother) is not meant to be particularly subtle, nor are the points to be made, necessary though they be, and it relies on humour with touches of satire. To many Australians, the mutual intolerance and derogatory attitudes of both sides, especially concerning marriage outside the culture and

religion, may seem impossible – we might note that less than a century ago, Christians of various denominations talked this way and were not allowed into each other's churches and marriages between churches frowned on...).

BURNT

US, 2015, 100 minutes, Colour.

Bradley Cooper, Sienna Miller, Daniel Bruehl, Ricardo Scammarcio, Omar Sy, Sam Keeley, Henry Goodman, Matthew Rhys, Stephen Campbell Moore, Emma Thompson, Alicia Vikander, Lily James, Uma Thurman, Julian Firth.

Directed by John Wells.

If anything were burned in Adam's clockwork kitchen at the London restaurant in fashionable London, the food would be hurled at the wall, as with the crockery and utensils. It would be the same with anything that Adam judged not to have reached his perfectionist stances. Bradley Cooper is Adam and has shown in a number of his films that he can be something of a fierce warrior, not just American Sniper, but a now a martinet with his kitchen staff.

It was not always so. Adam has quite an interesting back story before his ascendancy in London. As a 19-year-old, he left the United States, infiltrated a restaurant in Paris, the owner then becoming his mentor, and bringing him into work with the top kitchen staff. So far, so good. But drugs and drink take the better of Adam and he behaves abominably to everyone, even putting rats in a restaurant and then calling the health inspectors, putting the owner, Michel (Omar Sy) out of business.

From this bottoming of his life, he went to New Orleans, shucked a million oysters, keeping notes and the count, and then decided to get clean and make his way to London, confronting an old friend, Tony (Daniel Bruehl) to persuade him to appoint him chef in the up-market The Langham Hotel. Now, full of self-confidence, he rounds up old friends and associates to persuade them to work for him, and wanting a special chef so much, Sienna Miller, that he gets her fired so that she has to work for him. He is in command, they have to call him Chef, and put up with his perfectionist tantrums.

There are quite a lot of interesting supporting characters played by a very strong cast. They include Emma Thompson as the psychiatrist who had to check Adam regularly to ensure that he was clean – and, with the complication that she is the psychiatrist for Tony who is infatuated with Adam. Adam persuades Michel to come and work for him, as well is Max (Richard Scarmaccio) who is getting out of prison. There is also a rivalry with a fellow chef from Paris (Matthew Rhys) who now runs another London restaurant, who admires Adam and helps him when he is bashed by thugs to whom he owes money, admitting he is the best, but nevertheless in fierce competition with him.

It wouldn't be Hollywood film unless there was a romance and, as anticipated, the fired cook, who has a little daughter, admires Adam and falls for him.

On reflection, the plot is fairly commonplace and the characters, well-acted as they are, have no real depth.

But, while the film is entertaining, it probably would go on the must-see list of those who are foodaholics, cookaholics, gourmetoholics, because, visually, a lot of time is spent in the kitchens, the detail of the preparation, the cooking, the serving – especially because Adam has two Michelin stars and is desperate to get a third.

One of the pleasures of the film is that it is set in London, offering many memories for those who have lived in or visited London.

CRIMSON PEAK

US, 2015, 119, Colour.

Mia Waskowski, Jessica Chastain, Tom Hiddleston, Charlie Hunnam Jim Beaver, Burn Gorman, Leslie Hope, Doug Jones, Jonathan Hyde.

Directed by Guillermo Del Toro.

Once upon a time, the word ‘Gothic’ referred to large and beautiful European cathedrals. Later centuries, especially with the 19th century fascination with mediaeval architecture in English-speaking countries, the word had overtones of larger than life melodrama, mysterious buildings, suspicious sinister characters, touches of the supernatural, images of blood and death.

It is safe to say that *Crimson Peak* is contemporary Gothic movie-making. It is the creation of Mexican, Guillermo del Toro, who has made films based on such graphic novels as *Hellboy* and *Pacific Rim* its gigantic undersea monsters rampaging through the world. But he also made striking films in Spain, *The Devil’s Backbone* set during the Spanish Civil War and the blend of grim fairytale and World War to realism, *Pan’s Labyrinth*.

The colour photography for this film is very striking indeed as are the sets, costumes and decor, opening in the American city of Buffalo in the 19th century and then moving to Cumberland in snowbound and frozen northern England. The film is also full of premonitions, ghosts, dastardly doings and revenge. This Gothic atmosphere is certainly reinforced in the episodes in Cumberland, in Allendale Hall, an enormous mansion out in bleak fields, its huge facade looking like no other building – except, perhaps, the front of St Pancras Station in London. As for the interiors, with gaps in the roof, snow falls within the building which is a mixture of ancient warehouse, whirring machinery, old-fashioned living quarters and a sinister basement.

The characters also have a Gothic touches. At the centre is a young woman, Edith, who lost her mother and has ghostly premonitions. She is played by Mia Wasikowska – who in recent years also played *Jane Eyre*. Actually, Allendale Hall is a place where Mr Rochester might have felt at home, with ample wings and rooms to conceal his mad wife. Then there are a British brother and sister who come to Buffalo promoting a machine for the extraction of a particularly enriched soil on their property. The brother, Thomas, played by the versatile British actor, Tom Hiddleston, seems to fall in love with Edith, and she him. We are all more wary of the sister, Lucille. This reviewer did not check who was playing Lucille before the preview of the film and could not place the familiar looking face, only to find it was American Jessica Chastain – who really steals the film with her most powerful performance.

While things may have been hard in Buffalo, matters are a far more disturbing in Cumberland, ghosts, mysterious past marriages, money and disappearing spouses, the strange machine, the blood- soaked soil, and more than a little vengeful blood and gore.

For those whose imagination tends to the Gothic, *Crimson Peak* can be recommended. For those of a more simple and stable imagination, it might be too much.

THE DRESSMAKER

Australia, 2015, 118 minutes, Colour.

Kate Winslet, Judy Davis, Liam Hemsworth, Hugo Weaving, Sarah Snook, Kerry Fox, Rebecca Gibney, Gyton Grantley, Shane Jacobson, Caroline Goodall, Barry Otto, Julia Blake, Sasha Horler, Terry Norris, Shane Bourne, Mark Leonard Winter, Alison Whyte, Genevieve Lemon.

Directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse.

In many ways, this is a curious film, the characters and the plotline moving in ways that the audience might not have anticipated, sometimes very serious, sometimes with humour, sometimes with touches of a nasty vengeance. But, it is particularly well made and acted, adapted from a novel by Rosalie Ham, co-written by the director Jocelyn Moorhouse, who made such an impact in 1991 with *Proof*, to films in the US, but no film for almost 20 years. Her husband, P.J.Hogan, also acted as second unit director and co-writer.

The Dressmaker sounds a very quiet kind of title, rather sedate, but that also is deceiving.

The setting is 1951, a rather remote country town between Sydney and Melbourne, a small place, some homes, some shops, a local council, a local policeman, and some rivalry in football and theatrics with the next town along the line. The film offers a look back at Australia in the middle of the 20th century.

Into the town comes a very stylish looking woman, fashionable clothes, someone who obviously does not belong to the town, Tilly, played by Kate Winslet. But, in fact, she does belong to the town or, at least, she did. Throughout the film there are quite a number of flashbacks to Tilly and the other now-adults and their schooldays, their play together, friendships in the yard, bullying in the yard, and death of one of the children and the blame being put on Tilly who was sent away to boarding school and has stayed away for decades, going overseas and becoming a skilful international dress designer and dressmaker.

Why has Tilly returned at this stage? Is to understand herself better, to reacquaint herself with her mother, to find out the truth about whether she had killed the young boy or not? Or, some revenge?

The town is absolutely full of eccentric characters, played by a great number of veteran Australian screen and stage actors in cameo roles. This has to be one of the best casts of any Australian film.

First of all there is Tilly's mother, called Mad Molly by all the people in the town, living as a recluse in a rather dirty old house, dressed raggedly, not quite all there, and not too sure about her daughter when she arrives back, cleaning up the house, getting her mother back on her

feet, trying to probe what happened to her as a little girl. Judy Davis gives yet another extraordinary performance as Molly, referring to herself at one time as a tag, and looking and acting like it, but not without the wicked sense of humour and a beginning of appreciating her daughter.

Then there is the policeman, played by Hugo Weaving who welcomes Tilly back because he is something of a secret cross-dresser, secret in 1951, but exuberantly caught up in Tilly's materials and creations – and who played a part, as the policeman, into her being sent away.

Tilly makes quite an impression on some of the young people in the town, a number of whom she went to school with, especially Teddy, a good, strong role for Liam Hemsworth, captain of the local football team – who, during a match, like the audience itself, cannot take their eyes from Tilly in her striking red dress, then in her striking black dress!

The locals are against Tilly, especially the prim school teacher, Kerry Fox, who was instrumental in blaming Tilly in the past. There are the parents of the dead boy, Shane Bourne, local councillor, philanderer, bringing in Una (Sasha Horler) as a rival dressmaker, and Alison Whyte, the withdrawn and still grieving mother. At the local store, there are Shane Jacobson and Rebecca Gibney, pillars of the community, and their plain daughter, Sarah Snook – with memories of the schoolyard of the past, and agreeing to get a fashion makeover from Tilly, especially to entice the young son, Mark Leonard Winter, of a rather snobbish citizen, played by Caroline Goodall.

Tilly mellows somewhat, though not against teeing off with golf balls from her mother's house and swinging them towards the school and other town buildings, making her presence felt. She is also comfortable with Teddy – though this is one of the difficulties in the casting that both Sarah Snook and Liam Hemsworth are both in their mid 20s while Kate Winslet is nearing 40, the characters meant to be 35.

The film often veers into quirky Australian comedy, ironic and satiric in its way, especially with the rivalry between the two dressmakers, a drenched wedding sequence, and the competitiveness between the two towns for the award for best costumes at the Theatre Festival (Una with elaborate costumes for Macbeth and Tilly for the rival town with costumes for *The Mikado*).

Towards the end of the film, it seems that it is about to end several times, but it does go on with some surprising developments, not all of them happy, and, in apocalyptic fire ending with Tilly, of course, vindicated.

For those who are intrigued as they watch it, a second viewing could be recommended.

THE LAST WITCH HUNTER

US, 2015, 106 minutes, Colour.

Vin Diesel, Michael Caine, Rose Leslie, Elijah Wood, Olafur Darri Olafsson, Rena Owen, Judy Engelbrecht, Isaach de Bankole.

Directed by Breck Eisner.

For any audience who has always wanted to see Michael Caine on screen as a priest, at last

an opportunity. After more than 50 years in films, he is still a significant screen presence.

Not that every Michael Caine fan would necessarily want to see the *The Last Witch Hunter*. It is one of those action adventures, a blend of the historical and the contemporary, overtones of witchcraft and the demonic, scenes back in the Middle Ages where the wicked Queen Witch is unleashing the black plague over Europe, eerie battles in dark and caves, then to contemporary New York City (where, according to American films, so many apocalyptic crises have to take place).

As one can tell by the title of the film, it is one of those stories with a graphic novel imagination. And this is a special project for Vin Diesel who is one of the producers as well as the star – a bit more humane and sometimes smiling than his *Fast and Furious* outings... But, he is the action hero, the witch hunter, whose destiny is to save the world.

The Medieval scenes definitely have an atmosphere, though an unrecognisable Diesel (hair and beard) has a robustly difficult time confronting and destroying one of those special effect hags with a threatening and sinister voice.

To continue with the atmosphere, there is a transition to Abu Dhabi airlines (strong product placement) and a young witch on board the plane causing an enormous storm which alarms the passengers – but the hunter, Kalder, takes the witch to task, calms the storm and makes a date with the flight attendant. And this brings him to New York City in the present, when he continues his witch hunting, cursed by the Queen with immortality and his having to adapt for over 800 years to each generation. (He is particularly up-to-date on IT, taunting Michael Caine's priest about having an iPad - with Caine later squashing a sinister beetle with his book and remarking that you couldn't do this with an iPad!).

The reason that Michael Caine appears is that he is the 36th in a line of priests who belong to the organisation, The Axe and the Cross, protectors of the witch hunter. He is about to retire and, of all people, Elijah Wood, is to be his successor, a very earnest young priest, diligent about his mission and trying to learn.

The other principal character is a witch, Chloe, who runs a bar with New York witches as her clientele. Kalder helps her and she then supports him in his quest for the disciples of the Queen and, eventually, the Queen herself whose heart has been preserved by her disciples and in their plan for her comeback for the 21st century world.

One doesn't have to be a genius to work out what happens, especially the final confrontation – though there is a twist with one of the characters that might have been anticipated.

The Last Witch Hunter doesn't pretend to be anything else than it is, a comic-book action show – and that is what it achieves.

THE LOBSTER

Ireland/Greece, 2015, 118 minutes, Colour.

Colin Farrell, Rachel Weisz, Ben Whishaw, John C.Reilly, Olivia Colman, Ariane Labed, Lea Seydoux.

Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos.

A number of people have described this film as “weird”. And they are not entirely wrong. But, it is an interesting kind of weird!

As we first look at the film, it does not look particularly weird at all. The director, Yorgos Lanthimos, famous for his weird film *Dogtooth*, is Greek, has filmed in Ireland and in English. The setting is woodland by a river, one of those old Greystone Irish buildings standing in for a hotel. So far, so arresting. But it is when we start to listen to the dialogue, that the weirdness begins to set in.

This is a somewhat future society, one of those dystopian societies, where this hotel has been set up and managed for single people to come and find a partner in life. But, they have 45 days to do this, otherwise they will be turned into an animal of their choice! The central character, David, has opted for becoming a lobster!

David is played by Colin Farrell, who has put on some weight for the part, is not as young and vigorous as he was in his early screen days, is rather reticent, even deadpan, shortsighted with his spectacles. His wife has left him. He is welcomed by the staff who have all been drilled in the ethos of the hotel, has to hand in all personal possessions including clothes and is supplied with clothes and shoes from the hotel. Is given a spacious room, but on the first night has an arm handcuffed to his back and has to manage nonetheless. Breakfast is announced, he goes to the dining room where he meets the Lisping Man (John C.Reilly) and the Limping Man (Ben Whishaw).

There is a narration by Rachel Weisz, explaining the characters and situations, and she will make a later appearance is one of the Loners out in the forest who will find a relationship with David. One of the exercises for all of the guests is to be issued with a rifle, dart guns in order to hunt down Loners in the woods. And so the days go, with lectures from the manager and roll plays to illustrate dangers in company, a dance, with introductions to various characters with descriptions rather than names, like the Biscuit-eating Woman or the Blood Nose Woman (who becomes a partner with The Limping man who engineers nosebleeds in order to relate to her).

David seems to manage at first, but then goes into the woods with the Loners, meeting the Short-sighted Woman and bonding with her, especially on a trip to the city, which seems rather normal except for the interrogating guards, with the help of the Leader of the Loners, Lea Seydoux.

The film goes on from there, the activities in the woods, the loners going on exercises like raiding one of the yachts where couples live, attacking the room of the manager of that hotel and her husband...

After some grim episodes, the film stops... Or rather leaves its narrative, its themes, its strange humour, its seriousness, for the audience to reflect on, wondering what has happened to human nature, what has happened to relationships and love, and what will be the consequences.

MISS YOU ALREADY

UK, 2015, 112 minutes, Colour.

Tony Collette, Drew Barrymore, Dominic Cooper, Paddy Considine, Tyson Ritter, Jacqueline Bisset.

Directed by Catherine Hardwicke.

At a recent conference, a speaker was very strong in her declaration that men did not really understand how women tick. It was an impassioned intervention. This came to mind while watching *Miss You Already*. It is very much a women's film, writer, director, performances – a film that men should see to help them understand women.

That might not be such an easy thing to arrange when potential audiences hear that the film is about breast cancer, mastectomy, chemotherapy, illness and death. But it is also about strong friendship, love, family, fidelity and infidelity, hope.

This story of the friendship of two women, one who experiences illness and terminal cancer, the other who desperately wants a child and becomes pregnant, is enhanced by the strength of the writing, the sensitivity of the direction, and two very fine performances.

The opening traces the beginnings of the friendship between Jess and Milly, inner London setting, where the American Jess comes as a child and has to settle in, befriended by Milly, growing up with her, schooldays, some rather wild days, especially in their 20s, and settling down to family in their 30s.

Toni Collette, one of Australia's most versatile actresses, gives a complex performance as Milly. she is an extroverted girl about town, falling for a roadie for a rock group, Kit (Dominic Cooper) and, surprising to herself and to others, settles down to married life and raising a family while keeping and promotions job. Drew Barrymore is Jess, happily married to Jago (Paddy Considine) trying all kinds of means to become pregnant but finally having to go for in vitro. She is a happy woman herself, generally content to play second fiddle to Milly, but always there as a confidant, always there to rescue if need be. Jacqueline Bisset plays Milly's and believes flamboyant actress mother.

There have been a number of films about cancer, especially for teenagers experiencing it, *The Fault in our Stars* and *Me and Girl* and the *Dying Girl*. But this is a story of a woman turning 40, trying to deal with this experience in her life, undergoing chemotherapy (presented quite graphically for what is a movie entertainment), the issue of mastectomy and its consequences for herself, for herself-image, for her relationship with her husband and much of his bewilderment and unwillingness to cope with the situation. While there is some relief, it is only temporary and she has to face the realities of a short life.

The film is not all sweetness and light. Milly is not that kind of person. She takes up with an American barman, even going to Yorkshire and Bronte country (she and Jess are devoted to *Wuthering Heights* and *Heathcliff*), but it is Jess who has to confront her.

This is a story which most women will basically identify with, the reality of breast cancer or other cancers, ways of dealing with illness and coping with the effect on children and husband. This is a story which, in a comparatively brief running time, a men's audience can allow itself to be challenged to empathy and understanding.

This reviewer found the film very moving, shared the joy in the women's lives, was saddened

by the reality of illness and the consequences, disappointed in Milly's moments of give-up, but impressed by the sequences of what might be called in religious terms, confession and reconciliation.

NO ESCAPE

US, 2015, 103 minutes, Colour.

Owen Wilson, Lake Bell, Pierce Brosnan, Sterling Jerins, Clare Geare, Sahajak Boonthanakit.

Directed by John Erik Dowdle.

This is a very gruelling film to watch, and its plot and treatment are quite gruelling, not a film for an easy night out.

It is set in something of a fictional South East Asian country, audiences particularly focusing on Thailand, where it was filmed, and the recent uprisings, clashes in the cities, changes of government, military command. The geography of the film is not accurate, a city on the river with a large American Embassy is only a few minutes away down the river to the border with Vietnam.

This is one of those stories for American audiences focusing on an American family in an alien situation, continually under threat, showing a skill for survival when most of the locals are threatening, violent. It could have been set in Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia...

The Dwyer family have had some difficulties in finances and the father, Jack (Owen Wilson surprisingly convincing in a non-comedy role as something of an action hero) has accepted an engineering job in the Asian country, working on its national water system. Towards the end of the film, audiences will realise that this is a message film about American corporations, their role in Asian countries, building up systems, banks organising loans which are difficult to repay and the corporations taking possession – with anti-American sentiment in the country.

While everything seems nice and sunny in the morning after their arrival, Jack wanders down the street to buy a newspaper only to be caught in the middle of a rioting mob and helmeted truncheon-holding military marching to confront them. He has to use his wits, and some local help, to escape back to the hotel, only to find the mobs rampaging already, killing the guests in their rooms. While he manages to get to his wife and children, he has to go downstairs to the pool where one of his little girls has gone swimming. From then on for the next hour or more the film shows the ordeal of the family and the struggles, ingenuity and luck for them to survive.

They do encounter a friendly scruffy-looking man on the plane, played by Pierce Brosnan. He helps at the airport to get a lift with his associate, a local whose nickname is Kenny Rogers – which is also the name of his van which is plastered inside with photos of the singer.

The steps of the survival are going to the roof, enduring a helicopter attack, killing many people on the roof, the adults leaping from building to building and Jack throwing his daughters across to his wife, climbing down a building, finding office workers trying to save documents only to be bombed by a tank, the continued search by masked rebels, going down

to basements, disguising themselves as locals and riding a motorcycle, even through an advancing group in the night, trying to reach the embassy... Luck does intervene when Pierce Brosnan and Kenny Rogers turn up again, enabling them to get some refuge before the final, perilous attempt to get to the river and the Vietnam border.

Lake Bell is strong as the mother, supporting her husband, continually trying to keep the daughters safe and quiet – but the film does raise the issue of the defence of family and the exercise of violence, even to killing someone who is a threat.

The story may seem remote to many Americans for whom Asia is a long way away – but for audiences who live in the region and are aware of uprisings, the story may seem only too real.

NOW ADD HONEY

Australia, 2015, 100 minutes, Colour.

Robyn Butler, Portia De Rossi, Lucy Fry, Phillipa Coulthard, Lucinda Armstrong Hall, Hamish Blake, Erik Thomson, Robbie Magasiva, Lucy Durack, Angus Sampson, David Field.

Directed by Wayne Hope.

The success of a comedy does not necessarily depend on the quality of the film itself – but, rather on the mood of the person watching the comedy at a particular time. This comedy has many moods, some funny, some serious, many somewhere in between. With the title, the Honey is not necessarily a sweetener. Which means a mixed response.

The film is the work of writer and star, Robyn Butler, and of her husband, director, Wayne Hope. Their contributions to television, *The Librarians*, *Upper Middle Bogan* have been much appreciated. Perhaps they work better in a brief running time format.

Here is a suburban Australian couple, she, Caroline, a lawyer, with two daughters, he a writer (who is soon discovered to be cheating on his wife), causing something of a breakdown – but not as much of a breakdown as the arrival of Caroline's older sister, Beth (Portia De Rossi) with her precocious, ultra-spoilt, daughter, honey (Lucy Fry). Honey is about 16, going on 40 in precocity, going on 9 in terms of growing up. And her mother, self-absorbed except for promoting her daughter in Hollywood (where she has been successful in a series of films with the character, *Monkey Girl*). They have arrived in Australia to make a record – with a video which make might make Miley Cyrus blush!

It gets complicated at the airport with Beth having her special photographer into who is particularly demanding about light and angles. Then it gets worse when Beth is taken in by customs officials because of the amount of drugs, all for her health, of course, that she has in her cases – and she is soon sent off for rehabilitation leaving Honey stranded, to be taken in by the family.

While some of the satire on the ignorant and, perhaps, innocent, Honey has its moments, she is such an exasperating character, not only to the family but to the audience, so that a lot of it is rather hard to take. We do have great sympathy for Caroline, who is on the receiving end of a lot of barbs from Beth about her age, her looks..., Difficulties in getting time off at the office, but having some pleasant moments encountering a television chef. Then there is her

younger sister, continually smarting about the description of her as fat in Beth's biography and dealing with her fiancé who, to put it politely, is rather dumb. And Caroline's two daughters get involved, one a fan and the other definitely not.

There is a sleazy photographer wanting to get in on the act and to do some exploitative stuff with Honey who, bewildered and a touch of eventual against her mother and the family, decides to go through with it – with some slapstick comedy in the family's attempts to rescue her.

There is a lot going on in the film, perhaps too much for its brief running time, but, if it catches you in the mood, you may well enjoy its comic touches. On the other hand, if...

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY: THE GHOST DIMENSION

US, 2015, 88 minutes, Colour.

Chris J. Murray, Brit Shaw, Ivy George, Dan Gill, Olivia Taylor Dudley.

Directed by Gregory Plotkin.

For the last six years there has been a Paranormal Activity thriller each year, much of a muchness in content and style. But, they have appealed to the fans, though this last episode has not received such an enthusiastic response.

The earliest films were based on "found footage", videocassettes from the past, especially the 1980s, capturing all kinds of weird goings on in houses at night. There were indications on screen of the number of nights involved, and, with the filming, the time of the activity was noted. End, the activity tends to be of the poltergeist type, mysterious and sudden shocks, things banging on the night, people being afraid (sometimes, very afraid).

The effect of the films depended on the audiences willing suspension of disbelief in such goings on at the susceptibility for jumping out of one seat at sudden editing cuts or loud noises.

Once again, we have some found footage from 1988, a mysterious deaths, a strange character talking to 2 little girls and persuading them to follow him. Cuts 2013, a family moving into a house (something like at Amityville where people don't know about the weird goings on at the deaths in the house before they bought it). There are the parents, the little girl, Lila, and her visiting uncle, and a friend of the family staying in the house.

But, this time the screenplay gears towards demonically presence and to Monica possession. And it is the little girl in 2013 who seems to be the target of the strange man, this time on Demon, called Toby. The various Catholic symbols in the house, rosary beads, and a Christmas creep with little girl able to identify who Mary's baby is, Jesus.

With all the troubles, the mother phones the parish priest, Father told, if this is the house, put holy water on the forehead of the little girl and her Tory, explains that the Demons take students to conceal themselves and that, even if they moved out of the house, Demons tend to create fear but only with persons rather than places. Later, he returns to perform an exorcism, those he is a bit doubtful about it and its effect. So, while he prays and performs the rituals, making this let loose – and, with Toby and the little girls are all appearing, there is no great

prospect for survivors.

Perhaps the fans have had enough of Paranormal Activity, and the producers signal that this is the last in the series.

SCOUTS GUIDE TO THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

US, 2015, 93 minutes, Colour.

Tye Sheridan, Logan Miller, Joey Morgan, Sarah Dumont, David Koechner, Cloris Leachman, Halston Sage.

Directed by Christopher Langdon.

If the title sounds off-putting, then be off-put. If the title sounds somewhat intriguing, then perhaps it might be worth trying out since you are a zombie movie fan on the lookout for something zany.

This could be called something of a Night of the Living Dead Junior.

It opens with a zombie-like cleaner at an experimental lab who, of course, unleashes a zombie who then goes on a rampage, biting and creating a town full of living dead.

But, the film also introduces the local Scout team, three young men in their mid-teens and a very earnest scoutmaster, played by comedian David Koechner looking quite strange with a hairpiece (which soon gets knocked off). The three boys are a mixture, the last remnants of the Scouts squad, unable to recruit anyone new and staying on for the sake of the scoutmaster. The sympathetic one is Ben, played by Tye Sheridan, who looks too smart and serious to be acting in this kind of film. On the other hand, Logan Miller as Carter is pretty hormonal, horizons fairly limited by sexual longings and curiosity. Then there is Augie, the earnest nerd Scout, accumulating his badges, loyal to the scoutmaster, pudgy and eating too much – but, it must be admitted, the screenplay gives him plenty to do in combat.

The two Scouts want to leave Augie and sneak out to a party but have been given the wrong address, going back into town where they have previously found a glamorous stripper, oops, cocktail waitress, from the local joint who has bought them beer. Going back into town, and seeing the bouncer from the club absent, in they go, only to find the place empty – except for a zombie dancer – and then the pursuit is on. The film does give quite a lot of extras the opportunity to lurch around the town as zombies, pursue humans and get bashed, shot, decapitated etc. This includes the scoutmaster as well as a cranky old lady, played by Cloris Leachman who perhaps is fulfilling a life's ambition to play a zombie!

It probably helps to appreciate this film if you are a boy aged between 12 and 16, enjoying the kind of bodily function jokes, sex anticipations, that are generally attributed to the imagination of boys of this age.

The cocktail waitress helps the boys in their various attempts to find the party, to report the apocalypse to the authorities, to save anybody they can.

Which means there that this is something of the tail end of a long resurgence of zombie stories on our screens, some slapstick and juvenile humour, with the touch of the rights of

passage themes.

SIMSHAR

Malta, 2014, 101 minutes, Colour.

Lofti Adbelli, Jimi Busuttil, Sekouba Doucoure, Chrysander Agius, Adrian Farrugia. Clare Agius, Mark Mifsud.

Directed by Rebecca Cremona.

It is not often that we see a film from Malta. Many western films have sequences made there but not one that is made by the Maltese themselves. This is a topical story, a story of an island in the middle of the Mediterranean, on the route from Libya to Italy, to the not-so-distant island of Lampedusa. It is a story of refugees from Africa as well as a story of families and fishermen from Malta itself. Simshar is the name of a boat.

On the one hand, the film is principally about the Maltese themselves, their fishing livelihood, the impositions of bureaucracy, the challenges to fishermen to bypass the impositions, the role of the fishermen and their families, the work of doctors who are called on to help on the refugee ships, the role of the police and authorities.

The film introduces three younger middle-aged men who are friends. The principal friend is Simon, who works tuna fishing on the Simshar with his father (the man playing the father, Jimi Busuttil, is not a professional actor but an actual fisherman), has a loving wife and a mischievous young son, Theo. (Theo with his friends, sometimes dressed as altar boys ringing the church bells, is not above testing out whether a cat has nine lives and throwing it over the belltower.) Simon is visited by an officious bureaucrat, threatened about his catch, refrigeration, regulations and limitations – but decides to go out with his father and with Theo, going south beyond the boundaries towards Libya.

John is a police official, married and friends with Simon's family. We see him in action when a refugee ship is caught in international disputes between Italy and Malta, sailing back and forth on the Mediterranean, in discussions with the captain and crew, and in discussions with Alex who comes as a doctor inspecting the health of the refugees and involved in the search and rescue helicopter operation.

Alex is a married, a doctor, going on to the refugee ship, examining a range of passengers including a pregnant woman whose husband has died but who does not want to go ashore because she is being supported by her brother who is not allowed to leave the boat. There is also a man suffering from dementia. The audience sees many sequences of the people on the boat, sitting listlessly, with hopes of getting ashore and refuge, clambering when there is an opportunity to leave the boat. There is also an African woman refugee who serves as a translator for Alex and who challenges him to behave more compassionately towards the refugees.

This means that there is a great deal in the plot to reveal something about Malta and the situation of so many refugees crossing the Mediterranean and drowning.

But the climax of the film is the focus on Simon, his father and his son, going beyond where people are expecting them to be, encountering difficulties, especially the disregard by a

Libyan vessel captain who does not want to be caught up in rescuing people at sea. What makes this part of the film particularly moving is that on the boat with the family is an African man who is working in Malta, a hard-working and diligent man, who tries his best in the face of impending loss at sea.

The film was co-written and directed by Rebecca Cremona who has an eye for filming the islands and the seascapes beautifully and who brings a sensitive awareness of the complexity of situations for Malta itself at this time as well as for the local protagonists and their stories. Malta's Oscar nominee for 2015.

SLEEPING WITH OTHER PEOPLE

US, 2015, 101 minutes, Colour.

Jason Sudeikis, Alison Brie, Jason Mantzoukas, Margaret Odette, Amanda Peet Adam Scott, Natasha Lyonne Mark Blucas.

Directed by Leslye Headland.

The title is not particularly subtle and does indicate something of the theme of the film – though it underplays the most important part of the film, the difference between sexual activity and love.

This is in New York romantic comedy with a difference. It opens in 2002 on a college campus, an eccentric young woman, Lainey (she abhors being called Elaine) carrying on in a corridor, angry with the medical student with whom she wants to have sex. She is rescued by an onlooker, Jake, who takes her into his apartment, calms her down, they talk, and each, for the first time, has sex. They don't see each other for another 12 years and then only by accident.

The bulk of the film takes place 12 years later. Lainey is still having an affair with the medical student who has now become an ultra-serious doctor, who has also become engaged. Lainey is still infatuated, bitterly disappointed, not handling things particularly well and her therapist advises her to go to a sex addicts' meeting, a 12-step meeting. Jake, who now has a good job, has been inventive with his work, is a serial womaniser notices her. When they meet, they recognise each other, dwell on the memories.

What happens is not what we might expect in terms of their relationship – they continue acting according to the title of the film, but not with each other. Instead, they renew their friendship, which remains Platonic, deepening all the time, a genuine intimacy arising, their trusting each other, confiding in each other, relying on each other for their different personal crises.

The key to the film is this exploration of what this Platonic relationship means.

During this friendship, Lainey takes up with a businessman, thinking that this will be the solution – but he takes to her to a social where, who should be present but the doctor and his now pregnant wife. It is too much for her. In the meantime, Jake and his close friend, Xander, who has been married a long time to his wife, and they have a son, have been successful in business and have been bought out by Paula. Jake sits his sights on Paula. It seems to be a future, especially as he relates well to her son.

When Lainey goes interstate to study medicine, they both realise how much they miss each other, that they have genuinely fallen in love – and the challenges as to what are the consequences...

Alison Brie as Lainey and Jason Sudeikis as Jake convince us while they are on screen, especially in their living out the Platonic relationship.

The Lainey and Jake of 2002 could never believe that this is how they could be 12 years later – something which may make an impact on audiences in their 30s who may have gone through similar experiences and are being challenged to make decisions about their future lives.

To that extent, the film is something of a moral parable in an age of confused sexual morality and very frank expression of it.

SPECTRE

UK, 2015, 148 minutes, Colour.

Daniel Craig, Christoph Waltz, Lea Seydoux, Ralph Fiennes, Ben Wishaw, Naomie Harris, Andrew Scott, Rory Kinnear, Monica Bellucci, Dave Bautista, Jesper Christensen.

Directed by Sam Mendes.

The on-screen James Bond is 53 years old, arriving in the form of Sean Connery in Dr No in 1962. Spectre is the 24th official James Bond film, though there have been some others including Sean Connery in Never Say Never Again. And this is the fourth film with Daniel Craig who has proven himself a popular, if quite different, James Bond.

The previous film, Skyfall, made quite an impact on audiences and the box office. While it had the usual ingredients, it presented a more human James Bond, especially in his relationship with M, played in all the Pierce Brosnan and Daniel Craig films by Judi Dench. Audiences emotions were shaken and stirred by her death at the end of Skyfall – though we are all happy that she has a few moments video glimpses in Spectre. Ralph Fiennes was taking over at the end of Skyfall and is in command here, though not entirely in command because there are moves afoot to combine MI5 and MI6 and the MI6 building is in a state of collapse.

This is the background for the action of this film, fulfilling most of the expectations of the conventions of the James Bond film – but with some differences.

As so often, the opening is quite spectacular, filmed at The Day of the Dead in Mexico City, crowds, costumes and masks to represent the dead, elaborate processions, with Bond present, using a woman to get into a hotel but with operational intentions to listen to the group planning sabotage and to shoot the leaders. He is in some danger as the whole building almost collapses on him. The main assassin gets away and there is a pursuit through the procession, and in the helicopter which came to rescue the villain, soaring over the crowds and eventually crashing – but with Bond escaping.

M is not particularly pleased and stands Bond down. Bond does his tests with Q – Ben

Whishaw taking over the role effectively and having much more to do in this film, as does Miss Money Penny, Naomie Harris, helping Bond with research, with technology. The fly in the ointment, so to speak, is C, Andrew Scott, who is all for security and surveillance but not in favour of democracy and thinks the 00 division is out of date.

Bond, taking Q's brand-new super-technology car, follows links to Rome, goes to the funeral of the deceased assassin, encounters his wife, Monica Bellucci. The tradition of the Bond girls is changed in this film, Bond relating only to the widow and to Madeleine, Lea Seydoux, the actual sexual encounter scenes quite truncated and brief.

Further action, in the Bond tradition of multi-locations, takes place in Austria, where he encounters Mr White from Casino Royale, tracks down his daughter, Madeleine, who grew up learning about Spectre, with the action then transferring to Morocco, to the desert with a spectacular fight on a train, the headquarters of the arch-villain, played by Christoph Waltz.

More explosions in Morocco and then a finale back home in London involving the collapse of the MI6 building, helicopter pursuit and crash on Westminster Bridge, and a moral dilemma for Bond himself as to how he will treat the arch-villain on the Bridge, with M beckoning on one side and Madeleine watching on the other.

We are given small family details about Bond and his growing up, which gives the film a more humane touch, as does Daniel Craig, especially in his relationship to Madeline, even though he is still adept at doing battle with enemies.

Audiences will all welcomed the final statement, which always appears, "James Bond Will return".

REVIEWS DECEMBER 2015

5 TO 7

ABSOLUTELY ANYTHING

BY THE SEA

CROW'S EGGS, The

END OF THE TOUR, The

FREEHELD

HE NAMED ME MALALA

HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA 2

HUNGER GAMES: MOCKINGJAY PART 2

LOVE THE COOPERS

LOOK OF SILENCE

IN THE HEART OF THE SEA

MAN UP

MISSISSIPPI GRIND

NIGHT BEFORE, The

PHOENIX

SECRET IN THEIR EYES

TANNA

TRUTH

5 TO 7

US, 2014, 95 minutes, Colour.

Anton Yelchin, Berenice Marlohe, Lambert Wilson, Olivia Thirlby, Glenn Close, Frank Langella, Erich Stoltz, Jocelyn De Boer.

Directed by Victor Levin.

“I love you” may seem the same, exactly the same, as the French phrase “Je t’aime”. This film reminds us they are not exactly the same at all, the cultural differences between the English language and the French language coming to the fore, but American moral stances compared with French moral stances, as we have often heard from the French, have quite a number of differences.

Perhaps this is not the best introduction to a film review of 5 to 7. But this reviewer liked it very much indeed, surprisingly so.

The phrase “5 to 7” is used by the French to indicate a time in the afternoon, between work hours and whatever is to take place in the evening, when affairs can be arranged and lived out. All Americans might have affairs, but this more explicit approach by the French, and the alleged rules by which the French have their 5 to 7 soirées, differs from the Americans and their more explicit moral stances.

Brian Bloom is a young would-be author, from a wealthy background, getting lots of rejection slips which he pastes on his wall, who encounters a Frenchwoman as they both have a cigarette in an afternoon break from work. He is immediately attracted. And so is the audience. She is Arielle (the name of *The Little Mermaid* as Brian notes) and is played by French actress Berenice Marlohe who was a strikingly memorable Bond girl in *Skyfall* who had quite an unhappy end. While she has the potential for an unhappy ending here, she is a woman who has an extraordinary smile, more than fulfilling the cliché saying that her smile would light up a room – and beyond. Fortunately for us all, and for Brian, she smiles a lot during this film.

He is 23. She is 34. And she is married and has two young children. But, in the alleged French manner, so attracted is she by Brian, that she suggests a 5 to 7 arrangement, which he eagerly accepts. They meet frequently, enjoying each other’s company, going to art galleries, she blindfolding him to test his palette for red and white wines (he mistakes a white for a red) and then tests her for beer and Guinness (and she mistakes a Guinness for ordinary beer).

And her husband, Valerey (Lambert Wilson)? He also has a 5 to 7 arrangement with a young American editor, Jane (Olivia Thirlby). Personal relationships and social relationships are all carried out with the best of all possible good manners, Brian is invited to a meal at home by Valerey. And Brian takes Arielle’s children out and teaches them some elements of baseball.

Of course, the question is, how can such arrangements continue – if they are purely sexual arrangements, they could go on forever until one or other tires. But, if genuine love enters in, with a mixture of possessiveness and single fidelity, what could happen?

Which is what happens between Brian and Arielle. Again, civilised manners, except when Valerey momentarily strikes Brian. Brian declares his absolute love – but what of Arielle? The best thing for a reviewer to say is: go to see the film to find out and check how this ending fits with romantic sensitivities and moral sensibilities. Suffice to say that the film's story goes on little longer than might have been expected, which gives a little more depth to the experience of all concerned.

An extra bonus for the audience is the presence of Glenn Close and Franklin Langella as Brian's parents, he continually complaining about something, especially the price of parking and taxis in New York City, and also about his son's relationship with a married woman. Glenn Close reminds us of what a good and significant actress she is.

The good memories from this film certainly last beyond 5 to 7.

ABSOLUTELY ANYTHING

UK, 2015, 85 minutes, Colour.

Simon Pegg, Kate Beckinsale, Rob Riggle, Eddie Izzard, Joanna Lumley, Robert Bathurst, Sanjeev Bhasker, Meera Syal.

Voices of: Robin Williams, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Michael Pailin, Terry Jones.

Directed by Terry Jones.

The Monte Python Flying Circus was extraordinarily popular in the 1970s and the 1980s, with their television series as well as films like *Jabberwocky*, *The Life of Brian*, *The Meaning of Life*. They were always very talented with short sketches, and their films really included a succession of sketches. This is the case with *Absolutely Anything*, based on the script by Terry Jones but not produced when he wrote it, now resurrected and the opportunity for some Python humour as well as the reuniting of the team to provide eccentric voices.

Audiences stumbling into the film and not aware of Python humour may be puzzled. The fans may not think it is one of the greatest but, nevertheless, there is quite some enjoyment.

The basic plot is one of those “what-if?” stories where a character is given unlimited powers to effect anything they desire. All they have to do is formulate their wish and wave their hand – and there it is. The character who receives this power is Neil (Simon Pegg), a high school teacher (with an impossibly unruly class and a head teacher who puts down) who lives by himself, is infatuated by the television producer upstairs, Catherine (Kate Beckinsale), who quite likes him but... nothing special.

In the meantime we go into the realm of Terry Gilliam animation, into a world beyond the stars, to be introduced by some rather farcical hideous-looking characters, an interplanetary Council who have the power to test out a human to see whether they want Earth or not. And the joke is that these ugly looking creatures, who mistakenly all have girls names, are voiced by the Python team. The President of the Council is, needless to say, John Cleese with his dominating and vigorous voice. Eric Idle pops up now and then as does Terry Jones – though not always easy to pick Michael Pailin.

We go into space now and again but most of the action focuses on Neil who is a hapless

individual but rather enjoys having the power to achieve anything he wishes. Like Dudley Moore in *Bedazzled*, granted many wishes, he makes some inept choices, especially when he wants a better image and sexual prowess for himself. But, by and large, there are some amusing variations on the wish-fulfilment thing, getting rid of his class by an explosion but able to restore them so that they all are absolutely delighted when they have to read a whole chapter of Dickens quietly.

There is also his friend Ray, Sanjeev Bhaskar, who has an infatuation with one of the teachers – but is alarmed when Neil wishes her to worship Ray and she starts a sect, with touches of the Hari Krishna. There is also the American Grant, Rob Riggle, who is absolutely obsessed with Catherine, making life a misery, but tricking Neil into giving him the powers with, of course, dastardly results.

But, there in the foreground is Neil's pet dog, Dennis. He is voiced by Robin Williams in one of his last roles, always amusing, a touch of the frenetic as well as sardonic quips – although it is Dennis who is wise enough to think out a solution to the whole problem.

While the film does not give its audience anything it absolutely wants, it does give 90 minutes or so amusement.

BY THE SEA

US, 2015, 122 minutes, Colour.

Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie Pitt, Melanie Laurent, Nils Arrestup, Melvil Poupard, Richard Bohringer.

Directed by Angelina Jolie Pitt.

One of the experiences while watching this film is to find a word that would pinpoint its impact. One of the word choices was “languid” or, to be more precise, “very languid”, or “tres, tres, the languid”. It is one of those films judged by those who are addicted to action pace: “slow”.

The film is set in France, although it was filmed in Malta, standing in for France – beautiful countryside, the roads, the mountains, the bay, the sea, the cliffs, the village and the villa... At the opening, audiences introduced to the central couple, Vanessa and Roland, driving through this beautiful scenery, going to the luxury villa, settling into their apartment. But, all is not well. Roland gets out his typewriter, tries to write but has a writer's block. Vanessa seems particularly listless.

Over two hours, we share the experience with the couple, something of a novella prolonged into the two-hour film.

Days go by, she staying at home, reading a book she doesn't like, doing some sunbaking, wearing her wide-brimmed hat, sometimes going for a walk, and not particularly responsive when Roland comes home each evening. He spends his time in the bar, trying to write, still blocked. He drinks.

There are two agreeable characters at the bar, Michel the manager, Nils Arrestup, whose wife is dead, whose memory he cherishes, who listens to Roland, and tries to give him advice,

especially about his drinking. And there is Patrice, the old owner of the bar who sits, watches, eats, plays chess with Michel.

Then a young couple on their honeymoon take the next apartment, Melanie Laurent and Melville Poupard. They are friendly – but do not know that there is a peep hole from one apartment to the other, discovered by Vanessa, watching through it a great deal, and with the audience, sharing prurient curiosity. Eventually Roland discovers it and he and his wife share a great deal of gazing at the life of the other couple, especially the more intimate parts of their life, their talk, nudity, the sexual relationship.

And all the time and there are quick edited glimpses of some kind of traumatic experience that Vanessa has had – and which the audience may well suspect almost from the beginning.

Roland is exasperated with his wife, sometimes trying hard to build the lost love, sometimes just giving. And she often gives up as well. They share some experiences with the couple next door, sailing, playing cards, going shopping.

Ultimately, there is some tension leading to a final confrontation and truth-telling, especially Roland speaking bluntly to Vanessa. Whether this is what she needs in her depression could be discussed but, ultimately, there is some effect, even hope.

Speaking of prurient curiosity, this is inevitable with Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt as the stars, the producers, and Angelina Jolie (several times in the credits referred to as Angelina Jolie Pitt, and even in the final credits as Mrs Jolie Pitt) writing and directing. And the niggling question: does this reflect their real-life relationship? It must be said that Angelina Jolie, quiet voice, listless, depressed, is the exact opposite of Lara Croft and some of her more vigorous characters. So, a drama that probably owes more to French cinema of the 1950s and 60s and to the existential portrait of characters, lost and found, of Italian Michelangelo Antonioni.

Languid as we watch it – but much of it stays in the memory.

THE CROW'S EGGS/ KAAKKAA MUTTAI

India, 2014, 91 minutes, Colour.
Directed by M. Manikandan.

The Crows Eggs is a Tamil film from the city of Chennai (formerly Madras). Films from the industries on India's west coast, from Kolkotta and Chennai, tend to be dramas and comedies without the colourful romantic song and dance of Bollywood, from Mumbai and the east coast.

Many were surprised when Slumdog Millionaire won the Oscar for Best Film in 2008. Before and since there have been many slumdog films and this is one of them, something like Slumdog Pizza. Blog reports from India indicate that the Indian population really warms to this film.

The focus of the story is a family in the slums, father is in jail, mother works and tries to raise money to pay a lawyer to help get her husband out of jail (without any results). Her mother-in-law lives at home, sitting and getting older, giving advice to the two young boys who have

to go out to collect coal, especially that falling from the trains as they pass, to get money for the family rather than go to school. There are quite a number of children with similar lives in these slums.

The boys, generally smiling, even when the younger one has problems, as in the opening of the film, with wetting his bed mat. They go out to play, give rice to the local crows and climb up to the nest so that they can drink the yolk from the crows' eggs. They nickname themselves as Crow's Egg.

Their lives are fairly routine, but, on the whole, they seem to enjoy them, not having had the opportunity to live better in any way. Until their playground is taken over, a building is put up and it turns out to be a Pizza Parlour. They have no idea what pizza is but they are attracted by the multi-coloured flyer, even persuading their grandmother to try to reproduce it.

They spend a lot of the film collecting the coal, helped by a friend who guides them to a government store and they gradually build up the money, only to be rejected at the Pizza Spot for being dirty urchins. Their next goal is to buy clothes so that they can be respectable as they try to get pizza.

In case this is too schmaltzy (which, in many ways, it is), there is a subplot about financial wheeler dealings to buy property, to put up buildings, to line the pockets of officials...

It comes to a head when the manager of the Pizza Spot actually punches the older boy – and it has been filmed on a mobile phone, leading to TV exposition, TV panels, discussions about the wealthy and the poor, politicians getting in on the act, locals trying to extort money from the Pizza boss, and, without spoiling the ending, no surprise when they get a free pizza (and then turn up their noses at it).

A family film, more attuned to family audiences and younger audiences than *Slumdog Millionaire*, audiences identifying with the boys who, for most of the film, seem to have as their goal, money, money, money – but, of course, they discover their generosity at the end.

THE END OF THE TOUR

US, 2015, 106 minutes, Colour.

Jesse Eisenberg, Jason Segel, Anna Chlumsky, Joan Cusack, Mickey Sumner, Mamie Gummer, Ron Stevenson.

Directed by James Pondsolt.

The End of the Tour is something of a specialist film, a film for lovers of literary fiction, especially American fiction. It is basically a two-hander, several days of conversation between the novelist, David Foster Wallace, and a Rolling Stones reporter, David Lipsky, who accompanied him on part of his tour to promote his book, *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996. It is based on the reporter's memoir, *Although of Course You End up Becoming Yourself*.

It does not matter if the audience has not heard of David Foster Wallace. They will have quite an impression of him by the end of the film. It does begin somewhat grimly, with the news in 2008 that he had killed himself. The reporter, David Lipski, is shocked to discover the news and prepares a eulogy of the novelist which he delivers in New York City.

Then the film goes into flashback.

Jesse Eisenberg, who is almost always the same in every film (well, always the same) whether he be Mark Zuckerberg in *The Social Network* or David Lipski – always a little hunch-shouldered and forward-stooping, nervous manner in speaking, always on the edge even when he is relaxed. But this suits him here, a reporter tired of writing about Boy Bands, and proposing to its editor that there is a story in the success of David Foster Wallace and his thousand page novel.

For those familiar with Jason Segel's career, almost always in comedies, including *Knocked Up* and similar comedies, *Gulliver's Travels* and *The Muppets*, his performance here as Wallace will be a complete surprise – except that he does remind us that earlier in his career, it would be Jeff Daniels as Wallace. Some commentators have said that he captures Wallace's manner very well, a tall and rather lumbering man, always wearing a bandanna, chunks of hair emerging from each side of it, in old clothes (Joan Cusack's chauffeur in *Minneapolis* exclaiming rhetorically as he goes to radio interview, "you're not wearing that"). And, he doesn't mind McDonald's[?] and other takeaway food...

David Lipski goes to Bloomington to do the interview, recorded but Wallace has a few reservations, especially about the privacy of his parents. What follows is a great deal of conversation, relishing of words and delivery, interactions between the two men, Wallace speaking at a book signing, on radio, with a friend from university days (Mickey Sumner) and enthusiastic fan (Mamie Gummer).

There is a great deal of self-revelation from the two men, the reporter nosing out details for his story, but, somewhat envious of the writer, who does not take himself too seriously with his fame, who has a certain charm, despite living alone with his large dogs, friendly with students in his creative writing course, able to reflect on the themes of his work, especially the theme of loneliness and a future prospect for marriage and having children.

Direction is by James Ponsoldt whose work includes specialist films, *Smashed* and *The Spectacular Now*.

Words, words, words, – those who enjoy conversation will not be sick of words but will relish the conversations.

FREEHELD

US, 2015, 103 minutes, Colour.

Julianne Moore, Ellen Page, Michael Shannon, Steve Carell, Josh Charles, Luke Grimes, Kelly Deadmon, Dennis Boutsikaris, William Sadler.

Directed by Peter Sollett.

The title is intriguing but not really helpful until we have seen the film. It seems to relate to the two central characters, Laurel (Julianne Moore) and Stacie (Ellen Page) and their relationship, and issues of civil equality. But, then, at the meeting of the Ocean County Council, underneath the plaques with the names of the councillors was the title, Freeholders. Ultimately, there is a civil liberties and legislation clash between citizens and Council.

The film has several genres in the plot development.

Freeheld opens as a police investigation drama with touches of the thriller, the career of Laurel, who had been in the Ocean County, New Jersey, police force for over 20 years, working with her partner, Dane (Michael Shannon). We see them in action, in raids, courageous. And we see the authorities congratulating the pair but the Chief looking only at the man, bypassing the woman. We are also shown Laurel doing her research work at home, coming up with leads and the follow through which involves her being dragged along the street holding onto a car, then a bad cop/good cop method where she is able to elicit the information needed. Laurel and Dane get on very well together, he having a crush on her.

After work, Laurel goes to a local gay club. She notices a young woman, Stacie, and joins in conversation, dancing, and they go home together, developing their relationship and, after a year, with Stacie doing garage work (being shown able to change a wheel more quickly than the expert at the garage) and the couple deciding to buy a house and renovate it. It is at this juncture that Dane discovers the truth, is momentarily shocked, but disappointed that she had not confided in him as he had confided personal matters to her.

Michael Shannon is very effective as Dane, portraying a good guy when, as so frequently in films, he can be extraordinarily sinister (as in 99 Homes, made at this time).

Freeheld then develops the theme of gay relationships, friendship, love, intimacy.

But then there is a transition when Laurel complains of a sore nerve and is urged to go to the doctor. She has lung cancer, quite advanced. In 2014, Julianne Moore gave her Oscar-winning performance as Alice, a 50-year-old succumbing to Alzheimer's disease, Still Alice. Here she puts her deepest self into the performance, audiences convinced that she is terminally ill, going through the chemotherapy, accepting the limitations on her lifetime, being helped by the, at first, unbelieving Stacie.

It is here that the film becomes political. Laurel has decided, according to New Jersey legislation of 2005, to leave her pension to Stacey so that she can pay the mortgage on their house and live there. The local council, five male members, the Freeholders, hear the petition presented personally by Laurel and reject it. They offer different reasons, principles about the same-sex relationships, the possibility that this would lead to legislation on same-sex marriage, religious principles and their invoking that this is what the majority of citizens, older, of Ocean County believe in.

A campaigner, Steven Goldstein, suddenly erupts into the film. He is played vividly by Steve Carell, reminding people that he is middle-aged, middle-class, white, Jewish and gay. One of his lines is to remind people that his protests, rounding up followers, placards, slogans, shouting and singing, are "political theatre". He takes up the cause of Laurel and Stacie even though Laurel will not endorse his campaign for same-sex marriage. What she is after – and she makes two speeches to the council, one when she is very sick – is gender equality.

There are two main approaches to awareness about social issues, campaigns and principles: some take the crusading path, as do the protesters in this film; others take the education path, telling stories, inviting people to step into the shoes of people whose causes are being promoted. This is what Freeheld does. With the expert performances, the modes of storytelling, audiences are invited to step into Laurel's shoes and walk with her, as a person, in her career, in her sexual orientation, in her partnership, in her illness, in her fight for the issue of her pension going to her partner.

The advantage of this kind of storytelling is that it gives some possible compassion for people whether an audience agrees with them or not.

HE NAMED ME MALALA

US, 2015, 100 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Davis Guggenheim.

If ever a bullet did not achieve what the shooter intended it to do, it was that which the Taliban fired into the head of the young student, Malala Yousafzai. The intention of the shooter was to kill Malala to make an example of her because she advocated education for girls.

Despite expectations to the contrary, when Malala was flown to Britain for surgery and for recovery, recover she did. And, although Malala is only 18 now, the rest is history.

This documentary, from director, Davis Guggenheim, who won the Academy Award for his Al Gore film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, presents a portrait of Malala as something of a jigsaw or patchwork quilt. His material is not presented in conventional chronological order. Rather, we are introduced to Malala, some information about her work as a young student in Pakistan, but then a focus on her recuperation, her becoming something of a public figure, her campaign for education for girls.

Interspersed throughout the film are animation pieces, a device used to move quickly over events and perspectives by offering sketched images of Malala herself as well as of the countryside and other backgrounds. Some have found this a bit disconcerting or not appropriate to such a serious subject. However, it does allow for a change of mood, a shift in perspectives, a way of getting the audience to reflect on what they are seeing and what it means.

With the emphasis on the title, it is clear that Malala's father is quite a significant presence in her life. He often accompanies her. He is an educationalist with strong ideas, obviously a major influence on his daughter. By contrast, her mother is quiet and stays in the background. One of her siblings, her younger brother, offers some cheeky and playful comments about his sister. Malala herself is often playful.

One of the significant aspects of the film is Malala, after her recovery, pursuing her education, but also travelling widely to a variety of countries, especially in Africa, again to encourage girls to go to school and receive an education. She is a strong teenage missionary for female education.

It is only towards the end of the film that it focuses on Malala in Pakistan, the threats to education, her being shot, the immediate impact, strikingly visual, her being saved and brought back to health, and her appearance in headlines throughout the world.

It was thought that she would receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013, but this did not happen. She was pleasantly stoic about all of this. But, in 2014, she did win and, at the end of the film, we see her making her acceptance speech and her exhortations about education.

Malala has become a significant figure already – and it will be very interesting over the coming years to see how she manages her celebrity and how she continues her education campaign.

HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA 2

US, 2015, 89 minutes, Colour.

Voices of: Adam Sandler, Andy Samberg, Selena Gomez, Kevin James, Steve Buscemi, David Spade, Keegan-Michael Key, Asher Blinkoff, Fran Drescher, Molly Shannon, Megan Mullaly, Nick Offerman, Rob Riggle, Dana Carvey, Mel Brooks.

Directed by Genndy Tartakovsky.

A couple of years ago, audiences were surprised to find that there had been some kind of truce between vampires and humans, especially with the opening of Hotel Transylvania welcoming human guests. Not only that, the patriarch of the vampire family, Drac, was consenting to the marriage between his daughter, Mavis, and human with a touch of the hippie, Johnny.

And this is where this sequel takes up, the preparations for the wedding and the wedding itself, the vampires and the variety of monsters at the Hotel Transylvania hosting the humans from California and everybody having an enjoyable time. Then a year passes, Mavis is pregnant, then she gives birth – and the big question, is Dennis (called Dennisovich by his adoring vampire grandfather) a human or a vampire. While he has a mop of reddish hair, he doesn't have any fangs. Nevertheless, he grows up happy, at home with vampires and monsters, comfortable with his human grandparents, an ordinary boy although everybody quibbles about the word "normal".

Mavis and Johnny go to California for a holiday where she is overwhelmed by the Slurpee choices in a mini-mart and shows her prowess at bike riding on skateboarding centres. She really enjoys living in the human world. In the meantime, Drac and other monsters decide to take Dennisovich on a holiday, to a summer camp for him to prove himself a vampire, able to fly... It doesn't turn out as hoped for and Mavis and Johnny, unable to get a flight, rely on Mavis's bat-power to get home before the camp-goers.

There is a big climax for Dennis's birthday, especially with the arrival of his great-grandfather (voiced inimitably by Mel Brooks), a fight of good monsters against bad monsters and revelation about Dennis...

The voice cast is very entertaining with Adam Sandler reprising Drac, Selena Gomez as Mavis, Andy Samberg as Johnny, and comic voices like those of Steve Buscemi, David

Spade and Kevin James as a very benign Frankenstein monster who is accommodating for the tourists to take selfies with him. In small roles are Fran Drescher, Megan Mullaly, Molly Shannon.

It is all very brightly lit, vivid animation, action, and quite a lot of humour, both visual and verbal, with reference to vampire traditions and movies – an easily enjoyable film.

THE HUNGER GAMES: MOCKINGJAY PART 2

US, 2015, 137 minutes, Colour.

Jennifer Lawrence, Josh Hutchison, Liam Hemsworth, Woody Harrelson, Donald Sutherland, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Julianne Moore, Willow Shields, Sam Claflin, Elizabeth Banks, Mahershalaher Ali, Jena Malone, Jeffrey Wright, Natalie Dormer, Elden Henson, Wes Chatham, Sarita Choudhury, Patina Miller, Michelle Forbes, Rob Knepper.
Directed by Francis Lawrence.

Three years ago, audiences who had not read the series of books, *The Hunger Games*, by Suzanne Collins, were introduced to strong heroin, Katniss Everdene. She lived in an oppressed sector of the dictatorship and became the tribute to the annual futuristic fight-to-the-death games, akin to the gladiatorial combats of ancient Rome, with an effete society, decked out in outlandish costumes, watching or following the breathless television commentary. The president was a tyrant, President Snow.

Then, two years ago, most of us were in the know, watching the developments of Katniss and her friend and survivor, Peeta, and the manipulations of the President and his entourage.

It was last year that we were taken into the rebellion, introduced to a new potential president, President Coin, and the mobilisation of forces to topple President Snow.

And here we are, now, witnessing the uprising, the manipulation of Peeta, the plans of President Coin, the commando raid into the capital and the final confrontations.

Jennifer Lawrence quickly established herself in the imagination of filmgoers as Katniss Everdene and then won an Oscar for Best Actress in *The Silver Linings Playbook* (2012). We cannot imagine anyone else as this strong character and strong leader.

And most of the cast have continued throughout the film including Josh Hutchison as Peeta, Liam Hemsworth as Gail, Donald Sutherland as President Snow, Woody Harrelson as the adviser, Haymitch, and Elizabeth Banks as the fashion adviser, Effie Trinket. Julianne Moore had been introduced as President Coin as had Philip Seymour Hoffman as adviser, Plutarch. They both continue their roles with Philip Seymour Hoffman having filmed a number of scenes before his untimely death.

So, what is there to say about this final chapter of the saga? The characters continue, although there are complications with the mind-influencing of Peeta, the greater prominence of Gail and his relationship with Katniss and his involvement in the revolt, ambiguities about the role of President Coin, the buildup to the confrontation with President Snow, a long and special effects filled commando sequence as the rebels enter the capital, go through sewers and underground and seem to lose.

The battle sequences are strongly filmed and a certain amount of savagery in the resolution of hostilities – but, not quite what we anticipated, the series comes to an end in an atmosphere of peace and domestic hope.

IN THE HEART OF THE SEA

US, 2015, 121 minutes, Colour.

Chris Hemsworth, Benjamin Walker, Ben Whishaw, Cillian Murphy, Tom Holland, Brendan Gleeson, Frank Dillane, Charlotte Riley, Jordi Molla, Donald Sumpter, Jamie Sives.

Directed by Ron Howard.

This film opens with deep underwater photography with a voice-over, that of novelist Herman Melville, who reflects on the impact of the sea and who arrives in Nantucket to get background for his novel, *Moby Dick*.

But the main story is that of the voyage of the *SX* in 1821, a whaling ship on expedition to the southern Atlantic and then into the Pacific Ocean. This story takes place in flashbacks as Melville interviews the last living survivor from the voyage who was a young lad, his first voyage, experiencing life on board, fierce storms, the confrontation of the giant white whale, the capsizing of the *SX* and surviving on *C* for over three months.

Ben Whishaw plays Melville and Brendan Gleeson the man, now an embittered alcoholic, keeping the secrets of the voyage, even from his loving wife, but who was persuaded to reminisce and recount what happened.

The main action takes place in the 1820s, focusing on Bowen Chase, Chris Hemsworth, newly married, his wife expecting a child, rather looked down on by the shipowners and merchants of Nantucket as a land man, but who gets the appointment to be first mate on the *SX*, under the command of an establishment captain, George Pollard (Benjamin Walker). Their commission is to bring back as many barrels of whale oil as possible, the oil used for lighting the lamps of the city streets.

With the difference in background in temperament, there are clashes between captain and first mate, brought to a head in a decision about confronting a vast storm. The storm sequence, coming early, helps audience appreciate the difficulties and dangers of sailing ships on the oceans.

The film also gives us a close-up on the tracking of the whales, the men in rowboat getting close, sailing amid the whales, finding the right moment to throw the harpoons, letting the rope go as far as possible before the whale is exhausted, the bringing of the whale blubber on board and its being cut up as well as the barrelling of the *Orwell* oil – with the young sailor being lowered into the belly of the whale to facilitate collecting the oil.

This all takes place in the South Atlantic, the ship then rounding Cape Horn and putting into Chilean port where they hear news of a giant white whale which has destroyed a Spanish ship. They go in pursuit and this leads to the confrontation with the extraordinary whale, the foundation for *Moby Dick*, an image of nature versus humans and not vice versa. As with the novel, the great whale is an instrument of destruction, even pursuing the sailors after the

sinking of the boat.

This is a film for audiences who appreciate going back into the 19th century and sharing these dangerous experiences. This is also a film for audiences, especially those inspired by Greenpeace, who have campaigned in recent decades against the exploitation of Wales, some of the barbarity in the harpooning and dissection of the whales, as well as the exploitation of the whales as a resource – with an ironic remark at the end as the old man mentions to Melville that he has heard that someone has struggled in Pennsylvania, something which he could not believe so extraordinary did it seem!

Direction of the film is by Ron Howard who for over 30 years has directed an extraordinary range of different genre films, from space in Apollo 13, a western in The Missing, and, to mention in passing only, two of the Dan Brown film adaptation, but winning an Oscar for A Beautiful mind Mind.

THE LOOK OF SILENCE

International co-production, 2014, 103 minutes, Colour.
Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer.

The Look of Silence is a companion film to the director's The Act of Killing. Joshua Oppenheimer's earlier film took audiences by surprise, sometimes making them aghast at the stories of the massacre of communists by the military in 1965. What was horrifying in that film was the actual footage of some of the killers remembering what they had done, no compunction, re-enacting the killings on screen.

The Look of Silence is, in some ways, easier to watch than the previous film though no less confronting.

Oppenheimer filmed in Indonesia, especially in 2003 and in 2012 in various locations, collecting a great deal of material which has been edited into the two films (the new film having some American television footage and reporting of the time).

This film uses the device of having a central character, Adi, born after the massacres, a son as a consolation for his parents saddened by the arrest and murder of an older son, Ramli. We see Adi with his wife and children, his little boy going to school listening to a teacher with an anti-Communist tirade, with his father contradicting the point of view of the teacher.

Adi is an optometrist, travelling round, testing the eyes of his clients, using a red frame (which features in a sinister way on the poster for the film) for the different lenses, helping people to see more clearly. This is obviously an image for the film and its perspective and message.

This time Addy interviews several of the killers. They are no less callous than those who re-enacted the massacres in the former film. Here, they speak to killers who were proud of what they did, have no hesitation in describing the killings, take Addy to the Snake River where they disposed of the bodies, one of them even having a sketchbook of drawings of what they did. Adi later goes to visit the family who are shocked at the news, and his showing television footage about their father, about the sketchbook. As can be imagined, the first reaction is to

deny the past, but Adi has evidence.

Another person interviewed is his uncle who was a guard for the prisoners who eventually makes excuses for what he did, that he was not in charge. Gradually, with the help of someone present at the time but who escaped, the true story about Ramli and his arrest, escape, re-arrest and torture and death is revealed.

There is a further interview with a man and his daughter, the daughter having to admit what her father had done – including tossing a head amongst a group to frighten the Chinese.

As with *The Act of Killing*, there is an exposé of this year of living dangerously in Indonesia, the role of the military, the role of the government, the number of people involved in arrests, torturing and killings of a barbaric kind, and, while the past is past..., yet.

LOVE THE COOPERS

US, 2015, 107 minutes, Colour.

Diane Keaton, John Goodman, Ed Helms, Alex Seyfried, Alan Arkin, Marisa Tomei, Olivia Wilde, Jake Lacey, June Squibb, Jon Tenny.

Directed by Jessie Nelson.

Sometimes, it is hard to – not all the Coopers love each other, at least on the surface.

This is a film for northern hemisphere Christmas release, full of family celebrations, but in winter, with many snowed in at airports and unable to travel, Christmas decorations everywhere, plenty of Santa Clauses, preparations of the family meals – and all the trimmings, but which, of course, do not go to plan.

One of the difficulties of the film is that it has almost too many characters, each demanding a percentage of the screen time, time that is not always there for their stories to develop. In fact, the film seems a collection of short stories mixed in together. Some of them get our attention more fully than others. Older audiences will be following the story of the grandparents and their gradual falling out of love with each other; younger audiences may identify with the tentative teenager, pimples and all, and his struggles with his first kisses.

As can be seen, the Cooper Family is fairly dysfunctional.

The film spends a lot of time introducing us to each of the characters and setting up particular stories. Some of them have comic elements. Some of them are romantic. Some of them dramatise hardships, divorce and job losses. Some of them have the touch of tragedy.

And the whole story is narrated by the family dog, Rage, whose story this is as well, voiced prominently by Steve Martin.

Diane Keaton, who is one of the producers of the film, has what might be called the villain's role. She is the matriarch who is prone to smother with her love and care, something which she does not always see, something she always defends – and, we hope, that she will see the light by the end of the film, especially because her husband, a genial John Goodman, really loves her and experiences a growing disappointment in her alienation, criticism, proud

declarations of her role as mother.

This is somewhat complicated by their daughter, Olivia Wilde, a playwright who is having an affair with a local doctor and feels pressure to make a good impression on her mother, not wanting her mother to give her “that look”. This character is better developed than others, sitting in the bar at the airport, not wanting to go home immediately, chatting with a soldier (Jake Lacey) who turns out to be something of her opposite, Republican, literal Christian, a good man who experiences her ups and downs of moods but eventually agrees to go home pretending to be her boyfriend. He is the catalyst for some of the changes.

In the meantime, her brother (Ed Helms) is separated, has lost his job as a photographer, goes through a failed interview, relates to his three children, a little girl who is not backward in being forward, a sympathetic young son who wants to help his awkward teenage brother (the one who gets involved in kissing). Their aunt, Marisa Tomei, is lonely, is arrested for shoplifting, and spends most of her part of the film involved in amateur counselling of a police officer, Anthony Mackie, whom she accuses of being a robot in his behaviour. His is one of the interesting characters, especially in his response to Marisa Tomei.

Then there is the great-grandfather, played nicely by Alan Arkin, who befriends a lonely waitress, Amanda Seyfried, and invites her to the Christmas dinner. And June Squibb is on hand as the friendly family aunt with touches of dementia.

Some have attacked the film as too formulaic – and, probably, it is. But that doesn’t mean that many audiences will not enjoy the formula, interested in some characters more than others, but watching how it will all turn out and whether there would be some change of heart and some Christmas cheer.

MAN UP

UK, 2015, 88 minutes, Colour.

Lake Bell, Simon Pegg, Rory Kinnear, Olivia Williams, Ophelia Lovibond, Henry Lloyd-Hughes, Sharon Horgan, Stephen Campbell Moore, Ken Stott, Harriet Walter.

Directed by Ben Palmer.

Man Up as a title does not do justice to this comedy, with serious undertones. It is an amusing film with an appeal for both men and women in middle age, whether undergoing their crisis, or anticipating one, or just interested how men and women tick at this age.

It is something of a comedy of errors. Lake Bell is particularly good as Nancy, and with a British accent, a 34-year-old who has been for some years getting over a broken relationship, has a career as a journalist, something we don’t see much of, and is being urged on, especially by her married sister, to date and to make some romantic connections. We first see her invited to an engagement party, backing out, having room service at the hotel, being hounded to go down and being pushed to meet someone with whom she has no rapport.

Next day, on the train, she meets a rather prissy young career woman, Jessica (Olivia Lovibond) who is reading a bestseller on relationships, giving Nancy a little lecture, and leaving the book for Nancy to pick up. Jessica has planned to meet on a blind date a man under the clock at Waterloo Station. As Nancy hurries to give back the book (while Jessica is

buying another one), Jack (Simon Pegg), who has been waiting, mistakes Nancy for Jessica. And the cautious Nancy throws caution to the winds and goes on a date with Jack, he incessantly talking, taking her to a bar, their having drinks, going to a bowling alley and exercising rivalry, going to another bar when Nancy meets Sean (Rory Kinnear in a somewhat over the top comic performance) who has had a crush on Nancy and causes her to reveal the truth before she was ready.

Some more rivalry and an encounter with Jack's ex-wife and her boyfriend – with Nancy deciding to play up her connection with Jack, much to the amazement of his ex-wife, and with some slapstick consequences.

In the meantime, Nancy should have been at her parents' 40th wedding anniversary to give the speech. Eventually she does get there, but so does Jack, relying on the good offices of Sean (which he should not have), and things get more or less sorted out to everyone's satisfaction (except Sean's).

There is quite an amount of witty and entertaining dialogue, audiences probably enjoying the farcical situations and the mixups, and probably pleased to see romance winning out for this middle-aged couple.

MISSISSIPPI GRIND

US, 2015, 110 minutes, Colour.

Ben Mendelsohn, Ryan Reynolds, Sienna Miller, Analeigh Upton.

Directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck.

Mississippi Grind offers audiences an American road trip – but with quite a difference. It opens with the ravaged face of Ben Mendelsohn as Gerry, sitting and contemplating in his car. It looks very existential with angst, and it is. But Gerry is contemplating his fortunes and misfortunes in gambling, eventually going in to a familiar casino situation and trying his luck.

Inside the place, there is a cheerful character, Curtis, played pleasingly and effectively by Ryan Reynolds, who clicks with Gerry and they finish a night on the town. Actually, Gerry is a not very successful real estate agent, separated from his wife and daughter, living a rather miserable life, so it is not difficult for him to agree to go with Curtis on a trip from Iowa to New Orleans with a plan to visit his ex-wife and daughter on the way and (misguidedly) achieve reconciliation.

We see a whole range of characters, especially Curtis, his girlfriend and the girls who work on a Mississippi riverboat. Curtis has many charming but fickle moments, brought to a head in New Orleans when he goes to a bar, listens to the ageing singer who turns out to be his mother. Gerry has no success at all with his wife, even trying to steal some of her savings from her.

The two gamblers fall in and out of the luck, but Curtis has an easy going way about him and is able to succeed on the rebound while Gerry is an all-or-nothing risk taker. He perseveres in the ending is (probably temporarily) beat.

The film was written and directed by the team of Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, responsible

for such films as *Half Nelson*, the sports film, *Sugar*, *It's Kind of a Funny Story*. Their shrewd understanding of characters, of the impulse to gamble and its consequences, are well served by the performance of Ben Mendelsohn, long a top stalwart of the Australian film industry, venturing sometimes overseas but, in more recent years, making his mark in American films, *Killing Them Softly*, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, *A Place Among the Pines*. This is one of his best performances and well worth seeing.

THE NIGHT BEFORE

US, 2015, 101 minutes, Colour.

Joseph Gordon- Levitt, Seth Rogen, Anthony Mackie, Jillian Bell, Lizzie Kaplan, Michael Shannon, Ilana Glazer, Aaron Hill, Tracy Morgan.

Directed by Jonathan Levine.

Might be best to start this review by indicating that it is a variation on the classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, though American style of living has vastly and openly altered in many areas from that of small towns in upstate New York in the 1940s. This reference is to indicate that there are some redeeming features in *The Night Before*, despite initial suspicions to the contrary.

This is one of those raucous, crass, drug-filled American comedies that are so popular in recent years, especially with people like Seth Rogen in the cast. But, if you are not responding to this kind of comedy, and you have the patience, there is some resolution part of the way through and right at the end. The thing is with these crass comedies is that they have their cake and eat it as well: they enjoy indulging in all the raucous aspects of the screenplay, have no holds barred on the coarse and explicit language, and have no problems in their central characters reliance on drugs and hallucinating trips. But the audience which enjoys all this may have quite some difficulties with the ending where there is redemption all-round, confessions of wrongdoing, giving up drugs, wanting genuine romance, extolling marriage and babies, put off by the highly moralising message at the end.

It is the night before Christmas, and nobody is really asleep. We have seen three friends in 2003 consoling one of them, Ethan (Joseph Gordon- Levitt) on the death of his parents in a car crash. One of the friends is Isaac (Seth Rogen) and the other Chris (Anthony Mackie). They have a great desire by 2008 to go to the Christmas Eve Nutcracker Ball but cannot find where it is held. Come to 2015. Ethan has no job and is supplying as an elf carrying the entrees at a Christmas social. Isaac is married to Betsy (Jillian Bell) and they are expecting. Chris has become a champion sportsman – though relying on steroids. They are still friends but this is to be their last traditional night before celebration.

Whatever the providence, Ethan finds and takes three tickets to the Nutcracker Ball and goes to find his friends. For some reason, Betsy gives a Christmas present to Isaac of some top drugs – which sets him up for the night, on a vivid trip which includes going to midnight mass, getting sick in the aisle, to claiming that the Jews did not crucify Jesus, (a reminder that Christianity is far more tolerant about religious jokes than some other religions we might think of). Chris wants to buy drugs for a white sportsman (Chris is African American) and they set off to meet the dealer who supplied them when they are in high school. This is Mr Green who turns out to be Michael Shannon, supplying all the drugs, but also giving them a pipe to smoke which projects them into the future, some grim pictures of what they might be,

which helps them eventually to change their ways. Michael Shannon is generally an unsettling screen presence and is so here – until we realise who he is and what he is doing (It's a Wonderful Life), confirmed, as was Clarence, in getting his wings.

A lot of the time is spent in stupid shenanigans, Chris and the sexual encounter with a tough girl who steals his stash and whom he chases through the city; Isaac and his hallucinations; and Ethan wanting to find Diana (Lizzie Kaplan) in order to propose to her - which he does while singing with Miley Cyrus (and James Franco turning up for the Ball). He later has to do a more genuine proposal.

There is also an interlude where they go to dinner at Chris's mother's house – she has a shrine to her champion son, wanting him to go to church, but giving them the leftovers from the meal to take to the homeless down the street.

For those devoted to this kind of raucous comedy, no problems. For those not devoted to this kind of raucous comedy, probably best to let it pass. But, if for some reason those unfavourable are watching, there is reconciliation, confession, and firm purposes of amendment by the end of the film – and everyone sitting happily around the Christmas table.

PHOENIX

Germany, 2014, 98 minutes, Colour.
Nina Hoss, Ronald Zehrfeld, Nina Kunzendorf.
Directed by Christian Petzold.

It is not often that a film review starts with a recommendation for audience to see it because of the final scene, but this is the case with Phoenix. This final scene is most effective: song, Speak Low, its melody has been heard throughout the film – a song by Kurt Weill and Ogden Nash for the musical, One Touch of Venus, a Pygmalion story of a statue coming to life – and now sung by Nelly, the central character, her husband Johnny playing the piano, and a glimpse of a tattoo which makes all the difference. It is an ending which does not spell out its consequences, leaving it for the audience to respond and to decide.

With a title like Phoenix, it would seem that this is a film about a character rising from ashes to a new life. And that is correct. It is the dramatic story of Nelly, a Jewish woman arrested in Berlin in 1944, interned in the camp at Auschwitz, thought to have died, but returning to Berlin at the end of the war.

Phoenix has been directed by Christian Petzold, director of a number of very successful German dramas, many of which starred Nina Hoss (Barbara, a story about East Germany, Yella, Jerichow). Nina Hoss won a Best Actress award at the Berlin film Festival, 2012, for Barbara and her performance as Nelly is as good and as powerful.

At the opening of the film, Nelly's face is in bandages as she travels by train from Poland to Germany in the company of a friend, Lene (Nina Kunzendorf). She goes for an operation for facial reconstruction, wanting her old face as much as possible instead of a new one. But, her face is sufficiently different as she goes to seek out her husband who works in a Berlin club.

He does not recognise her. This is very sad for her as she still loves him.

Her husband, Johnny (Ronald Zehrfeld) is a handsome type, with some charm. However, he decides to transform Nelly into his wife, overtones of Pygmalion. There are many scenes where Nelly has to write, walk, be transformed with clothes and make up into Johnny's wife because he thinks she is dead, but if she is alive, she and he can claim her money.

The audience knows the truth while Johnny does not, so there is a tension in Nelly's love, her following the directions that Johnny gives her, but her wanting to know whether he actually had betrayed her to the Nazis or not.

The film gradually builds its tension, the focus on Nelly and her anguish and love, the focus on Johnny and his ambitions, the sadness of Nelly's friend Lene and her despair after the war, and the drama of Nelly's train ride and alleged arrival from the East – and that final, powerful scene.

TANNA

Vanuatu, Australia, 2015, 100 minutes, Colour.

Directed by Martin Butler, Bentley Dean.

This is a story from Vanuatu, a story from the Yakel tribe, set in 1987, a story of a doomed romance.

The film is a co-production between Vanuatu and Australia, people of the island performing, Australians writing and directing after their experience in being with the tribes people.

Many audiences will be thinking of Romeo and Juliet as they watch this film, star-crossed lovers.

The film opens with a focus on two young girls, Selin, a sprightly young girl and her sister Wawa who is at the verge of her initiation into adulthood and, therefore, an arranged marriage. However, she is in love with another member of the tribe, a Hunter, Dain, who has been away from the tribe but has now returned. The couple elope, going away from the tribe to the rim of an active volcano in the centre of their island. Selin follows them and they declare that they will not return.

This leads to a state of warfare between the two tribes, Wawa having been promised to a man from a neighbouring tribe, continually antagonistic towards Yakel.

Following the Romeo and Juliet lead, the young couple are found dead, which leads to a cessation of hostilities, grief for those who have died, a challenge to the traditions of arranged marriages – with a final songs celebrating this transition to greater freedom for love amongst the people.

The Yakel tribe are proud that they have their customs, that they have resisted colonialism, that they have resisted Christianity, that they have resisted the lure of money, that they have kept to their old customs.

Actors and others involved in the film had not seen a film before this production and travelled overseas to be feted at the Venice film Festival, an extraordinary change of life that they had been used to. There is simplicity about the performances, and authentic feel about the people, and some spectacular photography, which means that a wide audience will enjoy the story, its romance and tragedy.

TRUTH

US, 2015, 120 minutes, Colour.

Cate Blanchett, Robert Redford, Topher Grace, Dennis Quaid, Elisabeth Moss, Bruce Greenwood, Stacy Keach, John Benjamin Hickey, David Lyons, Dermot Mulroney, Rachael Blake, Andrew McFarlane, Noni Hazelhurst, Lewis Fitz-Gerald, Philip Quast, Steve Bastoni, Nicholas Hope.

Directed by James Vanderbilt.

Truth is a very broad title from any film, let alone one about journalism, especially investigative journalism. director, James Vanderbilt, as written screenplay adapted from the 2005 memoir by Mary Mapes, Truth and Duty: The Press, the President and the Privilege of Power. Mary Mapes was an award-winning television producer, latterly working with television celebrity host, then Rather, and the attempted 60 Minutes program on George W. Bush and his being eased into the National Guard instead of action in Vietnam.

Mary Mapes wrote the book explaining the process of researching and compiling the program, or the producers being subject to a CBS internal investigation and Mapes being fired from her job – and has not worked in television production since. obviously, the film is from her point of view, her explanations and justifications of the behaviour and procedures, the felt prejudices at the time of the 2004 presidential election, the behaviour of CBS network.

Investigative journalism has become very significant in recent decades. With such an appetite for news, radio, television, the press, online, there is also a public desire to go behind the headlines, often sensationalised, often the personal opinion of the journalist with the byline. The Social Media, with easy access for people to offer opinions, blacken reputations, foment conspiracy theories, there is certainly a need for investigation.

Information came in to Mary Mapes about George Bushes cracked Bushes military service. She gathered together a crack team and is authorised by CBS to research the program. phone calls were made, documents received, attempts were made to verify the truth of the documents, checks were made on opinions of military personnel... Some were persuaded to be filmed for the 60 Minutes Program. in the immediate aftermath, there were denials, criticisms of the lack of verification of the documents, even to questions about the use of typefaces and particular on typewriters in the 1970s. Of the networks created controversy and the investigator to particular to many lengths to try to verify the truth – unfortunately, not successfully.

This inside look at the methods and processes of such journalism is fascinating in the investigations on current media, whether it be of corruption in racing industries, low wages and exploitation of overseas workers or the royal commission can still into institutional sexual abuse. It is certainly a cautionary tale.

What makes it powerful, whether one agrees with the attitudes of the characters and their conclusions are not, is the presence of Cate Blanchett as Mary Mapes. A commentator noted that the powerhouse performance, one of the best (actually most of Cate Blanchett's performances are best) almost this film to succeed. We are all on her side but appreciate the strengths and flaws, the intensity of the work, the powers of persuasiveness in person and on the phone, admiration for Dan Rather, the glimpses of life, the son and supportive husband.

Robert Redford is always a reassuring presence (despite his age and dyed hair) as Rather, a well journalist who had, in some ways, to fall on his sword. the supporting cast is particularly strong, especially Tofu Grace as at the 30th tracking down leads, with Dennis Quaid and Elisabeth Moss. Stacy Keach is military source who supplies the documents which have to be examined. And then we might notice that Noni Hazelhurst plays his wife, and there are quite a number of Australian actors are present in the film, Andrew Mc Farlane as Mary Mapes' lawyer, Nicholas Hope as a handwriting expert, Rachael Blake and David Lyons as CBS executives. Then, at the end, we are informed that it was all filmed in New South Wales, with a few New York scenes. Indeed, the director of photography, Mandy Walker, the editor Richard Francis-Bruce, and others in the technical credits are also Australian.

The film is an interesting picture of the significance of investigative journalism and the need to try to get everything right – or else.