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WRONG TURN
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CODE 46

Code 46 is a futuristic film (with echoes of such films as Gattaca). In the not too distant future, climate has been change with cities like Shanghai surrounded by desert. People are confined to the cities because of climate changes. Travel is difficult and there is a need for "pappels", a kind of insurance and passport document which can be circulated illegally.

The focus of the film is on an insurance investigator, played by Tim Robbins, who comes to Shanghai from the United States. He has had an empathy virus implanted in him which enables him to detect criminals. However, he does not denounce the person circulating illegally the pappels, played by Samantha Morton. He falls in love with her. They spend the night together but then he returns to his family in Seattle. He discovers that she is a clone of his dead grandmother and there are complications with her being taken away, hospitalised, a pregnancy terminated, memories of all that experience eliminated. When he tries to escape with her, and goes also to another country, he tries to reactivate the memories. In a car crash, he is injured and taken to a hospital where all memories of these episodes are eliminated as well.

The film is brief, was shot on digital video, is quite striking in its use of locations (especially Shanghai, Dubai). The film creates an eerie look at the future, not by high technological special effects, but by showing familiar places in unusual ways and by using ordinary hospitals, offices as scenes for something sinister underlying them. The film was written by Frank Cottrell Boyce who had written many screenplays for director Michael Winterbottom, Jude, 24-hour Party People, The Claim.

THE PIANIST (France, 2002, d. Roman Polanski)

The events portrayed in this film took place sixty years ago during one of the greatest horror stories and tragedies of the 20th century, the Holocaust. Each decade has produced its cinema version of these events: the 1970s miniseries, Holocaust, Sophie's Choice in the 1980s and, of course, Schindler's List in the 1990s. The survivors are now growing older and dying. These films contribute to keeping our consciences alert, 'Lest we forget'.

One person who has not forgotten is Polish film director, Roman Polanski, who will turn seventy this year. As a little boy, Polanski himself escaped the bombing of Warsaw with his father and joined his mother in the ghetto in Krakow. She later died in the camps. He was helped by non-Jewish friends in Krakow and survived. Pain has followed Polanski. When he was thirty five, his wife Sharon Tate was brutally murdered by Charles Manson and his followers. Some of this suffering went into his films, especially his violent version of Macbeth made after his wife's death.

With The Pianist, Polanski is able, at last, to share something of his childhood story. The telling, however, while it has terrible moments of Nazi atrocities towards the Jews, is done in a more traditional, classical way of film-making, not what might expect from the often bizarre Polanski. The screenplay, by England's Ronald Harwood, is straightforward in its narrative. The film uses many authentic Warsaw locations as well as computer graphic effects that re-create the impact of the invasion of the city. The Pianist won the Palme D'Or in Cannes in 2002.

But it is not Polanski's story. As director, he is almost anonymous. What he has done is to take the opportunity to tell his own childhood story through the memoirs of an actual Jewish pianist, Wladislaw Szpilman (who died in July 2000). Throughout the film Szpilman and Polanski seem to be observers of Warsaw's suffering rather than participants in it. While this gives a different perspective on the deportations, the ghetto uprising, the Polish resistance and the entry of the Russians to liberate the city, the film spends a lot of time with the pianist's lone exile and patient survival, hidden in apartments and dependent on kind and fearful neighbours. With Szpilman, we frequently look out of windows, helpless in the face of what we see.

Szpilman is played by American actor, Adrien Brody, who enters deeply into his character, portraying the grief at the upheaval of his family, playing music in the cafe's of Warsaw, using his fingers to 'play' silently with the music inside his head offering him some sanity and consolation. As in the film, in real life Szpilman was discovered by a Nazi officer who was moved by his music and protected him before he himself disappeared into the Russian camps.

This is a film of great sadness and beauty and one comes away with a deep sense of the inhumanity of the Nazis, the humiliation of the Jews and their suffering.

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN (US, 2002, d. Steven Spielberg)

Frank W. Abignale Jr assured interviewers during his promotion tours for Catch Me If You Can that the events portrayed were basically accurate. He also assured audiences who might be alarmed that the movie says that crime pays that he has literally paid his debt to society (with a substantial income from consultancies to counter the kinds of frauds that he indulged in).

Leonardo di Caprio still looks boyish enough to convince us that he is a teenage imposter. His movie career has given him enough experience to bring some depth to the extraordinary bravado of Frank Abignale and to the depth of feeling he has for his father and, eventually, for his FBI pursuer, Carl. Catch Me If You Can has several key sequences which take place at Christmas. Frank calls Carl Hanratty to make some contact knowing that Carl is working late and alone in his office. As the movie progresses, it is clear that they are bonding like father and son.

Part of the charm as well as the roguery of Frank Abignale is his deep love for his father. He admires him, he takes his cue from him with the story of the enterprising mouse. He shares his father's sense of fun and tweaking his nose at authority. He is driven, while pretending to successful characters, to make up to his father all that he lost. His parents' divorce is traumatic and drives him away from home. His final visits with his father sadden him and the news of his death is a shock. In the meantime, he has found another father, Hanratty. Just as he revealed his own father in his exciting and lying escapades, for the rest of his life, in working for the FBI, he reveals the qualities of Carl Hanratty.

While Tom Hanks has a role which is the opposite of flamboyant, he is completely convincing as a humourless, conscientious and dedicated filed officer. Christopher Walken (to whom di Caprio bears a persuasive resemblance to be his son) is by turns endearing and sinister.

This is a Steven Spielberg movie. After several very serious movies (Amistad, Private Ryan, AI, Minority Report), he seems to be enjoying this colourful and often comic story which takes up his favourite themes of abandoned children. The screenplay, however, with its moving backwards and forwards in time, seems unnecessarily cumbersome.

THE HOURS (UK, 2002, d. Stephen Daldry)

Virginia Woolf is still being read and is still being studied in schools and at universities. Some of her novels make demanding reading. However, her smaller novel, Mrs Dalloway, is much more accessible (and was filmed in 1997 with Vanessa Redgrave in the lead role). The Bloomsbury writers were not interested in religious themes as such but they were intensely interested in human nature and values. Mrs

Dalloway was written as a symbol of an ordinary middle class woman during one day in 1923, coping with her family, preparing a party, facing issues of death and trying to understand her life.

In 1999, American novelist, Michael Cunningham, published a novel, *The Hours*, in which he created two stories, one set in 1951, the other in modern times, paralleling incidents in the life of Mrs Dalloway. His third story was that of Virginia Woolf herself writing her novel. The novel moved fluidly from one story to the other. Celebrated playwright, David Hare, has adapted the novel for the screen and kept the fluidity and the parallels as the three stories intercut one another.

The Hours has already won Golden Globes and has been nominated for several Oscars which make it one of the more important films to be released this year. One of the great challenges to Catholic reviewers and Catholic audiences is to be attentive to the searches for values in films. Just as Jesus told 'secular' stories in his day, the parables which have now become religious stories, so film-makers today offer parables that ask questions about what we believe in.

Virginia Woolf suffered from both physical and mental illnesses and ultimately took her own life by drowning (which is portrayed in this film). However, it is the glimpse into her being mentally and emotionally disturbed that demands our understanding. Mental illness can be exhausting and exasperating for a carer (as was seen in last year's *Iris*, with John Bayley caring for Iris Murdoch as she slipped into Alzheimer's disease). Leonard Woolf is as desperate to protect her from herself.

The caring theme is taken up more explicitly in the contemporary story which has Meryl Streep as a New York editor caring for years for her poet and novelist friend, Richard, for whom AIDS has meant not only physical collapse but mental as well. On the day that he is to receive a literary award, his friend Clarissa (whom he nicknames Mrs Dalloway) is preparing a party for him. In a cruel, but somehow truthful way, he tells her that he lives on only because she wants him to, so that she can care for him. This disturbs her deeply, making her reassess her attitudes.

The 1951 story is really the saddest. A pregnant wife makes a birthday cake for her devoted husband but really wants to end her life of depression. Reading Mrs Dalloway influences her decision to live but she makes a more profoundly distressing decision to walk out on her family.

Responding to *The Hours* touches deep chords in our lives and should open us up to more understanding and compassion for those whose experience is more tormented than our own. Directed by Stephen Daldrey, *The Hours* has a superb cast led by Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore and Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf.

SOLARIS. (US, 2002, d. Steven Soderbergh)

An exploration of themes of God, death, relationships in the guise of a non-action science fiction film. George Clooney plays a psychologist who is asked to travel to a space station to assess what has gone wrong with the mission and with the minds of the crew. While there, his dead wife re-appears, raising puzzlement about life after death, the impact of love and the possibility of forgiveness. Perhaps the planet, Solaris, is meant as an image of Purgatory/Heaven.

Clooney describes Solaris in these terms, "What makes Solaris relevant today, is that it deals with the basic issues we constantly question and wonder about: love, death, after-life. The things we don't have answers to. We want to define things and those things we can't define, terrify us. We want to know how high is up, how old is eternity. Everything we know as humans has limits - a beginning, a middle and an end. No one in this story has answers, they just have really good, smart questions."

Audiences who appreciate more thoughtful drama, rather than slam-bang action, will see the similarities between Solaris and Stanley Kubrick's cinema-poem, 2001: A Space Odyssey, which raised similar questions in 1968.

Solaris is based on a Russian novel by Stanislaw Lem. It was filmed in the USSR in the early 1970s by a Russian director who is now considered one of the masters of cinema, Andrei Tarkovski. Thirty years ago, audiences noticed the similarities with 2001 and were intrigued by a Russian film-maker venturing into themes of spirituality. Clooney's Solaris is directed by Steven Soderbergh whose recent successes include Traffic, Erin Brockovich and Ocean's Eleven. Soderbergh did not want to do a remake. Rather, he wanted to offer the themes and the questions to a contemporary, wider audience. Many have found it beautiful to look at but too puzzling and demanding. But Soderbergh and Clooney are trying to show how films can take us deeper than simple entertainment.

THE CORE (US, 2002, d. Jon Amiel)

The 19th century version of this story was Jules Verne's Journey to the Centre of the Earth. In the 20th century, it was filmed several times under its original title and with such variations as At the Earth's Core. Well, technology has come a long way even if storytelling remains much the same. The difference is that we enjoy conspiracy theories so, if nature is turning against the human race, we should not assume that it is nature which is malevolent. Rather, it is us - and, as usual, the US military. In the light of controversies about weapons of mass destruction, The Core is quite alarming. The Americans have countered threats by hostile powers to build bombs that, ignited underground, cause earthquakes, have built their own and created eruptions and lethal sonic booms, tilting the earth's core and setting us on the road to the end of the world.

So far, so bad for us. But, as with Verne, a sturdy crew take a modified space vehicle down through the cracks in the earth's plates. Well, perhaps the crew is not altogether sturdy and, as we might guess, most of them do not survive - but get the chance to do some heroic deeds to save the planet. Aaron Heckhart is the laid-back college professor whizz who has to lead the team. Hilary Swank is the tough navigator. Also along for the ride is the obnoxiously vain scientist, Stanley Tucci, his humble rival, Delroy Lindo and nice family man, Tcheke Karyo.

Of course, it is a film of special effects, last moment crises, the threat of nuclear havoc and staunch heroism. The scenes of destruction of the Colosseum and the Victor Emmanuel monument in Rome and the collapse of the jammed Golden Gate Bridge are alarmingly vivid. The core is the set designer's fantasy and seems an entirely unreal world despite so much of the dialogue - which will baffle the non-physicists among us.

THE RULES OF ATTRACTION (US, 2002, d. Roger Avary)

Brett Easton Ellis has built a reputation for novels that make readers squirm. He is a black and bleak satirist who takes on American society and shows its shadow, its violence and power, its lack of moral bases and the indulgence in sexuality and hedonism. His best known novel is American Psycho, filmed in the late 90s, showing us Patrick Bateman, the complete 80s yuppie who is conscienceless, narcissistic and destructive.

In The Rules of Attraction, we are introduced to his brother, Sean. Sean is a familiar campus type, intelligent, attractive, irresponsible yet a leader. He spends most of his time drug-dealing, moving around with his buddy entourage and in sexual activity. He is a lower rung Bateman who runs foul of his suppliers, lacking the class of his dapper brother.

Writer director, Roger Avary (Pulp Fiction, Killing Zoe) tries to give the visual equivalent of Ellis's novel. He roams the US campus, early 1990s, giving captions for the many parties that preoccupy the students. They are sex and pleasure focussed, but also have an apocalyptic tone, "The end of the world party..." He also tells the story of Laura, an ingenuous and romantic student who idolises Victor who does not know she exists. Then there is the story of Paul, the cynically flirtatious gay student who is a friend of Laura and infatuated with Sean. By starting at the end and, literally rewinding the film, we learn more than we probably want to know about these people and arrive back at the empty ending. Ellis and Avary want to show an empty, bleak world of self-centredness and indulgence that is almost nihilistic. They do.

IN THIS WORLD (UK, 2002, d, Michael Winterbottom)

In the crowded Afghan refugee camps outside Peshawar on the northwest frontier of Pakistan, two young cousins, Enayat and Jamal, set out overland for London. No ID documents, a little money, a little English, at the mercy of people smugglers, they make their way through Iran (and are sent back to Pakistan), back through Iran, over the Turkish mountains to Istanbul, locked in a container on a boat to Trieste...

Asylum seekers. Controversies rage in Britain and other European countries. The closure of the temporary camp at Sangatte on the Channel coast where so many refugees jumped trains and trucks to attempt a concealed journey to England led to an influx into England. These are social and political topics that led to heated arguments prior to the war on Iraq. In the aftermath of the war, thousands of displaced people will be on the move again. Catholic papers like *The Universe* have constantly alerted its readers to the plight of the Iraqis and other refugees. What should be done?

British director, Michael Winterbottom, offers one answer: put a face on these anonymous refugees, show their story so that the argument will not just be about statistics or unspecified fears.

When *In This World* won the Ecumenical Prize at this year's Berlin Film Festival from a jury consisting of three Catholics representing SIGNIS, the World Catholic Association for Communication, and three members representing Interfilm, the Protestant Organisation for Film Festival juries, commentators were pleased that the Churches had acknowledged the global problems of millions of people on the move. The next day, the press was very surprised that this small-budget film running under 90 minutes won the main award, the Golden Bear.

While we see news items about the refugees, and they are frequently alarmist in tone, few of us know many of them or even any of them. Winterbottom has taken a small digital video camera and re-created the harsh journey from Peshawar to London and invites us to accompany him. We get to know the two cousins, especially Jamal and share with them the uncertainties of the journey. None of us would like to spend our lives and see our future in the camp in Peshawar, dusty, crowded, limited access to water. We would try to get out.

During the journey, which has more comforts these days like bus travel and phone calls, we experience the two boys limited language skills, their having to trust so many people who might swindle them, the interrogations by police. As they get closer to their goal, they are trapped in the container ship and, like the 58 Chinese who suffocated in the back of a truck two years ago, not everyone survives.

Afghans have been refugees in Pakistan since the Russian invasion over twenty years ago. Others fled the Taliban. Others fled the bombings of 2001. There are more than three million Afghan refugees in Iran alone. When the bombs stop falling, how will the people live, where can they go? And, without explicitly asking its audience, this is what this film challenges us to ponder.

SWIMMING UPSTREAM

Geoffrey Rush and Judy Davis have become international cinema names. Here is an opportunity to see them in a film they starred in at home, Australia.

Swimming Upstream is the family autobiography of Tony Fingleton, a Queensland swimmer and backstroke champion, silver medal winner at the 1962 Commonwealth Games in Perth. However, he did not go on to an Olympic swimming career, preferring rather to accept a scholarship to Harvard. While the film is a sketch of his own early life and character, it is more a portrait of his parents.

On paper, Harry and Dora Fingleton sound like stereotypes. On screen, they come powerfully to life because of the intense screen presence of Geoffrey Rush and Judy Davis. Harry Fingleton is what we could call an 'ordinary bloke'.

We first see him labouring on the Brisbane waterfront in the late 1950s, sometimes only casual work, sometimes laid off. He and Dora have five children, four boys and a girl. Home life seems to be ordinary. Dora is what people in the past called an 'ordinary housewife'. She cooks, she washes, she cleans. She has little time for anything else. She is a dowdy dresser, too busy to worry about her clothes or her appearance.

Harry seems your average quieter than louder Australian. He lives in the present although one of the destructive aspects of his character is the demanding dream he has of swimming success for his son, John.

One of the difficulties in understanding Harry is the story of his childhood. His mother drank, entertained a range of men at home with Harry there – one of her customers, a company executive, taunts Harry with this during a picket protest at the wharves. He was also a talented footballer but the Depression prevented him from playing for his country. These embarrassments and frustrations have eaten into him. He is a wife-basher and imposes his dreams on his sons.

He has an inbuilt contempt for Tony who is inept at boxing and football and likes to play the piano. Harry can see Tony's swimming skills but bypasses them to focus on John. John's failure to dedicate himself to swimming means that he destroys his father's dream. This also means that we often see Harry angry, drunk, pushing his sons, attacking Dora, becoming caught up in his dream and acting over-emotionally.

Dora Fingleton is a good woman. She has loved Harry despite himself and herself. She knows that he is 'difficult' and makes allowances for his mood swings and brutal behaviour. She has been able, over the years, to keep him on an even keel for much of the time. But, as his sons grow up and he imposes his expectations on them, she is able to calm him less.

Dora's life is the proverbial humdrum of housekeeping. She does not really rebel against it. She has managed the house well and brought up the children very well. She appreciates each of her children and is able to be a refuge for Tony whenever his father attacked him and, later, when he grudgingly acknowledges Tony's swimming talents. Harry is at his worst when he cannot bring himself to watch Tony's race at the Commonwealth Games.

And this is how things were in those days. Not everywhere, of course. But, this was an expectation of life in the suburbs. The men were expected to dominate, be a man; the women were expected to be subservient, be a woman. Life in those days – when so much was about to change in the 1960s – was swimming upstream.

A MAN APART

Filmed prior to his high octane role in *xXx*, *A Man Apart* is another action show for Vin Diesel, somewhat inexplicably emerging at the beginning of the decade as a successor to Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Willis. The film was held back from release until the opening weeks of the war in Iraq and is interesting to view making comparisons with real events, especially the assumptions of US superiority, authority and being police leader of the world. It also shows undercover operations against Mexican drug cartels (which have required seven years of covert activity rather than several weeks) and daylight operations in the streets which seem to be indiscriminate gun mayhem with audiences unable to tell who is who as everyone is dressed in civilian clothes. Some of the police arrange the evidence to protect violent emotional outbursts on the part of a buddy who 'loses it' and throws a secret operation into turmoil when he takes justice into his own hands.

The drug world, as in *Traffic*, centres on California and Mexico. It obviously requires a great deal of commitment for police to stay in their roles to protect innocent society. It is shocking to see some of the violent episodes on the part of ruthless gangsters who assume their rights to superiority and the violent consequences of law enforcement. Diesel is a po-faced hero who unleashes fierce emotions that jeopardise himself and his work. The rest of the cast play the usual roles of police, wives and families or the usual suspects, suppliers, henchman and bosses.

PUCKOON

UK, 2002, 82 minutes, Colour.

Sean Hughes, Daragh O'Malley, Elliot Gould, Richard Attenborough, Nikolas Grace, John Lynch, Griff Rhys Jones, Milo O'Shea, David Kelly, Freddie Jones.

Directed by Terry Ryan

Spike Milligan was one of the great eccentrics and one of the great comics. His major successes were on the radio, especially with the still-repeated *The Goons* and on paper with his anarchic books. He enjoyed witty wordplay and funny non-sequiturs. Prone to depression, he also had the satirist's desire and demand for society to be better than it ever could be.

His work does not transfer so well to the screen - with other writers adapting Milligan's style and with other actors voicing his lines with different emphases, intonations and timing. And, perhaps, they are best visualised by the mind's eye as they are heard or read.

Puckoon is Terry Ryan's adaptation of Milligan's comic story of a small town in Ireland that finds itself divided as the boundary markers set the border between Ulster and the Irish Free State. On the whole, *Puckoon* sounds like a variation on Dylan Thomas's *Under Milkwood* with the same kind of village characters presented in verbal sketches and visual impressions. It has to be said that Thomas's Welsh lilt and poetic tones are more telling and humorous than Milligan's Irish blarney. And the Irish seem rather a stupid and crass lot compared with their Welsh counterparts. All the old caricatures and clichés are there (many of which are funny nonetheless despite their being sometimes obvious and predictable).

But Milligan is also concerned about Ireland itself. Clearly on the side of the Irish Free State of the 20s and 30s, he lampoons the British military and police (more caricatured than the Irish) and highlights the patriotism and bigotry that have fuelled disagreement for decades (and centuries). It is very surprising to find in the final credits that the film was largely financed and shot in Northern Ireland.

The film opens with Richard Attenborough reading a text on the radio and then turning into the God-like director of the film with the power to converse with his characters, change their plot behaviour and introduce music and signs in the heavens at will. Sean Hughes, from *Will and Grace*, has been imported to be the oafish hero, Dan Madigan, as has Elliot Gould to play the Irish-Jewish local doctor. Various Irish actors like John Lynch and David Kelly lead the locals. These include, of course, the parish priest who is also satirised, more along the lines of Fr Ted than Ballykissangel.

All in all, it might give the locals a laugh as well as annoy them. Non-Irish will complain that it is too Irish and not so funny. So, it remains a curiosity item for the devotees of Spike Milligan.

GANGS OF NEW YORK (US, 2002, d. Martin Scorsese)

Martin Scorsese has had this project in mind for thirty years. It was intended as his masterpiece as well as a continuation of his portraits of New York, whether Mean Streets stories like *Taxi Driver*, praise of the city like *New York, New York*, a historical perspective like *Age of Innocence* or gangster saga like *Goodfellas*.

Many have found this epic too bloodthirsty and questioned Scorsese's interpretation of city life in the 1860s. If one can withstand the shock of the violence, it certainly repays a second look where Scorsese's skills and artistry are more evident, whether it be the staged battles between the gangs or simple scenes where Butcher Bill sits at Amsterdam's bedside and quietly tells his story. In fact, the director's cut should be better than this version which has been pared to three hours for acceptable commercial release. It seems as if Scorsese did his cutting from the last hour and more information and scene-setting for the build of the final clash between Bill and Amsterdam is needed.

What we have is an exercise in myth-making, the thesis that the frontier of the West was not the only violent frontier. New York with its influx of migrants, especially the Irish, was at flashpoint due to the anger of the 'natives'. Political corruption, symbolised by Boss Tweed, was rampant. Troops were being commandeered from the city to fight for Lincoln while it was clear that many sympathised with the south.

This is the social and political backdrop to the story of the gangs. The Irish, led by 'Priest' Vallon (Liam Neeson) are defeated by the natives, led by Butcher Bill (Daniel Day Lewis). Vallon's son sees his father die and swears revenge. When he returns as Amsterdam (Leonardo di Caprio) after years in an orphanage, he finds Bill supreme, in cahoots with Tweed (Jim Broadbent), and many of the Irish working for him. He ingratiates himself with Bill who looks on him as a son. A kind of rivalry builds over affection for Bill's protegee, the pickpocket, Jennie (Cameron Diaz). Eventually, the truth is revealed and a pitched battle between Bill's followers and those of Amsterdam is the culmination of the action. The East coast had a violent frontier as well - and this is what New York and its respectability is built on.

While this may or may not be true, Scorsese makes it absorbing, a credible hypothesis that may tamper with historical fact but makes its point about American violence. The strong, even manic, performance of Daniel Day Lewis gives the film a kind of psychotic strength. Leonardo di Caprio carries off the difficult role of Amsterdam and there are some intense supporting performances. Not to everyone's liking, but a powerful piece of cinema history.

CHICAGO (US, 2002, d. Rob Marshall)

Beginning its life in the 1970s on the Broadway stage, under the direction of Bob Fosse, this popular piece of American theatre has become a popular piece of American cinema, winning Oscar for Best Picture and a number of other Oscars with one for Catherine Zeta Jones as Best Supporting Actress.

Coming after Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*, it was welcomed by audiences who could now accept quite stylised musicals. It still may take a while to get into the swing of the style but, after seeing Roxie Hart, the 1920s Chicago housewife who dreams of singing in a club and who murders her lover (the mixture of fantasy and reality), audiences will realise that the action moves from down to earth realism to highly theatrical action, especially through song and the all that jazz gyration inherited from Bob Fosse's choreography. Once this is accepted, there is an energy and verve in the singing and dancing not seen for a long time in a musical. All the songs by Kander and Ebbs (*Cabaret*, *New York, New York*) are memorable and imaginatively, often provocatively, staged. Mama Morton's prison has inmates who sing of killing their man. Billy Flynn the shyster lawyer controls his clients and the press like puppets.

The setting is Chicago in the 1920s, the time of Prohibition, bootlegging and gangsters. The way to celebrity was through crime and through the press. Looking at this musical we realise the ironies of what it is presenting: an amoral American attitude that glorifies celebrity right or wrong.

The cast is admirable, all doing their own singing and dancing. Renee Zellweger has the most difficult role as the meek but ruthless Roxie who has to grow into an exploitative vixen and wows people with her emotional appeal, her singing and her dancing. And Zellweger does that well. Catherine Zeta Jones is dynamic in her musical numbers as is Queen Latifa as Mama Morton. Richard Gere also shines as Billy Flynn, singing and dancing effectively but always with an ironically knowing tone in what he does. John C. Reilly is a standout as Amos Hart, the hard done by husband and his song, *Cellophane Man*, is superbly done. This is how a piece of American musical theatre can be made cinematic.

PERSONAL VELOCITY: THREE PORTRAITS (US, 2002, d. Rebecca Miller)

A short feature, produced on video, with glimpses of three women. Rebecca Miller (daughter of Arthur Miller) adapted her own stories for the screen and directed the film. It is a small budget work.

The three stories offer familiar portraits of women, the important thing being here that we share the writer's perspectives on these women (although, strangely, the voiceover is by a man).

Kyra Sedgwick is Delia, ignored by her father, the school tramp who married at seventeen and now has three children. We are suddenly shocked by the brutality of her husband at the dinner table and are plunged into Delia's dilemma of whether she should leave or not and where she could go. Her surliness is no help at the shelter for battered women and she seeks out an acquaintance who she thought was on the outer back at school. In fact Delia receives kindness from her, finds a job. Maybe a life is possible.

Greta is quite the opposite. She is the daughter of a reputable lawyer. She herself is moving up in the book publishing world. Her job is secure. She has a loving husband. But, she has problems (like her father to whom she does not speak after he abandoned her mother) with fidelity. An incisively cutting book editor, she sadly comes to realise she is going to edit her husband out of her life. Parker Posey is Greta.

Fairuza Balk is Paula, a runaway now living in New York with a Haitian and pregnant. When she narrowly escapes death in a car accident, she picks up a hitchhiker, a young man who has been physically brutalised, and visits her mother. She begins to sort herself out as regards her boyfriend, the coming baby and caring for the runaway.

Low key stories that are more persuasive because of the performances than the writing.

SHANGHAI KNIGHTS (US, 2003,

The accepted wisdom is that sequels are not as good as the originals. This time the sequel is as good if not better. The teaming of Jackie Chan and Owen Wilson as gunslingers in the American West rescuing a Chinese princess was a very funny combination of Jackie Chan's martial arts and Owen Wilson's nonchalant deadpan humour. And now they have done it again. This time the budget is bigger. The setting is 19th century London. There are more choreographed fights through hotel swing doors, in London markets, in a palatial library, on a barge on the Thames and, finally, inside and outside Big Ben. And the situations are droll, the dialogue amusing and some nice, ironic surprises along the way.

The writers have been doing their research on England in the 1880s and 1890s. While the film says it is 1887 and Queen Victoria's jubilee, the writing sets everything in 1897 with the emergence of cars, the movies and the Boxer Rebellion. They seem to have been reading their John Buchan (The Thirty Nine Steps), Fu Manchu and other English adventures and seeing plenty of 30s movies.

After a lavish opening in the Forbidden City, we get a glimpse of Jackie keeping law and order in Carson City, making his way to find Owen living it up in New York and writing paperbacks about their exploits (in which he is the hero and Jackie the sidekick). To avenge the death of his father and save the royal seal, Jackie goes with Owen to London.

The villain, played with smarmy superiority by Aidan Gillen, is called Lord Rathbone (and emulates his screen successor, Basil, with swashbuckling swordfights). Though tenth in line to the throne, he intends to get rid of Queen Victoria (Gemma Jones) and the other nine. Jackie and Owen cut their path through a swathe of opposition (and Owen's anti-Brit feeling and comments) with the help of a police inspector with wonderful powers of deduction called Artie Doyle and a young pickpocket, Charlie Chaplin.

It shows how a well-thought out and witty script can make routine martial arts adventure material an above average entertainment.

BLUE CRUSH (US, 2002, d. John Stockwell)

What has this light and entertaining surf movie (at least for those who love watching enormous waves swelling and breaking) in common with the clever comedy, Adaptation? When you look at the credits, you will see that it is based on an article, Surf Girls of Maui, by Susan Orlean (the orchid article writer played by Meryl Streep in the film). And that is what Blue Crush is about, surf girls on the north beach of Oahu.

The plot is the old standby: young girl overcomes all obstacles, macho prejudice, falling out with friends, falling in love with the tall, dark and handsome stranger, being haunted by nightmares of hitting her head

on a rock and drowning while surfing, doing a wonderful ride and then being overcome by her fears but urged on by a kindly competitor and then doing the ride of her life. I don't think that that spoils the film - we knew this more or less before the film started.

Kate Bosworth is an energetic school dropout turned hotel cleaning maid turned champion. Matthew Davis is the romantic football star. Michelle Rodriguez is the best friend coach with a touch of jealousy. But the star is the Hawaiian coast, the magnificent waves which are filmed from a distance, close-up and under and within with special handheld cameras - and with pounding sound engineering. Enjoyable but not deep except when the waves send the capsized surfers under.

ANALYZE THAT (US, 2002, d. Harold Ramis)

The premiss of Analyze This was that a Mafia chief was having a mid-life nervous breakdown and went, however reluctantly and with macho self-preservation, into therapy. And it was on demand, even in the middle of his psychiatrist's wedding. The other premiss was that the psychiatrist had to take the place of the chief at a Mafia conference and carry it off with face-slapping bravado. It was a funny film, with Robert de Niro blubbing in his sessions and a bewildered Billy Crystal trying to marry Lisa Kudrow and avoid being whacked.

Why not a sequel? While not as fresh as the original and the stars hamming it up, especially Robert De Niro (who proves with his renditions of West Side Story that singing is not his forte), it is an amusing show. It is more or less a repeat of the original except that De Niro fakes his collapse to get out of jail and execute a robbery and Billy Crystal gets to do more than sitting at a meeting. He is a co-robber as the co-dependency between client and doctor develops. Lisa Kudrow is not amused, especially at having the criminal now living with them.

The new, entertaining element is the popular TV series, Little Caesar. De Niro and his associates are hired as technical advisers, especially for the star, played by Anthony La Paglia with his own Australian accent, needing to be coached on how to talk and be tough like a gangster. In his early career (in Betsy's Wedding), La Paglia was seen to be doing a De Niro. Now we have scenes with De Niro himself teaching La Paglia how to do it.

Slight but an entertaining sequel.

THE RING (US, 2002. D. Gore Verbinski)

The original Japanese film, The Ring, was an eerie, spooky, thriller. So is this Americanised version.

The premiss is presented as an urban legend, that people who watch a particular video will receive a threatening phone call that they will die in seven days. Anyone in the audience who has a slight fear that this could happen will find the film frightening. Meanwhile, others can watch it more objectively, analysing how the scary parts work, especially as we, the audience, get to actually see that deadly video (which is an effective avant-garde/student arty combination of black and white grainy footage, closeups of mysterious people and some enigmatic symbols).

It does not take long for video deaths to occur and for an intrepid reporter (an aunt of the victim) to sense a story. She tracks down the video and sees it - so she might as well spend her seven days trying to solve the puzzle, especially when her son watches it as well as her electronic expert friend and father of her child.

We do find out what the video is all about and the mystery of a malevolent little girl who can transmit images into people's imaginations. The reporter does not die after the seven days, but...

Naomi Watts is vigorous and persistent in her quest, with Martin Sanderson as the expert and Brian Cox turning up grimly as the little girl's father. If you want a scary movie, try The Ring.

25th HOUR (US, 2003, d. Spike Lee)

25th Hour is not your typical Spike Lee 'joint'. Rather, it is a focus on America in general, especially on three white Americans, three 30-somethings at crisis points in their lives.

Edward Norton is convincing, as usual, in his performance as Monty, a 31 year old reformed drug dealer who had begun dealing while at school and has continued working for Russian interests in New York City. His change of heart is symbolised by his taking pity on a dog, who has been bashed near the river where he walks and contemplates. In a discussion about Murphy's Law, which his friend thinks is Doyle's law, he takes him to a vet, calls the dog 'doyle' and the dog becomes his favoured companion. He is in a long relationship with a Puerto Rican American, Naturelle (Rosario Dawson) whom he suspects of turning him in.

The 25th hour refers to him giving himself up to police for a jail sentence after 24 hours with his friends and family. His friends are played most convincingly by Philip Seymour Hoffman, a seemingly repressed literature teacher who is full of lustful feelings especially towards a provocative young student played by Anna Paquin, and Barry Pepper as a no-prisoners-taken Wall Street whiz-kid.

The film focuses on life in the broad scope of New York City, from the schools to Wall Street to drug dealing. The older generation is represented by Brian Cox as Norton's father, a retired alcoholic fireman who owns a bar. There is also 'Uncle' Nikolai, the Russian Mafia drug lord, imprisoned in three countries, but now dominating the trade with his brutal henchman. The younger generation is represented by Mary, dressing provocatively, trying to get into the club, wanting high marks and prepared to give anything to get them, gulping down champagne, some extasy and reacting in shocked amazement after flirting with her teacher when he kisses her.

This is not usual Spike Lee territory. The focus is not on African American issues but rather the broader picture of Lee's own city which he lovingly photographs. He has a scene where the two friends discuss the meaning of life overlooking workmen at Ground Zero. However, there are two flourishes in the Lee manner, a rap attack on everyone and everything, spitting out biases against all races, migrants and religions in the US, spoken by Ed Norton as he looks at himself in a toilet mirror in his father's bar. There is also an over-romanticised fantasy of the American dream at the end, spoken by Brian Cox as he drives his son to prison.

While this ending may seem oversweet but ironic as Norton goes to do his time, beaten by his friend so that he will escape sexual attack in prison, there are many good things in the film, not least the very strong performances which bring the characters and their crises alive.

TO KILL A KING (UK, 2003. D. Mike Barker)

Originally entitled, Cromwell and Fairfax, this is a re-creation of the crucial decade in British history, the 1640s. Charles I saw himself as king by absolute divine right and ruled with an arrogance that disturbed the Parliament. In 1642, many came out in open rebellion, especially those guided by devout Protestant principles and Puritan moral codes. Civil war began and was waged for three years, further outbreaks occurring in 1647. The culmination was the public trial and execution of Charles I and the establishment of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell and his eventually being installed as Lord Protector of England.

In 1970, a more sympathetic film version of Cromwell's life and career was released with the title, Cromwell and starring Richard Harris in the central role. Alec Guinness was Charles I. Most of the history of the Commonwealth was handed down from Royalist sympathisers and so quite hostile to Cromwell. While this version is sympathetic to the rebels, it presents Cromwell as zealous, ambitious and, ultimately ruthless, almost as no better in practice than the king.

However, the centre of this film is Lord Fairfax, the General who led the rebels to victory and who is credited with developing the strategies and discipline of modern armies. Cromwell was his deputy and the two men were strong friends. Fairfax wanted to be a reformer and so was sympathetic to a monarchy which collaborated with the Parliament. Cromwell wanted equality in the realm and a republic.

Eventually, the two men fell out and Fairfax retired to his Yorkshire estates and was pardoned by Charles II because he did not sign Charles I's death warrant.

The opening of the film suggests the horrors and ravages of war. The film then becomes political, showing the steps from the defeat of the king until his beheading in 1649.

Dougray Scott brings a dignity, strength of character to the role of Fairfax. Tim Roth (shorter than Cromwell actually was) brings a cold intensity to his interpretation of Cromwell, a Puritan with a God-given mission, a God who showed no mercy. Rupert Everett (taller than Charles I actually was) brings a civilised arrogance to his interpretation of the king, sure of his God-given rights, shrewd in politics and law but ultimately defeated by his inability to adapt. Olivia Williams is Lady Anne Fairfax, from a Royalist family, devoted to her husband and wary of Cromwell.

A mixture of pageantry, politics and portraits of historical characters.

HEARTLANDS (UK, 2003, d. Damien O'Donnell)

A small British road movie from the director of the picture of Pakistanis in Salford in the 1970s, East is East, Damien O'Donnell. This is a very localised film, from Nottinghamshire to Blackpool. It will be of more interest to local audiences, with its detailed picture of people and places, less to audiences beyond the British Midlands.

Colin is an agreeable, rather passive, newsagent, married to Sandy. Life goes on day after day in the same way, the main bright spot being the local darts competition and the possibility of going to the championships in Blackpool. One night Colin gets a shock to find that his wife is carrying on with the captain of the darts crew. Bewildered, he cuts his overlong hair, gets on his motor scooter and decides to go to Blackpool to get his wife back. It's what happens on the way that is the main thrust of the film: Colin's outward journey brings him in contact with nature in a way that he had never noticed before, with bikers, campers and singers on the road, with girls and teachers on a nature ramble, on fat Ron who gives him a lift with Mandy and her bored daughter as he goes on an illicit weekend. Needless to say, the effect on Colin is that he wakes up, his better nature emerges (especially listening to a sympathetic teacher and taking Mandy and the girl around the carnival that is Blackpool). He has a chance for a new life.

Michael Sheen is pleasing as Colin. Mark Addy is the obnoxious Ron. Enjoyable if you catch this film, but not one to pursue.

THE HEART OF ME (UK, 2003, d. Thaddaeus O'Sullivan)

A BBC film and a reminder of those dramas that it used to do. They were excellent in the re-creation of a period, boasted strong performances and were very civilised in their treatment of serious treatment of life issues and relationships. That is exactly what The Heart of Me is like. Some audiences profess themselves weary of this kind of restrained, even slow-moving, traditional drama. Others enjoy it because it is so well crafted and offers insight into the human condition.

The author of the original novel is Rosamond Lehman and it is suggested that it is semi-autobiographical concerning her long relationship with poet Cecil Day Lewis. It is a dramatic three-hander, a story of an intense triangle. The first part of the film is set in London in 1934, opening with the funeral of the beloved father of two very different sisters. Madeleine, played superbly by Olivia Williams, is loving but reticent, even cold. Dinah, Helena Bonham Carter doing excellently what she has done before, is a free spirit. Rickie, Madeleine's gentlemanly and devoted husband, is played by Paul Bettany.

Everything is altered when Rickie's feelings for Dinah surface and he begins an affair. This is a perennial theme of films but it is treated here with sympathy for each of the three characters while showing their unpleasant sides and how deeply they hurt each other. When the scene moves to 1946, we are aware of what has happened but are not sure whether the characters know the truth. This is revealed in flashbacks

which develop well the complications in the relationships and how each character is able (or not able) to deal with the hurt and the betrayals.

The characters are so well portrayed, bringing to life the complications and emotional pain, that the film should satisfy audiences who prefer their drama low-key but intense.

NOWHERE IN AFRICA (Germany, 2002, d. Caroline Link)

Nowhere in Africa won the 2002 Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language film.

It is not very often that audiences are offered a woman's perspective on life in the Nazi era. The usual focus, as with the recent award-winning *The Pianist*, is on men, with women in the background. With *Nowhere in Africa*, we now have not only a woman's story but the story of a young girl who flees Germany in 1938 with her parents and spends the next ten years in Kenya.

This is the kind of film that audiences can enjoy. It makes its audience aware of very serious issues while, at the same time, telling a story that most people can identify with. It is rather old-fashioned film-making, beautifully crafted and photographed, with a straightforward story. The point of view is not just female but, if one can say it, particularly feminine. The film is based on a memoir by Stephanie Zweig and has been written and directed by Caroline Link.

We have become familiar with stories of Jewish families suffering hardships in Germany at the end of the 1930s. Here there is only a short glimpse of that life because attention is immediately on a young lawyer who has been able to arrange for his wife and daughter to flee to Kenya. The rest of the family stay and are ultimately killed or taken to concentration camps.

The film is principally about how this young family cope with life in a different culture. It is shown through the eyes of the young girl, Regina. We realise that children are adaptable and Regina quickly becomes at home in this land which seems so hostile to the parents. She makes friends with the local tribes and shares their customs and rituals.

The film also makes us look through the eyes of the young mother, uprooted from the culture she knows, set down on a farm, struggling to accept the fact, becoming more distant from her husband. We realise, and her husband tells her, that her attitude to the Kenyans resembles the way Germans were looking at Jews. It takes her a long time to come to terms with Africa and its ways. In this way the film is valuable in taking us on a journey where differences have to be acknowledged, then accepted and then appreciated.

The family also experiences internment because they are Germans but the British eventually acknowledge that they are not supporters of the Nazis and allow them to manage a farm where the owner is on active service. The father himself eventually joins the British forces. His final dilemma is whether to stay in Africa or return to Germany to contribute to its reconstruction. By now almost ten years in Africa, mother and daughter have absorbed the culture and are asked to wrench themselves away from the land they now feel as their own.

There is enough plot in *Nowhere in Africa* for a miniseries, enough issues about tolerance, culture and prejudice and enough emotional sharing with Regina and her mother to help audiences feel that they have had a Kenyan experience.

THE JUNGLE BOOK 2

Everybody enjoyed *The Jungle Book*. In theatres, on video, it is a very popular film.

It is something of a shock to realise that it was first released in 1968. Children who were ten at the time and enjoyed it are now on the verge of being grandparents. It has taken thirty five years to make a sequel. There have been two live-action versions of *The Jungle Book*, but Disney's cartoon has remained the favourite.

The Makers of *Jungle Book 2* have been careful to stay close to the original. The drawings are the same. All the familiar characters are there: Mowgli, of course, and Baloo; Bagheera returns as does Kaa, who is still trying to hypnotise a potential lunch; the Elephant Colonel is still leading the parade. And there is no more sleek and cunning a villain than Shere Khan. In case anybody has forgotten, Baloo and Mowgli burst into song several times with *The Bare Necessities*.

Sadly some of the voices from the 1960s are no longer with us. While Phil Harris made a boisterous Baloo, now John Goodman is equally boisterous. The producers have gone for quality for the voice of Mowgli. It is Haley Joel Osment from *The Sixth Sense* and *AI: Artificial Intelligence*. While George Sander's voice made for a smoothly sinister Shere Khan, Tony Jay now does an excellent impression. Most audiences will not notice the new cast and will be content with how well done the sequel is.

At 75 minutes, it is full of action, humour and colour to entertain young children. The story is simple. Mowgli has settled down with a family in a village but he remains restless. His foster mother says that you can take the boy out of the jungle but you can't take the jungle out of the boy. When he returns to see his friends, he has a wonderful time. Shanti, the daughter of the family goes searching for him (at night, of course, with plenty of owls and bats to frighten her) and there are so scary bits, but not too scary. At the end, Mowgli has to make a decision: is his life to be in the jungle or in the village. Parents and young children who know *The Jungle Book* will very much enjoy *Jungle Book 2*.

PHONE BOOTH (US, 2002, d. Joel Schumacher)

During the 1930s there was a radio play by Patrick Hamilton (author of *Gaslight*) about a man who was pursued from telephone booth to telephone booth by an unseen assailant until he was shamed into admitting the truth about his life. It is said that Alfred Hitchcock was interested in it. Seventy years later, the drama reached the screen, written by Larry Cohen and directed by Joel Schumacher. Cohen had been working on *Phone Booth* for many years after a successful career in the 1970s and 1980s writing and directing a succession of small-budget horror films like *It's Alive*, *The Stuff* and *Q*, *The Winged Serpent*. Joel Schumacher directed some of the biggest hits of the 1990s including two *Batman* films and two adaptations of John Grisham novels, *A Time to Kill* and *The Client*.

As *Phone Booth* opens, a voiceover reminds us of the role of phone communication and shows us satellites in space and streets crowded with people using their mobile phones. The old-fashioned phone booth is disappearing. However, Stu Shephard, a jumped-up PR man uses one to deceive his wife and flirt with a would-be actress. Suddenly, the phone booth becomes his prison as a disembodied voice becomes an unseen judge and jury and threatens Stu physically with a rifle, psychologically with his emotional game-playing and morally with his forcing him to tell his wife and the public the truth about himself.

Colin Farrell emerged as a popular leading man in Schumacher's *Tigerland* and in Hart's *War*, *Daredevil* and *The Recruit*. He suits the part of Stu perfectly. Kiefer Sutherland provides the sinister voice of the judgmental sniper. Forest Whitaker is the careful and sympathetic police chief. Schumacher is something of a razzle-dazzle director and he uses this style to pump up audience tension and excitement as well as Stu's growing desperation, the hectic pace of New York city and the circus-watching response of the crowds and the media.

THE LAST GREAT WILDERNESS (UK, 2002, d. David Mackenzie)

Shot with digital camera (which makes the bleak Scottish highlands even bleaker), this is an experimental film that tries the patience of the audience. Two young men, one on the run, the other wanting to burn down the house of the pop star who stole his wife, find themselves out of petrol and stuck in the oddest of psychological retreats run with questionable pseudo therapies. It all looks as if they made it up (or failed to make it up) as they went along. It is difficult to work out the characters' emotions. Huge plot leaps occur without explanation.

DARKNESS FALLS (US, 2002, d. Jonathan Liebesman)

With so many scary movies these days and a tradition of slasher teen movies, it is an eerie pleasure to watch *Darkness Falls*. The logic of the plot is not strong - but that doesn't matter. It is the atmosphere, jumps and screams and a spooky malevolent ghost which are the main attractions. South African director, Jonathan Liebesman, made his American horror story in Australia on a small budget, but it looks very stylish indeed, boasts a frightening creature created by Stan Winston and is edited to maximise frights for the audience.

We have heard about the benign tooth fairy. In this legend, a kindly old lady, Matilda Dixon, who lived 150 years ago, gave children coins when they lost their teeth. Unfortunately, she was disfigured in a fire, wore a mask and incurred the suspicions of the townspeople who finally accused her of killing two children and hanged her. Now she is back, not only in nightmares, but flying through the darkness to destroy all those who see her - and she does quite a thorough job! But, of course, she has to meet her match: a young man who was tormented by her as a boy, his girlfriend and her brother who is suffering the same fears of the dark. Only 85 minutes, playing it straight rather than as a send-up, it has more scares than most scary movies.

THE CRIME OF FATHER AMARO [EL CRIMEN DEL PADRE AMARO]

The Mexican film, *El Crimen del Padre Amaro*, was nominated in the category of Best Foreign Language Film for the Academy Awards for the films of 2002.

When it was released in Mexico in mid-2002, it received a large amount of press coverage which highlighted its 'controversial' Catholic Church issues. The film was popular at the Mexican box-office. At the time a number of Mexican Bishops expressed their protest at the themes of the film. The secretary of SIGNIS Mexico, Rodolfo Guzman, wrote more positively of the film's technical qualities, of the treatment of the characters and their interactions, especially concerning money issues and clerical celibacy as well as the challenges to the church which such films offer to look again at structures and abuses.

Towards the end of 2002, the film was released commercially in the United States and received a negative review from the critic of the American Catholic Conference classifications office. The film was judged as vicious and corrosive and referred to some sequences as hurtful to Catholics. As with so many issues, regional and national sensibilities differ considerably and have to be taken into account when making recommendations or issuing condemnations.

El Crimen is based on a book dating from 1875, a reminder that problems of relationships between church and governments and the potential for corruption as well as difficulties with clerical celibacy are issues of long standing. This is particularly the case for nations which have centuries-old Hispanic tradition from Catholic countries and societies so different from those influenced by the 16th century Reformation, most of the countries of Europe as well as the United States.

It needs to be acknowledged that the style of the film is that of the telenovella so popular in recent years in Latin America. Critics from less emotional societies find the telenovella style particularly melodramatic, highly volatile and emotional with characters and situations often presented in broad and sweeping strokes. This is an accepted way of storytelling. As the critic for *Variety* shrewdly pointed out, the audiences for which *El Crimen* was geared would have no trouble in appreciating its style.

The Catholic Hispanic (and Iberian) culture also has a long history of what might be called anti-clericalism. 'The Mission' is a cinema reminder of 18th century clashes between civil authorities and the church in South America which led to pressure on the Pope in 1773 to suppress the Jesuits. During the 19th and 20th centuries there were the revolutions for independent nationhood as well as the 1930s Spanish Civil War. This is true of Mexico, so it is not unexpected to find a film that takes a critical look at the local church. By the 1940s, Graham Greene had written a classic novel of such Catholicism in *The Power and the Glory*.

El Crimen del Padre Amaro has been described as anticlerical. It is truer to say that the film is anti-clericalism rather than anti-clerical. It is critical of the power plays (clericalism) of some clergy, of

misconduct by some priests and members of religious orders who profess to live exemplary lives. It does not say that all clergy are like this. In fact, one of the heroes of the film is a priest who tries to live the Gospel injunctions of service to the poor and oppressed but who becomes the victim of the power plays, this clericalism. The film also presents sequences of bizarre and superstitious religious practices. The broad sweep does not necessarily imply general condemnation as is sometimes felt by audiences whose sensitivity is bruised by such presentations. A film about individual or group police corruption or political corruption is not necessarily anti-police or anti-government.

With the contemporary contempt for official organisations (the misconduct of financial corporations, the lack of credibility of government action), it is not unexpected that Church organisations are targets for criticism. Since the Church has always acknowledged that it comprises both saints and sinners, that the Church continually needs reforming (the old Latin adage, *Ecclesia semper reformanda*), the actions of sinners, no matter how distasteful and hurtful for those strongly committed to their Church, are able to be dramatised, criticised and, where necessary, be held accountable.

These are the implications of a film like *El Crimen del Padre Amaro*. Documented material would indicate that the lack of commitment to vows of celibacy are not rare, that officials can be corrupted by financial ambition or greed, that drugs, dealing and export are a continual problem in many Latin American countries. These are some of the topics of *El Crimen*. The implication of the critique offered by the film of several of the central characters is that this is not what the Church professes and not what its members expect it to be like. So, the film offers a challenge to an examination of conscience and the need for reform.

KANGAROO JACK

Kangaroos have had a bit of a hard time in the movies. They do far better in documentaries and on the Discovery Channel. Back in the 70s, there was a comedy about a boxing kangaroo with Robert Mitchum and an actor in a kangaroo suit. It was called *Matilda*. Kangaroo Jack is in the *Matilda* tradition but now we have an animatronic kangaroo - which makes him at least a little more realistic.

Who is this film aimed at. Producer Jerry Bruckheimer who is famous for his slambang action shows like *Conair* and *Gone in Sixty Seconds* (whose writer, Scott Rosenberg had a hand in this one as well) said that he thought it would entertain younger audiences. So, maybe boys aged twelve. At that level, it is corny action that passes the time. One has to add that it is geographically incorrect, giving would-be tourists a false idea that you can drive from Sydney to Alice Springs in a couple of hours.

Two Brooklyn young men are best friends. One has saved the other's life when they were boys. The Mafioso stepfather is understandably upset when a completely unnecessary car chase with maximum damage leads the police to his warehouse full of stolen goods. What to do? Send them to Australia where they can be bumped off. When they put a jacket with \$50,000 in the pocket on what they think is a dead kangaroo, he leaps up and off and they spend the rest of the film chasing it (especially on camels) and being chased. And there you are!

THE TRUTH ABOUT CHARLIE (US, 2003, d. Jonathan Demme)

This modern thriller is based on the 1963 classic *Charade*. To enjoy *Charlie*, it would probably be best not to have seen *Charade* or to have forgotten its detail. After all, it had a suave silver-haired Cary Grant starring with Audrey Hepburn and Walter Matthau as the villain. It was stylish and sophisticated entertainment. It is not intended as a remake but as a different interpretation of characters and their interactions.

Director Jonathan Demme (*Silence of the Lambs*, Philadelphia) has admired *Charade* but he also points out that while it was being filmed in Paris in the early 1960s, many of the classic French New Wave films of Truffaut, Godard, Demy were being shot. These he admires as well. So, this is *Charade* re-structured in the style of those French films - and including several of its stars, like Charles Aznavour and Anna Karina. He uses handheld cameras to give the film an edgy feel rather than a polished style.

The plot is pretty complicated with a number of the characters playing charades in order to cover a murder or investigate it. The focus is on a young woman, Regina, played by Thandie Newton who starred in Demme's *Beloved*, whose husband, Charlie, is murdered as the film opens. We then learn more about his shady past, double-dealing with colleagues and pursuit by American authorities. Mark Wahlberg befriends Regina. Is he really a criminal? Defence Operations official, Tim Robbins, helps Regina but lurks in the background. Who is the hero and who is the villain?

We have to keep attentive to appreciate what is going on and what happened in the past so that we can finally discover the truth about Charlie. For those who know and love Paris, the use of the city, almost as a character, will be an added pleasure.

THE ACTORS (Ireland, 2002, d. Conor McPherson)

Conor McPherson is an Irish playwright in his early 30s. Several of his plays, like *The Weir*, have been staged very successfully in London and New York. He has also written the comedy film, *I Went Down*, directed a version of Samuel Becket's *Endgame* and a film from his own script about Dubliners, *Saltwater*. This time, he has written a comedy based on a story by Neil Jordan.

It would be great to be able to say that this is an unmitigated success and an uproariously funny comedy. It's more of a smile comedy and might have benefited by a longer running time to develop the characters and show parts of the plot instead of merely describing them. The basic idea is a good one. What if a ham Shakespearean actor, playing Richard III to poor audiences in a Dublin theatre in a Nazi setting, with Hitler as the tyrannical king, heard about an easy set-up from some criminal types while his doing research for his role? What if he got his friend, who is playing an extra, to pretend to be a bagman and collect money owed before the real thugs turned up from London?

Well, it is a great opportunity for Dylan Moran to do a number of clever impersonations. It gives an opportunity for Michael Caine to do a really terrible Richard III, display a talent for cowardice and even impersonate Miranda Richardson as the London gangland boss. So, plenty of opportunities. However, the whole thing is slight and the whole thing rather ordinary, despite Moran's talent, Caine's great professionalism and some hamming from Michael Gambon. Entertaining but not special.

MOSTLY MARTHA (Germany, 2002, d. Sandra Nettlebeck)

There are seminars these days surveying films made about kitchens and food and quite a number of them there are: for instance, *Babette's Feast*, *The Big Night*, *What's Cooking*. *Mostly Martha* is a more than worthy addition. It is a pleasing and intelligent drama about middle-aged people who elicit our sympathy and whom we can believe in.

This is an award-winning German film with an empathetic woman's perspective on characters and issues. The director is Sandra Nettlebeck who has filmed in her native Hamburg. The star is an impressive Martine Gedeck who creates a character who can be both fascinating and exasperating as Martha, the chef in a popular restaurant. Her long-suffering boss has sent her to a psychiatrist for therapy because Martha is an obsessive perfectionist who finds it difficult to relate to people - especially those impossible customers who complain vociferously and publicly and want to send their meal back on principle. When confronted by Martha they are in no doubt that she is in charge.

Two important events have an effect on Martha. Her sister dies in a car crash and she has to take in her eight year old daughter who is grieving for her mother and resents her aunt. Much of the film is a sensitive look at this relationship. The other event is the arrival of an Italian cook (Sergio Castellitto) to whom she takes an instant dislike. But he and the niece become friends and Martha has to face a different kind of future. It is a good example of how a film can have deep feelings and not be sentimental. Most adult audiences should find this film satisfying on a human level - and with its culinary detail and the display of meals.

IN THE NAME OF BUDDHA

We don't have the opportunity to see many (or any) films from Sri Lanka, so *In the Name of Buddha* is a good opportunity. While the film is made for a local audience and uses many of the dramatic and melodramatic styles that are geared to the sensibilities of audiences from the sub-continent, it is also Western-audience friendly.

On its release in Sri Lanka in early 2003, many Buddhists objected to it and other religious groups (including the Catholic church) protested in solidarity. It was claimed that the film says that Buddhists were responsible for the long civil war. Looked at from this vantage point, this does not seem to be the point of the film at all. In fact, there is a plea for non-violence with reference to both Buddha and Gandhi.

The film is a vivid presentation of the war with some particularly grim sequences which include torture, shooting battles, bombings, brutal rapes and the destruction of a Catholic church during Mass. The point of view of the film-makers is distinctively Tamil and is highly critical of the Sinhalese military and of the Indian Peacekeeping Force which was ineffectual (with some soldiers indulging in atrocities) during the mid-80s. But it is also critical of many Tamil strategies. The violence over two decades took its toll of thousands of Sri Lankans.

The story focusses on an asylum seeker arriving at Heathrow in 1993 and recounting his story to an immigration official. This makes the film relevant to current discussions about intake of asylum seekers. It visualises the dangers they have lived through, war, families destroyed, life ambitions frustrated, military atrocities. The film is not as polished as products from big-budget studios, but it is earnest, grim, emotionally demanding as well as raising political and social issues.

JAPANESE STORY (Australia, 2003, d. Sue Brooks)

An Australian film for Cannes' Un Certain Regard, directed by Sue Brooks, featuring Toni Collette and Gotaro Tsunashimi.

The plot is fairly straightforward for most of the film: wealthy Japanese businessman is taken on a tour of Port Hedland, Mount Newman, the Pilbara and the desert by a reluctant geologist. They become bogged in the red sand and, as we anticipated, the relationship develops into something deeper. It was during this section that the men in the audience were restless. Were they identifying with the Japanese man who was manifesting a fairly inscrutable thinking manner but was obviously out of place (his formal clothes for a start) in the outback and seemed incapable of being flexible in his behaviour and decisions. He might have thought he was in command of the trip, but to the audience it was obvious that he was not.

When they became stranded, he could not lose face and use his mobile to get help. It was his error in not heeding advice. He had to rectify it. But Toni Collette's Sandy was the one who knew what she was about.

Sandy was not at such a good place in her own life. She was a talented geologist but seemed to be unlucky in relationships and was living at home with her mother. She had no wish to be traipsing off from Perth to the northwest. And she found the Japanese man quite condescending to her, considering her as merely the chauffeur. She warned him about the hazards but he took no notice. She warned him how to behave in the desert, not leave the car, keep warm during the nights.

In the isolation of the desert, with the prospect of trying to get the four wheel drive out of the sand, Sandy and Hiromitsu discover their deep need for intimacy. Sandy seems to be more affirmed in who she is, a strongly feeling woman. With Hiromitsu, he is able to let go of the formalities of his cultural norms and their expectations as well as his own very objective manner. He discovers less formal love. He discovers, especially after he humbly admits he made a mistake about this part of the trip, underestimating its rough difficulties, that he has a gentle and, especially, a playful side. When they get going, they are able to join in a somewhat off-key rendition of Willie Nelson's *On the Road Again*.

The executives at the mining companies show that they respect Japanese formalities and customs. Many of them have learnt to speak some Japanese. The challenge to the Australian kind of casual attitudes and behaviour is to respect a culture that seems too proper to be believed. But the challenge to the straightlaced culture is to relax and to acknowledge and be one's true self, especially the more spontaneous and carefree self.

I thought that the film was going to end here - but, when I looked at my watch, there was another 30 minutes to go. How could they fill it out? If you intend to see the film and have not heard anything of its plot, it would be better to stop reading now and resume after seeing Japanese Story. Otherwise, read on.

Hiromitsu suddenly dies, playfully diving into a desert pool, hitting his head in the shallows. Sandy is appalled. The rest of the film gives Toni Collette the opportunity to show us what emotional distress is truly like and the reality of grief. I sat up during this part of the film and was sorry that those men had left.

Suffice to say, that Sandy's wanting to be involved with the funeral, a universal need but strong for an extravert, her profound sympathy for Hiromitsu's widow and her gracious courtesy to her (which was reciprocated) is a fine dramatising of grief. When the widow looks at the photos of Hiromitsu and Sandy in the desert and then offers Sandy an envelope, we expect it to contain the photos. What is in there is a letter that Hiromitsu had written, beautifully expressing how this formal and rather sad Japanese man, this Thinking man, had discovered his inner child and would be the better husband and father because of his sharing with Sandy. It really is a tender film.

THE MAN OF THE YEAR

During 2002, City of God was a success all around the world. A Brazilian feature, it highlighted life in the barrios of Rio de Janeiro. It took the audiences back to the 60s and 70s, focusing on the young boys who followed their older brothers and fathers into a life of gangs and crime. It was a frightening film, showing young children with an urge to violence, exercising manipulation and shrewdness. With Man of the Year, we are again in Rio de Janeiro. This time we are in the mainstream, not an affluent area, but people who live ordinary lives, own ordinary stores and do ordinary jobs - but connected with some of the wealthy, who want to control the populace with right-wing authoritarian ideas, as well as to corrupt police.

The film tells the story, or the character tells the story himself, of how, after losing a bet, he has his hair dyed blond. This leads to a confrontation in a bar and his vendetta the next day, shooting dead the man who insulted him. Instead of the police coming to arrest him, or giving himself up as he thought he should, he becomes the area hero for having rid the area of an obnoxious criminal. Eventually, he is asked to do another killing, this multiplies and he becomes a professional killer, aided by his friends who operate a garage remaking cars illegally. He also falls in love with the woman who changed his hair colour, she becomes pregnant, but, according to the pet store owner for whom he works, once married, the excitement falls out of the marriage. He also takes in, at first unwillingly, the young girl who was living with the man that he murdered.

As the film progresses, it becomes more disturbing. The young man gradually assumes the persona of the killer, wanting contracts, getting finance, becoming more and more amoral, if not immoral. However, the ending is not easy and there is an escalation of violence. The film ends with all kinds of possibilities.

Very well acted, realistically shot in Rio, the film is a mixture of serious comment on society in Rio as well as having a great deal of black comedy. In this it is quite unique entertainment.

RESERVNI DELI (SPARE PARTS) (Slovenia, 2003, d. Damijan Kozole)

Spare Parts was written and directed by one of Slovenia's major directors, Damijan Kozole. He takes the situation in Slovenia at the beginning of the 21st century: flashbacks to the laying of the foundation stone by Tito of the nuclear power plant in Krsko; the importance of motorcycle speedway in Krsko and the

celebrities and legends; the reality of the new democracy but also the exploitation of the refugees from Afghanistan and the Middle East as well as from the Balkan Peninsula.

The film is realistic - with some brutal touches as it shows the treatment of the refugees by the rather ordinary truckies who are eager to make money, exploit the refugees, not having any care or commitment for them and their fate. The film is sympathetic to the refugees and shows the brutality of their exploitation and what it means to them: a woman being sexually assaulted, a family put in the boot of a car and suffocating and their bodies thrown in the river, the moodiness of a driver who lets his passengers off on the freeway, the discussion about the refugees being exploited for their body parts in black-market deals in Continental Europe. The film takes us behind the headlines of the unfair and brutal treatment of the refugees as well as the plight of the refugees.

The actors are quite convincing in their roles. However, they are not entirely without heart and the impact of the film is showing their friendships, their falling-outs, their relationships, their own personal struggles and griefs alongside the callous treatment that they offer to the refugees.

PETITES COUPURES (SMALL CUTS) (France, 2003, d. Patrice Leconte)

Small Cuts is what one might call "a French film". The film is peopled by fragile characters, moving in and out of relationships, wanting some kind of fidelity, wandering into infidelity, afraid of commitment. It focuses on a middle-aged man (and the director indicates themes of Dante and mid-life crisis) who is in relationship with his partner but breaks it off, takes up with a very immature teenager, is attracted by a political secretary, and wandering in a forest (like Dante) meets a very strange Beatrice who seems to have the possibility of leading him further along his life journey.

There is a lot of silence, a lot of intense looks, a lot of driving in a car.

Daniel Auteuil is expert at this kind of role and has become one of the central French stars of French cinema. Kristen Scott Thomas, who lives in France, is Beatrice and is required to play a part that is extraordinarily complex, at times scarcely credible. She has to indicate intensity, lightness, mood changes, a touch of craziness. Ludivine Sagnier (the young girl in 8 Women) pouts expertly as the teenager. Pascal Bussieres is all business until attracted by the man. Emmanuel Devos is his partner.

One wonders after watching a film like this whether, after all, it is fairly inconsequential. If it is consequential, one wonders what the meaning should be, the unexpectedness of life, the challenges to grow, the importance of love - and it reminds us that the French invented amour fou.

MONSIEUR N (France, 2003, d. Antoine de Caunes)

Monsieur N is one of the many films made about Napoleon. It opens in 1840 with the exhumation of his body and the transfer to Paris and the tomb of Les Invalides where it lies in state. However, there are flashbacks to 1915 and the aftermath of Waterloo and the transfer of Napoleon to the island of St Helena in the South Atlantic. The film takes up the story of the emperor's imprisonment, his being guarded by a British garrison led by Lord Howe. The fictional character in the film is a young officer called Basil Heathcote (played by Jay Raydon) who is the personal guard of the emperor. The film moves back and forth from 1840 to the last years of that second decade of the century, showing the imprisonment of Napoleon, Lord Howe and his pompous and haughty ways, the court around Napoleon, the various plots to kill him by poison, for Bonapartist supporters to rescue him, and his mysterious death after not being seen for several weeks.

The film speculates that his friend and assistant Cipriani who was poisoned, was the body in Napoleon's grave which was witnessed to as authentic but by people who had not seen him in his last years. The film's plot has Heathcote in 1840 visiting the various people who had memories of their time in St Helena, eventually working out that the body was Cipriani's, interviewing Lord Howe who was living in poverty in Paris and eventually deducing that Napoleon had escaped to Louisiana, to a plantation in Baton Rouge,

with Betty, the daughter of the Balcombe family, who had been infatuated with him on St Helena - and with whom Heathcote was infatuated.

There have been many films about Napoleon, the classic French silent epic Napoleon by Abel Gance, popular films including Desiree with Brando as Napoleon, an American version of War and Peace (Herbert Lom's Napoleon) and the Russian War and Peace (Sergei Bondarchuk, its director, as Napoleon). Kenneth Haigh was Napoleon in a story of the imprisonment on St Helena, Eagle on a Rock, in the mid-70s. Ian Holm portrayed Napoleon in The Emperor's New Clothes - using the hypothesis that a look-alike was brought to St Helena, Napoleon escaping to Belgium (and with a visit to Waterloo and his listening impatiently to a tourist guide), finally living his life in simplicity in Paris, the look-alike dying and being buried in St Helena in 1821.

Philippe Torreton (It All Begins Today) is effective as a brooding, sometimes smug, always scheming Napoleon. Richard E. Grant is perfect as the kind of pompous ass British commander. The film was directed by Antoine de Caunes, better known on television as the compere of the zany, if often crass, sexual fun show, Euro Trash. This is a much more serious effort.

LITTLE MORE THAN A YEAR AGO (POCO PIU DI UN ANNO) (Italy, 2003, d.Marco Filiberti)

Little More Than a Year Ago is quite an achievement, a tour de force for its writer-director-actor, Marco Filiberti. He made the film at the age of 31. It is a mature piece of writing, a skilful piece of directing, and quite an exhibitionist and in-your-face performance. However, in real life the artist is much more reticent, talking about serious issues in his film even though the theme is the portrait of an Italian porn star. (There are sufficient scenes to indicate the style and work of the porn star, scattered throughout the film, and not over-emphasised.)

The director wanted to take an extreme situation about reputation and wanting to live on in people's memories. His central character comes from an ancient, very wealthy family, who have fallen on hard times. He resents his father's shady financial deals and womanising, and at his mother's death has left their French home and moved to Rome with success as a porn star. When his father dies, his brother comes to find him and he returns for the funeral. Only his aunt knows the truth. His brother, suspicious and always wanting to care for his younger brother, returns to Rome and eventually discovers the truth, follows his brother in his work, sees his gay relationships, goes to the gay clubs but finds a world of individuals and he gradually is able to let go of his starchiness, rethinking his attitudes towards many things, especially towards his estranged wife, and is able to reconcile with her.

Filiberti is at pains to make his central character very humane, not merely a dumb character being exploited by the industry. He is in control of his life, knows his sexual urges, knows that he is unable to form relationships of any depth, yet becomes free by the understanding and support of his brother. The significant even in the film is he and his brother witnessing a single mother being killed in a street accident, the young boy seeing his mother killed. They take him to the hospital, the boy forms an attachment to the star, his grandparents do not know his work. As the bond grows, the effect on the star is wanting to adopt him or be a foster-father, an older brother. By accident the grandparents discover the truth and fight him in the courts. He loses. He dies at the age of thirty, after opening the Gay Olympics in Rome. Fourteen years later, the young orphan boy has grown up, wants to investigate the star and begins to make documentary on him – with a range of characters giving straight-to-camera interviews to create the impression of this documentary.

The film is quite emotional, well acted, and challenges audiences' stances on many issues, judgments on characters and appearances, an invitation to see complexities and depth in human nature.

BULGARIAN LOVERS (LOS NOVIOS BULGAROS)

Bulgarian Lovers is a film designed for gay and camp sensibilities. It also focuses on social situations in Spain, the wealthy middle class, the refugees from the Balkans and Eastern Europe and their exploitation of their new situation, especially with East European Mafia connections and smuggling. The film combines

these themes in a focus on a fortysomething lawyer, his friends, his cruising gay circles and picking up Eastern Europeans. The lawyer falls in love with a Bulgarian who is waiting for his girlfriend to come to Spain. The lawyer allows himself to be drawn into the schemes of the Bulgarian, lending him money, allowing him to go away, getting deeper and deeper into frauds connected with Bulgarian authorities and nuclear substances. The film also includes a visit by the lawyer to Bulgaria so that the film contrasts the Eastern and Western European cultures.

The film is of interest in terms of focusing on situations in Spanish society at the beginning of the century.

ANGER MANAGEMENT (US, 2003, d. Peter Levin)

After Jack Nicholson's two previous films, *The Pledge* and *About Schmidt*, *Anger Management* seems rather frivolous. The theme is serious enough, the anger and rage that lurk beneath the surface of so many 'ordinary' people, people who feel put down and have a low self-esteem, and can erupt at the most unexpected times. However, the general setting is portrayed as realistic, the treatment is more like farce, situations for a sitcom. And, when the final twist is revealed at the end, it makes it all seem too unbelievably contrived.

Perhaps Jack Nicholson had his eye on the popular success of Robert de Niro's two 'Analyze' films - even to singing songs from *West Side Story* where Nicholson has it all over de Niro! The formula is some what the same except that the psychiatrist is now the seemingly crazy extravert and the client is the meek and submissive type. Jack Nicholson looks as if he has been overdosing on his performances in *The Shining* and *The Witches of Eastwick* to create his Buddy, the anger management therapist. It is left to Adam Sandler to bring the quiet and reflective atmosphere until Buddy challenges him to self-assertion and he is able to propose in front of thousands at the Yankee Stadium, urged on by Rudolph Giuliani and the fans.

In the meantime, poor Dave (Sandler's character who designs clothes for outsize pets) is caught up in assaults in a plane and in a bar which are not really of his doing. As a favour to Buddy, David is sentenced to a month's anger management with Buddy moving in and controlling David's life - and, it seems, stealing the affection of his girlfriend, Marisa Tomei. There are therapy groups with John Turturro and Luis Guzman leading the rage group. David has to persuade a girl in a bar (Heather Graham) to date him; he has to confront his childhood bully who is now a Buddhist monk (John C. Reilly); he has to challenge his boss who has overlooked him for promotion.

Many of these sequences are quite funny, especially with Sandler capitalising on his hangdog style rather than just being stupid as he has tended to do in many films. But, overall, cast expectations would lead audiences to expect something a little funnier and a little less silly.

IGBY GOES DOWN (US, 2002, d. Burt Starr)

The poster for *Igby* notes that the Slocumb family in this film make the Royal Tennenbaums seem normal. There's a lot in that claim. What we see is an extremely dysfunctional family, embodying all the ills and quirks of, at least, contemporary USA. It opens with *Igby* (Kieran Culkin in an intelligent performance of a difficult role) and his brother, Oliver (Ryan Phillippe, speaking as usual in a kind of strangled preppie manner) assisting their mother (Susan Sarandon as a self-absorbed snob) to commit suicide.

As the film flashes back, we are given portraits of the two boys, Oliver the perfect one and *Igby* always in trouble and having to continually move schools, their nice father (Bill Pullman) who is about to experience a schizophrenic collapse and their controlling mother. When *Igby* runs away from military college, he ends up in New York working for his entrepreneur godfather (Jeff Goldblum), his girlfriend (Amanda Peet) and her camp, drug-dealing artist friend (Jared Harris). The only bright spot is friendship with an older girl named Sookie (Claire Danes).

Igby is depressed, confused, comparing himself to his brother. He loathes his mother, clashes with his godfather over an entanglement with his girlfriend and is reduced to being a drug courier. His dream is of escaping everyone and going to California. It is his mother's illness that brings things to a head, a little

more optimistically than the rather black screenplay would have led us to believe. What we have is a gallery of eccentric characters acting in absurd ways, often with a clever way with words, materialistic and self-centred. Satire is an art form that enables the creator to mock society while implying that it should be so much better. That seems to be the intention of writer-director, Burr Steers.

I'LL BE THERE (US, 2003, d. Craig Ferguson)

In the history of the movies, there have always been star vehicles introducing the popular singer of the time. In 2003 UK, it is Charlotte Church. Charlotte Church was a singing sensation at the age of thirteen, singing for Pope, Queen and royalty, Presidents and a world-wide public.

This film has been written and directed by its star, Scot Craig Ferguson, who found fame in The Drew Carey Show. He has also appeared in The Big Tease and Saving Grace. A strong British cast of character actors fills out the supporting role with Jemma Redgrave as mother, Joss Ackland as a 70 year old relic of the rock'nroll era who can still stir up and entertain the oldies.

The plot is as old as the hills (with a Billy Elliot finale). That means we know what is going to happen but the enjoyment is in how we get there. Charlotte is Olivia, a very nice sixteen year old young lady who lives in Cardiff (Church's home city). Her mum is a flourishing hairdresser, prim and reserved. Craig Ferguson is an alcoholic burnt out star who has to have psychiatric treatment and is helped to AA by an Australian colleague. But mum has a secret from her wilder days and Olivia is the result. Circumstances change and it is time for mum to tell Olivia the truth about her father, the rock star.

It is a matter of mum melting, or cooling it (whichever applies), dad drying out and letting his nicer side be seen, grandpa offering his advice and Olivia, who has her secret as well - she has been taking singing lessons - to follow her dream of becoming a singer.

This is as traditional and popular film-making as you can get. It is full of hope that people can admit their mistakes and change. Good things can happen. (Critics groan at this niceness but multiplex audiences will have a nice time.) Charlotte Church gets to sing a Welsh song, a modern ballad, 'Reach out... I'll be there' and Gershwin's Summertime. Her image is intact and enhanced.

IDENTITY (US, 2003, d. James Mangold)

The dictionary tells us that Identity means one's individual personality. It also means people being the same, identical. It also has psychological overtones of a person's hold on self - identity crisis and so on.

James Mangold made a film about women in an institution for mental illness in 1999, Girl Interrupted. Clearly the topic interested him. But he has taken the patient outside the institution and created a variation on Hitchcock, motels and slasher killers as well as a case study of multiple personality. We hear that Malcolm Rivers (Pruitt Taylor Vince) has killed a number of people at a motel and is to be executed. The film flashes back to the motel on that fateful and fatal night (with continuous rain) and gives us glimpses of the characters and how there is a chain reaction of accidents that gets them into the one place, trapped with floods at each end of the highway.

Once the killings start, the audience has to work hard as to the identity of the killer, especially when the events do not seem to be logical. Mangold has some of the usual types plus some who are quite different in peril at the motel. However, the one anchor of calm is a former LA cop, played with his usual sincere style by John Cusack. Ray Liotta turns up as a tougher cop, with his prisoner, Jake Busey. Amanda Peet is a prostitute who is on her way home to make a new life. There is a self-centred fading actress, a nice family with a rather quiet son, a newlywed couple and a nervy motel manager.

About two thirds into the film, the audience is given information that is new and changes perspectives on what has happened - and there is a final twist that rather undermines faith in psychoogists. It is all done with flair, well acted, plenty of suspense and not too gruesome so that audiences who are not into gory thrillers might enjoy it.

A GUY THING

A film with a title like that and a trailer that seems to indicate it is American Pie for adults does not bode well. Since it opens with a groom's party and some sexual hijinks and ambiguities, it looks as if that is where it is going. But, no. Its heart is in the right place and true love must win out at the end.

Jason Lee (Kevin Smith's films, Dreamcatcher) has one week before he marries Selma Blair, rich, accomplished and something of a controller. The ambiguities concern one of the dancers at his party who has ended up at his place. Well, it turns out that she, Julia Styles, is the bride's cousin - with Jason making extraordinary efforts not to meet her (giving rise to a number of comic turns) and then meeting her all the time, especially when he is confronted by her former boyfriend who is a psychotic cop under investigation by internal affairs. There is plenty of plot, especially since Jason's older brother goes into raptures at every occasion.

Once again, you know what is going to happen - but how, and when? Will the wedding go on? What will happen to Selma (well, you can guess that) and what will happen to Jason (of course, it does). Jason Lee is an agreeable screen presence. Julia Styles is the less glamorous, sweet kind of actress and so brings to the film some sharpness instead of simple sweetness. There are some funny lines, quirky characters and it turned out to be more likable than anticipated.

ADAPTATION (US, 2002, d. Spike Jonze)

Listening to critics talk about Adaptation, one heard that it was very entertaining and clever or else that it was too clever by half. 'Clever' seems to be the operative word. The director, Spike Jonze, and the writer, Charlie Kaufman, found that with their first collaboration, Being John Malkovich, everyone thought that they were very clever - a movie about getting inside a real film star's head for fifteen minutes and seeing life through his eyes. Capitalising on Being John Malkovich, Adaptation opens on the set of that film, with the stars there, discussing things with Kaufman who is being played by Nicolas Cage.

The trouble is that Kaufman is having trouble with his adaptation of articles written by the real-life Susan Orleans (who will be played by Meryl Streep). He has writer's block, has a dim view of himself, feeling that he looks like an unkempt slob, is too reserved and has no talent or flair with women. However, his twin brother, Donald, is writing a formula cop movie (with all the trendy themes), is a charmer and oozes confidence. Donald is also being played by Nicolas Cage in a very effective performance where he keeps the twins quite distinctive in manner and style. (In fact, of course, even though the screenplay of Adaptation is attributed to both Kaufman's, the only place that Donald exists is in Charlie's imagination and in the film.) Perhaps, with having two Kaufmans, this is being too clever by half, where half might do.

Charlie goes to New York to meet Susan Orleans. He goes to Florida to meet the subject of the film who is an orchid thief in the Everglades (Chris Cooper in his Oscar-winning performance). This means that Charlie is able to unblock himself by writing a screenplay about how difficult it is to write a screenplay on The Orchid Thief and how he does it. When Donald achieves success, he is able to help Charlie who goes to screenwriting classes by real-life expert, Robert McKee (played in the film by Brian Cox). And so on, with plenty more plot ingredients included Charlie's agent, his girl friend, the meetings with Susan Orleans and (maybe the influence of Donald and McKee) a shoot-em-up chase through the Everglades to finish up.

Spike Jonze juggles all these aspects like a movie jigsaw and a visually stylish one at that. Dialogue is witty, performances are good - really sophisticated entertainment. The real Kaufman must have been on a role because he had also written the screenplay for Confessions of a Dangerous Mind, about TV series creator, Chuck Barris, who claimed that he had a secret life as a CIA assassin while doing The Dating Game and other programs.

DARK WATERS

With the great success of the two Ring films, with their eerie mood where a Japanese journalist tries to solve the mystery of a video that people watch and then receive a phone call to tell them that they will die within a week, what next for director, ? First of all, there was the American version of Ring with Naomi Watts. Now comes another atmospheric thriller, less overtly horror than the Ring films, but creepy and suspenseful nonetheless.

Once again we have a woman coping with a mysterious situation. In the process of divorce, she wants to protect her six year old daughter and takes an apartment. Ignoring the water stain in the roof of a bedroom (a fatal mistake), she finds herself more and more involved - in deeper waters, one might say. The water in the building is dirty, the roof stain gets larger, footsteps can be heard above. And, to top it all, a young girl who lived in the upper apartment went missing four years earlier. Is she haunting mother and daughter? Does she want to destroy them? Step by step, the movie, rather patiently, takes us through the mother's terror for her daughter, the pressure from her husband in the divorce, the discovery of floods and the water tank on the roof. It depends on how you enjoy ghost stories. One wonders how the Japanese regard ghosts. (And this one should not be difficult for an American remake.)

THE MATRIX RELOADED

(US, 2003, Andy and Larry Wachowski)

It is difficult to remember a time when there was no Matrix. The 1999 release of the original film not only pleased fans of science fantasy but drew academics and philosophers into discussion about its issues as well. A world where human beings were under threat from machines, especially the sophisticated machines created by humans. The story of rebels who were trying to break through the tyranny, especially its black-suited and dark glasses agents, were the new heroes. And, of course, the principal figure was Neo, the One, who was destined to be the Saviour. Loved back into life by Trinity, his destiny is clear.

And so we arrive at The Matrix Reloaded with Matrix Revolution to be released in November 2003, completing the trilogy. The financial success of Reloaded has meant that millions around the world wanted to continue the experience of the menaced futuristic society and think about the issues raised. It has also meant that many critics who like to lop successful films have now praised the action sequences (even more spectacular with Neo being able to fly and Agent Smith able to replicate himself at will to do battle with Neo) and the decor and special effects (even more elaborate than before). However, many have ridiculed the discussion sequences, some dismissing it as gobbledygook. One of the troubles with this kind of dismissal is that when a serious issue like human freedom and choice is discussed, it makes demands on the minds of the audience which some critics resent, declaring it holds up the action. Those who valued the reflections on the dimensions of existence, human freedom and the purposiveness in choice will not be disappointed.

Neo has matured since The Matrix with Keanu Reeves very comfortable in the role. Carrie Ann Moss is more serious and more loving as Trinity. Laurence Fishburne has more gravity as Morpheus. A number of new characters are introduced, including Lambert Wilson as a kind of Turette sufferer who compulsively swears and is vulgar in French, some light moments which precede one of the more important philosophical discussions.

Just as this film relies on knowledge of the original, so it relies on the third part. It is an interim film in terms of plot. Neo and the rebels have staved off attack, but the respite is only temporary.

THE LIFE OF DAVID GALE (US, 2003, d. David Parker)

British director, Alan Parker, has made a number of socially minded films in the United States, from Fame to Come See the Paradise. This time his interest is in capital punishment. The film uses the device of a journalist coming in at the end of a prison sentence, just prior to execution, and unravelling a case so that the injustice of the death penalty is made emotionally and intellectually clear. One of the difficulties of this film is that the protest is highly contrived and the ending may leave audiences more bewildered by the plot twists than up in arms. On the other hand, there are quite a number of clues in the film that make sense with the unexpected ending.

Kevin Spacey has made a name for himself as villains (Consenting Adults, Seven, The Usual Suspects) but more recently has been seen as a kind of American Everyman, someone who is both noble and flawed (American Beauty, The Shipping News). As a university lecturer and writer, found guilty of the rape and murder of a colleague, he elicits sympathy, the belief that he could not have committed the crimes. The plot device is having him grant final interviews to a hard-headed journalist who will campaign to show that he is innocent. Kate Winslett is the journalist.

The flashbacks fill in the details of the protest against capital punishment, his relationship with the murdered protest leader, played with tough sentiment by Laura Linney, and rather alarmingly re-create the death scene. While the issues are serious, the film turns melodramatic by the end and the final revelation seems too stretched to have the dramatic effect intended.

BROKEN WINGS

Broken Wings is a contemporary story set in Israel, in the city of Haifa (the city of the director).

The film opens with a young seventeen-year-old singing a song on the roof of a building near the central railway station. It emerges that she has composed a song, is singing it with her boyfriend. However, all is not easy. When we see her family, she clashes vigorously with her mother. It emerges that her father has died nine months earlier and she blames herself for his being accidentally stung by a bee, being allergic, and not able to withstand the injection. Since then, she has clashed with her mother, her mother being on night shift at the hospital and sleeping during the day. It is September, the opening of the school year, the youngest daughter getting ready to go to kindergarten, the young boy very angry and wanting to break a record by jumping into a dry pool, the oldest boy alienated and dressing up as a mouse, handing out leaflets in the town.

The film focuses on the relationships, the tensions and the various reactions after the death of the father. While the family is middle class, comfortable, and able to sustain itself, it shows itself particularly dysfunctional and unhappy, at times suicidal. The performances are excellent, especially Orli Silbershatz-Banai as the harassed mother. The young Maya Maron is Maya, the alienated daughter who confronts her mother, runs away to record the song she composed for her father but, in grief, is unable to complete it.

The film relates to most First-World people's lives, people with creature comforts, but still with relationships unresolved, seething angers bursting out, and the need for love and affirmation.

CARPET OF THE WIND

Carpet of the Wind is a film of great beauty, sentiment and charm as well as humour. The focus is on a young Japanese businessman who is commissioned by a Japanese festival to provide a carpet, woven in Iran. His wife is the designer of the carpet. She and her young daughter pray that the carpet will be a success. However, the young wife is killed in a street accident. The young man continues his visit to Esfahan with his young daughter. The carpet which was commissioned has not been woven. The man is in despair, his daughter feels isolated and cannot communicate. However, the welcome of his Iranian friend, Akhbar, is very warm as well as that of his wife and the people of the town. The businessman who should have commissioned the carpet is busy about his many other business interests. A young boy who has a carriage for tourists has the idea that the townspeople can combine and, working on shifts, make the carpet in twenty days. The film shows the collaboration of the townspeople, the exhilaration of their work, the difficulties in getting the wool, the dye and other aspects of weaving. However, the carpet is completed - as well as celebration of a marriage with the visit of the local Mullah.

The film is rich in its character-drawing, beautifully crafted, well acted. The film also introduces religious themes such as Japanese prayer as well as Muslim traditions of prayer, blessings and making ordinary life sacred. The director of the film also made at the same time a very esoteric film called Take a Look at the Sky Sometimes, using many of the same cast. However, it is quite elliptical and uses magic realism in its interpretation of Iranian religious customs. Carpet of the Wind is more classical film-making.

CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE (Ireland, 2003, d. John Deery)

Conspiracy of Silence takes up the contemporary theme of celibacy of the Catholic clergy.

Writer-director, John Deery, grew up in an Irish Catholic family, briefly considered becoming a priest and is still a practising Catholic. He has said that his film was not the result of immediate personal experience, nor from involvement in debates about the status of celibacy for the clergy, nor from scandals that have beset the Church, especially in Ireland, during the last decade. Rather, during the mid-90s, he said that he was reflecting on the Church at the end of the second millennium and where challenges to its relevance lay. It seemed to him that the celibacy question posed such a challenge, especially with the departure of so many priests from active ministry, the decision of so many to marry, and then the small numbers of men entering the seminaries in Western countries. How would the Church cope with fewer priests.

John Deery intends Conspiracy of Silence to stimulate and contribute to the debate about celibacy not being required for priesthood. The screenplay cites the history of the rule and its introduction at the beginning of the second millennium. For many Catholics, this discussion is not new. It is current practice and is supported widely around the world. On the other hand, at the Second Vatican Council, many bishops asked for the rule to be changed so that they would have more priests available for ministry, married priests, especially in the developing world.

For some 'Catholics in the Pew', this discussion may not be familiar and could be surprising given the present practice that they are familiar with. For non-Catholic audiences, especially Christian audiences from Churches which do have married clergy, the discussion may not seem relevant except for its importance for Catholics.

John Deery has decided not to write a book, not to examine statistics, not to venture into sociological or psychological explanations, but rather to dramatise the issue in a contemporary Irish situation. His screenplay is based on research and he used Catholic technical advisers. Most Catholics will recognise dialogue, characters and many situations as authentic. They will recognise the dilemmas of those in good faith concerning celibacy and the misconduct of some of the clergy (both sexually and in the abusive exercise of power) which have become the frequent material for headlines and media coverage and are now all too familiar.

At 87 minutes, the film is modest in scope. While celibacy is the main issue, the screenplay also raises questions of clergy in homosexual relationships, HIV infection and the tragic suicides of clergy who cannot face their situations. With a strong Irish cast, including Brenda Fricker and John Lynch and actual well-known talk-show host, Gay Byrne, the film works on the emotions first and then uses this emotional response as a basis for debating the issues.

Clearly, media interests and those in position to foster controversy, will highlight the film and its issues. It would be a pity if it were sensationalised rather than being seen as a drama and debated fruitfully.

X MEN 2 (US, 2003, d. Bryan Singer)

For those who thought that X Men was one of the great comic-books-into-movies entertainments, this is not only more of the same, this is Xtra, so to speak. The first film introduced a world of mutants who have superior powers to those of ordinary mortals. This made them look bizarre, sound bizarre and have capacities that were often aggressively bizarre - an evolutionary leap. And they had names to match, like Wolverine or Magneto. As with all comics adventures, there were good and bad mutants and life and death struggles to save the world.

This time the cast seems very relaxed. They know their paces. They can take for granted the eccentricities of the appearances and superhuman powers. Wolverine is once more the leader of the pack. Jean Grey is self-sacrificing. Storm can create - a storm. There is also a new creature, a German circus character, Nightcrawler. Professor Charles Xavier still runs the school for the mutants. However, there is a new

villain, played by Brian Cox, who has conducted experiments which have led to the mutant transformations and which have destroyed his son. He now wants to rule the world (as is wont with such villains) and his only hope is to have the now-imprisoned Magneto escape and lead him to the power. It is not important that we know what is going to happen. It is important to see how it happens.

Brian Cox is menacing as the villain - and so is Ian McKellen as the supremely self-confident Magneto. Patrick Stewart has to look anguished as the Professor. The rest of the cast are mainly familiar, although Alan Cumming is intriguing as the Nightcrawler. Plenty of action and effects, exactly what fans would hope for.

PURE (UK, 2003, d. Gillies Mackinnon)

Over the years, Scottish director, Gillies Mackinnon, has made a number of films which focus on small groups, family relationships and social crises: *Small Voices*, *Hideous Kinky*. *Pure* is even more dramatic. The focus is on a widowed mother with two sons in the West Ham area of London. But the audience share the point of view of the ten year old son. He is devoted, especially preparing medicine for his sick mother. He has no idea that she is a heroin addict and that the friend of his father who calls round socially is the supplier. Gradually, he learns the truth and is determined that she will come off the drugs, especially when a friendly neighbour dies of an overdose and her little daughter is taken into child care.

Young Harry Eden gives a very moving performance as Paul, the young son. He is so real that he continually makes us reflect on the issues and how a boy who has to face these responsibilities every day can cope with school and the ordinary life of a ten year old boy. The film is frequently harrowing, especially through Molly Parker's performance as the mother, continually desperate for fixes, trying to be a mother to her boys, promising to go cold turkey (with Paul locking her in her room and having to ignore her cries and pleas). It is even more harrowing when Paul himself tries the heroin so that he will know what his mother is going through.

While we are taken into the suburban depths of drugs and seeming hopelessness, the film does offer some hope (offending some critics who seem to believe a film has no integrity unless it has an unhappy ending).

OLD SCHOOL (US, 2003, d. Todd Field)

A distraction from the raucous goings on of teenagers acting up in such films as *American Pie* or *Road Trip* would be to wonder what they would be like in ten years' time. Now we have the answer. In the words of the director, they regress and overact in juvenile drinking, sex and inane horseplay. And it is all up there on the screen in *Old School*. Unless you are identifying with the shenanigans, this can be hard going. The film rubs our noses in the antics and then tries to make some moral points, a kind of having one's cake and eating it. Yes, there are many gross moments. Yes, there are some funny moments. But, by and large it is a US campus version of *Men Behaving Crassly*. Vince Vaughan and Will Ferrall are convincing in their roles but main star Luke Wilson looks too much of a straight arrow to convince us that he is enjoying it all as much as he says he is.

HOPE SPRINGS (UK, 2003, d. Mark Herman)

A light and slight romantic comedy. Poor Colin Firth travels from London to the town of Hope in New England to get away from a failed relationship and get over his depression. Eventually, he does with the help of a 'people carer' (Heather Graham) with whom he falls in love and the help of the townsfolk who are initially curious but, when he sketches portraits of them for an exhibition, are very supportive. Then his ex (Minnie Driver) turns up, rather cold and caustic and the expected complications arise. Will he go back to her? Will the carer find out? What lies will he tell to cover himself? How will he reconcile with the carer who finds out that he has lied?

This is a British production (with some wry comments about how the Americans see the British and vice versa) but it gives the impression of being just another romantic comedy, pleasant, a bit obvious, showing emotional tangles and opting for commitment and a happy ending.

I CAPTURE THE CASTLE

Dodie Smith was famous for having written *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*. However, she wrote *I Capture the Castle* in the 1940s, a memoir of coming of age in the 1930s in country England. It takes the form of a diary of a seventeen year old younger sister who records the difficulties of living with the writer-father and his writer's block, of their being impoverished and of the plans for her sister, Rose, to marry well and save the family. She also records her emotional journey and her falling in love.

Bill Nighy is very good as the depressed father with his one-off success, his dreams of being creative but his moroseness and his violent outbursts. Romola Garai is able to communicate to us the details of daily life as well as the big sweep of events which overtake the family when the American lord of the manor arrives and is smitten by Rose. Henry Thomas is the lord and Rose Byrne is Rose.

After scenes of poverty where the family live in the ruins of a property, we are transported to a world of wealthy society, of fashion and the arts and the fulfilment of romantic girls' dreams. In the meantime, there are many emotional crises as arranged love versus true love with quite an amount of self-sacrifice. Re-creating its period with a great sense of detail, it might have been stronger with better performances from some of the younger cast.

BRUCE ALMIGHTY (US, 2003, d. Tom Shadyac)

Film director, Tom Shadyac, is a practising Catholic. For some moviegoers, this might be something of a surprise because Shadyac is best known for broad, popular comedies with Jim Carrey, Eddie Murphy and Robin Williams. He made *The Nutty Professor*, *Liar, Liar* and *Patch Adams*. *Bruce Almighty*, is another Jim Carrey comedy. But it is also a film about God, God's providence, human free will and prayer.

Carrey is Bruce Nolan, a television reporter, who feels that he is being passed over at the station, that exasperating things always happen to him, that God has something against him. It's the kind of feeling that many of us have from time to time. What is God doing to us?

Bruce gets his answer when God calls him to a warehouse and appears to him, not in clouds and trumpet blasts, but as a janitor-electrician who seems to find doing some manual work a relief to all the thinking and guiding he has to do. Morgan Freeman is an actor with great dignity and gravity with a beautiful speaking voice and he brings those qualities to his portrayal of God. God also has a fine sense of humour and some witty one-liners. God gives over his powers to Bruce for a week to see if he can manage things any better.

What Bruce discovers is that he is rather self-centred and that he uses his powers, often in petty ways to annoy people, just for himself. When God arranges a meeting with Bruce on top of Mount Everest so that they can admire creation, he urges Bruce to think beyond himself and to think about people's prayers. Bruce is somewhat overwhelmed, especially when he finds that one of the most constant of people praying is his girlfriend - who has the significant name, Grace. Bruce begins to see the world rather differently, through God's eyes.

Perhaps this makes the film sound more serious than it is. All this reflection on God and prayer is set within a funny comedy. Fans of Jim Carrey now know that he can do clowning slapstick comedy but, after *The Truman Show*, that he can do more witty and thoughtful comedy as well.

People often say that they should make more positive films and films with moral and religious values. Tom Shadyac has been able to combine truly important themes with a popular comedy.

DARK BLUE (US, 2002, d. Ron Shelton)

Hard action, hard hitting and hard sounding, this is a very interesting film about police work and police corruption in Los Angeles. The setting is 1991. The film opens with footage of the Rodney King beatings

by a group of police. The action of the film takes place during the trial of these police and their subsequently being found not guilty. This acquittal sparked off riots and looting as the African American population expressed anger at the verdict.

The story is by James Ellroy, author of another book about police corruption, *LA Confidential*, which was made into a very successful and Oscar-winning film. *Dark Blue* is even more gritty, focussing as it does on a staunch, 'redneck' officer played by Kurt Russell in one of his best performances. His grandfather was a policeman when Los Angeles was a frontier town. His father was a respected officer. He has tried to live up to his father's expectations but his views and his disgust at criminals have taken him into a dangerous vigilante path, especially under directions from his father's partner, a bent chief of police, played all too believably by Brendan Gleeson.

Things come to a head when his apprentice partner (Scott Speedman) is investigated for a fatal shooting during a surveillance. Ramrodly upright officer, Ving Rhames, who has ambitions to be the first African American police chief, is unrelenting in his pursuit of corruption, especially in the context of the King incident.

This makes for strong courtroom style drama as well as the portrayal of violence in the streets and the manipulation of evidence to frame known criminals and their cold-blooded execution. When it becomes too much for his partner and he himself becomes a target (as well as his wife leaving him), Russell has to reassess his life and values and make a decision with integrity.

Impressive direction from Ron Shelton, better known for his sports films including *Bull Durham* and *The Tin Cup*.

ANIMAL FACTORY (US, 2002, d. Steve Buscemi)

There have been many prison films, tough, harsh, frightening films. This is one of those, although its material is generally familiar and does not offer anything particularly new. Its strength is in its performances. Willem Dafoe is always credible as someone with a dark side. Here he is the 'boss' amongst the prisoners, serving a 25 year sentence, well ingratiated with the wardens, able to deal drugs and to influence any faction in the prison. Edward Furlong is a rich kid drug dealer, sentenced to the prison, who teams up with Dafoe and his clique, learning the ways of the prison, being protected, but flaring up in anger and endangering his parole. One of the difficulties is that Furlong is either miscast or does not give a persuasive performance because his character does not seem to fit his behaviour - almost too nice for the violence, surliness and attacks on authority. The rest of the cast make quite a believable job of portraying harsh criminal elements.

Steve Buscemi, no slouch at portraying seedy villains, directed the film and plays one of the prison officers. The title of the film seems very pessimistic and we are shown how prison can turn men into animals. However, there are elements that offer some hope for redemption - or, at least, of accepting one's fate.

CHARLIE'S ANGELS: FULL THROTTLE (US, 2003, d. McG)

Full Throttle is as apt a title as any for this sequel to the popular action show, *Charlie's Angels*, and tribute to the popular television series of the 1970s. (Part of the tribute is in still using John Forsythe's voice for Charlie and having Jaclyn Smith appear to Drew Barrymore, like a guardian angel, to urge her to have faith in herself). Otherwise, this film is definitely of the 21st century, fast, flip, full of action, humour, tongue-in-cheek, just like a music video in its editing and pace as well as its offbeat glamour, the specialties of its director, McG).

The Angels themselves are given stronger personalities this time, a bit of family background and some boyfriends. They still have time to disguise themselves every few minutes (from exotic club dancers to nuns) and to enjoy themselves as they go into action to save the American Justice system from criminals who have stolen rings with the coded identities and addresses of everyone in the Witness Program

protection system (including Dylan) and want to sell the information to the highest bidder. Would any government rely on two rings for this data!!

Drew Barrymore is the earthier angel, Lucy Liu the more educated and accomplished angel and Cameron Diaz simply holds centre screen whenever she is on, glamorous, singing and dancing and doing funny impersonations. The men play second fiddle, with Bernie Mac as one of the least effective of the Bosleys, the go-between for Charlie and the Angels. There are some boyfriends, including Matt LeBlanc taking time off from Friends to do a parody (or repeat) of his Friends' persona, with a few jokes at the expense of Mission Impossible 2.

It is surprising to see Demi Moore looking so fit. But she is at the stage of her career where she plays villain in this kind of film. Other guest spots include John Cleese, Bruce Willis and Luke Wilson.

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY (UK, 2003, d. Douglas McGrath)

There are two traditions of translating Charles Dickens' well-loved and mammoth novels to the screen. There is the David Lean tradition of making quite dark interpretations, very serious and revealing the evils of what has become known as Dickensian London. Lean's Great Expectations and Oliver Twist are outstanding examples of this kind of film-making. The other tradition is to go for colour, for light and to offer an outline of the plot, a touch like the Readers' Digest condensed book, and have an array of character actors to bring the characters to life. It can be done as a musical like Oliver or like a television movie. There have been several Christmas Carols and Great Expectations.

This version of Nicholas Nickleby seems intended as a more serious adaptation but comes across more like the condensed book. It is attractively photographed, sometimes prettily like a postcard. It has more than enough actors to satisfy an appetite for celebrities. But, some of the dialogue and the righteous and indignant behaviour sound so rhetorically 19th century that it makes the film seem a touch antiquated.

The best thing in the film is Christopher Plummer's performance as Nicholas' greedy and manipulative uncle. (Very akin to Scrooge, but without finding his redemption.) He illustrates just how much there is in Dickens that reveals the dark side of human nature. Other distinguished actors don't have so much screen time and come across as caricatures, for instance, Jim Broadbent and Juliet Stevenson as Mr and Mrs Squeers, although Nathan Lane does well as the travelling theatre manager. (And that is Barry Humphries as Edna Everage playing his wife.) Charlie Hunnam and Romola Garai are nice and proper as Nicholas and his sister, but not more and Jamie Bell tags along as Smike.

This is not to say that the film will not give a great deal of pleasure to audiences who enjoy a comfortable version of the classic.

LA COMUNIDAD (Spain, 2002, d. Alex de la Iglesia)

Alex de la Iglesia is a Spanish director who has a talent for the offbeat and the comically grotesque. He made one of the ugliest road films, Perdita Durango. In La Comunidad, he brings his wild ideas and style under more control - or, he focuses them better. This means that La Comunidad is truly an original.

Carmen Maura is a larger than life Spanish star who has appeared in several of Almodovar's films. She is intense and dominating. Here she plays a woman working for an estate agent who decides to move into one of the apartments she is trying to sell. She has no idea of what she has let herself in for. Neither do we, the audience. So, we follow the crazy happenings in the building (much of which is in a state of collapse, very handy for some of the chases and dangers to come) as she finds a corpse and a huge amount of money. As she tries to get away with it, she learns something of what community solidarity is like. Everyone in the building has a claim - and they take it very seriously. Maura finds herself pursued in lifts, up and down stairs, swinging from buildings, leaping over rooves with various greed driven characters in pursuit. It is all rather breathless, filmed in flamboyant style to show us how a Spanish black comedy can be made.

WRONG TURN

Maybe the simplest horror plots are the best. If you read the synopsis of *Wrong Turn*, you will surely say that it has all been done before (all kinds of *Scream* movies as well as *Blair Witch Projects*). But, we realise, it is not so much whether we have seen it before but how is it done now. Personally, I found this quite a creepy film, with more than a touch of realism in the dangerous situation in which the characters find themselves and fight for survival (not all of them successfully).

The film is set in the backwoods of West Virginia amongst inbred families (who behave like characters in the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*). The Governor of West Virginia might have a reasonable case to sue the film-makers for their presentation of West Virginia. Having said that, we can say that *Wrong Turn* does what it sets out to do and does it very effectively, chills, fears and scares. A group of young adults find themselves on dead-end (literally) roads in the mountains and have to use their wits to escape some monstrous mountain men. Some do, some don't.

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A good title for a horror-thriller. And the settings are eerie (all filmed in Luxembourg, offering different views for the US). But, the plot is very difficult to follow, something about people who log on to a fear website finding that they will be killed within 48 hours (something like *The Ring* and people who watch a video getting a call threatening them with death within a week). Part of the complication is that there is a dead girl who wants vengeance and she is linked in with a mad (very mad) doctor who has killed her and is a serial killer with autopsy skills. Added to that are the two main characters, a weary young policeman whom the serial killer taunts and a health inspector who is called to the scene of one of the deaths. They team up, discover what happens when you log on. He does, although warning her not to. She does. And she has to find the doctor. At least, I think that that is more or less what it is about. Stephen Dorff is the policeman, Natasha McElhone the health inspector and Stephen Rea being madder than mad as the doctor. It looks very effective, has eerie atmosphere but does not make all that much sense.

THE FOUR FEATHERS (UK, 2002, d. Shekha Kapur)

Back in the days of the British Empire, there were glory days of war and heroism. In the post-Empire days there were novels and films, with the touch of *Boys' Own Adventure*, of brave British soldiers who went to hostile countries and climes to conquer heathens and to serve Queen and country. The novels of A.E.W. Mason were in this vein. Two 1930s films of his stories became classics: *The Drum* and *The Four Feathers*. *The Four Feathers* has proven to be a very popular story over the decades with a 50s remake called *Storm over the Nile* and a 70s version, called *The Four Feathers*, with Beau Bridges as the hero. Now, here it is again at the beginning of the 21st century, with Empire long gone - and with some, forgotten, or never known.

Directed by Shekha Kapur, the Indian director of *Elizabeth*, it is often sumptuous to look at in its English sequences, and captures to atmosphere of the Sudanese desert, dunes and villages, with Morocco standing in for the Sudan. The cast is also international. Australian Heath Ledger plays the hero, the young man who gives up a military career, partly in the desire to marry his fiancée and partly out of fear and who is reviled as a coward and sent four white feathers as a sign of his lack of manliness. Americans Kate Hudson and Wes Bentley play the fiancée and best friend. The British actors take supporting roles, Michael Sheen and Rupert Penry Jones.

After a Rugby opening, the men from the playing fields of Eton embrace the prospect of action and adventure against the Mahdi. The reality is far from noble engagement with the enemy. They discover their own fears and strengths as well as learning that their assumed British superiority is something of a myth. Our hero, of course, wants to redeem himself in the eyes of his fiancée and friends and goes to the Sudan undercover, prepared to give his life to save them. These aspects of the film are very physical and gruelling. The spirit of Empire did inspire many to a self-sacrifice that looks ultra-heroic these days.

TEARS OF THE SUN (US, 2003, d. Antoine Fuqua)

This is a very watchable action adventure, probably because it is almost old-fashioned in its linear storytelling and in its emotional pull as we watch a rescue mission turn into a dangerous chase and pursuit. It is the kind of story that they told on screen, especially in British films of the 1950s.

However, the location is modern-day Africa, specifically Nigeria, and the setting is a military coup and a civil war with the rebels executing the president and his family. While this may not be Nigeria, it is true of several African countries, especially in West Africa and in the Congo region. One of the questions about the reception of this film is its post Iraq War release. It seems a tribute to American troops coming in to rescue people from tyrants and save the day, especially through firepower. (A film to compare notes with is *Black Hawk Down*, set in Somalia in the early 1990s.)

Bruce Willis, looking like Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*, leads a crack squad of military who specialise in undercover missions. This time they are to bring out non-Europeans, specifically an Italian doctor (Monica Bellucci), the Italian mission priest and two Irish nuns. In the event the priest and nuns refuse to leave and the doctor is forced out but not before asking for a number of the refugees from the rebels to be flown to safety with her. Orders are clear and applied objectively. However, Willis and his men have a change of heart and the film turns into a chase, with the harassed group trying to reach the Cameroun border.

There are some violence scenes of cruelty to men, women and children in the mission, including the beheading of the priest, as well as a massacre in an allegedly sympathetic village hiding the president's surviving son. There is also a commando raid as the Americans kill the rebels committing the atrocities. The vivid presentation of these sequences is certainly far stronger than what we can see in films of the 50s.

The film raises political issues of sovereignty of states and intrusion or invasion by foreign troops, the precarious politics of some African countries, war crimes and justice for the innocent victims. It is pleasing to see in a film of 2003, a sympathetic picture of a contemporary mission with a contemporary priest and sisters. The film was directed by Antoine Fuqua who directed Denzel Washington in *Training Day*.

CE JOUR LA (THAT DAY) (France, 2003, d. Raoul Ruiz)

Ce Jour La is a Swiss production, with Portuguese-Chilean director Raoul Ruiz having made a career in South America and then in France over several decades. He received financial support for this project and located it in Switzerland.

Comparisons have been made between Bunuel and Ruiz. With this film they are more than just comparisons. This, in many ways, is a cinema of the absurd. However, the locations are naturalistic, the comedy of manners is elegant as well as absurd. The film offers a critique of the State, specifically Switzerland, with its financial laws, becoming a terrorist, using violence against its citizens to save its finances. The film is also critical of society, in a manner akin to that of Bunuel, as it shows a father in debt willing to let a murderer out of the asylum that he owns, giving him a message from God that he should kill his daughter who was to receive his mother's inheritance and which he needed to pay his debts. The other characters are a gallery of characters and caricatures: there is the insane daughter, the insane murderer, the father himself and his presiding over his business, his eccentric sister, his mistress, his two sons, a stranger met by the wayside, the evil power from the Swiss government and his brother who has protected the young woman. As with Bunuel, they are assembled at a significant meal in which the characters and interactions are revealed.

The title refers to 28 December in the near future (because it is a Monday, it is 2004). The runes and other signs have told the young woman that it is to be her special day - and this definitely becomes true.

The film is very well performed, keeping a balance between eccentricity and normality, making the strange goings-on almost plausible. There is an irony as the two policeman in the town decide to do nothing and spend the day sitting in a restaurant, finally coming to apprehend the killer. Ruiz has done many comedies of manners as well as eccentric and absurd films. These two aspects of his career come together very

elegantly in this film.

THE IN-LAWS

When the original was released in 1979, it gave audiences some laughs. It was one of those frantic comedies with odd couple, Alan Arkin and Peter Falk, caught up in international espionage while they were trying to prepare their children's wedding. A re-make? Why? Why not?

I enjoyed this version (updated from Latin America to Europe and post-soviet collapse arms' dealing) and found it funnier and more agreeably frantic than the original. This time a very extraverted and cheery Michael Douglas is the spy while Albert Brooks is the hypochondriac, multi-phobias podiatrist who accidentally gets caught up in the cloak and dagger stuff. Albert Brooks has one of the most hang-dog looks in Hollywood and one of the best deliveries of mournful, feeling-put-upon one-liners. He is perfect for this part. David Suchet hams it up with gusto as the international dealer of anything illegal who takes more than a liking to Brooks. Candice Bergen is the New Age mother of the groom.

The action keeps shifting from marriage doings in Chicago to planes and chateaux in France, always with a nice sense of timing as Douglas is able to use Bond-like ingenuity to get himself and Brooks out of every far-fetched dangerous situation. Always amusing, some good laughs - and both of them learn something from each other to be more attentive to their children and be better parents. And that can't be all bad.

THE HARD WORD (Australia, 2002, d. Scott Roberts)

The Hard Word is a tough Australian crime thriller. While it shows two robberies in detail, it focuses very much on the old mateship ethos. The central characters are three brothers played by Pearce, Edgerton and Richardson. They play very well together and are believable brothers. They are released out of jail by the governor and by crooked police in order to do robberies, controlled by a crooked lawyer played by Robert Taylor. Rachel Griffiths plays Pearce's two-timing wife. Paul Sonkkila and Vince Colosimo are the corrupt police.

The film also nods in the direction of Ned Kelly and the lovable larrikin outlaws. Everybody in this film is amoral/immoral. The brothers are just the least amoral of all the characters.

Bondi Beach and Sydney locations are very well used to give an impression of the city. So also are the scenes of Melbourne. The Australian love for the Big Banana, Big Pineapple and so on receives a homage with a fictitious town and the Big Cow, a statue in which the robbers hide the money.

The action is fast-paced, violent only towards the end - which leaves one in the strange experience of disapproving of all the characters while barracking for the brothers.

Direction is by Scott Roberts, a writer who spent some time in the United States writing The American Way, K2 and Shadow of the Cobra amongst other films. This is his feature film debut.

HULK (US, 2003, d. Ang Lee)

It is hard to put one's finger on Taiwanese director, Ang Lee. His career has covered a wide range of genres: Wedding Banquet, Sense and Sensibility, Ice Storm, Ride with the Devil and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. Now, he has made a comic-strip hero action movie. He has said that he would like to do a musical!

Hulk is not your everyday hero. In fact, he is more in the tradition of King Kong than Spiderman. While Peter Parker is infected by a mutant spider that enables him to be the saviour of the city, Bruce Banner has been infected by his arrogant scientist father's experiments on himself. Nor does he know this. When he tries to save the life of a fellow scientist and receives a super electric charge, his depth physiology and psychology are both detonated. His Jungian shadow, his smouldering inner rage, is so huge that he transforms into the destructive Hulk. One of his difficulties, he confesses, when he returns to himself, is

that he enjoys the rage. Hulk saves no one. He destroys property and the greedy entrepreneur who wants to make money out of potential weapons of mass destruction. But, he can return to himself, like King Kong, and be tamed again by his love for Betty Ross.

Hulk is, therefore, both comic book and philosophical. It questions the ethics of experiments that dehumanise. In the character of David Banner, we have the mad scientist gone berserk (especially as he transforms into a destructive monster). Nick Nolte is one of the wildest-eyed, wildest-haired would-be Frankenstein on screen.

With the military context and with Sam Elliot's stern and stubborn General Ross, we have echoes of The Lawnmower Man and experiments to be at the service of American power. In the post September 11th era, Hulk offers some critique on warfare and terrorism. The fact that the military find it impossible to capture or quell hulk offers an ironic comment on American peace-keeping in Iraq.

Eric Bana is the nice Bruce Banner who is bewildered by his transformations. Jennifer Connolly is his strong-minded and loving colleague. As regards Hulk himself, the producers have not followed the television lead of having Bill Bixby and Lou Ferrigno do the two roles. Rather, Hulk is computer-generated. In the realism context of the film, this oddly shaped (though intelligently faced) creature, bouncing all over the countryside and flinging helicopters as if they were toys, does not really mesh with the film as a whole. Too much need for suspension of disbelief.

DOUBLE WHAMMY (US, 2002, d. Tom de Cillo)

Slight and light. Writer-director, Tom de Cillo, has a pleasant CV with offbeat comedies like Johnny Suede, Living in Oblivion (very funny on independent film-making), Box of Moonlight and The Real Blonde (very funny on the world of commercials). On this level, Double Whammy is probably the least and least satisfying of his films. The comic ideas are good but they go together in a somewhat inconsequential way.

What about a detective with a bad back which goes out just as a mass killer is machine-gunning customers in a take-away place - and a young boy gets to stop the murderer? What if the detective is at home sleeping when the super of his building is stabbed by two killers? Double Whammy for a loser cop - that's the verdict of the media and his boss. What if his sexually-confused partner recommended a chiropractor and the detective fell in love with her? And what about two would-be film-makers talking inanities as they do their screenplay with dreams of Sundance and Cannes? All good ideas, especially as it is the nice young daughter who has hired the hit-men to get rid of her father, the super.

The cast is good too. Denis Leary is far less sarcastic and frenetic than usual as the detective. Steve Buscemi does a nice turn as his partner. And Elizabeth Hurley is the chiropractor. It's just that it gells too loosely to be as punchy, funny and entertaining as it might have been.

BRINGING DOWN THE HOUSE

The 'odd couple' has proven a constant and popular theme in American films. This time it is quite an odd couple: Steve Martin plays a middle-aged lawyer, divorced but still loving his wife, and a loving father; Queen Latifah plays a solid ex-prisoner who has been framed and who wants justice done. She has been corresponding by email with the lawyer, leading him to think she is a glamorous blonde. When she arrives at his house on a date, it is definitely not what he expected and it goes downhill from there. Obviously, by the end of the film, it is uphill again and she has resolved most of his personal, family and business problems.

The humour is not particularly sophisticated - undemandingly amusing.

Queen Latifah has shown us in a number of films just what a strong presence she is. This culminated in an Oscar nomination for her role as Mama Morton in Chicago. Steve Martin is... well, Steve Martin, angsty over problems, though not without a touch of wheeler-dealing. Jean Smart is his ex-wife, Eugene Levy is his leering partner, especially in Queen Latifah's direction. Joan Plowright plays a snooty American grand dame from the South brought up in England who puts her foot in it all the time with her snobbery and racist attitudes. Add to that the gangsters who have framed Latifah and you have quite a mixture for comedy and mishaps.

DIRTY DEEDS (Australia, 2002, d. David Caesar)

Although there are American gangsters in this film, it is particularly Australian. In fact, it is particularly a Sydney film. Overseas critics thought it exaggerated with a touch of farce. However, older Sydneysiders can tell you of the 60s and the days when there were violent disputes about poker machine sales' rights (and wrongs), about warfare and vendettas and how the New South Wales state premier of the time, Sir Robin Askin, has been unmasked as a corrupt politician.

This is not to say that Dirty Deeds is history. Rather it has touches of Aussie (Ocker) humour with its drama. It was written and directed by David Caesar who began his career in documentaries, made some feature films (especially Idiot Box about unemployed young men in Sydney and television culture and violence) and a number of television movies and series episodes. He has a good ear for the accents and speech patterns of his characters and it all has the ring of authenticity, no matter how exaggerated it may seem.

Most of this is to the credit of Bryan Brown who sounds 'fair dinkum' (Australian for 'authentic') in his rather inarticulate eloquence. He can be both sinister and charming - which is precisely what his gangster character is like. Toni Collette plays his gum-chewing, brook no rivals, tough wife. Sam Neill is a corrupt Sydney police officer who keeps a lid on everything. Sam Worthington is a young Vietnam vet who has to make choices for his life: thuggery or being a chef.

John Goodman and Felix Williamson are two Americans who are sent to Australia to seal the deal on local buying of poker machines. Goodman is older and a touch wiser and is content to ride with the situation, eventually seeing that with the money deals and murders, it is worth nothing. Williamson, on the other hand, is a trigger happy petty crook who does not understand Australia and who is more at home with double deals. When you stir all this together, you get a fairly true picture of those dirty deeds days - the time when Pizza is being introduced to Australia and the country is being transformed by international culture.

THE RECRUIT (US, 2003, d. Roger Donaldson)

In recent years, Al Pacino has been making a lot of films. He has a strong screen persona, with an ability to come across as much larger than life (Devil's Advocate, On Any Sunday, Simone, Insomnia). In The Recruit, he is definitely larger than life, playing a veteran of years of covert activity, now on the brink of retirement, full of angers and resentments, but an overt patriot.

Colin Farrell, on the other hand, is a young man in search of a calling. The first part of the film shows Pacino playing cat and mouse with Farrell, trying to recruit him for secret service. Will he, won't he? What means of manipulating and manoeuvring will he use? Will Farrell succumb? Well, the title of the film does give it away. He does.

What follows are scenes of gruelling training, enough to make anyone in their right mind want to give up. However, Farrell's father may have been killed in some kind of operation in South America and he wants to know the truth. He perseveres and Pacino offers tantalising incentives of information.

The third act is more complex: the test. Farrell has to prove is worth as a secret agent, but undercover activity means living perpetually in puzzle and at risk. Who is telling the truth? Who is lying? Who is trying to kill whom? And why? And is it worth it? And that is how the film ends, with a high

melodramatic confrontation, speeches about patriotism, violence. While this gives us action entertainment, I am not sure that it is a very effective campaign for real life recruiting to the CIA or other agencies.

The director is Roger Donaldson who made *Thirteen Days* and other action films.

ANTWONE FISHER (US, 2002, d. Denzel Washington)

It is difficult to dramatise goodness. Far easier to deal with conflict and evil - and more absorbing for audiences.

This is very much the case with *Antwone Fisher*, only a moderate success at the American box-office and looked at with something of disdain by non-Americans who dismissed it as being too 'worthy' or that the ending was too clean-cut for an otherwise stately and thought-provoking movie. Yet, *Antwone Fisher* survived his past, wrote this screenplay as well as a fuller memoir after the filming. And, perhaps, the ending is not quite as clean as all that because *Antwone*, while he finds his mother, does not relate lovingly to her and there is no indication that he will return to see her, no matter how much the audience wants this to happen.

Derek Luke was working at the Sony studio's gift shop and by chance met *Antwone Fisher*. He went for the part, his first, and acquits himself admirably. On screen for virtually the whole film, he takes the audience through the difficulties of his life in the navy, his reluctance to undergo the obligatory psychological sessions, his gradual change, his hesitance in committing himself to a relationship. We share his discovering love. We share the tragedy of his birth, abuse by carers, the death of his best friend. We finally share his discovery of mother and family.

Denzel Washington makes his directorial debut and has a substantial role as the navy psychiatrist. The screenplay gives some substance to Dr Davenport's story outside his office, tensions as he and his wife are unable to have children, his personal edginess, his seeing *Antwone* as a surrogate son, his own healing by the trust *Antwone* places in him.

Not exciting or action-packed but a portrait of a man and his healing of memories.

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL (US, 2003, d. Gore Verbinski)

In the early decades of the 20th century, Douglas Fairbanks Sr and Douglas Fairbanks Jr along with Errol Flynn cornered the market on pirates with *Black Swans*, *Sinbad*, *Captain Blood*. Robert Newton was both Long John Silver and Blackbeard. Tyrone Power and Burt Lancaster also had their chances. However, in recent times, it is said that pirate movies do not succeed at the box office. Roman Polanski's *Pirates* was a case in point as well as *Cutthroat Island*.

That may all be over now as the *Pirates of the Caribbean* sail on to our screens. Based loosely on the ride in Disneyland, the project has been written by the authors of *Shrek*, *Aladdin* and *The Mark of Zorro* and produced by the ace of big action shows, Jerry Bruckheimer. And audiences have enjoyed it.

Set in the early 18th century, it has all the popular ingredients of sea battles, abductions of heroines, sturdy fighting heroes, an array of cutlass-armed sailors and prissy British authorities. It has a new element in so far as the pirates are under a curse and cannot die until the blood of one of their colleagues is spilt on some gold medallions. This enables the special effects crew to have the pirates look normal until the moonlight shines on them and we see them as skeletons. Since they are led by Geoffrey Rush as Captin Borbosa, they are formidable opponents.

The surprise of the film is Johnny Depp as the laissez faire Captain Jack Sparrow whose ship has been stolen by Borbosa. He escapes the island where he has been marooned and steps into all kinds of trouble in the port. Depp sports a made-up dreadlock style with a swaggering, slightly alcoholic accent, giving the wink to many of the old pirate conventions.

Orlando Bloom (Legolas in The Lord of the Rings) is the blacksmith hero and Keira Knightly quite a feisty heroine with Jonathan Pryce as the governor, her father.

It is quite long but enough going on and the performances good enough to keep us attentive.

LEGALLY BLONDE 2

Reese Witherspoon was such a success in the original as Elle Wood, the seeming Barbie doll incarnate who confounded everyone by getting into Harvard and then winning her legal cases with a mixture of ingenuous charm and luck, that she has returned. The first film was such a surprise, that it is hard to re-capture its freshness. However, the film-makers have had a pleasing stab at it that will have the critics saying that initial success cannot be repeated and audiences saying that, while it is not startling, it is an enjoyable show.

Elle now takes on Washington after she hires a private detective to find out the lineage of her dog - and, horror or horrors, mother is part of an animal testing company. What better than have anti cruelty to animals legislation (which, while funny in its singlemindedness on a single issue, makes one wonder why animal rights get more sentimental support than human rights)? Elle is thwarted by those who want the status quo. She is undermined by her heroine, a Congresswoman played by Sally Field. However, she wins over crusty politicians from both parties, exudes innocently shrewd sweetness, is helped by kindly doorman, Bob Newhart, and follows James Stewart's footsteps (as Goldie Hawn did in Protocol) like Mr Smith Goes to Washington.

There are some daffy situations and quite a lot of well-delivered one-liners that keep a smile on the face as one watches Reese Witherspoon's ultra self-confidence in disbelief.

SPY KIDS 3D (US, 2003, d. Robert Rodriguez)

The unexpected success of Spy Kids meant that a sequel was inevitable. It followed very quickly. This next sequel has also followed very quickly but it has an added gimmick: 3D. Because audiences have to wear special glasses, they have found it annoying or irritating. Director Robert Rodriguez has been shrewd in this regard and has actor Alan Cumming explaining to the audience at the beginning of the film when to wear them and when to take them off - and a sign comes on to the screen just in case we didn't realise. By drawing attention to the glasses and their effect, he has made us happier to wear them.

The centre of the story this time is Juni, played by **. Having retired from spy activities, he is called back into action to combat the arch-villain, The Toymaker, who has invented a computer game that is unbeatable, Game Over. Juni's sister, Carmen, is now trapped in the game and Juni has to rescue her and defeat the Toymaster. The 3D effect is for watching the computer game.

On paper, it must have seemed a wonderful idea to have Sylvester Stallone as The Toymaster, to make him a villain and a comic at the same time. He may get away with it with young audiences, but his performance (along with characters based on other parts of his personality) seems very awkwardly less than funny. Much more effective is Ricardo Montalban who has a big role as Grandpa, the previous colleague of The Toymaker and then his victim. Juni is assisted along the way by a group of kids who enjoy their opportunity to be inside the computer game. Better still is that everyone from the previous movies is called in to help: parents, grandparents, friends, which makes it a happy reunion of all who worked on the series.

TERMINATOR 3: THE RISE OF THE MACHINES (US, 2003, d. Jonathan Mostow)

According to Arnold Schwarzenegger, he has been frequently asked when he was going to bring back his famous cyborg to the screen. Finally, he has done it. The gap between Terminator 2 and 3 is twelve years, quite a long time between sequels in a sequel-ridden age. However, the fans were right. The Terminator is a very popular character and has been welcomed with open box-office arms. James Cameron, responsible for the first two films, declined to take over directing reins. Direction has been entrusted to Jonathan Mostow who made the successful road thriller, Breakdown, and the submarine epic, U 571. He has

followed in Cameron's footsteps and brought the same kind of flair to the action and some of the deadpan repartee.

This is the role that suits Schwarzenegger so well. The body-building machine with limited acting ability but who has learned to parody himself and not be worried about getting a laugh out of his screen presence has become the action hero. It is interesting that most of his dialogue consists on average of four words per sentence in not so many sentences. But he delivers them deadpan, the most effective way. This time (as last), he is the good cyborg, sent to protect the future saviour of the post-nuclear-holocaust world, John Connor. Since Robert Patrick as the bad terminator was demolished in Judgment Day, a sleek and ultra-efficient new cyborg is sent to the past to destroy. She is TX and portrayed by glamorous and athletic, Kristanna Loken just as relentlessly as her predecessors.

Nick Stahl takes over the role of John Connor, on the run since the death of his mother and trying to conceal himself from the Terminators. By chance (?), he clashes with a young vet, Katherine Brewster who, it is revealed, will become his wife and lieutenant in the apocalyptic times ahead. Most of the film is the pursuit (and extraordinarily destructive car chase through Los Angeles, the bill for which would outweigh the cost of rebuilding Bagdad) across country to stop Judgment Day when the humanly-engineered machines who have taken over the world by virus contamination of computer systems will set off the nuclear warheads. Given the dramatic ending, the next installment could bring us back to the future and John Connor's attempt to save the world.

WHAT A GIRL WANTS

The title might sound a bit suggestive, but, in reality, in this nice film, what a girl wants is her father.

This modern fairytale is predicated on the American fascination with all things British, especially royalty and the trappings of the class system (the glamorous upperclass trappings with a mere nod to pub life and the world of those not born into privilege). It is in the vein of the amusing King Ralph and of The Princess Diaries.

What would happen when the daughter of an English lord (who was persuaded to send away his wife by deceiving advisers) and an American wedding singer (who was persuaded to leave by the same advisers thinking that her husband did not want her) decided at age 17 that she wanted to meet her father? Well, all the touristy things for a start with a young girl overawed by the sights of London town. Then there would be all the disruptive things as Lord Henry, having resigned his seat in the House of Lords to stand for the House of Commons, discovers his daughter, realises his own uptight primness as well as the schemes of his gold-digging fiancée and her prissy daughter and her adviser father, and has the chance to fall in love all over again. Everything is signalled well in advance, especially the young girl's extraverted American accident-prone behaviour, her falling in love with a poor musician (who actually was educated at all the best schools), the Cinderella triumph over nasty tricks played by wicked stepmother and jealous step-sister. That seems to be the point, the eager anticipation of how what we know must happen will happen.

Amanda Bynes, star of Nickelodeon Television is a lively Daphne. Colin Firth is still stuck in Mr Darcy and Bridget Jones' mode but makes some startling efforts to break the mould. Kelly Preston is the nice mother while a theatrical British supporting cast give the proceedings more effort than they perhaps deserve: Jonathan Pryce as the adviser, Anna Chancellor as the worst of British snobbery and Eileen Atkins as the nice grandmother.

Adults might fight it a little trying, too chocolate box and sentimental - but there is a valid niche market with fifteen year old girls who want to look at romance, shopping, dresses and music and fairytale endings, American style.

TRIGGER MEN

Trigger Men is a mixture of serious Mafia drama with comedy, in the vein of Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels. It has an American setting, two English petty criminals are mistaken for American assassins and given a job to liquidate the retiring crime boss of the city. In the meantime, the two criminals have been preoccupied with looking at a young woman so that they missed their hit money being stolen. The irony is that the woman they were watching is the daughter of the man to be eliminated. There are other petty criminals as well as the would-be successor and his ruthless henchman.

Neil Morrissey (Men Behaving Badly) and Adrian Dunbar (Hear My Song) are the two Englishmen abroad. The Americans, with some wisecracks against the Limeys permeating their dialogue, are Donnie Wahlberg and Michael Rappaport. Amanda Plummer has a brief role as Adrian Dunbar's wife. Claire Forlani is the daughter of the Mafia chief played by Pete Postlethwaite.

Gradually the threads all come together, the ironies appear, but the result is a mild version of comic crime capers.

AMERICAN PIE: THE WEDDING (US, 2003, d. Jesse Dylan)

Not being a great fan of the first two American Pie films (so, standing against the rest of the world according to the huge box office of each film), I approached the third instalment with some apprehension. The opening scene in the restaurant fulfilled the apprehension, a sex situation with the hero, Jim, which his father (the always entertaining Eugene Levy) misinterprets and the cause embarrassment. There were a number of crass sex jokes during the film and one excremental joke that has us squirming, the film has its pie, so to speak, and eats it, but...

Writer Adam Herz who invented the characters and had them mixed up with sexual shenanigans in the first two films decided that they had to grow up. And this makes a difference, quite a big difference. While Jim (Jason Biggs) causes a mess wherever he goes, he has now graduated and realises that he is in love with the often gawky Michelle (Alyson Hannigan) and that he wants to marry her. His friends can't believe it but enter into the spirit of the wedding preparations. In fact, the whole film is focused on a wedding, a lot of the old-fashioned traditions associated with weddings and, more surprisingly, an amount of dialogue about the nature of love and lifelong commitment. My guess would be that there will be more young people in the US who watch this film who will be persuaded by the film that there really is something of value in growing up, taking responsibility, committing oneself in love than by any sermon on marriage.

Still there is Seann William Scott's character of Stifler who makes us squirm with his macho, sex-obsessed life, his complete lack of sensitivity and finesse. And, yet, he also finally stops thinking about himself (well, at least, for a few hours) and also contributes to the wedding. By the end, most of it is rather sweet. That is not to say that it has not got enough crass jokes and some gross-out sequences that will not be to the taste of audiences who prefer the gentle to the bumptious and raucous.

THE SAFETY OF OBJECTS (US, 2003, d. Rose Troche)

Life in the American suburbs has always fascinated film-makers. It seemed so ideal in the 40s and 50s until some lids were lifted in films like Rebel without a Cause. In later decades, there was all kinds of rebellion. Now families still have their dysfunctional characters as we saw in American Beauty. The Safety of Objects does not have the power of American Beauty nor its fascinating watchableness. It is there on the screen and holds the interest while there but there is no compelling reason for us to see it. Having said that, it is fair to say that should you happen to see it, there is much of interest to watch.

One model for the film is Altman's Short Cuts in which several short stories by Raymond Carver are interwoven and connections created. This time the author is A.M. Homes and writer-director, Rose Troche (Go Fish, Bedrooms and Hallways) has skilfully put a number of stories together to take us through the lives of four families who live near each other over a four day period. It is more explicitly emotive in its American upfrontedness than other cultures might be, more melodramatic.

Troche is served well by a strong ensemble class. In the first family, Glenn Close plays a middle-aged wife and mother whose son (Joshua Jackson) has been lying for a year at home in coma after a car accident. Her husband has moved further to the edge of the family and the daughter (who blames herself for causing the accident as she was fumbling with her security guard boyfriend as the two cars headed for each other) is angry with herself and with her mother, forcing her mother to go on a marathon competition at the mall to win a car. The final scenes between Close and her son are very moving while raising questions about coping with a relative in coma.

Nearby, Patricia Clarkson has been divorced and is trying to cope with her two children and her increasing drinking while their father is about to re-marry and does not visit his children. Her older daughter (Kristen Stewart, Jodie Foster's daughter in *Panic Room*) is friends with a girl nearby whose mother (Mary Kay Place) is feeling alienated and indulges in New Age fads. Timothy Olyphant plays a gardener who is suffering from the loss of a boy in the car accident and abducts the young girl for two days.

The younger family in the neighbourhood has the father (Dermot Mulroney) undergoing some kind of emotional breakdown after not being promoted at work and not telling his rather controlling wife (Moirra Kelly). He has problems to come because his thirteen year old son talks, very seriously, to a doll. In the meantime, he works at the mall, supporting Glenn Close fanatically in her attempt to win the car.

This film is more hopeful as it moves towards some resolution of the problems and unites the characters in a final neighbourhood dinner as they welcome a new couple. The film has a strong sense of humanity.

ANGELA (Italy, 2002, d. Roberta Torre)

Roberta Torre is a Milanese director who moved to Palermo and has made several films showing Sicilian life. *Angela* is based on a true story, a more local and modest Mafioso story. Angela works in her husband's shoe store, where they use the delivery of shoes as a cover for drug distribution. Several family members and friends are in on the operation as couriers and accountants. When an attractive young man comes to join the group, Angela and he fall in love. They are taped in their meetings by the police who are suspicious of the drug deals.

When everyone is arrested, the police ask Angela to turn state's witness and they will destroy the tapes. Angela is bound into the Mafia code and refuses to collaborate. All except her husband who is in jail are under house arrest. The pressure mounts on Angela, faithful to her husband, still enamoured of her lover. What future can she have?

The film initially shows how the drug distribution works. Then it moves into Angela's emotional dilemmas. Finally, it focuses on law and justice issues. Donatella Finocchiaro, lawyer turned amateur actress, combines the smouldering beauty of the Italian actress tradition of Maganani and Loren with the limits of the Palermo housewife who enjoyed the good life and who has to face an obscure future.

LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER: THE CRADLE OF LIFE

Lara Croft is a very popular videogame personality, enhanced by the first Lara Croft film and Angelina Jolie bringing her to larger than life. This is a more polished production than the first film, relying on the fact that Lara does not have to be introduced. Rather, we go straight into action in the Greek islands, discovering a submerged temple built by Alexander the Great, admiring its beauty only to have Chinese thugs swim in, causing mayhem and stealing a ball which is the map to find Pandora's box which, when opened, could give mastery of the world to whoever controls all the evil it contains. This kind of mythology is twaddle but is articulated as if it were evident fact.

In many ways, the Lara Croft stories are variations on the James Bond films. As Lady Croft, she can be charming and aristocratic. As the Tomb Raider, she can be an intelligent historian and archeologist. As the performer of derring-do stunts, she is, of course, an action star. She is given quite a lot of scope for this kind of heroism as the action goes to China, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Kenya and Tanganyika. She is joined in her quest for the missing ball by Gerard Butler who either loves her absolutely or loves her but is

prepared to betray her to get possession of Pandora's box. However, the arch villain is Ciaran Hinds, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist who has obviously taken Bond's nemesis, Blofeld, as his model and wants to rule the world.

Assisting Lara are her computer nerd friend, Noah Taylor, and her butler and partner in martial arts practice, Christopher Barrie. To complain that it is all a bit obvious is to miss the point. Fans love it because it is obvious. It is the pleasure of following all the moves, anticipating the dangers, fighting the battles and seeing how good triumphs over evil that counts.

THE MAN WHO SUED GOD (Australia, 2001, d. Mark Joffe)

When Billy Connolly was approached about playing the main role in this film, he was really pleased with the title. It is an amusing title as well as an intriguing one - and that is how the film itself unfolds. It is very entertaining, but it does raise a lot of points about God and religion (and, so, something of a companion piece to Bruce Almighty).

The reason for suing God is what the insurance companies and others call 'Acts of God'. These are events which seem to be beyond the scope of normal prediction. When they cause damage which is considered excessive, some insurance companies use the act of God as a way out of compensation. There are some good court scenes where Billy Connolly argues against this, pointing out the true nature of God, not as someone vindictive waiting to hurt people, but a loving God. In fact, for a thoughtful audience there are quite a few theological ideas in the screenplay.

But, the tone of the film is light with some funny comedy moments and lines. Billy Connolly can be over the top with his language (still fairly salty one might say) and his comic style. Here he is very disciplined as well as giving an amiable tone to his character, a lawyer who retired to become a fisherman on the south coast of New South Wales and lost his wife and his daughter who is devoted to him.

He has met a journalist in a clumsy but funny restaurant accident. After an initial clash, she sees his story as a way for her to do some good investigative writing and becomes his close ally. Judy Davis plays this role.

There is a fine supporting cast of Australian actors, especially for the wily lawyer who prosecutes the case and for the church leaders who are the defendants because they represent God. Ecumenically speaking, the Catholic Cardinal of Sydney comes out best with some spiritual reflections, less so the Anglican archbishop and the Uniting Church moderator. The Chief Rabbi is the one with the comic lines.

Director Mark Joffe has made some entertaining 'quirky' Australian comedies that are worth catching if you liked this film, Spotswood (with Anthony Hopkins, Russell Crowe and Toni Collette) and Così.

CONFIDENCE (US, 2003, d. James Foley)

Confidence as in 'confidence trick', ensnaring the 'mark' so that you gain their confidence and then steal from them. The overall tone of the film is very clever: don't trust anyone, so that there are many twists throughout the plot. The overall tone is amoral: look how clever the trickster is and how they get away with it. While that is a simplistic overview, it is still worth thinking about.

It's the cleverness that absorbs audience attention. The central character, played by Ed Burns as a quietly charming man so that when he speaks you don't know whether he is lying, lies dying at the opening of the film, telling his story to a bank strongman. He explains how he has managed a big scam with his associates (including some LAPD on the take). The only trouble is that the money was to be given to a Mr Big. He is Mr King, Dustin Hoffman in a supporting role that is so smart and intense a creation of a sleazy crook that you tend to remember him more than all the other characters. There is also a special agent, looking down on his luck but obsessed about the leader of the cons, who is played by Andy Garcia in a manner rivalling Hoffman's. This is not to say that the other characters are not well played.. They are, especially with Paul Giamatti and Rachel Weisz as part of the gang.

There are lots of close-ups, so we are invited by director, James Foley, to scrutinise these faces, testing us to see how far we are taken in by them. Facial expressions, body language, boasting, lies and truth are all there for us to study and see whether we have been conned or not. If you like a twisting plot, try this one - even though some of them get away with it.

GERRY (US, 2003, d. Gus Van Sant)

The name of director, Gus Van Sant, has been associated with offbeat comedy and drama like *My Own Private Idaho* and *To Die for* as well as the feelgood *Good Will Hunting* and *Finding Forrester*. He won the Palme D'Or at Cannes 2003 with his brief portrait of a school and the gun culture, *Elephant*. Before *Elephant*, he made *Gerry*. It takes him back to his experimental roots and his exploring the ways in which cinema communicates. If that does arouse interest, it is best to stay away from *Gerry*.

In a way, one could call the film boring in an interesting way or interesting in a boring way. Van Sant acknowledges European director, Bela Tar, as an influence, a director who is unafraid of long, long (very long) takes, making his audience stay with whatever passing landscape he chooses or focus on a character. For those who prefer action, perhaps patience is not enough.

Having said that, there is a great deal in *Gerry*. It is not so much what is happening on the screen: two friends go for a hike, get lost and wander the mountains and flats for several days looking for water. It is rather how everything is communicated by the widescreen process, the magnificent colour photography, the editing and its pace, the music of Arvo Part. As the men wander, getting more tired and bewildered, we watch but, as we might do if we were there, not concentrate on the focus all the time, but look at them, then at the scenery and our minds and attention might wander as well.

Why they went hiking without water or food and why they did not take notice of the way they went, gives us something to think about. And, the dreadful fact that no one knew they were there, no one was looking for them, and they say nobody passing by. Being lost in the desert is a strong metaphor for being lost in life. Some of this is suggested in the interactions between the two men, both called *Gerry*, played by Matt Damon and Casey Affleck who contributed to the screenplay. But it is suggestion rather than elaboration. This is an experience of having to gaze at pictures, moving pictures.

BULLETPROOF MONK

As catchy titles go, this one has a lot going for it, a combination of violence and religion, action and contemplation. But this enhances the film too much. It is an enjoyable action show, combining the odd couple of Hong Kong's Chow Yun Fat (*Anna and the King*, *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon*) with Seann William Scott (the crass Stifler from the *American Pie* films). On the whole, it works, bringing a 1940s monk who carries a secret for power and for peace (and who was attacked by a Nazi commander who coveted the power) and a streetwise 21st century thief. Not only has the monk lived on, searching for a successor, but the Nazi as too and is still as determined to capture the monk as before. This makes for a mixture of pseudo-Buddhist mysticism and martial arts action - some daredevil stunts and some humour.

NED KELLY (Australia, 2003, d. Gregor Jordan)

It is hard to do an objective review of a film about a character who is part of one's culture and one's upbringing. Ned Kelly, who was hanged by the Victorian colony government in 1880 at the age of 25, was a legend in his short lifetime and has continued to be a considerable figure in the Australian imagination. The first full-length film made in Australia in 1905 was a Ned Kelly film. In the late 60s, a British company made *Ned Kelly* with Mick Jagger (who was the exact age for his character) as Ned. It was not a success. Now, an Australian company (with overseas finance) has mounted a new version which is not only helpful for local audiences to see but goes a long way to explaining for overseas audiences just who Ned Kelly was, what he stood for, his strengths and his weaknesses.

The film is based on a novelised version of his life, from Robert Drewe's 'Our Sunshine', the name Ned's father gave him when he was a boy after he had saved another boy from drowning. The film begins with this sequence and Ned's voiceover; and these are the images that come back to Ned after he has been shot by the police.

As a film, Ned Kelly is impressive. Gregor Jordan (Two Hands, Buffalo Soldiers) directs and gives the film a legendary, if not epic sweep, assisted by marvellous photography of the Victorian countryside (perhaps a few too many shots of the flora and fauna, however). The performances are also strong. Heath Ledger (Two Hands, The Patriot, Monster's Ball, Knight's Tale) comes into his own as Ned, playing him from a teenager until his death, not making him a photogenic hero, but rather a young man who did good things and bad, including killing police). The rest of the cast is very good with Geoffrey Rush playing it straight as the pursuing officer.

The screenplay gives enough information to the attentive viewer: the dominance and wealth of the English migrants and the putting down of the Irish, many of whom were descended from convicts; the Irish trying to eke out a living on farms; the cavalier attitude of the local police and their picking fights with the Irish. Those who have seen the westerns about the outlaws like the James Brothers will recognise similar themes from the United States in the same period. However, this film does not look like a Western and the disputes are on a smaller scale with the Irish dressed like farmers not cowboys. When Ned Kelly (who had served a sentence for allegedly stealing a horse) takes a stand against the police, he robs some banks in the Robin Hood vein, makes some political declarations about rights and injustices. When he finally makes a stand, with his bucket-like armour, it is too late because he has killed, even though he repents the killing. His famous last words, with which the film ends, were 'Such is life'.

CYPHER

You need to keep your wits about you to follow this film. Set in a mysterious near-future, it is about industrial espionage and the use of sophisticated technology to spy on rival companies. A new recruit, played in 'geek-like' fashion by Jeremy Northam wants to improve his lot and is recruited to go to conferences and relay speeches to headquarters by satellite. So far, so good. Then he is tracked by a rival company, is plagued by mysterious dreams and headaches and... Lucy Liu plays a woman he meets in a bar but who knows much more about him... With some action sequences, some surveillance confrontations, all is revealed but, because the plot is working at several levels, one leaves the theatre wanting to make sure that one has really understood what has gone on.

The film has the look of a futuristic science-fiction film, often an air of unreality about it, when suddenly one is immersed in familiar locations. For those who enjoy puzzles and enigmas, a must.

SECRETARY

It is fair to call this unusual film a sex comedy, but that would not be doing it justice. It opens with a young secretary doing the usual chores in an office while balancing a yoke on her shoulders. And that's the clue. In many ways, she is quite ordinary, but she allows herself to be imposed upon, even humiliated, by her boss - and finds that she likes it, that she is sexually energised, masochistically energised by his sadistic behaviour. She has spent some time in an institution, relying on her small box of treasures for her security. Her father who leaves home (Stephen McHattie), her devoted mother (Lesley Ann Warren) and her schoolfriend who proposes to her (Jeremy Davies) all want to help. But, it is only in her interactions with her boss that she is able to regain some kind of self-possession, even some maturity.

We are invited to a sometimes prurient look at this spanking and humiliating behaviour. But the film is more a portrait of a young woman with problems, trying to face them, learning about herself and trying to cope, especially at the end in a hunger-strike protest against her boss (with a media entourage enabling the public to be prurient as well). Maggie Gyllenhaal brings the character of the secretary and her skewed psychology to vivid life on the screen and she is well served by James Spader (drawing on his performances in such films as Sex, Lies and Videotape, White Palace) as the boss.

This is one of those films where the audience leaves the theatre somewhat unsure about what they have just seen, what it means in terms of personality problems and development, in terms of the sexual politics of the workplace and what it means in terms of aberrant sexual behaviour.

VERONICA GUERIN (US, 2003, d. Joel Schumacher)

Immediately after making his small budget film about truth and lies, Phone Booth, Joel Schumacher went to Ireland to film this story about the courageous Dublin journalist, Veronica Guerlin. From 1998 to 2003, several films were made about crime in Dublin. They include two films about Martin Cahill, 'The General', the assassinated crime boss of the city: John Boorman's The General with Brendan Gleason and Thaddeus O'Sullivan's Ordinary Decent Criminal (a phrase which is used in this film) with Kevin Spacey. Veronica Guerlin herself was portrayed by Joan Allen in John Mackenzie's 2000 feature, When the Sky Falls.

Investigative journalism is always an interesting theme for a movie. It implies risk-taking, even heroism, on the part of the journalist. It implies some corruption in society which is being covered up and needs exposing. It implies that audiences really want the truth to come to light and that society is the better for being honest.

Veronica Guerlin was an energetic and dedicated journalist but felt that she was being confined to safe subjects. When she began work on the crime round and contacts gave her leads, she decided that this was the area she had to investigate. It meant going to the drug slums of the city, confronting criminals and writing hard-hitting exposes. She received threats, was shot and bashed. Eventually, she was shot while driving her car - and the film begins by letting audiences know that she had been murdered.

The city of Dublin itself becomes a character in the movie, beautiful aerial shots, much location action in both squalid areas and affluent homes and properties. Veronica Guerlin is a Dublin woman and Cate Blanchett brings her vividly to life. A loving wife and caring mother, she nevertheless feels impelled to continue with her dangerous work. She sees it as a vocation. Brenda Fricker is her mother. Ciaran Hinds is John Traynor, her limelight seeking but treacherous informant and Gerard McSorley is alarmingly sinister as John Gilligan who was imprisoned for his crimes.

HOLLYWOOD HOMICIDE (US, 2003, d. Ron Shelton)

Solid ingredients but something of a soufflé rather than a substantial police-buddy movie. Part of the intention is to make the film light, offer comic strands throughout the detective investigation of the murder of a group of rappers in a Hollywood club. And then there is a long chase sequence: cars, trains, bicycle, foot... but, by this time, it looks more like an exercise in stunt film-making than a drama where you want to know more about the characters.

Former detective Robert Souza vouches that all the details of LAPD personnel have genuine bases. He has co-written the screenplay with director, Ron Shelton, who is more at home with sports films like Bull Durham or The Tin Cup. Prior to making Hollywood Homicide, he made the excellent expose of corruption in the LAPD, Dark Blue.

Harrison Ford plays the older detective who follows traditional methods but has to make ends meet by taking on some real estate brokering between cases (and, here, even in the life and death chase, during cases). His partner is Josh Hartnett who is a poor shot, takes New Age trends very seriously, is a Yoga instructor on the side but thinks he would really like to be an actor. There are some effective scenes between the two scattered throughout the film. The case itself concerns the music industry in California (with memories of the murder of Tupac Shakur). A star supporting cast has Bruce Greenwood as an Internal Affairs investigator, Lena Olin as a late night radio psychic, Lolita Davidovich as an LA madam, Martin Landau as a has-been producer who wants to sell his house, Isaiah Washington as the ruthless music entrepreneur, Dwight Yoakam as a corrupt ex-cop with glimpses of Eric Idle, Lou Diamond Philips, Gladys Knight and Robert Wagner.

It's a pity that it does not come together. What we have is serious issues, frothy treatment which makes it all more frivolous than seems intended.

WHITE OLEANDER (US, 2002, d. Peter Kosminsky)

White Oleander is a movie where men seem almost insignificant except when they hurt women.

The focus of the movie is Astrid, a fourteen year old who knows nothing of her father and depends on her free-spirited, free-thinking artist mother. When her mother is arrested for murder, Astrid begins an odyssey that takes her into the intimate life of two foster families as well as into a social services institution. It is a journey of growth, despite her mother, a journey of love of which her mother is jealous, a journey of freedom to find her inner strength and to accept the support of those who love her.

Astrid is played by Alison Lohman, 21 at the time. She is utterly convincing as she ages from fourteen to early adulthood. Lohman was also seen to great advantage (again playing young teenager) in the con artist comedy, Matchstick Men with Nicolas Cage. Her performance helps the audience to get into the mind and heart of a damaged girl and what she has to go through emotionally before she finds her deeper self.

Michelle Pfeiffer is also excellent as her mother. At first she seems strong and sympathetic. As we get to know her better, we see a self-centred and resentful woman. In prison, her poisonous bitterness comes to the fore, continually destructive of her daughter's chances to grow. Finally, we learn more of the truth about her and watch her face the dilemma of her life when Astrid challenges her to sacrifice her love for her.

The two foster mothers could not be more different. Robin Wright Penn has tended to play very serious, sometimes impassive roles. This time she lets rip as a born-again alcoholic and addict whom people write off as 'trailer trash' and who falls victim to her jealousies and rage instead of trusting in her faith and her capacity for mothering. Renee Zellweger plays a mousey would-be actress, affluent, sentimental, rather naive but who shows Astrid glimpses of motherly love. Patrick Fugit, the young journalist of Almost Famous, plays an artist who is able to give Astrid the support she needs.

The movie was directed by Peter Kosminsky who made a number of docudramas for the BBC. Amongst the screenplays written by Mary Agnes Donaghue was Veronica Guerin, the story of the murdered Dublin crusading journalist.

YOUNG ADAM (UK, 2003. D. David Mackenzie)

Novelist Alexander Trocchi is now being re-discovered. He is seen as one of the Beat novelists, reflecting the existentialist trends of the time, the anti-hero who lives in the present, who moves from one episode in life to another, often without regard to consequences. Trocchi was, for decades, a desperate heroin addict. His anti-hero seems addictive but is something of a sex-addict.

This film version of his 1955 novel re-creates Glasgow in the early 50s. This has been superbly done. The characters work on the barges in the canal system, transporting coal and fuel. We feel we have been there and experienced this life. The photography is complemented by an atmospheric score by David Byrne (of Talking Heads) and the lyrics of a final credits song about anti-heroes.

Ewan McGregor is a drifter, Joe, a reader and would-be writer, working on a barge managed by your ordinary labourer, Les, a fine, bluff Peter Mullan, and owned by his hard-working wife, Ella, played by Tilda Swinton, completely convincing as a dowdy woman trapped in drudgery and an increasingly drab marriage who responds to the drifter discovering passion and sensuality that she had never suspected.

The other principal character is Cathie, Emily Mortimer. She has embarked on an affair with Joe which has unexpected consequences which are revealed in flashbacks which are initially confusing, making us think at first that they are part of the narrative. Gradually, they build up another story and to a climax where Joe has to the opportunity to make a profound moral choice.

While Ewan McGregor acts well, his character is difficult and challenging to respond to - which, of course, is the aim of the film-makers. He is both charming and impersonal, sensitive and callous, sometimes deep, sometimes callow. He is also sexually impetuous.

This is gritty film-making, a slice of life where characters are not simply good or evil, but tantalisingly complex.

GIGLI (US, 2003, d. Martin Brest)

This film received some of the worst reviews of 2003 and was a notable failure at the box office. This seems strange because, at the time, the stars, Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez were an item and planning marriage - which did not take place.

Writer-director Martin Brest has some notable films in his CV, particularly the first Beverly Hills Cop, Midnight Run and Scent of a Woman. He also directed Meet Joe Black. Scent and Joe Black were particularly long, moving at a stately pace and with some padding. This is one of the major problems with Gigli. It is far too long and inflated for its very slight plot. Ben Affleck has often seemed wooden in his performances and this is the case here. On the other hand, Jennifer Lopez has a lively screen presence. They are joined by newcomer, Justin Bartha, as a mentally impaired young man. There are brief cameos by Christopher Walken and Al Pacino (whom Brest directed in his Oscar winning Scent of a Woman) which lift the energy somewhat.

Affleck is a petty gangster, a loner dominated by his mother (Lanie Kazan in a bright cameo). When he is asked to abduct the impaired young man and finds Lopez as an unwilling partner, he bumbles along, finds that she is lesbian, is asked to cut off the young man's thumb... And then they find themselves in the clutches of Pacino as a big-time gangster. Will they escape, will they find romance, will the young man get to go to the Baywatch beach which is his main ambition in life? The film spends two glossy hours answering these questions which are not really (rhymes with Gigli) of major moment.

UNDERWORLD

Underworld is a surprise, an intense vampire thriller that boast top class photography, impressive sets, plenty of action, vibrating sound engineering, all that horror fans might want. It is likely to become a cult favourite.

In the dark future, fortunately unbeknown to ordinary human beings, a centuries' long battle between vampires and werewolves (Lycans) is coming to a head. Bands of vampires, armed with sophisticated guns and weaponry, seek out the Lycans to destroy them. Meanwhile the leader of the Lycans aims to capture a human who is half vampire, half lycan, to get his blood and continue the werewolf domination and, perhaps, achieve peace. (In the past, the lycans were the servants of the vampires.) By know you will know whether you want to immerse yourself in the Underworld, because this is what director, Len Wiseman, and his screenwriters do.

At first, it is not easy to identify who is who, who is pursuing whom, and whose side we are supposed to be on. What we discover is that there is evil on both sides. Kate Beckinsale (whose cape coat and gear is more than reminiscent of The Matrix) is a roving squad leader who rescues the lycan's victim (Scott Speedman). Bill Nighy has a great old time as the vampire chief revived to fight new battles. Michael Sheen brings an unexpected sympathy to the chief lycan and reveals that the past was not all that vampire history claimed it was.

Visually and aurally most impressive, Underworld sets out to create a fantasy world of good and evil, but not in stark contrast and it does it in a way to satisfy horror fans.

BLIND SPOT - HITLER'S SECRETARY

If you were told that you were to spend the next ninety minutes watching a film that was all interview, a focus on a talking head without any visual relief except the interviewee's change of clothes and, sometimes, watching herself on a video monitor, you might well beg out of the experience. But, you would be mistaken. This is an absorbing documentary, an interview with a woman who brings to life the last years of the Third Reich.

Traudl Junge was one of Hitler's private secretaries from 1942. He dictated his last will and testament to her. On the whole, she did not see much of Hitler until she was in the Bunker in the final days, although she was interviewed by him for the job.

Her description of those times becomes increasingly vivid and detailed as she warms to her subject (although it is a relief to hear her say at various times that she does not remember some things). The interview is at its most powerful in her recollections of the very last days, an eyewitness to Hitler's retreat into another world while still blaming the German people for not responding to his vision and their mission, especially to rid Europe of the Jews.

The important aspect of the interviews is Frau Junge's continually asking herself why and how as a twenty year old, she could have been so unquestioningly caught up in Third Reich propaganda, could have been charmed by Hitler's personality and not asked herself what was really going on. For decades, she did not give interviews but, finally, she was persuaded to talk to film-maker, Andre Heller, in 2001. Her testimony is honest, self-condemnatory, puzzled at herself as a young girl - and finding some small way to atone and to forgive herself. It is recording of interviews like this that remind us how important it is to have visual records for the future.

Sadly, Frau Junge died of cancer the morning after the film was screened at the Berlin Film Festival in February, 2002, at the age of 81.

BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS (UK, 2003, d. Stephen Fry)

Stephen Fry, who portrayed Oscar Wilde in the film of that name, sees himself as something of a successor to Wilde in being a satirist, a wit and an elegant critic of British society and its pretensions. One could add more than a dose of Evelyn Waugh in his 1920s and 1930s novels to that description. That is why it seems very appropriate that Fry should adapt Waugh's portrait of uppercrust butterflies of the 30s, *Vile Bodies*, to the screen.

One of the major difficulties of reading Waugh and watching Fry's version is that most of the characters are unattractive twits, all a-twitter, imagining that they are God's gift to England and caught up in a superficial world of wealth, extravagance, narcissism. It is a gaudy and gay world of parties, race meetings and incessant gossip. For those who find such characters obnoxious and unbearable, it may be hard to sit through their stories even though you know that Waugh and Fry are going to make some moral conclusions by the end of the film. In fact, with the outbreak of World War II, this world collapses and some sense of responsibility emerges on the bright young things' scene.

Fry has a very large British cast, young things in the central roles like Charles Campbell More, Emily Mortimer, Michael Sheen and David Tennant and a great number of old things in supporting roles, Jim Broadbent as an eccentric drunken major, Peter O'Toole doing an excellent comic turn as an eccentricly doddering father, Julia Mackenzie as an old-fashioned landlady, Dan Aykroyd parodying the North American media moguls who dominated the British press and even John Mills doing some cocaine.

Glossy, glitzy satire.

THE SIN EATER (US, 2003, d. Brian Helgoland)

In recent years there has grown up a sub-genre of religious horror films which create an eerie kind of supernatural atmosphere using the trappings of the Catholic Church rather than its theology and spirituality. It would be a mistake to think of them as ecclesiastical films, although they do make some points about

Church practice and beliefs. But, by and large, they are the inventions of the screenwriters who latch on to some biblical or theological connection and run with them. In the last five years, there have been *Stigmata*, *End of Days*, *Lost Souls*, John Carpenter's *Vampires*, *Bless the Child*, *Possession*.

The Sin Eater is the least persuasive of them. It is a pity because it was written and directed by Brian Helgoland who wrote *LA Confidential* and Clint Eastwood's *Blood Work* and *Mystic River* and directed *A Knight's Tale*. He has gathered his stars from *A Knight's Tale* for this strange tale of a personage who has the mission to take into himself the sins of a Church outcast with a ritual of bread and salt, devouring the sins of the deceased and giving them some hope for salvation!! Heath Ledger and Mark Addy belong to a very odd religious order, *The Carolinians*, who seek strange meanings and power in the Church. When their leader is killed (with his sins eaten), they go to Rome to investigate. They live in odd, candle-lit and art and relic-adorned quarters, visit even more odd bookshops and clubs where a hooded leader wants even more power. With them is Shannyn Sossamon who has escaped from a mental institution after she tried to kill Ledger but, fairly soon, he has let go of his priesthood (which was of a bizarre Tridentine variety) and succumbed to her. And, who should turn out to be a villain (and would-be Pope) but a Cardinal (as they have in several of these films) played by Peter Weller.

Oh well...!

CAMP

This is a variation on the Fame theme. Youngsters go to a camp in up-state New York where they put on several musicals and plays over the summer, learn their craft and hope for a career in theatre. It is full of songs, especially from Stephen Sondheim musicals - which are bit too sophisticated for the experience of these would-be actors. Stephen Sondheim himself even turns up at the end and is on the end of a great deal of adolescent idolatry.

While the film has a literal title for the summer camp, it also has overtones of the alternate meaning of 'camp'. This is seen in the presentation of the musicals but also in some of the characters who are struggling with sexual identity.

The hero is Vlad (Daniel Letterie) who plays guitar, has to act in a Samuel Beckett play and juggle the affections of several girls, especially a plain Jane who wins out in the end. Vlad's roommate is Michael whom we first see in drag attempting to go to the school prom. Michael is moody, his parents have disowned him but he has verve and talent and is well played by Robin de Jesus.

There are plenty of excerpts from plays, the difficulties in putting on a show, some unexpected talent emerging, especially Tiffany Taylor with a powerful song at the end.

If you are a Fame fan, then you will probably enjoy it. For others, perhaps...

CALENDAR GIRLS

When they hit the headlines in 1999, the Yorkshire women from the Women's Institute received unexpected publicity for the calendar they produced to raise money for a sofa in the waiting room of the local hospital where the husband of one of the women had died of leukemia. That must seem a long time ago because the headlines were not only local but worldwide. Hollywood came looking and invited them to chat shows and to make commercials - and even to agree to a film about their exploits. Behind the scenes there were difficulties about how they should handle the fame and some breakdowns of long friendships. Here, now is the film version, a blend of the UK and Hollywood with everybody remarking (as I am about to do) that this might be seen as the female version of *The Full Monty*.

The headlines exaggerated everything, of course. The nude calendar might sound racy, even objectionable, but it was done in fun and the women show very little. It is the humour and the suggestion which make the impact. It is a defence of older women being themselves and a blow against the artificial glamour of

commercial photography. It is humour about the body - which does not always go down so well in society which has been strongly influenced by Puritan or Jansenist severity and suspicions of things bodily.

Just as *The Full Monty* showed out of work men suffering from the social effects of unemployment and did their stripping for a joke, a blend of the humorous with serious social themes, so the *Calendar Girls* is both funny and serious.

The film shows us Yorkshire village life, the mundane meetings of the Women's Institute, the realities of marriage fidelity and infidelity, families both happy and unhappy, illness and death being persuasively portrayed. When it comes to the calendar, the film moves into cheerful mode (except for the president of the local branch of the WI). It is an unexpectedly huge success. When Hollywood beckons, the film changes gear considerably and the audience is made to feel the exhilaration as well as the over-glitz exploitation of Los Angeles.

Julie Walters plays the quiet character this time, with Helen Mirren left to do the flamboyant extraversion. There is fine support from several British character actors, Annette Crosbie, Celia Imrie, Linda Bassett and Penelope Wilton. The men don't get much of a look in but are treated sympathetically.

Despite the theme and the hoo-ha, *Calendar Girls* has its heart in the right place and is a film that you could take most people to - and those you couldn't are perhaps those who ought to see it.

INTOLERABLE CRUELTY (US, 2003, d. Joel Coen)

The Coen Brothers have built up a considerable reputation. They seem to be able to take all the popular genres and make something different from each one: *Raising Arizona*, *Barton Fink*, *Miller's Crossing*, *Fargo*, *O Brother Where Art Thou*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*. Now, in their most popularly audience-oriented film, they have taken on light comedy, the battle of the sexes and the touch of old screwball comedy. A number of reviewers who enjoyed the film feel that they have to make some kind of excuse: it is popular, it is comedy, it is slight... However, it is still very enjoyable.

George Clooney has the opportunity to preen himself without limit. He is the smoothest, most superficially charming, most ingenious marriage and divorce lawyer in America. Clooney carries this role off to perfection, with fine comic timing. However, he meets his match in Catherine Zeta Jones. She is the most glamorous, shrewdest and most calculating gold digger in America and, when he chosen foolish husband lapses, she takes him to the cleaners. Well, until she meets Clooney.

There are some very good comic turns, especially from Billy Bob Thornton as her infatuated, Texas-rich next husband to be who cannot contain his prattling (the exact opposite of his fine performance as the silent Man who wasn't there). Edward Herrman is her erring and discarded husband. Geoffrey Rush, unfortunately, hasn't much to do as an obnoxious television producer.

While the tone is comic and sometimes ironic, especially when Clooney becomes infatuated, falls in love and gives a speech to a congress of marriage lawyers about the need for love, the undertones about marriage commitment, pre-nuptial agreements and divorce are quite serious.

A fine example of the Coen Brothers' versatility.

MATCHSTICK MEN (US, 2003, d. Ridley Scott)

When articles are written about director, Ridley Scott, they talk about his science fiction classics, *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, about his 'feminist' films, *Thelma and Louise* and *G. I. Jane*, about *Gladiator* and *Hannibal*. One does not associate Ridley Scott with comedy. Now he has rectified this omission. *Matchstick Men*, which is a con name for confidence tricksters (or, as the screenplay says, confidence artists), is a humorous look at a number of cons.

But, it is more than that. Nicolas Cage (after his tour de force in playing two quite different brothers in *Adaptation*) pulls off the very difficult feat of playing a neurotic obsessive, with a cleanliness mania and facial and bodily tics to boot. It is the kind of thing that actors like to take on but run the risk of creating a caricature instead of a character. Cage definitely creates a character, a con artist who is expert at his game - or is he? Sam Rockwell is his partner and Alison Lohman (who was so good in *White Oleander*) plays his fourteen year old daughter (when, in fact, she is 24).

We follow a number of preliminary tricks with people parting so readily with their money. Then there is the big one as they work with a wealthy businessman who does not mind a shady deal in a currency exchange scam. Meanwhile Cage is seeing a psychiatrist who is really very good with him, encouraging him to find his daughter whom he has never seen, monitoring his medication and offering sound advice. Soon he is in top form, showing his daughter how to do cons but urging her to give the money back. What could go wrong? Part of the enjoyment is watching the tricksters in action, doing things we would never even dream of doing, and getting away with it. Or do they?

THE ITALIAN JOB

Whenever there is a remake of a well-liked film, people ask whether it was necessary and how does it compare with the original. The 1969 was not a great film but it was very enjoyable with a young Michael Caine planning and executing a robbery with the blessing of an old-timer prisoner, played with relish by Noel Coward. And then there was the mini car chase.

Mark Wahlberg has a pleasant rather than charismatic screen presence. Donald Sutherland is the old-timer but disappears from the scene comparatively early. Charlize Theron is his daughter and joins the plan to steal back the gold bullion that the gang has stolen in Venice and which was taken from them in the Alps in a double-cross. Other members of the gang include Edward Norton and Seth Greene (Dr Evil's son in the *Austin Powers* series).

There is a speedboat chase early in the film through the canals of Venice. One is tempted to think that they have substituted the minis and are staging the chase early. But, rest assured, there is a mini chase, it is very involved and takes place in the Los Angeles streets, the traffic lights now controlled by computer, and even in the LA subway.

Which means then that this is an OK entertainment, that we participate in the original robbery, carried out with perfect timing, are shocked at the double cross, want the villain to lose out to the gang with whom we now sympathise and trust that Wahlberg and Theron will fall in love. It won't spoil it to say that they do.

RAISING VICTOR VARGAS (US, 2003, d. Peter Sollett)

Give this small-budget, independent New York film a few minutes. It begins with the vain 16-year old Victor thinking that he is the macho gift to women, that this is how he ought to be. The rest of this short film is about who Victor really is under the poses and the bravado. And the film and the characters grow on you so that at the end you have a real feel for them, for their situations and struggles. It is a film of considerable humanity.

Writer-director Peter Sollett set his film in his own Brooklyn area but transferred it to Lower Manhattan after he met possible cast members. He chose amateurs who wanted to work hard in the film and let them improvise much of the dialogue. It works very well. Besides Victor, there is his younger brother, Nino, and his couch potato little sister, Vicki. They are being raised by their grandmother who migrated long ago from the Dominican Republic. Victor is infatuated with Judy and their up and down relationship is the centre of the film. There is Julie's tubby younger brother who wants to be friends with Vicki and there are the peer friends.

There is nothing particularly new in the film. What is pleasing is the way that it is made and communicates. Brothers Victor and Silvestre Rasuk are very good as the brothers as is Altagracia Guzman

as the grandmother with her old world values, her exasperation at her grandchildren (even trying to send them away through local social services) but loving them just the same.

FREDDY VERSUS JASON

This is a battle of two franchises. Jason Voorhees has been wearing his mask and bumping off young adults for over twenty years in ten Friday the 13th films. Freddy Krueger and his skeletal face and razor fingers has been in half a dozen nightmares in Elm Street. Now somebody has had the bright idea of bringing them together and pitting them against each other. Of course, the question is who will win.

The film recreates the setting for both serial killers. What one realises is just how ordinary and unimaginative Jason is. His mother might have given him enough madness and motivation for his rampages but he is still merely a horror figure stalking his victims. Freddy Krueger, on the other hand, is far more horrible and complex and there has been a consistency in Robert Englund having played him since Wes Craven introduced him in 1984. There was even a film that drew cast and characters together to analyse what had happened in Elm Street, Wes Craven's New Nightmare.

Freddy Krueger was a child abused and killer. He not only stalks his victims, he enters into their nightmares and terrifies them. He has an eerie past. He has an eerie cruelty. He is truly a horror bogey man.

Since he has lost some of his power to enter into dreams, he enlists the help of Jason to renew this power and start his activities all over again. But, what will he do with Jason? This is not a world-shattering dilemma for contemporary culture. On the other hand, there are many millions of fans who want to know the answer. That's the nature of cult horror movie characters.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN MEXICO (US, 2003. D. Robert Rodriguez)

The third in Robert Rodriguez' Mexican outlaw trilogy. He began with the minimal budget, El Mariacchi, in the early 90s. It was such a commercial success, studios gave him enough money to remake it in the mid-90s with Antonio Banderas as Desperado. Quentin Tarantino had a cameo in Desperado and became a strong influence on Rodriguez, for the maniacal horror of From Dusk till Dawn and the odd short story in Four Rooms. Tarantino is warmly thanked in the credits here.

Rodriguez, who usually does almost everything for his own films, writing, directed, composing, editing, doing special effects as well as minor jobs, has made enough money out of his subsequent films, especially his Spy Kids trilogy that he enough to burn on this wildly over the top saga of his Mariacchi player. His main credit for this films is that it was 'shot, chopped and scored' by him. He also has the support of Miramax and the Weinstein brothers. This means he could hire a number of stars as well as a number of extras who could be killed off at whim, registering a high body count.

With his Mexican background (though he now a citizen of Austin, Texas, where he does all his work), Rodriguez enjoys telling far-fetched tales of macho action and banditry and turning them into legends.

The films starts with a discussion of legends and a joking manner. Johnny Depp is a rogue CIA agent in Mexico who wants to engineer a change in a plot to assassinate the president. He gives another of his unpredictable and eccentricly mannered performances like his Captain in Pirates of the Caribbean. Antonio Banderas firts the bill as the Mariacchi who is now just known as El and is chosen to thwart the plan. Salma Hayek appears briefly as his wife. Enrique Iglesias plays one of his musical and action associates. The villain is Willem Dafoe as a drug lord and Ruben Blades is a retired agent who is persuaded by Depp to be part of the counter-attack. Mickey Rourke has a cameo as a gangster and Eva Mendes (Too Fast Too Furious, Training Day) is a turncoat policewoman.

There is plenty of plot, of action, complicated interpretations of myths and a great deal of derring-do.

CITIZEN VERDICT

This film has a huge problem to confront before it starts: how do you make a reasonable film about sensationalism without succumbing to what you are attacking? Do you make a subdued documentary? Do you take the risk of glamourising the target? Or, do you indulge in doing a bit of sensationalising yourself. Citizen Verdict tends towards the last.

While Armand Assante is the star, the co-star is, of all people, Jerry Springer, the speech-writer, Mayor of Cincinnati, who has become king of the daytime talk shows with his no holds barred technique and the seemingly outrageous topics that he encourages on his show. This is sensational enough. Plus, he plays a television producer who is the end in sensationalist programming, who is ruthless, plays politics, is cutthroat in whom he employs and fires and whose personal life is couching-cast oriented. One thinks he must have a great deal of front to take on this role.

Reality shows have become the staple of network programming with the success of shows like Big Brother and Survivor and the myriad imitations. Already in Series 7 - The Contenders, we had a film that portrayed a reality show where the winner had to kill off every competitor. Death is the ingredient for Citizen Verdict and, given the US propensity for talk shows, the plot seems not altogether impossible.

The idea is to have a trial, lasting three hours, on television with a judge, a prosecutor and a defence lawyer (all on the payroll) who will try an actual criminal on death row. The verdict is the Citizen Verdict where people phone in their judgments and the accused is found guilty or not guilty according to the popular poll. Already polls dominate opinion around the world and here is one, sanctioned by the Florida government (with Roy Scheider as the governor and backer of the TV show for ratings, profit and votes) on a matter of life and death.

The idea is very interesting given television trends. The screenplay shows the tactics and techniques of the competing lawyers and the behind the scenes machinations with the truth for more sensational television. The climax of an execution on TV and the subsequent wheeler-dealing for control of the show leave a nasty taste in the mouth - which is what the film-makers were trying to do.

THE BOY DAVID STORY

Desmond Wilcox was a British journalist then television producer from the 1960s. During the late 1970s, he worked with director, Alex McCall, in a series of award winning documentaries which had as their subject a boy from the Amazonian jungle of Peru. David had a congenital defect in his face, the centre of it collapsing in. Taken to a hospital in Lima, he was left with staff unable to help. Rescued by a Swiss charity worker, he was taken to a Scottish plastic surgeon who worked in Lima, Ian Jackson. The documentaries traced the journey of David from Peru to Scotland, his journey of over 80 operations and reconstruction, his being accepted into a Scottish family who then moved to Detroit, the quest for his parents and permission for the Jacksons to adopt David, the 11th hour visit to the jungle, the help of the local priest and sisters and intervention of the president's wife just as the legislation on adoption was to change.

Now, after the death of Desmond Wilcox in 2000, Alex McCall has revisited his material, collected material on David from the late 80s and the 90s tracing his growth and development, his education, his becoming an American citizen, his decision to be a commercial artist and to move to Los Angeles. It has all been edited into a 90 minute documentary where truth is stranger than fiction. It is as interesting and as enjoyable as a feature film. One is impressed by the Jacksons, parents and children, and their devotion, love and loyalty for David. David meets the Swiss charity worker after twenty years. He goes back to the jungle to understand his roots. David is an impressive character.

While the format and material (and Dougray Scott's narration) are quite straightforward as well as quite emotional, the story takes over and takes the audience with it. It is a fine tribute to the valuing of human life.

BLACKBALL

Lawn bowls. Not the immediate subject that leaps to mind when producers talk about their movie projects. In fact, Australia has produced three feature films about bowls and bowlers, *Greenkeeping*, *The Road to Nhill* and *Crackerjack*. Now, here is the British version, *Blackball* (which is not entirely unlike *Crackerjack* in its characters and in its critique of the rather staid traditions of the prim bowling community).

One of the major difficulties with *Blackball* is not the sport itself. In fact, the tournaments are presented quite interestingly. It is the screen persona of the central character with whom we are meant to sympathise as played by Paul Kaye. He is a yob. Even when he becomes a nicer person, he is still pretty much of a yob. We might agree with his attitude towards the bowlers, but he is not exactly the person you would be dying to meet.

He comes from the wrong side of the tracks and is looked down on by the bowlers who have allowed his grandfather to play for the club - now Bernard Cribbins is a pleasure to see on screen again. So is James Cromwell, sporting an English accent, as the long time club champion who is upstaged by the interloper who seems to have a natural gift for the game. Who will represent England against Australia in the championships (with Mark Little, star of *Greenkeeping*, as one of the Australian players)? There are many things to enjoy as well as many things which irritate.

You don't have to be Einstein to predict what happens but maybe Einstein could explain the utterly unbelievable romance between Kaye and Cromwell's daughter. Well, perhaps, love is blind.

BAD BOYS II (US, 2003, d. Michael Bay)

Bad Boys was a loud, raucous, violent police buddy movie. *Bad Boys II* is an even louder, more raucous, more violent police buddy movie - even though they fall out this time. Actually, in the light of the war in Iraq, the film seems fairly reprehensible. It is assumed that Americans are always right, that shoot-em-ups and spectacularly destructive car chases should be a normal way of solving and eliminating crime and, what seems worse, that it is OK to go to a foreign country (preferably one which is considered hostile) cause a lot of mayhem destroying a lived-in village without a second thought for the inhabitants (who may be all cocaine processors anyway). The number of those who have been killed in Iraq by accident is a sombre reality check with what we see here. In this case it is Cuba - is Cuba a cocaine producing country?

Director Michael Bay has got over Pearl Harbour and is merely blowing up parts of Miami and Cuba. He is a master of stunts and effects but less so in creating characters and telling a compelling story. The screen talents of Will Smith, Martin Lawrence and Gabrielle Union are secondary to the stunts. At practically two and a half hours, this is a long slog with so much violence that one is left rather numb - except for that irking feeling about American might is right.

COMMANDANTE (US, 2003, d. Oliver Stone)

Oliver Stone has made films about JFK and Nixon. This time he has made a documentary about Fidel Castro. It is not just about Castro. Castro features as the star, about 90 minutes culled from 30 hours of interviews done in February 2002. For that reason, it is well worth seeing.

At the time of the interviews, Castro was 75 and had been in power in Cuba for 43 years. Castro seems very agreeable, friendly with Stone and working through his interpreter. Stone himself also features a great deal, a kind of star turn which does suggest at times, especially in his sometimes awe of Castro, an ego trip.

At first some of the questions seem genial but trivial (and we learn that Castro saw *Titanic* on video, that he liked Brigitte Bardot and was one of the few who saw his favourite star, Gerard Depardieu, in *Vatel*). Once Castro gets a chance to talk about the revolution, the Battista regime and the role of Che Guevara, he is worth listening to and watching the body language. He is, as might be expected, very informative on the Bay of Pigs and the October missiles. He seems quite kindly towards John Kennedy, excusing him for the Bay of Pigs (which he had inherited from Eisenhower) and speaking about his inexperience as President.

He admired Krushchev but was wary about the Soviet missiles fearing that Cuba would be the first target of a nuclear strike. He speaks about his own inexperience of understanding the world balance of power at such an early stage in his government. He sheets home blame to the US and the still-in-force sanctions against Cuba. He is also interesting on his intervention in Angola and the very limited presence in Vietnam.

He explains his atheism (and his dislike of dogmatic religious teaching which he experienced growing up) but received Pope John II and says that he supports religion which instils values but not when it is used to back up causes.

On the whole, this is a pleasant interview, favourable towards the Castro regime and not strongly critical. It does make one reflect on a man who has led his country despite a great deal of isolation for almost half a century.

NICO AND DANI (KRAMPACK)

A Spanish coming of age story set at a beach town during summer. Nico comes to stay with his school friend, Dani, whose parents are on a trip to Egypt. Sex is predominantly on their minds. They meet two girls, flirt, go swimming, make advances. However, it soon becomes clear that Dani is more interested in Nico and, while they are very frank and intimate themselves in an unworried, amoral way, Nico is caught up with his new girlfriend. Dani becomes more despondent and, with great difficulty, has to face himself and understand himself.

It is all presented quite vividly with credible performances and a preoccupation with sex which might surprise some audiences.

FINDING NEMO

Pixar Studios have become one of the brightest of animation film-makers. They have had critical acclaim as well as huge box-office popularity with Toy Story, A Bug's Life, Toy Story 2 and Monsters Inc. Finding Nemo continues this tradition, a hugely enjoyable film both for children and for adults.

Firstly, the animation is outstanding, not only the skill in creating fish characters (not an easy thing to do) and in being able to suggest what life is like under water, both on the brightly coloured Barrier Reef and in the depths of the ocean. With their computer generated images, they are able to create a fantasy world that is not too far from realism.

The story is delightful as well as tugging at the heartstrings (although there is always a humorous line to offset any sentimentality). Marlin, a clown fish - who is not good at telling jokes - loses his family except for one baby, Nemo. He becomes over protective of his son who in a moment of rebellion is caught by divers and finds himself in a fishtank in a dentist's surgery in Sydney. Marlin sets out to find Nemo, encountering a comic fish named Dory, who suffers from short term memory loss and a sense of identity. Together their adventures include a group of sharks who are members of a kind of AA group who have sworn off eating fish, a school of jellyfish, some friendly turtles, a whale until they arrive in Sydney and with the help of the fish in the tank and a genial Pelican named Nigel, Nemo escapes and there is a happy family reunion.

While the creatures are all fascinating, they have a large cast of very talented voices. In all his films, Albert Brooks plays a put-upon, lugubrious character, with many ironic one-liners. He is perfect for Marlin, while Ellen de Generes with her deadpan patter makes a wonderful Dory. Geoffrey Rush is Nigel, Barry Humphries (more a Les Patterson voice), Eric Bana and Bruce Spence are the sharks, Alexander Gould is Nemo and the fish tank is inhabited by Willem Dafoe, Allison Janney and a range of comic talent.

Story and themes of family are very strong and audiences will identify strongly as well as enjoying the look and the sound of the film.

DOWN WITH LOVE

Forty years ago, there was a series of glossy romantic comedies, modern battle of the sexes stories where a strong minded-woman, Doris Day, was deceived by a self-centred man about town, Rock Hudson, chaperoned by his would-be Lothario friend, Tony Randall: *Pillow Talk*, *Lover Come Back*, *Send Me no Flowers*. Forty years on, Hollywood has decided to pay its homage to these films, imitating their style while also ironically spoofing them. So, *Down with Love*.

The film is like a cake and icing, pure confectionary. The plot, with a feminist author defying a chauvinist magazine writer while he takes on the character of an astronaut to make her fall in love with him, could have been tailor-made for the Day-Hudson team. As it is, we have Renee Zellweger dressed up like Doris, but too small, too squeaky voiced to have quite the same impact. Doris was strong, clear-voiced and direct. We have the slightly-built Ewan McGregor doing deception like Rock but he lacks Hudson's big, dominating presence. However, David Hyde Pierce is very much in the Tony Randall vein. This means that it is a pleasant screwball comedy but lacks the oomph of the originals. Its double entendres, however, are far more blatant.

Those who don't know the originals may enjoy this throwback style of the 60s. Those who remember will appreciate what is happening but long for those good old days.

MR IN-BETWEEN

A small-budget British film that will find its home on video or on cable channels. It is an uncomfortable film, showing in some detail a seamy side of British gangsters. The central character is a ruthless hit-man (with a compulsion to clean and tidy) who is in thrall to an older boss with perverse sexual and violent tastes. Can the killer be redeemed by resuming bonds with a married couple who were school friends? Can a priest help him to save his soul?

The glimpse of this seamy side of the crime world and the bizarre and violent behaviour of the killer will be offputting to those who come across the film. On the other hand, it is a picture of evil that reminds us of how cruel evil can be.

THE LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN

Because the main characters in this extravagant adventure are literary figures, most of the critics seemed to be expecting some kind of literary and literate film. What with Alan Quartermain from *King Solomon's Mines*, Captain Nemo from *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, Tom Sawyer, *The Invisible Man* (or, at least, someone who stole his formula, both Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Dorian Gray (and eventually his portrait) and one woman, Jonathan Harker's wife, Mina, who had, of course, been vampirised by Dracula. And the villain is... well, only by seeing the film will you find out who that literary villain is (and an excellent choice it is at that).

But... The screenplay is based on what were once were comic books and now are Graphic Novels. Author Alan Moore has had his graphic novel on Jack the Ripper filmed under the title *From Hell*. Graphic novels are not strong on words. It is the simple and straightforward image that counts. So it is here (with pounding sound engineering to add to the atmosphere). The characters all display their idiosyncracies (with explanations for those who are wondering who all these people are and why they have been summoned). The enjoyment is in the imagining of their interactions.

It is 1899 and a villain called The Phantom has developed tanks and other weapons of mass destruction. He is using them to provoke an arms race and then a war between Britain and Germany. His contemporaries are stuck in the more single combat, bright uniform ideas of war and to imagine a world war seems infinitely fanciful. The M of 1899 summons this league to stalk the Phantom and thwart his ambitions.

An old priest friend once remarked that in movies, he liked a good stoush. This is a film with stoushes galore, and then some. It is full of explosions and mayhem, which makes dialogue sometimes superfluous. After all this is a motion picture of a graphic novel. Sean Connery is himself as Quartermain (but acknowledging he now needs glasses for long distance shooting). Captain Nemo is Indian (which reviewers assure us is genuine). Stuart Townsend is appropriately Wildean and dilettante as Dorian Grey. Jason Flemyng has to double as the slight Jeekyll and gross makeup that makes him look like an ancestor of The Hulk.

The twist may be a bit obvious, but it is the identity of the obvious that is intriguing - as long as you know your literature of the time.

PARTY MONSTER

There have been several films about the club scene in New York City, for instance, *The Last Days of Disco* and *54*. This is a story of the club scene of the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, a time of hedonism and a cult of celebrity just for being there (and trying to demonstrate how eccentric you were). It was a period of drugs in abundance. And it led to mindless violence.

A young man from the mid-west, Michael Alig came to New York, hung on to the coattails of party goers and established himself as the king of mad parties, on subways, in diners in the Limelight club. They were gaudy and self-indulgent, often using horror movies for a bloodfest motif. He persuaded Peter Gattien, the owner of the Limelight to bankroll him. He relied on his love-hate relationship with cross-dresser, James Saint James, and a string of acolytes, both men and women.

Alig and one of his friends murdered their drug dealer, cut up and disposed of the body and boasted about what they had done. Alig is now serving a gaol sentence for manslaughter.

Soon after the trial, documentarists Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato made a film for television, with interviews of the main protagonists, including Alig and his mother and James Saint James. The video clips of the actual parties were fascinatingly repellent. The film-makers gave information, dates and situated their story within a historical context. It was called *Party Monster*. Now the directors have used the same title for a feature film. It offers portraits and mood. To that extent the documentary is more real and effective. The re-created parties lack the pizzazz and drama of the clips of the real thing. They also now omit dates and times so that the events are in some indeterminate period after the death of Andy Warhol.

On the acting side, Macauley Culkin impersonates Alig as a spoilt, sometimes naive, go-getter who believes in his camp image. Diana Scarwid compares very favourably as his mother with the interviews in the documentary. In fact, one learns a bit more about her from the movie and her involvement in her son's scene. The movie is stolen, however, in an excellent performance by Seth Green as James. The nuances and quality of his acting show up the impersonations of the other members of the cast.

But, then, you might not want to spend the time watching a group of hedonistic, self-destructive would-be somebodies.

SPELLBOUND

No, not a re-release of Hitchcock's classic 40s thriller let alone a remake. This is a contemporary documentary that is more interesting and entertaining than many a fiction feature which finds release.

The title is a nice play on words. The eight children at the centre of the film are quite under the spell of the national competition that they are so diligently preparing for. In fact, they are bound for a spell - they are on their way to Washington DC for the annual national spelling bee. Who would have thought a film about spelling could be so good? However, it did prove something of a humiliation for many of us reviewers as we found that we would have been eliminated at early stages. Surely iridescent has to r's? Isn't heleoplankton spelt helioplankton? Apparently not. And so many of the words that you and I have never heard of and couldn't guess at their meanings.

What Spellbound does is take eight of the contestants and tell their stories. What emerges is a fascinating picture of multi-cultural contemporary America. Two of the finalists (and another boy we see) all come from families who migrated from India. Their hard work is admirable - although one father drives his son relentlessly. Others come from wealthy Connecticut or rural Missouri. Not only do we get a portrait of each of the students but we learn a lot about their parents as well. The directors have been judicious in their choices providing a lot of serious insights but a great deal of humour as well. The film is often very funny.

And then there is the competition with its rather po-faced examiners grinding out the often impossible words, sometimes intimidating the children as they pronounced, gave country of origin and illustrated the word in a not always helpful sentence. I was happy with the winner - and got the final word correct: logorrhea (a bit ironic for the competition!).

JOHNNY ENGLISH

All a bit silly, really, but undemandingly entertaining. When you have John Malkovich as an effete French businessman restoring Britain's crown jewels only to rob them, force the queen to abdicate and have himself crowned king of England, it is, to say the least, a bit far-fetched. And when you have Rowan Atkinson as the only spy left alive (and it was he whose security measures failed to keep all the other agents alive) who can thwart Malkovich, then it is even more far-fetched.

So, this is a comedy vehicle for Rowan Atkinson and, as is inevitable, a variation on Mr Bean. Here, he is incompetence personified but always ready with a plausible reason and excuse for his inefficiencies and stupidities. Ben Miller is his poor assistant who has to save the day, whether it be when Johnny English has mistaken a genuine funeral for the gang concealing the jewels or parachuting into the wrong adjacent building for a raid. Natalie Imbruglia, Australian accent and all, turns up as a glamorous superspy who must have taken something dangerous for her to fall in love with Johnny.

It's a 007 spoof, even for poor Oliver Ford Davies suffering public indignity as the Archbishop of Canterbury. For those with a high tolerance of stupidity, it is an enjoyable time-passer.

2 FAST 2 FURIOUS

At the end of the noisy revving original, undercover cop, Paul Walker, lets his buddy criminal, Vin Diesel, walk free. Diesel disappeared over the horizon to make a sequel to Pitch Black but not to The Fast and the Furious. However, Paul Walker is back along with singer, Tyrese, to find themselves undercover again to catch a Florida drug lord at his money laundering. And this is what they do, earning themselves an expunged record, Walker falling in love with an FBI undercover agent (Eva Mendes) and helping themselves to a bit of the spare cash - to start a garage!

In between there are races, there are chases, there are scenes of motor mayhem and stunts and crashes to satisfy even the Bad Boys movie fans. The FBI look stupid, local police look good.

And there is more than enough macho posturing and testosterone (plus one woman driver who, of course, never actually wins a race). And that's it.

RADIO

Writer Mike Rich did the screenplays for Finding Forrester and The Rookie. Both of these films focused on mentoring and coaching. Sean Connery's Forrester, an older, more experienced author took a younger student under his wing and he developed beyond expectations. The Rookie was an older man who wanted to know whether he could have reached the top baseball league. Both of the films had a strong element of sport in them as well as more formal education. These are the ingredients of Radio. It is based on a true story and the real personages are seen at the end of the film. All Rich's films are overtly emotional in an

American extroverted kind of way that non-Americans find sometimes a little too fulsome. Radio has some edge and uncertainties too it that make it emotional, feel good and stronger than might be expected.

The setting is the American south in 1976. There are still strong traces of racism. Cuba Gooding Jr plays James, a mentally impaired young man who wanders the town, always stopping to look at the high school football practice. He is invited in to watch by the coach. A friendship develops and gradually the school adopts him, with the nickname Radio, and he becomes a fixture at all the matches and becomes part of the life of the school. It is not all easy with some bullying young men and the local banker throwing his weight around to have Radio ousted. This leads to difficulties for the school principal. But it is the coach who has to deal with the problems. He is a good man but tends to give more attention to Radio than to his teenage daughter. This leads to emotional complications and ambiguities which make the film more than a merely sentimental journey.

At first one wonders whether the mannerisms that Cuba Gooding uses to convey the mental and emotional state of Radio are gimmicky but, quite quickly, we accept them and believe his performance, growth from isolation to being accepted as part of society. Ed Harris gives his usual solid performance as the coach with Alfre Woodard as the principal and Debra Winger as his wife.

It is particularly American with its use of football, its high school ethos, sentiment and racism issues. The universality of its themes, however, make it a film for a wider audience.

IN THE CUT (US, 2003, d. Jane Campion)

Once touted as a star vehicle for Nicole Kidman, the central role of this erotic thriller has gone to Meg Ryan with Nicole Kidman acting as an executive producer. The film is based on a novel by Susanna Moore who collaborated on the screenplay with director, Jane Campion.

Jane Campion has been interested in women's issues in all her films, from *Sweetie* and *The Piano* to *Angel at My Table*, *Holy Smoke* and *Portrait of a Lady*. Her heroines are strong while vulnerable. They are menaced by men with power and have to make decisions to assert themselves and discover their stronger selves. In this way, *In the Cut* is very much a Jane Campion film.

She has gone back to some of the thrillers of the 70s for their ambiguous portrayals of women. Meg Ryan looks a lot like Jane Fonda's Bree Daniels in *Klute*, a film in which there was a relationship between a prostitute and a detective. Another 70s film for reference is *Looking for Mr Goodbar* where Diane Keaton plays a rather proper Catholic schoolteacher who goes out in the evenings to rough bars where her repressed sexuality surfaces in violence. In *In the Cut*, Meg Ryan is a teacher whose sexuality is repressed (especially in comparison with her more adventurous half-sister, played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) but whose prurience in a bar leads her to more overt relationships and behaviour as well as to physical danger from a killer.

Mark Ruffalo plays a detective who is attracted to the teacher and her intellectual sophistication and whose frank earthiness fascinates her. There are some frank sex sequences between them as well as frank talk and discussions.

While the focus is on Meg Ryan's character, her loneliness and isolation, her teaching poetry and studying language and slang and then her sensual and erotic experiences, there is a police investigation going on in the background. Unfortunately, this aspect is not so well constructed and it is not hard to anticipate who the murderer is.

The film is literally dark with many shadows, intense close-ups and settings which remind us of past films but also that themes of repression and sensuality are perennial.

IN AMERICA (US, 2003, d. Jim Sheridan)

For a while, audiences might be thinking that writer-director, Jim Sheridan, has gone soft. After all, his films have been very strong, emotionally and physically: *My Left Foot*, *In the Name of the Father*, *The Field*, *The Boxer*. *In America* is very sweet. Probably many will find the sweetness too much but, if the audience surrenders to the characters and the storytelling, they will find a depth to the sweetness.

In America is based on incidents in Sheridan's own life, especially his going to the United States from Ireland in the early 80s and struggling with his career. The film has been co-written with his two daughters so the picture of the children is very moving as well as the portrait of the adults. In fact, everything is seen from the perspective of the two girls, one ten and the other seven, having to cope with the death of their little brother from falling down stairs and a brain tumour and arriving in a strange land, Manhattan. While the parents have the struggles to find accommodation, deal with the strange characters in their building, look for work, experience a dangerous pregnancy, the girls adapt very easily - which offers quite a different perspective on the potentially dangerous and damaging situations. They make friends easily, do well at school, go trick or treating, befriend a dying African artist who becomes their saviour-figure.

Samantha Morton and Paddy Considine are strong character performers and do well as the parents. Djimon Hounsou (*Amistad*, *Four Feathers*) brings dignity to the role of the artist. But, it is two real-life Irish sisters, Sarah and Emma Bolger who drive the film. The older girl does the voiceover and is more quiet and self-conscious. The younger girl is delightfully spontaneous.

Sheridan is a powerful director when he takes on profound Irish themes. This story is much lighter but is his opportunity to tell something of his own story.

THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE

One American reviewer remarked that what the world was really waiting for and needing was a remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*! The makers have said that they wanted to reinterpret the classic for contemporary audiences. Box-office success has confirmed their hunch. But, ...

The original was made in 1974 by Tobe Hooper who went on to a career with horror films including *Poltergeist* and *Salem's Lot*. It was a small-budget story of five young people encountering a deranged family, especially one adult son who killed people with a chainsaw and covered his deformed face with the skin of his victims. Now, we have the same story with a bigger budget. (There were several sequels to the original and numerous variations on the theme including the 2003 releases the clever, *Wrong Turn*, and the very ugly *House of 1000 Corpses*.)

Much of the time can be spent in wondering who would want to see this kind of story and why. As *Leatherface* pursues his victims and tortures them, we are watching tragic and repellent events. The film-makers say they wanted to make their audiences fearful. This does happen, of course, but it raises the question of why we would want to submit ourselves to this kind of gross horror and fear.

The performances are not bad, especially Jessica Biehl as the intrepid member of the group who runs the gauntlet and survives. Veteran R. Lee Ermey does a variation on his *Full Metal Jacket* sergeant as the sinister and brutal sheriff.

HOLES (US, 2003, d. Andrew Davis)

What might one anticipate from a film with a title like *Holes*? Actually, there are many literal holes in the film. A pleasant young student becomes the victim of a false arrest and is sent to a juvenile detention camp in the desert where the inmates are made to dig holes all day every day. This is the whim of the warden (a curmudgeonly Sigourney Weaver aided by an eccentric Tim Blake Nelson and a really oddball Jon Voight). The young man puts his fate down to a family curse from Latvia (uttered by Eartha Kitt) and visited on all the men of the family, including his eccentric inventor father, Henry Winkler, who is actually doing the human race a service by trying to invent a formula to render shoes odourless.

There are historical holes as well: flashbacks to the time when the desert was a lake and a nice schoolteacher (Patricia Arquette) grieves over the lynching of a young man (Dule Hill) and becomes a famous bank robber whose loot is allegedly buried under the sand.

This is certainly an unusual story with touches of the fairy tale, touches of the American west and a grim picture of the realism in the hard life at the camp under the taskmasters. Shia LeBoeuf is the young man and Khleo Thomas his friend at the camp. They both sustain the film and are always a welcome counterbalance to the warden and her henchmen.

SECONDHAND LIONS

It is not hard to predict all that happens in Secondhand Lions. Enjoying it will depend on liking for the stars and how they act out what you know is coming. Kyra Sedgwick plays a flamboyant, irresponsible mother whose ultra-serious young son (Haley Joel Osment) is an impediment to her living the good life. She decides to dump him in Texas at the home of her mother's two old brothers (who reputedly have a fortune hidden away in their house). Needless to say, the brothers are not very happy in inheriting a teenager, even one as well-mannered as this one.

Needless to say, he wins them over and they have a very happy summer together despite other relatives often visiting to get inherit the money, despite one sleepwalking searching for his lost love, despite their planting corn when they thought they had planted other vegetables, despite the fact that the lion they bought is an old, secondhand lion (who does have a moment of leonine glory) and despite other setbacks.

It all depends on how you like Haley Joel Osment and feel sorry for him for having such a mother and hope that he will become friends with his uncles. It all depends as well on how you like Michael Caine and Robert Duvall. They seem to be enjoying themselves as two old codgers who have a mysterious past and who delight either in sitting on their porch without benefit of telephone or television or who want to indulge in daredevil stunts. They also have a history which is offered whether we believe it or not - a trip to Europe in 1914 which ends up with their being hijacked into the Foreign Legion, fighting wars in Africa for forty years, opposing an evil sheikh and taking his woman - all of which is visualised for us. By the time we meet them, they are secondhand lions but get a new lease of life in caring for their nephew.

It's all a bit of a shaggy dog, shaggy lion story which depends on the presence and charm of the stars to make it work.

SEABISCUIT (US, 2003, d. Gary Ross)

The American racing legend of the 1930s is given the epic treatment in this almost two and a half hours film, written and directed by Gary Ross (Pleasantville) and based on articles and a longtime bestseller by Laura Hillenbrand. It does not matter if you have never heard of Seabiscuit (although Shirley Temple starred in the 1940s *Story of Seabiscuit*) nor whether you are particularly interested in racing. There is enough plot, enough characters, enough evocation of history to keep you interested.

The film takes its time before Seabiscuit comes on. Rather, the background stories of three people are well told so that when they meet and take on training and running the horse, we know a lot about them and are interested to see what happens. The first is the entrepreneur Charles Howard who moved from making and selling bikes to making and selling cars but who suffered financial loss at the Wall Street crash and personal tragedy with his son. Circumstances involve him in the racing world and he buys Seabiscuit. The second is Tom Smith, a Montana cowboy, whose way of life passes and loses work in the Depression. He is a talented horse whisperer who recognises the potential of Seabiscuit and becomes his trainer. The third is John Pollard, nicknamed Red because of his red hair. His family fall on hard times during the Depression and leave him at a stable urging him to use his gift for riding horses. He never sees them again. He becomes Seabiscuit's jockey.

With a voiceover explanation of American history in the first half of the 20th century and many visuals, including photos of the period, the film has a social context for the celebrity that Seabiscuit became. He

coincided with the hopes of the underdogs in the 30s, with the era of radio and millions listening to races, to the growing cult of celebrity. The races are excitingly photographed so that audiences share in the extraordinary response to Seabiscuit in 1937 to 1940.

With Jeff Bridges as Charles Howard, Chris Cooper as Tom Smith and Tobey Maguire as Red Pollard, the film has quite a superior cast which gives it great human strength (as well as the horses). An added bonus is a very funny performance by William H. Macy as a twenty to the dozen radio commentator, complete with sound effects paraphernalia.

Released in a period where the United States has ambiguous status in the world, after September 11th 2001 and the Iraq War, the film also serves as a boost to the American spirit of the ordinary people.

ALIEN (RE-ISSUE, DIRECTOR'S CUT) (US, 1979/2003, d. Ridley Scott)

Alien was first released in 1979 and made a strong impact with its focus on space horror ('in space no one can hear your scream') just two years after the release of Star Wars.

Alien boasts excellent space-voyaging vehicles and effects seen in great technological detail. However, the plot is traditional horror, combining the Old Dark House, disappearing characters (a huge 7 crew spaceship has numerous eerie long corridors) and lurking monster (some ugly, scary touches and lots of ooze) and a gradually accelerating pace (after suspenseful slow tracking shots and ominous close-ups as the alien is searched for) until heroine Sigourney Weaver shows that the men, led by Tom Skerritt, don't have the monopoly on heroics. John Hurt and Ian Holm must have enjoyed themselves indulging in space horror, Holm as the android and Hurt with the famous monster exploding from his stomach.. Director Ridley Scott had made only commercials and The Duellists at this stage of his career. He went on to make some classics in other genres: Blade Runner, Thelma and Louise, Gladiator. This time he set out to scare and awe a vast audience and does.

He worked on a Director's cut in 2003, improving the soundtrack and adding about five minutes of extra footage, mainly scenes which he had originally trimmed.

BLACK AND WHITE (Australia, 2002, d. Craig Lahiff)

During 2002, five feature films were released in Australia which had strong Aboriginal themes: Phillip Noyce's award-winning Rabbit-Proof Fence, Rolf de Heer's The Tracker, Paul Goldman's Australian Rules, Ivan Sens's Beneath Clouds and Craig Lahiff's Black and White.

Black and White is based on the true story of the Max Stuart case which cause a furore in 1959. Accused on raping and murdering a young girl at Ceduna on the South Australian-West Australian border, Stuart confessed to the crimes. It emerged that he was beaten and the confession forced from him. An Australian priest, Tom Dixon, who had worked with aborigines in Central Australia, intervened for Stuart, indicating that he spoke Arunta and could not have written or understood aspects of the confession. He appealed to a distinguished anthropologist, Dr Strehlow, who wrote on behalf of Stuart.

In the meantime, the young Rupert Murdoch too up the case with his editor, Rohan Rivett, and provided sometimes sensational headlines in his new Adelaide paper which irritated the South Australian aristocracy (as Murdoch was to do all his life). Stuart lost his case in hearings, a trial and an appeal to the Privy Council in London. He also lost his plea in a Royal Commission, although the intervention of the premier of South Australia, commuted the death sentence to imprisonment and Stuart served 14 years. He himself appears singing at the end of the film.

Fr Dixon is portrayed by Colin Friels, Murdoch by Ben Mendelsohn. David Ngoombujarra is Stuart.

However, the principals of the cast are Robert Carlyle as the brash defence lawyer, David O'Sullivan, Kerry Fox as his partner, Helen Devaney, and Charles Dance as the government prosecutor, Roderick Chamberlain. Carlyle is effectively edgy and sincere as O'Sullivan. Fox does not have enough to do and

Dance with his frequently seen poised and superior manner. A gallery of Australian character actors fill out supporting roles.

The film offers Stuart's version of what happened and, later, visualises (as Charles Dance describes it to his wife and dinner guests) what the prosecution asserted, leaving both versions for the audience.

The historical context is of great interest and incorporated into playwright Louis Nowra's screenplay: the status of aborigines in the 1950s prior to the 1967 referendum on voting rights, the superiority of South Australian upper classes, the role of premier Thomas Playford, the parliament and the judiciary and the emergence of Rupert Murdoch and his tabloid style in the media. Direction is by Craif Lahiff who directed *Heaven's Burning*, with Russell Crowe, also written by Nowra.

THE MATRIX REVOLUTIONS (US, 2003, Andy and Larry Wachowski)

With *Matrix Revolutions*, the American screenwriters and directors, the Wachowski Brothers (Andy and Larry) have completed what has been one of the most popular and talked about film trilogies. While *The Lord of the Rings* showed us Tolkein's world and took its audiences into the mythical past and used religious symbols and motifs, *The Matrix* trilogy takes audiences into a future that is no less mythical and which also uses religious symbols and motifs.

With the release of *The Matrix* in 1999, audiences both young and old responded to its exploration of the relationship between humans and modern technology. Philosophers around the world hurried to write articles for academic journals on how it raised the problems of what is real, what exists only in the mind and the possibilities of co-existing dimensions. Noted Catholic Polish director, Krzysztof Zannussi, a member of the Vatican's Council for Culture was of the opinion that the film was a contemporary masterpiece and that people should see it, not only because of its extraordinary special effects but also because of its intellectual stimulus.

Matrix Revolutions, released around the world on the same day and the exact same time, will be the talking point for religious educators and theologians. A world where human-created computers and machines now hold the humans to ransom and who burrow through the earth to destroy them and their refuge city, Sion, can only be saved by Neo, an anagram of the One.

The first film in *The Matrix* trilogy introduced Neo as a Saviour-figure, someone human (or programmed like one) to be the means of saving the human race. In death and resurrection imagery, he was killed and then loved back to life by the warrior, Trinity. In *Matrix Reloaded*, the saviour role of Neo is developed but left in abeyance until *Revolutions*. By *Matrix Revolutions*, Neo is still the Saviour-figure par excellence, referred to by his enemy, Bane, as 'the blind messiah'. In apocalyptic imagery, with overtones of biblical battle imagery, he saves the bereft humans in the city of Sion and confronts the Satan-figure Mr Smith, and is seen, arms outstretched as on a cross. His blinded eyes see an internal vision, glowing beauty, a kind of 'beatific vision' which culminates in his final apotheosis.

While the Wachowski Brothers drew on all kinds of popular sagas and mythology, their use of names with Christian-overtones for their characters as well as imagery that is familiar from biblical stories, mean that there can be fruitful dialogue between the movie and the scriptures.

The descent of Jesus into 'hell' or 'hades' or 'to the dead' is an article of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Speculation in the early decades of the Church are echoed in references in Matthew's Gospel, the letter to the Ephesians as well as the suggested readings from John and I Peter. The tradition suggests that, while Jesus died for all, his death led him first to be associated with those who had gone before and were waiting to rise to new life with him.

The Jewish scriptures are full of battle imagery where God conquers the enemies of Israel as they do battle with their foes. The tour-de-force battle scene in *Matrix Revolution*, where the machines finally bore down to the city of Sion to destroy the humans, is replete with spectacular war machines, desperate human weaponry to ward off the enemy and terrible destruction of the humans. It is useful to read chapters 38 and

39 of Ezekiel, the chapter of Armageddon, so beloved by fundamentalist and rapture Christians. Gog of Magog has a plan to destroy Israel but is no match for the power of God. God's warnings are given through the prophet. Perhaps the Wachowskis know Ezekiel. However, the machines are like Gog, overwhelming forces for destruction. The warriors of Zion are like the harassed people of Israel. Like Ezekiel, there is an Oracle who prophesies and guides, especially to lead the hero, Neo. These biblical battles provide a context for Jesus' descent to the Dead.

The overview is given in I Peter 3:18-20: Jesus' mission at his death is to go to those who have remained faithful, even if they have sinned, and rescue them. The letter uses a parallel with God's patience for those who remained faithful at the time of the deluge (and goes further to parallel the deadly deluge with the saving waters of Baptism). Now, the dead can be 'baptised' and saved through Jesus' presence.

Since Neo is the saviour, he is pictured in Matrix Revolutions going down into his own 'hell'. He is betrayed by Bane, blinded by him. But his inner vision leads him to guide Trinity above the machines to a safe vision of clear and beautiful skies before he descends to do battle with Mr Smith. Part of his 'hell' is the sacrificial death of his beloved Trinity. As the power of megalomaniac Smith (Satanic in its delusions of grandeur) seems to conquer him, he goes into a grave before he regains the strength (with the images of Neo, arms outstretched) to finally defeat Smith.

In this connection, the sayings of Jesus in John 5:24-30 are evocative: the special hour coming, the dead hearing the voice of Jesus, those good people in the tombs rising to new life because of Jesus doing the will of the Father who sent him on his mission. As Smith asks in bewilderment during their battle, 'Why'. Neo answers, 'Because I choose to'.

Of course, many viewers will look at The Matrix trilogy as exciting science fiction or futuristic fantasy. Some will respond, according to producer, Joel Silver, just on the visceral level. Others will respond to the mythic layers. A Catholic response will explore those mythic levels and discover the links between the scriptures, Jesus of the Gospels and the religious symbols. For audiences who are not sure of their faith or their biblical knowledge, the films provide aspects of a new apologetics, a contemporary invitation to examine the credibility of the Catholic tradition.

S.W.A.T.

A watchable action show. At first it looks like a promotion film for recruiting members to the S.W.A.T. (Special Weapons and Tactics) unit of the LA police. In fact, most of the film seems like a promotion movie. We see them in action in the opening sequences, foiling a bank robbery but with one of the experts playing the cowboy, not following orders and justifying what he did by saying that he saved a life (no matter that the saved life was wounded and is now suing the LA Police Department for huge damages). You know he is going to turn out badly.

However, his partner, Colin Farrell, does the right thing, accepts a demotion and is grateful when S.W.A.T. hotshot, Samuel L. Jackson, picks him for the new squad (along with LL Cool J, now to be known as James Thomas Smith) and (although the press kit tells us that there is still no woman in a S.W.A.T. team) Michelle Rodriguez. They train, they do an exercise in overcoming plane hijackers, they bond.

Meanwhile, given easy access by immigration, one of Europe's most wanted, Olivier Martinez, commits a murder but is held on a technicality. The team have to guard him in transit to prison. Since the criminal yells at the TV cameras that he will give a hundred million dollars to anyone who frees him, this fires the ambitions of LA gangland and beyond. This means chases, explosions and a shootout when a plane lands on an LA bridge.

You know what you're going to get and you get it.

WILBUR WANTS TO KILL HIMSELF (UK/Denmark, 2003, d. Lone Scherfig)

This is low-key film-making. Danish director, Lone Scherfig, had a hit with her Dogme comedy, *Italian for Beginners*, and won many festival awards (including the Berlin Ecumenical award). That was an entertaining bittersweet comedy of a fascinating group of people and their relationships. *Wilbur* is more modest in scope, is bittersweet and quite restrained in its presentation of its relationships.

Filming in English in Glasgow locations and Copenhagen sets, Lone Scherfig focuses on four principal characters. There is Wilbur himself, a depressive who makes several suicide attempts and who contemplates death all the time. His brother Harbour is a nice man, devoted to Wilbur, caring for him and the bookshop left to them by their recently deceased father. He meets a single mother with a young daughter and soon marries her. The rest of the plot complications are best left to be seen on screen. However, it is no secret that they are about love and death, but with some surprises.

Jamie Sives makes a brooding but sympathetic Wilbur and Adrian Rawlins is even more sympathetic as Harbour. It is a strange but nice brotherly relationship. Shirley Henderson is Alice, the single mother, whose life is brightened by her marriage to Harbour. Not a lot happens in terms of plot, but the characters are interesting and there is a lot of feeling in the performances and the direction.

TIMELINE (US, 2003, d. Richard Donner)

Having read Michael Crichton's *Timeline* and enjoyed its kind of Saturday matinee adventures, I was looking forward to the film version. It begins exactly as the novel does. The last scene is the same as in the novel. And, in between, it stays very close to the novel as well. The result is an entertaining adventure in the past and some imagination concerning time travel in the present.

When an archeologist (Billy Connolly) working on the ruins of a 14th century fort and village disappears, especially when a message dated 1357 is discovered, his rather gung-ho son (Paul Walker) and the archeological team (headed by Frances O'Connor and Gerard Butler) are naturally concerned. What they never dreamed was that they would be following the professor within hours back into the 14th century. Not only do they have to find him and bring him home, they have to take an active part in the battle between the English and the French, rescue the Lady Claire (Anna Friel), defeat the English lord (Oliver), confront a scientist who finds himself more at home in medieval France - and get back themselves. Which is - more or less - what they accomplish. The enjoyment is in finding out what is the more and the less.

Michael Crichton's novels are a bit like theme parks (well, of course, *Jurassic Park* really was one) and this version takes us on a medieval adventure of knights, damsels and battles with 21st century Americans all the while trying to disguise themselves (although it is yet another case of the yanks coming to the rescue of the Europeans!). Even the technological plant where the time machine operates is a different kind of theme park. Richard Donner (*Omen*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Maverick*, *Superman*) set out to make a rollicking adventure without pretensions to literate dialogue of method acting. And he has.

THIRTEEN (US, 2003, d. Catherine Hardwicke)

A close-up on contemporary Girls' Culture in the US, especially at the onset of puberty, puberty blues, where thirteen year old girls experience the angst of past generations but find themselves in a permissive and rootless Californian society where glamour and flaunting it are everything, where media dictate what is fashion and what is not, where opportunities for drinking, for drugs and for sex are immediately available and where parents, their own struggles still going on and marriages being fragile or broken, try to exercise some authority and discipline but their efforts are futile. Welcome to one of the principal parents' nightmares. *Thirteen*.

One hopes that this is not too much the case with most families. On the other hand, it is the perennial context in affluent societies for girls to experience rejection, question self-image and identity, rely too much on peer influence and pressure and make a mess of their lives.

Catherine Hardwicke won the director award at the Sundance Festival 2003 for this, her first film. Trained as an architect and working as a set designer with many well-known directors, she ventured into writing,

especially with the alienated daughter of a close friend. The daughter, Nikki Reed, had just gone through her thirteens and was encouraged to share in the writing of the screenplay. Nikki Reed appears in the film, not as Tracy, the girl who embodies so much of her experience, but as Evi, her precocious and provocative best friend. The role of Tracy is played very well by Evan Rachel Wood. There is a strong adult contingent in the film, led by Holly Hunter as Tracy's well-meaning but floundering mother, Jeremy Sisto as her ex-druggie boyfriend and Debora Kara Unger as Eva's stepmother.

The film is set in LA with its combination of real and unreal. Perhaps the treatment is sometimes larger than life and audiences might react by saying this is too much. However, for the impact of the film and its challenge to thirteen year old girls and their parents, the melodramatic tone gets attention and keeps it. What will become of Tracy?

AMERICAN COUSINS

A pleasant family comedy drama set in Glasgow. Actually, it's that kind of Family comedy, two New Jersey mafiosi take refuge with their fish and chip shop owner cousins after a deal goes wrong in the Ukraine. The Ukrainians make contact with their thugs from Liverpool - Eastern European crime lords are doomed if they rely on ineffectual crooks like these. There are also some locals who want to take over the fish and chips shop. This mob is a far more violent and serious menace.

Which is not to say that the violence is the main theme of the film. Rather, the two mafiosi turn out to be quite decent chaps (within their vocational limits) and help out in domestic ways as well as a bit of professional know-how. As played by Dan Hedaya and Danny Nucci, they are mostly very genial. On the local scene, Gerard Lepkowski is an obviously nice man, ethical but with a reticent charm. Shirley Henderson helps out at the shop and is in love with the owner. But neither of them say anything until it is almost too late.

This is the kind of quirky local film that gets overlooked in the wake of the big blockbusters but which many people would find nicely entertaining (though with the Celtic propensity for four-letter emphasis), with interesting characters, some good humour and some happy comeuppance for the villains.

MASTER AND COMMANDER, THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD (US, 2003, d. Peter Weir)

It comes as something of a surprise to hear that Peter Weir has made a historical naval epic. Yet, in the thirty years since his first full-length feature, *The Cars that Ate Paris*, Weir has brought his intelligent and refined sensibility to a wide range of genres, in recent years often taking four or five years between films. *The Cars that Ate Paris* was a small-scale comic horror story. He followed it with *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and then his imagining of aboriginal myths in Sydney, *The Last Wave*. He has portrayed war in his masterpiece, *Gallipoli*, Asian political thriller in *The Year of Living Dangerously*, murder mystery among the Amish in *Witness*, the retreat from civilisation in *Mosquito Coast*, creativity in education in *Dead Poets Society*. He made only three films during the 1990s: *Green Card*, *Fearless* and *The Truman Show*.

Master and Commander is quite epic in scope, based on the seafaring books by Patrick O'Brien. The central character is a fearless, just, even noble captain, Jack Aubrey. Russell Crowe brings his best dignity to the role, as impressive as his performance as *Gladiator*. He is not perfect, becomes obsessed with his pursuit of a French ship through the Atlantic, round Cape Horn and into the Pacific as far as the Galapagos Islands, but tries to admit and rectify mistakes. The setting is 1805, the aftermath of Nelson's victories with the British navy's goal of preventing a Napoleonic invasion of England. Weir stages the battles at sea with vigour.

What is important for the film is its detailed picture of day by day life on board ship, the camaraderie, rivalry (and superstition) amongst the crew, the bonds between the officers (and the young nobility who do their apprenticeship at sea). It is tough but not as soul-destroying as is sometimes presented in more melodramatic stories. We feel that we have been to sea here and understood what was required of the seamen.

The other principal character, played by Paul Bettany, is the ship's doctor, a naturalist with an avid ambition to record species of plants, birds and animals. The Galapagos islands are a paradise for him (and the film was shot there) but he has to face the realities of Britain being at war and his principal duty being to serve and obey the captain. Captain and doctor are good friends, can speak honestly to each other - and relax by playing chamber music together.

An impressive and interesting film.

GOOD BOY!

It depends how you say this title (taking account of the !) on whether you think it is a family film about a boy or whether you realise that praise for a dog is 'Good boy!'. It's the dog option!

Most audiences prepared to surrender themselves to the fantasy and the comedy should enjoy taking the youngsters to see it. The poster says, 'ET with a bit of Benji' and that is exactly right. When a rather superior dog suddenly permits his owner to hear him speak, we find that he is a scout sent from Sirius, the dog planet from where all dogs on earth originally came, by the rule, The Greater Dane, who has heard that dogs on earth have become subservient and, horror of horrors, pets. Young Owen (Liam Aiken) has few friends but loves taking four dogs for regular walks. These four combine with Hubble (the name Owen gives the ET dog) to practise how they will persuade the Greater Dane that humans are really dependent on their animals (and aren't they!). It doesn't quite work out the way they planned.

The film has an excellent cast for the dog's voices. They correspond exactly with the real life acting dogs so that you believe it is all really happening (well, at least I did). Matthew Broderick is particularly good as Hubble and has to carry much of the comedy and the drama. The doggy gang is voiced by Carl Reiner, Delta Burke, Donald Faison and Brittany Murphy. The Greater Dane's obnoxious henchdog is Cheech Marin and the Greater Dane herself is no less than Vanessa Redgrave.

It is all very good fun.

THE SINGING DETECTIVE (US, 2003, d. Keith Gordon)

In the years before he died, British playwright and television drama's writer par excellence, Denis Potter adapted his British television series, The Singing Detective (with Michael Gambon) for the cinema screen and with an American setting. For fans of the series, this might well seem a very abridged version. For those who have not seen the series, the film will put audiences on the back foot at first. They will have to do some assessing of their emotional and intellectual response as they come to terms with this internal drama, with the fantasies in the imagination of the detective.

He is in hospital suffering from a virulent form of psoriasis which disfigures his face and makes his whole body alien and uncomfortable. He has written a noir detective story and finds himself retreating into his novel, into his intuitive imagination which has become suspicious of his wife and an agent, assuming that they are out to steal his manuscript. He also lapses back into destructive memories of childhood, his mother's betrayal of his father with his partner at a desert garage. The particularly Potter characteristic (which was to the fore in Potter's television series with Bob Hoskins and the Americanised film version with Steve Martin, Pennies from Heaven) is character's bursting into song and sometimes dance, a selection of songs from the 1960s. While this paragraph describes something of what is going on and how, it still does not prepare us for the experience of moving in and out of times, in and out of truth and fantasy, accepting the songs and trying to understand the character of the detective. It is further complicated when the detective begins therapy with his psychiatrist and wants to play his emotional and defensive games with the doctor.

The strength of the film is in Robert Downey Jr's screen presence and skilful performance, sometimes petulant, sometimes paranoid, sometimes pleasant. His psychiatrist is at first unrecognisable, a balding Mel Gibson. Robin Wright has a very difficult role because she has to embody the detective's wife, both

devoted and two-timing in his mind. Jeremy Northam plays the suave agent as well as the seducer of the detective's mother. Then there are two imaginary thugs who keep wandering in and out of the action, murdering Wright at one stage, threatening the detective at another. They are played as an odd couple by Adrien Brody and Jon Polito.

For many the whole thing may be too confusing and demanding, but Keith Gordon's film is an intriguing challenge.

ELF (US, 2003, d. Jon Favreau)

Perhaps they don't want the word to get round, but many of the crusty critics found themselves unexpectedly enjoying this Christmas concoction. It is very entertaining, well written, funny, plenty of sentiment but not mawkish, directed with some charm and flair by actor, Jon Favreau (Swingers, Love and Sex, Daredevil) who has a cameo as the doctor.

Much of the credit for the success of the film must go to Will Ferrell. In the broad comedies in which he usually appears (A Night at the Roxbury, Old School), he usually draws on his Saturday Night Live background and broad and raucous humour. Here, you can believe him as a giant elf who works (very ineffectually at times) at Santa's toyshop, finds that he is really human and sets off to New York city (as once upon a time Crocodile Dundee did) and reacts to the city and its people with a childlike simplicity and honesty.

Bob Newhart, as a senior elf, narrates the story like a television interview with his characteristic hesitant irony. He has adopted Buddy (who had crawled into Santa's sack at the orphanage as a baby). Santa is a somewhat crusty Ed Asner. James Caan is the cranky book publisher who never knew that he had a child and who is no mood to have a giant elf for a son. Mary Steenburgen is charming as his much more kindly wife. Zoe Deschanel is the shop assistant who befriends him.

It is quite amazing that Will Ferrell dressed in elf's clothes wandering modern New York City, trying to do nice things for people (especially getting the mailroom staff all singing carols), getting into all kinds of mix-ups can be so entertaining.

TAKING SIDES (UK/Hungary, 2003, d. Istvan Szabo)

British playwright Ronald Harwood is clearly still very interested in World War II stories, especially in stories that might not have made the headlines, might seem on the sidelines of the main war action and of the persecution of the Jews. He won an Oscar for his screenplay for Polish Roman Polanski's film, The Pianist. Soon after The Pianist, comes an adaptation of his play, Taking Sides, directed by Hungarian, Istvan Szabo. The Pianist, with its overtones of Polanski's own war experience, was something of a surprise to those following Polanski's career, Taking Sides will not be a surprise to those who have followed Szabo's career. In the early 1980s, he made his masterpiece about a man who sold his soul to the Third Reich, Mephisto. He followed it with war stories, particularly of World War I, Colonel Redl and Hanussen. In 2000, he released a three hour saga of the generations of a Jewish family in Austria where a central character becomes a Catholic for survival, Sunshine.

Taking Sides is very much the adaptation of a play. However, its strong characterisations, the force of its dialogue and the moral ambiguities of its two protagonists, mean that it is absorbing drama. The issue itself is powerful - and even more relevant now than when it was filmed because of the war in Iraq and the role of the American liberators, occupiers and judges.

The renowned German conductor, Wilhelm Furtwangler, opted not to leave his country, separating art from politics and, as an aesthete, hoped that he would contribute to a mellowing of the leaders of the Reich by providing music. In 1942, despite distancing himself from the Nazi party and from Goebels, and helping Jews escape the Reich, he conducted music for Hitler's birthday.

At the time of the Nuremberg trials, the allies wanted to make him an example and he was interrogated at length, charged but the charges were dismissed. Yet, he was never permitted to conduct in the US after the war.

At the time of the trials, it was assumed that the allies, particularly the Americans, had every right to interrogate and sit in judgment on the Germans. They were the occupiers and masters of a people who had sold themselves to Hitler. Now, in the light of recent events in the Middle East, these claims sound more hollow and overly self-righteous.

Listening to the words Harwood puts into the mouth of Harvey Keitel as the rather philistine former insurance investigator who loathes the Germans for their commitment to Hitler, who loathes the conductor and cannot really appreciate the music and culture arguments, we get the impression that the Americans are presumptuous and, as his secretary tells him, his interrogation methods are reminiscent of the Gestapo. Keitel relishes this role. By contrast, Stellan Skarsgaard as the conductor, conveys the bewilderment of a celebrity who has to face reality rather than speculate and retreat to a world of culture and music and who cannot believe that he is being treated the way he is.

Further dramatic complexities come from the secretary whose father was one of the conspirators against Hitler and a young American officer whose Jewish parents fled Germany in the 1930s.

There is a great deal to think about.

LOVE ACTUALLY (UK, 2003, d. Richard Curtis)

Writer Richard Curtis is a British institution. Not only has he contributed to such television stalwarts as Mr Bean and Blackadder, he has written two of the most successful British romantic comedies, Four Weddings and a Funeral and Notting Hill. Not being a fan of the former, I enjoyed the latter, mainly because of the presence of Julia Roberts. But the common denominator of these films (apart from cameos by Rown Atkinson) is the presence of Hugh Grant. Hugh Grant has also become a British institution with the former films but also Bridget Jones's Diary, About a Boy... In fact, he is such an institution that Curtis has cast him as the British Prime Minister and given him a rousing press conference speech, highly critical of the American President (Billy Bob Thornton) that had many British audiences applauding in the cinemas.

All of which is preface to saying that Love Actually did not do all that much for me. I realise that it is highly popular and many audiences will be greatly entertained. However, Curtis' mixture of romantic fluff with some serious undertones is not a satisfying brew for me. I did enjoy Hugh Grant's performance because I like his performance as the oops, by gosh (and other words) kind of Briton that he usually portrays. And, because Emma Thompson can do no wrong, I liked her segment of the film and she brought great poignancy to the role of the middle-aged wife with a husband with a wandering eye (Alan Rickman). I like Liam Neeson but could not believe in his character as the bereaved husband and ultra-pally father. Bill Nighy has to be one of the most eccentric of screen presences but he is very funny as the ex-druggie who loathes his Christmas hit single and gives dippy radio and TV interviews. Laura Linney is in it too, but... Curtis does not really write rounded characters on the whole. Rather, his comedies (as with Bean) are populated, as were the medieval and renaissance morality plays, with 'humours', persons who embodied a particular characteristic ('humour') and who interacted with the other 'humours'. Characterisation was not required as the audiences knew how the humours ticked, what they represented and the moral stances (good and bad) they stood for. Critics who want greater depth from Curtis (as I do) have to admit that this is not what he is about and that audiences pick up the morality play aspects of his films and enjoy them a great deal.

BIG FISH (US, 2003, d. Tim Burton)

For just a few opening minutes, it looked as though this could not be a Tim Burton film. What was he doing? Some father-son storytelling like A River Runs Through It? A straightforward piece of Americana? The doubts are quickly dispersed and we are back in Burton territory. Yet, it is unlike

anything he has done before even if there are visual references to other films, like the box-house suburbia of Edward Scissorhands.

This is a film for those who delight in storytelling.

Once we have got our bearings, we find we are listening to a tall story about a larger than life fish, that Albert Finney is relating it at his son's, Billy Crudup's wedding. And, instead of it being an endearing situation, it is the occasion for alienation. It's the kind of film that defies a neat synopsis as it moves from present to past, from reality to fantasy, from story to story.

Albert Finney is masterful as he invents his life, especially as he comes to the end of it. Billy Crudup is earnest as his less than imaginative son who has heard the stories a thousand times but wants to understand his father before he dies. Much of the film is about his father as a young man who finds he has great talents, leaves town with a giant and finds himself saving a community, finding and wooing his wife and embarking on a whole lifetime of adventures from down the street to Vietnam. The young man is played with charm and supreme self-confidence by Ewan McGregor. Jessica Lange has a smaller role as the mother and Helena Bonham Carter gives one of her calmest performances as a mysterious woman who may be a witch.

That is description and a taste of the plot and performances. It is too difficult in words to communicate Burton's ability to create a different and wonderful world full of truly magic moments, a mixture of the mundane and the marvellous, the tragic and the comic, building up to an ending that diehard realists may be annoyed by but illustrates the wonder of storytelling.

PETER PAN (US, 2003, d. P.J.Hogan)

A lavish production, filmed at Australia's Gold Coast studios. Co-writer and director is P.J.Hogan who made his mark with Muriel's Wedding and My Best Friend's Wedding. He obviously has great devotion to playwright J.M.Barrie and his immortal creation, Peter Pan.

Peter Pan has had many incarnations on stage, screen and television. It has been pointed out that he is usually played by a girl or a woman. While Disney's animated 1953 Peter Pan and the recent Return to Neverland have Peter as a boy, this film has a boy playing our hero. (Though, I should add, that I sorely missed 'Never Smile at a Crocodile' this time round.) Some critics have got themselves into a lather in their reviews, taking the opportunity to execrate Steven Spielberg for Hook - Spielberg was trying to interpret his own life and career through Peter Pan as a middle aged executive who had grown up and forgotten Neverland and needed to go back there, something that this Peter Pan gives as a reason for not growing up.)

Hogan recreates a turn of the century London that we are familiar with from stories like Mary Poppins. Mr Darling could be straight out of Mary Poppins with his subservient business nose to the grindstone, not understanding his children too well. In the meantime, they are being bossed about by their socially climbing aunt, Lynn Redgrave. Their mother, Olivia Williams, loves them, even if they cavort around the house playing pirates and they do have their dog, Nana, as their nurse. This is the situation when Peter Pan comes knocking on their window to retrieve his shadow which was cut off in their room.

Off they go to Neverland to find Lost Boys, fight pirates and confront the wicked Captain Hook. There is plenty of adventure, swordfights, especially with Peter and Wendy showing their derring-do. The Darling boys forget home. Wendy becomes an honorary pirate. Where will it end, especially as Mrs Darling sits vigil at their window night after night.

The question is: do they want to grow up? Is childhood in Neverland the goal in life? It is best to be the eternal boy? And, the invitation to the audience to join in and bring Tinkerbell back to life: 'We believe in fairies'?

Jeremy Sumpter, a touch too American to be the perfect Peter Pan, combines natural charm with a smirk that makes you wonder who innocent he is and how manipulating he is. Rachel Dunham Wood is a lovely

and vigorous Wendy. Ludivine Sagnier is a cheeky (sometimes irritating) Tinkerbell. As in the theatre productions, Mr Darling and Captain Hook are played by the same actor. Jason Isaacs seems very meek as the children's father but is more than lifesize as Hook. He showed he could do dastard in The Patriot and the second Harry Potter film.

Perhaps the pudding has too many rich ingredients to make it the satisfying delight that would be truly magical.

COLD MOUNTAIN (US, 2003, d. Anthony Minghella)

However one responded to The English Patient, it was clear that writer-director Anthony Minghella was a fine movie craftsman and a director of elegant films. The comparison usually offered is David Lean and it is a reasonable one here. And this is especially true of Cold Mountain.

Minghella has adapted the very popular novel by Charles Frazier into a two hour plus post Civil War epic journey. Minghella does not neglect the war. In fact, his portrayal of the siege of Petersburg, Virginia, in 1864 is quite extraordinary with its quiet picture of the confederate defences, the dynamiting by the Yankees and their eager attack which has them attacking, then massed against a wall from which they cannot retreat. If there were to be a picture of the horrors of war, we have it here.

However, the focus is on the community of Cold Mountain where the minister's daughter Ada (Nicole Kidman) writes letters to Inman, (Jude Law) whom she came to know briefly before he went to the war. Impoverished, she finds it difficult to accept charity, finds the attentions of Teague (Ray Winstone) the ruthless redneck leader of the Home Guard whose mission it is to round up and kill deserters very unwelcome and who has to learn to put aside some of her genteel ways and work to survive. The catalyst for this transformation is backwoodsman Ruby who comes to help and brooks no nonsense from Ada. Renee Zellweger puts aside the glamour of Chicago and Down with Love and gives a commanding performance. It is not meant as a put down but as a compliment to say that if they decided to revive Ma Kettle on screen, Zellweger could do wonders with her.

The core of the film is Inman's epic journey, his odyssey, from the Carolina coast through the farmlands and the mountains, the changing seasons back to Ada and Cold Mountain. Along the way, in the different encounters, we are given some fine cameos from an excellent cast: Philip Seymour Hoffman, Kathy Baker, Eileen Atkins, Giovanni Ribisi, Natalie Portman, Brendan Gleeson, all of whom are worth seeing.

This is screen romance, action adventure, an attempt to portray the war and its aftermath for the South, an attempt to immerse the audience in the feel of nineteenth century America and appreciate the hardships and heritage.

SCHOOL OF ROCK (US, 2003, d. Richard Linklater)

The popularity of Jack Black is one of the mysteries of Hollywood. On paper, he ought to be a screen presence that one dislikes, even at times loathes. He is rough and ready, looks and acts like a slob, has a bad mouth and bad attitudes, often anarchic. Yet, through Jesus' Son, High Fidelity, Shallow Hall and Orange County, he has made an extraordinary impression. We keep watching him. His super- confidence and comic timing and delivery are often mesmerising. It is the same with School of Rock, which is one of the most entertaining films of the year. It is Mr Holland's Opus, Dead Poet's Society and The Emperor's Club moved downmarket but with even better results for Black's young student musicians who become the School of Rock.

Black plays Dewey, for whom Rock and Roll, its rhythms, beat and lyrics are not just music. They also give it to 'the man', whoever is in authority. This time it is Joan Cusack reminding us once again what a versatile actress and comic she is. She is the uptight principal of an expensive and prestigious school who hires him under false pretences as a substitute teacher and whose school nearly collapses under the protests of angry parents who are horrified to learn that this slob has not been teaching them the curriculum - although they all become scholars of the history and ethos of Rock and Roll.

The usual assortment of kids are there in the classroom, the gawky guitarist, the bossy girl who will grow into Reese Witherspoon in Election, the gifted Asian pianist, the self-consciously large black girl who has a voice to die for, the effeminate costume designer, the computer whiz - and they are all ten. So, it's not so much the class resisting Black but rather how he transforms them and gives them a different vision of life and music.

Not only does Black work his slob-charm on the characters, he works it on us the audience, so that, while meeting him in real life would have major problems, watching him on screen has us on his side. The film is also often very funny. Director is Richard Linklater whose early films would have suited Black, Dazed and Confused, Slackers, SubUrbia.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING (New Zealand, 2003, d. Peter Jackson)

Whatever one's views on the trilogy, it must be said at the outset that Peter Jackson's achievement in bringing Tolkein's epic to the screen is unique, an extraordinary part of cinema history. Not only did he adapt and co-write the novel, he produced, directed and co-ordinated spectacular special effects. And he did it all in New Zealand.

The faith that the producers had in him that they allowed him to make all three films at once has been justified. The success of the first two films also provided financial leeway for him to fine tune and re-shoot so that the third episode would be just as he wanted. He was able to work with a large cast of international actors to create Tolkein's characters acceptable to the vast readership of the novels. In keeping to the threefold structure of Tolkein's work and incorporating most of the key elements, he has satisfied most of the purists, encouraged a new and young readership to open the trilogy and made fantasy more than respectable.

The first two films were honoured with technical Oscars. While the films were nominated for Best Film awards, they did not win. Whether the trilogy wins awards or not, the complete work deserves honours.

The Return of the King is filmed with light, even brightness, compared with The Two Towers. It still has its dark side as Frodo and Sam are led and misled by Golum in Mordor. In fact, the episode with Frodo and the spider in the cave as frightening as an arachnophobic monster film. The battles, too, are impressive, not only the flying creatures taking up soldiers in their mouths and tossing them around, but the mammoths and their relentlessly heavy tread as they advance (the sound engineering making them truly alarming).

With three basic plot stories intercutting, The Return of the King is easier to get hold of: Frodo completing his mission, Gandalf urging Rohan to war, Aragorn and the king riding to do battle with Sauron's troops. Another advantage of this film is that all of the characters have the opportunity to have a specific dramatic sequence that stamps their presence in the film and in the minds and feelings of the audience. It is interesting that the film opens with Gollum in his human form (Andy Serkis) dramatising his evil choices and his transformation into the split personality villain. The character who comes into his own in this film is Sam, played with solid loyalty and friendship by Sean Astin.

Tolkein coined the word 'eucatastrophe'. It means a disaster which is played out in all its tragic aspects but which leads to a good outcome. It is the equivalent of the 'happy fault' of Adam that led to the incarnation, of the passion and death of Jesus that led to resurrection. The battle between good and evil on the large scale in the trilogy, the struggle in Gollum which fails, the struggle in Frodo which succeeds are part of this experience of eucatastrophe. After the battles and the restoration of the king, as in Shakespeare's plays, there is the return of social order. Frodo goes on to another land, a hero. But Sam and the Hobbits stay in the shire where all is well.

LOONY TUNES BACK IN ACTION (US, 2003, d. Joe Dante)

I wish I could say that this was an entertaining comedy, in the vein of Who Framed Roger Rabbit. However, despite a lot of effort, the result is rather strained, too complicated for the younger audiences - and not complicated enough for their parents.

For those who have a passion for Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny, the whole thing will be delightful. When Daffy Duck is sacked from Warner Bros but an over-zealous new executive (Jenna Elfman) to make way for Bugs to be the main star, he finds himself in company with a gawky would-be stuntman (Brendan Fraser) who is, in fact, the son of the James Bond-like studio star (Timothy Dalton) who is both star and real spy. The plot concerns Las Vegas, a television satellite, a mad businessman, journeys into space to destroy the transmitter.

The villain has to be one of the smarmiest and overacted villain of comedy movies. It is an unrecognisable Steve Martin. He gives a terrible performance making Daffy Duck look as suave as Pierce Brosnan!! A lost opportunity.

THE NIGHT WE CALLED IT A DAY (Australia, 2003, d. Paul Goldman)

By the 1970s Frank Sinatra was, with Bing Crosby, the celebrity crooner of the century. He had made many films and had won an Oscar for From Here to Eternity. But, from the 1960s with the Rat Pack and the connection with the Kennedys and the Mafia, he had become something of an ambiguous figure with his bodyguards, his arrogance (and the suggestions from The Godfather that he was also connected with people who put horse's heads in executives beds).

In 1974 he began a concert tour of Australia but was picked at by journalists and angrily compared them with hookers. A hullabaloo ensued with concerts cancelled, apologies demanded and the Australian Council of Trade Unions becoming involved, future Prime Minister, Bob Hawke acting as mediator.

This is a fictionalised account of the visit, though David Field does a Hawke impersonation.

What is difficult for the audience is watching Denis Hopper as Sinatra. It is too difficult to move away from Hopper as Hopper. He does give a good performance, miming Ol Blue Eyes' songs which are sung by Tom Burlinson. And the abrasive character of the crooner definitely comes across, someone who is used to getting his own way, sometimes sentimental, sometimes hard, who eventually agrees to a compromise as long as he wins behind the scenes. Melanie Griffith is Barbara Marx who was to become Sinatra's fourth wife.

The screenplay is full of gibes at Sinatra including well-known criticisms of Mia Farrow by Ava Gardner. However, the principal focus is on a young would-be entrepreneur, played by Joel Edgerton, whose father is a Sydney criminal boss (Tony Barry) who manages to book the tour and has to fight desperately to make it a success. Rose Byrne as his assistant is made to be the voice of conscience and commonsense. The cast includes David Hemmings as Sinatra's agent and Portia de Rossi as the aggressive and insulted journalist. Definitely a curiosity item and one for Sinatra fans.

FREAKY FRIDAY

In the mid-70s there was a Disney film, Freaky Friday, with Barbara Harris and a young Jodie Foster as mother and daughter who did not see eye to eye with each other. A bit of hocus pocus and the two change bodies and have to cope with each other's lives - and learn to understand how mother's work and how daughter's work. In the 1980s, there was a spate of this kind of Vice Versa film, but it was mainly about boys changing with their fathers.

Now in the early 21st century, it is time to go back to female exchanges. Hence a remake of Freaky Friday. The first part of the film sets out to convince us that Jamie Lee Curtis, a widowed mother, a psychiatrist who is about to remarry, is proper, has rules in the house, has expectations of her young son and, especially, her loud, angry and rebellious daughter (Lindsay Lohan). It also sets out to convince us how

rebellious a daughter can be (depending on whether you are a girl of 15 empathising with the daughter or an adult empathising with the mother).

They certainly do a good job because they are both convincing when the body exchange takes place. Lindsay Lohan, who has been most believable in her rages, now performs demurely as a mother trapped in her daughter's body. Jamie Lee Curtis has the chance to become all ditzy as a 15 year old trying to think, speak and act like an adult (with a great lack of success). Naturally, this gives an opportunity for comic mix-ups which keep us amused. Mark Harmon as the prospective husband spends most of the time bemused by the strange behaviour of what looks (but does not sound) like his wife-to-be.

It is easy to suspend disbelief in what seems impossible and simply enjoy the film and its themes of literally stepping into someone else's shoes to understand them.

TAIS TOI (France, 2003, d. Francis Veber)

For those, like me, who are not aware of details of French slang, the title of this film means, 'Shut up'. It does not take too long to realise how apt the title is, in a humorous way. We are introduced to Gerard Depardieu (who looks now like an effective ad for weightwatchers) who is a really, really ineffectual thief. He gets caught very quickly. We also soon realise that he is intellectually handicapped but is blessed with a sweet Forrest Gump nature. Unfortunately for others, this manifests itself in his incessant talking, chatting, making friends with people, sometimes in a straightforwardly blunt yet innocent manner. It is not long before he has exhausted his stay with all the inmates of the prison.

Jean Reno (known for The Professional, Mission Impossible and Godzilla as well as his numerous films in France) has shut up completely after being arrested when a Paris gangster has murdered his girlfriend and Reno has absconded with his stolen millions.

When you know that the film was written and directed by Francis Veber, author of so many odd couple comedies, from La Cage aux Femmes to Les Diner des Cons and Le Placard), you realise that we are in for fun and games as Depardieu befriends Reno and after the most hilarious and preposterous escapes and dangers, Reno befriends Depardieu. There are a lot of frustrated detectives, policemen, not to mention gangsters and thugs along the way.

Veber is a master of farcical situations with unlikely heroes. Meeting the Depardieu character in real life would be disastrous. But, up there on the screen, especially with the taciturn and expressionless Reno, it works.

UPTOWN GIRLS

This is not a film for adults to be reviewing. Most might find it hard and irritating going.

Brittany Murphy (Clueless, 8 Mile, Don't Say a Word) is an irritating young woman, unlucky in love and just about everything else despite have a famous rock and roll father who wrote a song for which everybody knows. She can be ditzy most of the time because money is not what she lacks. Responsibility has never been part of her vocabulary or her life. She can't resist spending despite the caution of her endlessly patient friend. Abandoned by the English musician she thought was the one, bankrupt and impossible to live with, she accepts a job as a nanny for the daughter of a club owner (Heather Locklear).

Dakota Fanning (I am Sam, The Cat in the Hat) is an irritating young girl. Left to her own devices by her absent mother, she is rigid in routines, demanding and intolerant.

If you need to see a film where two people change as you know they are going to, from impossible to nice, then this is your film. Despite the talents of the two actresses, this long day's journey into sweetness is hard going.

DUMB AND DUMBERER: WHEN HARRY MET LLOYD

It's not a lot of people who will be immediately attracted by this title. Yes, it is a fairly dumb film. No, it is not quite as dumb as so many others in this seemingly proliferating genre. For example, My Boss's Daughter is dumberer.

What is of movie lore interest is that this is a prequel to the Farrelly Brothers' 1994 hit, Dumb and Dumber, a star vehicle for Jim Carrey in his early days and for Jeff Daniels. The challenge for this film was to find young lookalikes for Carrey and Daniels and coax them to act in ways that the stars did. On the whole, they have succeeded with Eric Christian Olsen the Carrey character and Derek Richardson for Jeff Daniels.

There are some funny moments among the silly ones, bodily function jokes and lots of slapstick (after all the classic movie diarrhoea involved Jeff Daniels in Dumb and Dumber; this time the joke is on chocolate). When Harry and Lloyd go to school, they become friends although jealousy arises when they are both attracted to the school's most glamorous student who just happens to be the paper's investigator researching some dishonest goings on with the school principal (Eugene Levy skilfully funny as usual). Of course, it will be funny only if you feel in a dumb mood.

MY BOSS'S DAUGHTER (US, 2003, d. David Zucker)

Only a short running time, but this is a tough one to sit through. Having seen it on a plane, I had other things to distract me when necessary (a lot of the time). Ashton Kutcher seems to be having a star run in Hollywood (Dude, Where's My Car, Just Married, Texas Rangers) but, on the evidence of his films, one is not sure why. He has a reputation for practical jokes on Saturday Night Live, so this might be the reason for this comedy of errors where he has to mind his boss's house for a night and everything that could go wrong does go wrong - in the most raucous and grating way. The cast, especially Terence Stamp as the curmudgeonly boss and Michael Madsen as a drug debt-collector go through humiliating routines. David Zucker (Flying High, Ghost) employed his farce techniques to better effect in Scar Movie 3.

ALEX AND EMMA (US, 2003, d. Rob Reiner)

A rather low key romantic comedy from Rob Reiner (A Few Good Men, Misery, The American President) who has a cameo role as a publisher. It is a vehicle for Kate Hudson who, so like her mother Goldie Hawn, has been appearing in a number of films recently, Four Feathers, How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days, Le Divorce). She is a stenographer who is hired by blocked writer, Luke Wilson.

You didn't have to guess it. She inspires him, actually takes him in charge, gets his novel finished, by which time he realises that he is in love with her. Since we saw this would happen before they met, he is a very slow learner.

The special device of the film is to have him write a novel that is set in the 1920s, which gives it some panache and affluence, and to visualise the sequences, especially a romance with Sophie Marceau. The key is that he keeps introducing a governess and maid and changing her nationality. Since Kate Hudson plays this character, she has the chance to impersonate the stereotype of maids from Sweden, Germany, Italy... which she does with some aplomb.

A soufflé of a movie - and that all novelists with writer's block should find Kate Hudson to achieve success.

THE MOTHER UK, 2003, d. Roger Miché)

This is a study of a 68 year old woman who has lived her whole life in an English provincial town, sharing her life with her husband, especially with his needs as he grows older. While she has worked in shops, she has never had any major ambitions and has accepted her life as it came along. Her two children are settled in London, one working in finance with a very upwardly mobile working wife and his two children. His friend from school is building additions to his house. The other child is a single mother, involved in an affair with the builder, tutoring in poetry and generally feeling insecure. A not uncommon scenario.

What happens when her husband suddenly dies? Does she accept impending old age and fade quietly away? Does she change her life completely? How does she deal with her children's crises and their general self-centredness? Have intimate relationships finished for her?

These are the questions the film asks. Because the film is asking these questions of the audience as well as of the mother, we are in a continuous state of challenge, sometimes approving what she does, sometimes disapproving, sometimes apprehensive about what the consequences of her actions will be. She has to endure the criticisms of her children, especially her daughter and her complaints about unaffirmed when she was young. While there is some truth in this criticism, the mother does not quite deserve the tirades she receives. More controversial is the issue of sexuality and intimacy. A woman of 68 who has been faithful to her husband discovers the intimacy and sensuality of sexuality, experiences that she had been really unaware of.

It is to the credit of Anne Reid, better known in the UK from television, that she brings depth to the character, a credibility to her choices and behaviour and a vulnerability to the criticisms both of her past behaviour and her present actions. As the builder with whom she becomes infatuated, Daniel Craig gives a subtle performance, seemingly brutish but tender, seemingly committed but wanting to be carefree. We share the passion and the disillusionment as well as the puzzle that the mother goes through.

Direction is by Roger Michell (*The Buddha of Suburbia*, *Notting Hill*, *Changing Lanes*) and the screenplay by novelist and playwright Haneif Kureishi (*The Buddha of Suburbia*, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and that other intense story of unexpected relationships, *Intimacy*). Often provocative, this is an intelligent portrait of an ageing woman.

AMERICAN SPLENDOR

Harvey Pekar, a Detroit-based hospital filing clerk, discovered early in life that he was not meant to be a superhero. In fact, his life was more than particularly ordinary. Rather grumpy, no clothes-horse, paunchy, with two failed marriages, he got along by selling records and collecting comics. When he met cartoonist, Robert Crumb (the subject of Terry Zwigoff's fine documentary, *Crumb*), some of his life changed for the better. He started to write captions about his daily life, his humdrum experiences. Crumb liked them and offered to draw them. The result was the *American Splendor* comics.

Pekar continued in his day job until 2001. However, his comics took off and, for a time, he was an acerbic guest on the *Letterman* show. He married an admirer, Joyce Brabner, who also created a book on her charity concern visits to Israel. Harvey developed a cancer but overcame it - but the experience resulted in a joint effort by Harvey and Joyce, a comic book on his cancer year. Joyce, an intuitive diagnoser of other people's mental problems, wanted children. Harvey did not. Yet, when a cartoonist friend left his daughter in the care of Harvey and Joyce, they found fulfilment and adopted her.

This film is basically a docudrama. However, it is full of zest, humour, pathos, with an original style. We see the real Harvey and the real Joyce. Interviews with them are interspersed throughout the film, sometimes with the actors playing them watching the interviews. Most of the *Letterman* shows are actual - except for the last one where Harvey tells him off. Paul Giamatti is wonderful at recreating Harvey, an impressive performance and impersonation. Hope Davis is excellent as Joyce. This is an affectionate but strong critique of American life and a creative way in cinema of doing what cartoons and captions have done in Harvey's comics and books.

CRIMSON GOLD (Iran, 2003, d. Jafir Panahi)

From a screenplay by Abbas Kiarostami, Jafir Panahi has created a character portrait of a former soldier who has fallen on hard times, is ill, is overweight, is supposed to marry the sister of his best friend. He is tempted to commit a robbery in a jewelry store where he has been snubbed by the manager. The film opens with the robbery gone wrong and then goes back to develop the portrait and lead us back to the robbery.

It gives Panahi the opportunity to picture the poorer side of Tehran where so many are trapped and to show us the extraordinarily lavish life of the wealthy. By the end of the film, we have got to know the thief very well and wish that he was not doomed to his pessimistic end.

DOGVILLE (Denmark, 2003, d. Lars Von Trier)

Lars Von Trier seems fascinated by moral and religious themes. So much of his imagery and his references are biblical. It has been easy to see his persecuted woman, Emily Watson in *Breaking the Waves* and Bjork in *Dancer in the Dark*, as martyrs, whose sufferings bring healing to men. Von Trier sets them up as redemptive Christ-figures.

As we share the experiences of Grace (and her doubting Thomas) in the community of Dogville, we trace the pattern of the Gospel: like Jesus coming into a lowly world, accepted despite suspicions, serving rather than being served, turned against and given her own passion. As the three hours running time pass, we seem to be being led in a most positive way. It is the way of forgiveness no matter what the offence - and, finally, Grace becomes the victim of women and children's malice and men's lusts.

This would have been so simple. We might have been using Dogville in years to come for seminars on grace. But, there is the enormous 180 degree turn in the final chapter of the film. When the unseen gangster finally arrives, we might surmise he represents the devil. But, then we see him, and discover that the Godfather might be God the Father and von Trier is challenging us to think again about John 3 where God so loves the world... It seems that in this US world, God so hated it that he sent his daughter to destroy it. If there is to be no more deluge, then 2 Peter says that the next destruction is by fire. And, in Dogville, so it is. With David Bowie singing about America's young over the final credits and the devastating collage of American photos, we are sent out of the cinema questioning the good and the evil in human nature and whether there can be any hope.

CARANDIRU (Brazil, 2003, d. Hector Babenco)

We are impressed before the film starts to know that the book which has been adapted for the screen was a Brazilian best-seller, that it brought to hundreds of thousands of readers, devastating information and images about Brazilian gaols and the stories of the inmates. Author, Drauzio Varella, spent years treating prisoners in Carandiru. The prison was destroyed by implosion in December 2002.

Director Hector Babenco was a friend and patient of Dr Varella. He has done his friend a service in making this film. A character remarks at the end that he has seen many of the old black and white gaol movies from the US. We all expect to see the prison routines, and we do. But here they are quite different. The film opens with a violent dispute but it is solved with patience by the governor and the shrewdness by one of the prisoner bosses. And we are introduced to the doctor who then takes centre screen.

The character of the doctor is one of the most admirable on screen. His is not only a medical service and care, it is also a ministry of listening and healing. He is a catalyst for many of the prisoners to tell him - and us - their stories. These take us out of the prison into the world of mainly petty crime, of robberies and vindictive murders. With these flashbacks, the characters come alive and show their humanity.

Then there is the riot, an extraordinary re-construction of a 1992 riot in which the police took over and brutally killed 110 of the inmates. It was a massacre.

Babenco made *Pixote* in the early 1980s and portrayed the street kids of the time. He had intended no connection with this film. He said that on the third viewing, he realised that many of these prisoners of the 90s were the *Pixotes* grown older.

SWIMMING POOL (France, 2003, d. Francois Ozon)

French directors are noted for the impeccable craftsmanship, the elegance of their cinematic style and the intensity of their portrayal of emotions and relationships. In recent years, Francois Ozon, particularly with *Under the Sand*, has emerged as one of the best of these directors.

One reviewer made the snide remark that in this film, he remains at the shallow end of the pool. I wonder. Given the excellence of his two leading ladies and their skills in communicating contrasting characters and generations and his portrayal of a detective fiction writer who is observing everything for inclusion in her book, we are taken more deeply into these characters than might appear on the surface. While, at times, their behaviour seems bizarre and psychologically improbable, this is all part of the plot twist that brings it all to a satisfying conclusion.

Forty years ago, Charlotte Rampling was emerging as a glamorous starlet in films like *Georgy Girl*. After an increasingly strong career, she has become an icon, an intense screen presence. Playing the ageing mystery writer as an introverted, moody personality, she has the opportunity to develop into a more open, sensual, scheming and playful woman. It is a performance to be relished. Ludivine Sagnier is able to keep pace as the wilful, self-absorbed promiscuous teenager who changes the writer's attitudes.

Set in beautiful French countryside, the film is an intelligent drama, a psychological thriller and a satisfying adult entertainment.

THE BARBARIAN INVASIONS (Canada, 2003, d. Denys Arcand)

In 1987, Denys Arcand's *The Decline of the American Empire* was a witty and intellectual treat, a group of Canadians in middle age, assessing their lives and careers, discussing, sometimes profoundly, sometimes fatuously, their interpretation of the world, especially the American-dominated western world. But, the film was not so strong on its dramatic narrative. Then came *Jesus of Montreal*, 1989, a surprising, complex film that satisfied as drama, as display of characters, as intellectual discussion and as visually arresting. Arcand's films of the 90s were less satisfying. *The Barbarian Invasions* gathers all Arcand's talents and offers a sequel to *The Decline* to enjoy and relish.

Arcand and his characters are older and, very often, wiser. Remy Giraud as the dying Remy is the larger than life (which he is soon to leave) focus of the film, a blustering, often raging character who has alienated wife and children but still commands the devotion of friends (the main gallery from *Decline* whom it is fascinating to listen to 15 years on, joys, regrets and all). When his son - a new barbarian who plays computer games and has never read a book yet is a millionaire financial adviser - is able to relocate his father in a reconditioned hospital room, the older man begins to change as does his son. But, for Arcand, there is no quick sentimentality. The friends still discuss the world and assess their lives. The next generation - who are more preoccupied by money, drugs (and mobile phones) than sex - are challenged in generosity, responsibility and love.

The setting is post 9/11 (pictured shockingly in the film) and Arcand uses this as the basis for his title metaphor - but, who are the new barbarians? The 'illiterate' generation who think money can buy anything - and does? The range of migrants and refugees who pour into the American world? Perhaps the metaphor is over-stated for the realities it refers to.

Arcand has many intriguing, passing observations, especially the characters' Catholic reminiscences, the changes in Catholicism in Montreal in 1966 and the emptying of the Churches of people and statuary. The nun doing pastoral care in the hospital is presented with dignity and sympathy. The film ends with an assisted suicide which seems emotionally satisfying even as it goes against and challenges accepted religious and social standards.

MYSTIC RIVER (US, 2003, d. Clint Eastwood)

At the end of *Mystic River*, the Columbus Day parade goes on. People celebrate the American Dream. They are not dead, as they are at the end of *Dogville*, but so much has died inside. One of the characters

has said that the secrets and lies should come out. But, they don't. People hide their sorrows, their breaches of conscience and, sometimes defiantly, carry on.

However, Clint Eastwood's film is about how the central characters got to that situation. In his 24th film as director, making it at the age of 72, Eastwood has settled for intelligent adult drama and a dramatisation of moral issues. His film is also finely crafted, with the city of Boston and the Mystic River almost becoming characters as well. The film is quite long, is measured in its pace and, while it does show a police investigation into a murder in some detail, the interest is always in the characters and the tangles of their interactions.

In the prologue, one of the three neighbourhood kids is abducted and molested. This crime, focussed on one boy, will have consequences and ramifications for many people and for the community decades later.

The three men are expertly portrayed, Sean Penn standing out as the punk grown into middle age, devoted to his family, grieving the murder of his daughter but deciding that he is to be the arbiter of justice. Tim Robbins does well as the man who still mourns the childhood he never had because of the abduction. Kevin Bacon (with Laurence Fishburne as his partner) is the straight-arrow successful detective. Eastwood is well served by both Laura Linney (whose speech at the end to her husband is key to the decisions made) and Marcia Gay Harden as a bewildered wife who makes a terrible mistake of judgment.

Eastwood has contributed to our movie consciousness in so many ways. Here, he contributes reflection on our conscience.

ELEPHANT (US, 2003, d. Gus Van Sant)

Gus Van Sant quotes the title of a British film of the late 80s by Alan Clarke, *Elephant*, as the inspiration for his title: the challenge to notice social problems which are as large as an elephant in the living room. He also alludes to a Buddhist saying about identifying the parts and limbs of an elephant and assuming that one has, therefore, understood the whole. This is a useful comment to offer to many critics who have complained that the film gives little or no insight into the characters and motivations of students who carry out campus shootings. If Michael Moore had too many answers in *Bowling for Columbine*, Van Sant seems to have too few.

What he seems to be doing (and the film was made for an American television audience who watch Home Box Office), is to lure us into an ordinary day at a Portland, Oregon, high school, make us literally follow a number of students around (lots of tracking shots which are very long), see them in action, even if only in passing, just as we might do if we had occasion to visit the school for the first time. We notice some students, not others. We see the principal, a science class, a group discussion about sexual orientation, the playing fields, the cafeteria. We can identify a couple of students and know a little about them.

And then comes the Columbine-like massacre. Of course, we want answers. Of course, we want to understand motivations. We find it hard to believe that the killers can be so calculating and cold, proud of their body count. Yes, they watch Hitler footage, have neo-Nazi sympathies and have a sexual encounter in the shower before they go to school. One plays Beethoven on the piano. No, this does not explain what they do. The indications seem quite banal. But, Van Sant seems to want us to note the banalities and leave us with the questions that we need to pursue after the film. It is no good giving answers in a film if that means we satisfy a need for dramatic completion. The elephantine issues of American youth and alienation, gun-culture and violence are to be understood and solved after the movie.

LE TEMPS DU LOUP (Austria/France, 2003, d. Michael Haneke)

Dark nights of the screen: doomsday and doomsnight dark. After *Benny's Video*, *Funny Games*, *Code Inconnu* and *The Piano Teacher*, a Michael Haneke film is an event. Perhaps *The Time of the Wolf* is an event, but for me... This is a very subjective review.

I found it very difficult to become involved with the film, although the opening moments were full of promise. I needed more information. In fact, the characters had more information than we did. They knew where they came from, something of the crisis that was causing the social chaos. While so much of the film was in helpless darkness, characters moved in and out without sufficient sketching of who they were and why they were doing what they did. The exception was Isabelle Huppert's daughter and the enigmatic young stranger. Had the others had some of this definition, I might have been drawn into their plight. While I can appreciate the fears, the bewilderment, the uncertainties, the numbness of such a crisis, it was difficult to engage emotionally with them. This meant that behaviour become irritating, situations confusing and a great desire for the film to end. In fact, even though the train was moving at the end, the film just stopped.

LOST THINGS

Lost Things is a B-budget film, with unknown actors, written by playwright Stephen Sewell. It is very much derivative of ideas from the I Saw What You Did Last Summer series as well as The Blair Witch Project. Unfortunately, the acting is very stilted, which takes away from the basic plot which has some merits, especially the group coming on their weekend and ultimately being revealed as ghosts. The film relies a great deal on swearing rather than solid dialogue, which also detracts from its quality and entertainment value. It is a scary movie in parts, although a lot of the earlier part of the film is given to creating the atmosphere. Produced in association with Showtime Australia, it will occupy an hour and a half of television time.

LOST ZWEIG

Lost Zweig is based on a novel about the Austrian Jewish author. The film focuses on the last months of the Zweigs' life. After a second marriage and a strong career in Austria, especially as anti-Nazi, urging European unification as well as having an ambition to find a homeland for European Jews in Brazil, he moved to Brazil in 1936, wrote a best-selling book about it and was welcomed by the Vargas dictatorship. He returned to Brazil, hoping to get visas for many of his Jewish friends so that they could escape Nazi Germany and have a refuge and a homeland in Brazil.

He was joined by his publisher and friends. The film shows them and their friendship, the lifestyle in Brazil (which some attack because they were privileged whereas others, especially Jewish women, were lured into pretence marriages and sold into prostitution on their arrival in Brazil). The film shows the literary group in Brazil as well as an encounter with Orson Welles, in Brazil filming in Rio and the carnival.

Ultimately, Zweig felt betrayed by the dictatorship, having failed to get a homeland in Salazar's Portugal and then in Brazil. He and his ailing wife decided then that the most appropriate thing would be to end their lives.

Structurally, the news of their death comes in the middle of the film, which leaves audiences puzzling. There is a lot of argument about where they should be buried - Jewish rabbis considering that they had broken the law by their suicide, other rabbis thinking that they would be serving as an example of Jewish commitment in the difficult times of World War II. The second part of the film then speculates and dramatises the last hours of their life, the philosophical decision of Zweig to take his life, quoting Montaigne whom he was writing a biography of, as voluntary death being more beautiful. His wife, devoted to him, also takes her life.

THE POET

The Poet is billed as a romantic thriller, although it focuses on a cold professional hitman. The Poet has been his alias in his native Russia and in his work in Chechnya. However, he does have a devotion to Pushkin and other poets and is attracted by the arts.

When the film focuses on the hits and his escapes, it is quite strong. When he has to kill a witness, he begins to make mistakes. Intrigued by artist whom he shoots, he then visits the art gallery where the photographer's exhibition is being held. He is also attracted to his sister and begins an affair with her. It all has to come to a head with the sister, who has declared she could never kill anybody, having to make a decision of where she stands with the killer as he faces the police.

Dougray Scott is solid, sometimes stolid as the Russian killer. Laura Elena Harring (from Mulholland Drive) is not so effective as the sister. She tends to be portraying her role in posed sultriness, rather than depth of character. Jurgen Prochnow is solid as the police investigator.

On the whole this is routine material - but the sections with the hitman at work show what it might have been.

LA PETITE LILI (France, 2003, d. Claude Miller)

For many years Claude Miller has made serious dramas which have been well-crafted and finely acted. This film has a lighter touch. He acknowledges his inspiration from Chekhov. In a holiday house, a family and friends gather to see the experimental short film made by the moody son and featuring the attractive young neighbour, Lili. What follows is partly comedy of errors, partly a comedy of reconciliation.

Amongst the gallery of characters are a film star mother with as much temperament as her son, her producer lover, her elder and crotchety brother as well as the owners of the house and their love-stricken daughter. Rounding out the group is the local doctor.

As a picture of a dysfunctional group, the film is interesting even if we are irritated by their behaviour. When the second part of the film moves into their all participating in a film of the first part, it is often amusing while highly, perhaps too highly contrived. Once again, it is the performances which stand out: Nicole Garcia and Robinson Stevenin as mother and son, Ludivine Sagnier as the ambitious Lili and, best of all Jean-Pierre as the grumpy brother spouting hilarious lines (and being played by Michel Piccoli in the film).

SOLDADES DE SALAMINA

This is Spanish film-making at its best. While it is easy to describe a film that is a journalistic quest to discover the truth about a historical person as like Citizen Kane, it is still a useful comparison for this film.

The Spanish Civil War is receding into the past, yet it recurs in so many films, maybe necessary for younger generations to ponder what happened and why - and to discover more from the elderly veterans before they die. David Trueba has adapted a novel by Javier Cercas. A one-novel academic is asked to write an article on the war by her editor. It opens up her curiosity and she discovers that a Falange poet escaped a firing squad in 1939 and was allowed to live by a young soldier who found him in the woods. Was the poet's life worth saving? He became part of Franco's government. Who was the young soldier and why did he do it?

The writer's journey takes her to interview witnesses, to visit the historical sites and, ultimately, to some insight about human nature, as well as making her own interior journey. Her quest is interspersed with recreations of the events of 1939, so that the film works well as a re-creation of the period. But, her own journey from self-contained individual to acknowledging her need to express feeling and to relate to people is also credibly explored. She is helped by a seemingly ditzy clairvoyant whom she looks down on and who becomes her close friend. She is also helped to new insights and new feelings by her meeting with the old soldier.

The writing, the pacing and the performances, with Ariadne Gil in the central role, are admirable.

LES COTTELLETES (France, 2003, d. Bertrand Blier)

Bertrand Blier has long been an 'in-your-face' director. In the 70s, *Les Valseuses* stood out as a thumbing of nose at society and its values, with Gerard Depardieu and Patrick Dewaere as a couple of amoral bums who seemingly couldn't care less. It is interesting to read that Blier has commented that his two ageing gentleman in *Les Crotchettes* are *Les Valseuses* in old age. While Philippe Noiret and Michel Bouquet have political and social stances, they are still ready to let *les valseuses* out, give them frank and crass voice and challenge everyone and everything even, at the end, Death.

Opened out from a play, the characters move in and out of homes and landscapes, with instant ease, creating a surreal dialogue between the self-satisfied bourgeois Noiret and the irritating man who came to dinner, Bouquet. They range over a wide number of subjects in their prolonged conversation including politics and social issues (but regularly returning to sexuality which is the most preoccupying topic). Suddenly, they have their way with Death so that their maid, whom they love, will not die, and a musical number breaks out and then the movie stops.

It is something like French commercials which, instead of a narrative, offer some exotic poses, some enigmatic behaviour and an aesthetic exercise and leave it to the audience to work out what it is all about.

THE BROWN BUNNY (US, 2003, d. Vincent Gallo)

Is Vincent Gallo, actor and director of *Buffalo 66*, just self-confident or extremely self-indulgent? This is a two hour home movie that presumes its audience wants to watch Gallo (who wrote, produced, acted as director of photography and as one of the camera operators as well as starring) in his drive across America. We see him cleaning his teeth, putting on his clothes and every other domestic activity at more length than one would watch in real life. We see his ear, his nose, his eye in lengthy close-ups. And then we see the road, during the day, night, through rain, through a specked windscreen (and then he cleans his van). Personal encounters are minimum, mainly some girls with the names of flowers. He is on a quest to find his lost love, Daisy.

With so much focus on Gallo, one wonders whether he will include a scene of his sexual activity. We are right to wonder because he does, including some close-ups which are more at home in a pornographic film. It would be interesting to hear Chloe Sevigny's take on her performance and the whole film (she appears as Daisy) which seems not only self-referential to Gallo and a wallow in his character's life and misfortunes but seems strongly misogynistic. Gallo's character, the plot of his life and the cinematic treatment, which is more akin to episodes of *Big Brother* and the like, though not so visually slick, mean that it is only ardent fans who will watch or care.

KISS OF LIFE (UK, 2003, d. Emily Young)

A film that is both modest and ambitious. Emily Young, who also wrote the screenplay, wants to explore a London family and its relationships as well as remind us of the 90s wars in the Balkans. She also wants to explore the impact of death and dramatically speculate on possibilities of limbo and purgatorial experiences. And all within 86 minutes. She succeeds.

By intercutting through the whole length of the film, both the episodes in London concerning a mother who is injured in a street accident, her two children (who are at awkward ages and miss their father working in Serbia) and her ageing father as well as the father's hardships in travelling back to England, we get to know all the characters while experiencing the sense of absence, the angers due to the absence and the need for some reconciliation and forgiveness, for a kiss of life.

The film is attentive to authentic detail and is served very well by Ingeborga Dapkunaite's presence as the loving mother and frustrated wife. Peter Mullan brings an earnest toughness to his role as the father.

PURPLE BUTTERFLY

Portrait of a significant phase in Chinese history, Manchuria in the late 1920s and the Japanese occupation during the 1930s. One of the difficulties for a western audience is the unfamiliarity with the period and the effort to identify the characters easily. However, the director creates an atmosphere, presents us with characters who are passionate and who eventually make decisions that lead them into dangerous conspiracies and rebellion. A confused shooting spree at a railway station is a highlight of the film. Audiences can appreciate the Chinese feeling of humiliation, the arrogance of the Japanese towards the Chinese and the plight of individuals caught up in movements far bigger than themselves.

TIREZIA

It helps to have some background on the classical character, Tiresias, the blind hermaphrodite prophet of Thebes, and the various legends that led to his/her being blinded. Perhaps it won't, because many audiences will not have the patience to stay with the first half - and, if they do, and are satisfied with a forty minute section which enables us to get a hold on aspects of the plot and characters, the ending is so elliptical and rapid, that we are left with enigmas that we may or may not want to take from the cinema.

Written and directed by Montreal and Paris-based Bertrand Bonello (*The Pornographer*), the film opens with a long volcanic sequence of molten lava, spends a great deal of time observing (and ogling) the transsexual prostitutes of Paris parks. When an obsessive and grim man imprisons the Brazilian Tiresia, the film is more coherent, the story of a collector, which ends in shocking violence. Tiresia is played by an actress and acts as a woman. In the second part, Tiresia is played by an actor and lives as a man. Laurent Lucas is the collector and it is more than an emotional jolt when we seem him vesting for a baptism. Presumably, the audience assumes this priest is the collector. The cast credits, however, indicate that he is another character played by the same actor (in the same unsmiling way that Lucas does, as in *Harry, He's Here to Help* and *Who Killed Bambi?*) What follows is a use of both the Greek mythology and allusions to the Gospels, but by that stage the film has become so studied and puzzling that the temptation is to opt out.

WHALE RIDER

For audiences searching for a film for the whole family, a quality film with serious themes and a touch of humour, *Whale Rider* is just the film.

It comes from New Zealand, from a novel by Witi Ihimaera. It boasts wonderful photography of a village on the east coast of the North Island, filmed in the town where the film is set. The village is small and a community of Maori people live there. They treasure myths about their ancestor, a hero who came to the land, riding on the back of a whale. As the modern world has encroached on the people, they are in need of a new leader. When the son of the chief goes to Europe to work as an artist, expectations are high for the birth of his son.

In fact, twins are born. The boy dies, but the girl lives. When things deteriorate in the village, the chief blames his granddaughter even though he loves her. She, on the other hand, is a strong-minded girl and learns all the rites and rituals of the tradition even though she has been forbidden to do so. But, it is she who is destined to be the new whale rider and the new chief. Whales beach themselves on the coast at the end of the film, then the myth of the whale rider lives again.

Most of the cast had not acted before. Eleven year old Keisha Castle-Hughes is so natural as well as forceful on screen, there is no doubt that she will make a great leader (and actress). Rawiri Paratene as the chief brings great dignity to his role, even though he is at times harsh and stubborn. This is tempered by Vicky Haughton as the kind and proud grandmother.

The film is firmly based in New Zealand and on Maori customs. It takes us into an unfamiliar world and invites us to consider a different culture. Yet, the story and the characters are universal and all of us can identify with them. It is also a convincing picture of men and women working together and women emerging in leadership roles. Plenty to enjoy as well as to think about.

THE MEDALLION

This is one of those easy come, easy go Jackie Chan vehicles. It is action combined with hocus pocus mysticism. In case you hadn't noticed, there is Irish money in the film so, after the initial Hong Kong sequences, we are off to Ireland and the Interpol office there. Hong Kong, Dublin and a castle on the Irish coast make for unusual settings.

The plot is a mixum-gatherum of police investigations and rivalries, especially between Lee Evans (who is not particularly funny) and Jackie Chan (who has the knack of being unselfconsciously comic). There are a ragbag of crooks under the thumb of archvillain Julian Sands who has the usual villain's desire for power and immortality and is unscrupulous in pursuing the marvellous medallion even though it endangers the life of a gifted child. And so on, until his timely and special effects death and disappearance. There is a bit of love interest in the background with Jackie's neglect of a girl friend he worked with in Hong Kong (Claire Forlani looking both amused and bemused).

Not major league Chan.

SPUN

There are films about ugly characters and incidents and there are films that are ugly. Spun is both. One has a suspicion that audiences mirror those whose lives are portrayed on screen will love it and that those who like flashy techniques derived from music videos and commercials (the credentials of director Jonas) will have favourable reviews. The style is clever and suited to the content of the film and setting its tone. The rather starry cast who (somewhat inexplicably) allow themselves to act like the dregs of society with few redeeming qualities do their best. For others, it will be a depressing excursion into the suburban drugworld of dealers, addicts, corrupt police and general deadendedness.

Jason Schwartzmann is offered as a kind of Everyaddict hero but veers off into a lost world. Brittany Murphy is a dumb addict who is in favour of being eventually rescued. Mickey Rourke, who is specialising these days in over-the-hill oddballs, is the controller of events and drugs until he is incapable of doing any better. Mena Suvari, Debbie Harry, Peter Stormare, Alexis Arquette have supporting roles. This drug excursion is quite ugly.

LE DIVORCE (US, 2003, d. James Ivory)

James Ivory, his producer Ismail Merchant and his writer, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, have build a strong reputation for making literate, opulent and stately versions of classic writers, especially Henry James (The Europeans, The Bostonians, The Golden Bowl) and E.M. Forster (A Room with a View, Maurice and Howards' End). These films tend to be dismissed as museum pieces by younger commentators who are more MTV generation of pace and style as well as older commentators who feel that movies should radiate obvious vitality. Le Divorce is something of a challenge. It uses the same storytelling devices, creation of characters and dramatically plotted interactions as the period films but it is set in contemporary Paris. Once again, especially as in the Henry James adaptations, the Americans are the innocents abroad, eager to learn from Europe but failing to realise until it is too late what the traditional Europeans, the French, really think of them and the contempt beneath the scarcely veiled ironic politeness. So, here we are in Merchant-Ivory territory only the look and the sounds are contemporary.

The plot is reminiscent of an Altman ensemble film. It centres on two sisters, Naomi Watts (an American expatriate artist married to a Frenchman, with one child and another on the way) and Kate Hudson (eager to support her sister, especially when her husband walks out on her, but also eager to sample the heterodox ways of marriage and mistresses). The implications of the actions of the two sisters are enough for a mini-series. Matthew Modine portrays (far too eccentrically) the enraged husband of the woman Naomi's husband has absconded with. Thierry Lhermitte portrays the ageing businessman roue who has no trouble with the beginning or the end of the affair.

The parent generation consists of Sam Waterston and Stockard Channing as the 'what are we doing in Paris?' Americans and Leslie Caron as the erring husband's mother. Glenn Close (doing something of a

Germaine Greer) is the worldlywise author who has learned more than a thing or two in her thirty years in France but who is now happy to leave it all behind.

There is froth and glamour, licit and illicit romance, snobbery and naivety, realism with a touch of magic (especially a floating umbrella over the rooftops of Paris) and a sudden plunge into melodrama that takes one off guard and seems a bit preposterous. But, of course, all's well that ends well.

GETTIN' SQUARE

An unexpected critical and box-office hit in Australia. It won Best Screenplay at the 200s Australian Film Institute awards and Best Actor for David Wenham (best known internationally as Fr Damian in Paul Cox's *Molokai*). Whether it will travel beyond Australian shores is another matter.

Since Australia was founded as a convict settlement, it is not surprising that stories about prisoners are fairly common. When they are linked with stories of losers who have an ironic sense of humour, they are popular. However, how they express their sense of humour, slang and accent may be hard on the foreign ear (just look at the body language instead!)

Getting square means getting rehabilitated (which is not exactly what most of the characters here are able to achieve). It also means getting even. They are much better at this.

Sam Worthington is the hero who has spent eight years on a murder charge, a murder he did not commit. His mother's ex-boyfriend tries to have a hold over him as does a corrupt cop. However, he is employed, when he gets out, by a weight-watchers enthusiast restaurant owner who has had some money laundering deals in his time. He is played to great effect by Timothy Spall.

However, the scene stealer is David Wenham as a comically whining addict who wants to keep out of trouble but can't and who gets caught up in the money laundering deals. His scenes in the courtroom where he manages to confuse everyone with what his evidence is and, more importantly, are they paying his bus ticket money home are some of the best in Australian comedy.

It all ends up legally OK and, possibly, morally OK.

LOST IN TRANSLATION (US, 2003, d. Sofia Coppola)

Lost in Translation was written and directed by Sofia Coppola, daughter of Francis Ford Coppola. She had taken Winona Ryder's place acting in her father's *Godfather III* and received bad reviews and ridicule. However, she had collaborated with her father in writing his section of *New York Stories* and moved into directing with the 1999 study of a stern Catholic family, *The Virgin Suicides*.

This is a change of pace, a comedy set in Tokyo but also a wistful look at a young woman who has accompanied her photographer husband on a commission in Japan. Left alone, she is feeling abandoned. The focus is on a middle-aged actor whose marriage is brittle (with his wife forever ringing him to check on colour choices for redecoration) but who is a successful star brought to Tokyo for whisky commercials (which he is happy both to drink and endorse). He is manifesting all the signs of mid-life crisis.

There are a lot of very funny scenes in the film, especially with Bill Murray as the star, with hotel hospitality and a dominating woman provided, the garish nature of television celebrity shows as well as the language difficulties during the filming of the commercials. Bill Murray gives one of his best ever performances as the star. Scarlett Johansson (*Horse Whisperer*, *Man Who Wasn't There*, *Ghost World*, *Girl with the Pearl Earring*) is affecting as the young Yale graduate left to her own devices. She won a Best Actress award in Venice for her performance. Giovanni Ribisi appears briefly as the husband and Anna Farris has a very satiric sequence as a vapid actress giving an inane press conference about her filming with Keanu Reeves. The comedy is good. The insights into relationships between men and women are fine. The film is strong as it focuses on friendship rather than immediate sexual fulfilment. It has depth as it

shows characters developing, understanding one another, sharing experiences and enabling friendship to transform them.

KILL BILL VOLUME 1 (US, 2003, d. Quentin Tarantino)

Billed as the fourth film by Quentin Tarantino (not exactly accurate as he directed a quarter of the portmanteau film, Four Rooms), it is definitely a Tarantino movie.

Odds are that most over-50s in the audience will focus on the amount and extent of the violence with an estimate of the considerable body count - the martial arts choreography will be seen as enhancing a reprehensible display of visual mayhem and death. Odds are that many of the under-50s who watch the film will be enthralled by its visual flair, the staging of the fights, the composition of scenes, the extraordinary editing and the amazing fights and effects. They will be more inclined to laugh at the comic-book displays of violence and death (as they did with the car shooting scene in Pulp Fiction and the subsequent cleaning of the vehicle). They will see this as so far-fetched that it is entertaining fantasy and that anyone who looks at it 'realistically' is missing the point. While it does have a lot of Tarantino's trademark offbeat, cleverly inconsequential discussions about the mundane realities of life as well as his ironic offhand one-liners, this aspect is not as strong as in Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction and Jackie Brown.

And once again, not only does Tarantino play with time (giving us two volumes with a tantalisingly unexpected piece of information at the end of volume one to have us queuing up for more), his revenge story shifts all over the place as Uma Thurman tracks down her attackers. For those who are not going to see it, in Volume 1 she does not kill Bill.

It is always uncomfortable sitting on the fence, which is where I was, amazed at the visual impact of the film, dismayed at the carnage, comic-book though it may be.