

ROGGER EBERT'S MOVIE YEARBOOK 2010



Every Single New Ebert Review

Roger Ebert's
Movie Yearbook
2010

An Illini Century

A Kiss Is Still a Kiss

Two Weeks in the Midday Sun:

A Cannes Notebook

Behind the Phantom's Mask

Roger Ebert's Little Movie Glossary

Roger Ebert's Movie Home Companion *annually 1986-1993*

Roger Ebert's Video Companion *annually 1994-1998*

Roger Ebert's Movie Yearbook *annually 1999-2007, 2009*

Questions for the Movie Answer Man

Roger Ebert's Book of Film: An Anthology

Ebert's Bigger Little Movie Glossary

I Hated, Hated, Hated This Movie

The Great Movies

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Your Movie Sucks

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DVD Commentary Tracks

Citizen Kane

Dark City

Casablanca

Floating Weeds

Crumb

Beyond the Valley of the Dolls

Roger Ebert's Movie Yearbook 2010

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This book is dedicated
to Robert Zonka, 1928–1985.
God love ya.

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Introduction

As you know, my life has undergone a fundamental change since I had surgery in the summer of 2006. The surgery was a success, and I am at present cancer free, but the result was a loss of my ability to speak. My first-grade report card had this notation: *Talks too much*. Well, I don't any longer.

This disability has ended my days on television, but it came with a silver lining. The focus of my work life has always been seeing movies and reviewing them, and that hasn't changed. In the early days of my recovery, my wife, Chaz, brought me a DVD of a movie she thought I might enjoy, *The Queen*, with Helen Mirren. She was correct. I took out a yellow legal pad and wrote my first review in a few months.

My illness involved more surgeries in an attempt to restore my speech, which were unsuccessful. What was constant were the movies. I attended as many as possible, watched more on DVD, and was soon up to form again. Indeed, I seem to be more productive than ever; as I write this in autumn 2009, I've already reviewed 211 reviews this year, as well as Great Movie essays, Questions for the Movie Answer Man, interviews, and entries in the blog. I started writing in the spring of 2008.

People ask if my writing has changed since my illness. Not that I am aware of. But it has become more necessary. From the age of sixteen, I've been a newspaperman, and that has always been my first love. Television was unexpected. Now I am writing more than ever for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and my Web site. Because I've always been very verbal, this writing has become a form of speech. I take particular pleasure in writing a review because I am expressing myself as fully as possible, and the rest of the time I'm afraid I come across as the village idiot, holding up conversations while trying to scribble down notes.

What else has changed? I remember a day in 2008 when I was at a screening of the new Indiana Jones movie and realized how happy I was—how much I loved movies. I was still in a wheelchair during a rehabilitation process, and all hell was breaking loose on the screen, and I loved every moment of it, even the obvious special effects.

Something has improved. I have more time now to review films out of the mainstream, more foreign films, documentaries, smaller indie productions, revivals. I've always tried to cover those areas, but now I have more time. And opportunity. Some of the best films I've seen this year, like *Silent Light*; *You, the Living*; *Munyurangabo*; *Tulpan*; and *Departures* (filmed in Mexico, Sweden, Africa, Kazakhstan, and Japan) were films that might have flown under my radar.

I also find myself valuing the human qualities of a film. Serious illness focuses the mirror on human mortality and draws idiotic entertainments like *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* into focus. What can anybody learn from such a film? Paul Cox, a director who has never made a film without human values, once said the experience of film should not make you less of a person than you were before it began.

Movie critics have an immediate consolation after undergoing such films. We can write

our reviews. There are few things tastier than revenge, freshly brewed.

We missed a year of the *Yearbook* while I was sick, filling the gap with a collection of a my four-star reviews. The 2009 *Yearbook* doubled back and picked up everything published since the 2007 edition. Now here is 2010, which, depending on how you count, is the twentieth second or twenty-third annual volume. This one means a lot to me.

My thoughts go back to the original *Movie Home Companion* and to Donna Martin, the Andrews McMeel editor who conceived it and later persuaded me to switch to the *Yearbook* format. My sincere thanks to her, and to Dorothy O'Brien, who has been the book's valued editor at Andrews McMeel in recent years. Also to Sue Roush, my editor at Universal Press Syndicate, and to Laura Emerick, Miriam Dinunzio, Darel Jevens, Teresa Budasi, Thomas Conner, and all the other heroes at the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and Jim Emerson, John Barry, and the webstaff at rogerebert.com. Many others are thanked in the acknowledgments.

In autumn 2006, the University of Chicago Press published *Awake in the Dark*, a survey of my forty years of writing about the movies. My Andrews McMeel book *I Hated, Hated, Hated This Movie* inspired a sequel in spring 2007, *Your Movie Sucks*. As for the Great Movies book there may be a volume three by the time you read this, and I'm already a dozen essays in volume four.

ROGER EBERT

Acknowledgments

My editor is Dorothy O'Brien, tireless, cheerful, all-noticing. My friend and longtime editor Donna Martin suggested the yearbook approach to the annual volume. The design is by Cameron Poulter, the typographical genius of Hyde Park.

My thanks to production editor Christi Clemons Hoffman, who renders Cameron's design into reality. John Yuelkenbeck at Coleridge Design is the compositor who has worked diligently on the series for years. I have been blessed with the expert and discriminating editing of Laura Emerick, Miriam DiNunzio, Darel Jevins, Jeff Johnson, and Teresa Budasi at the *Chicago Sun-Times*; Sue Roush at Universal Press Syndicate; and Michelle Daniel and David Shaw at Andrews McMeel Publishing. For much advice and counsel, thanks to Jim Emerson and John Barry of www.rogerebert.com.

Many thanks are also due to Marsha Jordan at WLS-TV. My gratitude goes to Carol Iwata, my expert personal assistant, and to Gregory Isaac, who is a computer whiz and invaluable aide-de-camp. I must also thank those who have given me countless observations and corrections, including Peter Debruge, Jana J. Monji, and Troylene Ladner.

And special thanks and love to my wife, Chaz, who was always at my side during a difficult illness, helped see three books through the press during that time, and was a cheerleader for this one. I am so grateful to her as we once again, relieved, enter a period of good health.

ROGER EBERT

Key to Symbols

★★★★ A great film

★★★ A good film

★★ Fair

★ Poor

G, PG, PG-13, R, NC-17: Ratings of the Motion Picture Association of America

G Indicates that the movie is suitable for general audiences

PG Suitable for general audiences but parental guidance is suggested


PG-13 Recommended for viewers 13 years or above; may contain material inappropriate for younger children

R Recommended for viewers 17 or older

NC-17 Intended for adults only

141 M. Running time

2008 Year of theatrical release

 Refers to “Questions for the Movie Answer Man”

A

Across the Universe ★★★★★

PG-13, 133 m., 2007

Jim Sturgess (Jude), Evan Rachel Wood (Lucy), Joe Anderson (Max), Dana Fuchs (Sadie), Martin Luther McCoy (JoJo), T. V. Carpio (Prudence), Bono (Dr. Robert), Eddie Izzard (Mr. Kite). Directed by Julie Taymor and produced by Matthew Gross, Jennifer Todd, and Suzanne Todd. Screenplay by Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais.

Here is a bold, beautiful, visually enchanting musical where we walk INTO the theater humming the songs. Julie Taymor's *Across the Universe* is an audacious marriage of cutting-edge visual techniques, heartwarming performances, 1960s history, and the Beatles songbook. Sounds like a concept that might be behind its time, but I believe in yesterday.

This isn't one of those druggy 1960s movies, although it has what the MPAA shyly calls "some" drug content. It's not grungy, although it has Joe Cocker in it. It's not political, which means it's political to its core. Most miraculous of all, it's not dated; the stories could be happening now, and in fact they are.

For a film that is almost wall-to-wall music, it has a full-bodied plot. The characters, most named after Beatles songs, include Lucy (the angelic Evan Rachel Wood), who moves from middle America to New York; Jude (Jim Sturgess), a Liverpool ship welder who works his way to New York on a ship; and Lucy's brother Max (Joe Anderson), a college student who has dropped out (I guess). They now all share a pad in Greenwich Village with their musician friends, the Hendrixian JoJo (Martin Luther McCoy), the Joplinesque Sadie (Dana Fuchs), and the lovelorn Prudence (TV Carpio), who has a thing for Max, although the curious cutting of one scene suggests she might have lesbian feelings as well.

Jude and Lucy fall in love, and they all go through a hippie period on Dr. Robert's Magic Bus, where the doctor (Bono) and his bus bear a striking resemblance to Ken Kesey's magic mystery tour. They also get guidance from Mr. Kite (Eddie Izzard), having been some days in preparation. But then things turn serious as Max goes off to Vietnam, and the story gets swept up in the antiwar movement.

Yet when I say "story," don't start thinking about a lot of dialogue and plotting. Almost everything happens as an illustration to a Beatles song. The arrangements are sometimes familiar, sometimes radically altered, and the voices are all new; the actors either sing or synch, and often they find a mood in a song that we never knew was there before. When Prudence sings "I Wanna Hold Your Hand," for example, I realized how wrong I was to even think that was a happy song. It's not happy if it's a hand you are never, never, never going to hold.

Julie Taymor, famous as the director of *The Lion King* on Broadway, is a generous

inventive choreographer, such as in a basic training scene where all the drill sergeants look like G. I. Joe, a sequence where inductees in jockey shorts carry the Statue of Liberty through a Vietnam field, and cross-cutting between dancing to Beatles clone bands at an American high school prom and in a Liverpool dive bar. There are underwater sequences that approach ballet, a stage performance that turns into musical warfare, strawberries that bleed, rooftop concerts, and a montage combining crashing waves with the Detroit riots.

But all I'm doing here is list making. The beauty is in the execution. The experience of the movie is joyous. I don't even want to know about anybody who complains they aren't hearing "the real Beatles." Fred Astaire wasn't Cole Porter, either. These songs are now more than forty years old, some of them, and are timeless, and hearing these unexpected talents singing them (yes, and Bono, Izzard, and Cocker, too) only underlines their astonishing quality.

You weren't alive in the 1960s? Or the '70s, or '80s? You're like the guy on the IMDB message board who thought the band was named the *Beetles*, and didn't even get it when people made Volkswagen jokes because he hadn't heard of VW Beetles either. All is forgiven. Jay Leno has a Jaywalking spot for you. Just about anybody else is likely to enjoy *Across the Universe*.

I'm sure there were executives who thought it was suicidal to set a "Beatles musical" in "the Vietnam era." But this is a movie that fires its songs like flowers at the way we live now. It's the kind of movie you watch again, like listening to a favorite album. It was scheduled for the Toronto Film Festival, so was previewed (as several Toronto films were) for critics in major cities. I was drowning in movies and deadlines, and this was the only one I went to see twice.

Now do your homework and rent the DVD of *A Hard Day's Night* if you've never seen it. The thought that there are readers who would get this far in this review of this film and never have seen that film is unbearably sad. Cheer me up. Don't let me down (repeat three times).

Adoration ★★★

R, 101 m., 2009

Arsinee Khanjian (Sabine), Devon Bostick (Simon), Scott Speedman (Tom), Rachel Blanchard (Rachel), Noam Jenkins (Sami), Kenneth Walsh (Morris). Directed by Atom Egoyan and produced by Egoyan, Simone Urdl, and Jennifer Weis. Screenplay by Egoyan.

Atom Egoyan is fascinated by the way life coils back on itself. He uses coincidences and chance meetings not as plot devices but as illustrations of the ways we are linked across generations and national boundaries. His characters are often not completely connected to where they find themselves, and they bring along personal, sometimes secret, associations. These often reflect much larger realities in the outer world.

Adoration circles around a central event or nonevent. A report is read about a woman who

falls in love with a man from the Middle East. His family is in Israel, he says, although I am not sure that is true. She becomes pregnant. He is unhappy at first but later overjoyed. They seem deeply in love. He wants her to fly to meet his parents in Bethlehem. For business reasons, he must take a later flight.

In an age of terrorism, this triggers alarms, but not for her. What becomes of these people and the flight is not for me to relate now. We see them only in flashbacks. The story presents more than one way they possibly did meet. The film is about other people in their lives—before, and after, they met. It is also about how these other people think about what they did and didn't do.

The buried issues involve nationalism, religion, and prejudice. But this is not a message film. It is about people trying to find their way through emotional labyrinths. We are never always sure what these are, or what really happened, or what these people really feel about it, or their motives. Neither are they. *Adoration* isn't confusion; it's about confused people. Most movies make it easy for us. The central characters know what they want, and we understand.

Here there is the illusion that we are feeling our way along with these people. The most important connection, although we don't realize it for a while, is a Toronto high school drama teacher named Sabine (Arsinee Khanjian, Egoyan's muse). She reads a story about the original air travel incident as an exercise in French class. Why that story? An exercise in comprehending spoken French. And something more ...

A student named Simon (Devon Bostick) transforms this into a first-person story, with his mother as the pregnant woman and his father as the treacherous fiancé. Simon's parents are dead, and he lives with his Uncle Tom (Scott Speedman). Sabine encourages him to read his story to the class as if it were true—as an acting exercise, she says. The story is picked up in Internet chat rooms involving Simon's high school friends.

I don't want to say too much about what is real or imagined here, and nothing at all about the secret connection the teacher Sabine is hiding. Egoyan contrives meetings between Sabine and Tom with two rather brilliant sequences that keep us guessing even while played out in full view. And there are flashbacks to the couple in Simon's story and to his actual parents, played by the same actors, so that, as it frequently does in Egoyan's films, reality takes on uncertain implications.

Throbbing beneath are ideas about terrorism, about Israeli-Palestinian feelings, about Muslims in Canada, and about the role of the Internet in creating factoids that might as well be real. Statements are made involving these subjects, but they're all suspended in an incomplete resolution; the movie withholds closure. There are areas only suggested: the boy's anger at his father, the use of the original story to him, the circumstances of two deaths, the placing of blame.

Some viewers may find the film confusing; I found it absorbing. One problem with reviewing an Egoyan film is that you find yourself struggling to describe a fractured plot line and what characters (and we) may believe at one point and not later. This can be confusing and unsatisfactory. Yet the film presents emotions that are clear. Why does Egoyan weave this tangled web? Because his characters are caught in it. Our lives consist of stories we tell ourselves about our lives. They may be based on reality, but not necessarily, and maybe the

shouldn't always be. If you couldn't do a little rewriting, how could you stand things?

Adventureland ★★★

R, 107 m., 2009

Jesse Eisenberg (James Brennan), Kristen Stewart (Em Lewin), Martin Starr (Joel Schiffman), Bill Hader (Bobby), Kristen Wiig (Paulette), Ryan Reynolds (Mike Connell), Margarita Levieva (Lisa P.). Directed by Greg Mottola and produced by Ted Hope, Anne Carey, and Sidney Kimmel. Screenplay by

It is a truth of twenty-somethings that if you have a crappy summer job with other twenty-somethings, the way to take your mind off work is daydreaming of sex with your workmate. You are trapped there together, eight or ten hours a day for three months, right, so what else is there to make you dance to unheard melodies?

Take James. Here he is, all set to move to New York, and his dad loses his job and he's forced to take a job at a shabby Pittsburgh amusement park. All of the rides look secondhand, all of the games are rigged, and all of the prizes look like surplus. Your job is to encourage customers even more luckless than you are to throw baseballs at targets that are glued down while inflamed with hopes of taking home a Big Ass Panda. That's what Bobby the owner calls them when he instructs you, "Nobody *ever* wins a Big Ass Panda."

Director Greg Mottola, who made the rather wonderful *Superbad*, is back now with a sweeter story, more quietly funny, again about a hero who believes he may be a virgin outstaying his shelf life. Jesse Eisenberg, from *The Squid and the Whale*, plays James, who has a degree in Renaissance studies. (The movie is set in the 1980s, and there may still be a few jobs around.) He's out of his element at Adventureland; Bobby has to coach him to fake enthusiasm when he announces the horse race game, where you advance your horse by rolling balls into holes. His performance reminded me uncannily of my last visit to Dave Buster's.

Most of the male employees in the park lust for Lisa P. (Margarita Levieva), who wears an Adventureland T-shirt unfortunately advertises Rides Rides Rides. James is much more interested in Em (Kristen Stewart), who is quieter and deeper (Games Games Games). She's smart, quirky, and seems more grown-up than the others. A quick rapport springs up, despite her edge on James in sexual experience. She thinks he's kinda sweet. They talk about subjects that require more than one sentence.

This romance takes fragile bloom while Mottola, also the screenwriter, rotates through a plot involving James's friends, one of whom expresses his devotion by hitting him in the netherlands every time he sees him. We cut often to the owner, Bobby, and his wife, Paulette (Kristen Wiig), who are lovebirds and have firm ideas about how every job at the park should be performed, which doesn't endear them to the employees because they're usually right. Oh, and then there's Connell (Ryan Reynolds), the good-looking maintenance man, who's married, and why am I telling you that?

As the summer lurches between deadly boredom and sudden emergencies (someone wins Big Ass Panda), James and Em grow closer. This is absorbing because they reveal themselves as smarter than anyone else realizes. From his earlier work, I expected to like Eisenberg. What surprised me was how much I admired Kristen Stewart, who in *Twilight* was playing below her grade level. Here is an actress ready to do important things. Together, and with the others, they make *Adventureland* more real and more touching than it may sound.

I worked two summers at Crystal Lake Pool in Urbana. I was technically a lifeguard and got free Cokes, but I rarely got to sit in the lifeguard chair. As the junior member of the staff I was assigned to Poop Patrol, which involved plunging deep into the depths with a net, a flyswatter and a bucket. Not a lot of status when you were applauded while carrying the bucket to the men's room. ("No spilling!" my boss, Oscar Adams, warned me.) But there was another lifeguard named Toni and—oh, never mind. I don't think she ever knew.

Alexandra ★★★ ½

NO MPAA RATING, 91 m., 2008

Galina Vishnevskaya (Alexandra), Vasily Shevtsov (Denis), Raisa Gichaeva (Malika).

Directed by Alexander Sokurov and produced by Andrei Sigle. Screenplay by Sokurov.

It is as simple as this. An old lady is helped on board an armored military train and journeys all night to visit a remote Russian army outpost. The soldiers seem to know about her and help her visit, and after a couple of local boys apparently try to "guide" her away from her suitcase, two soldiers in uniform turn up and escort her to the base.

We already know a lot about her. We know she is opinionated, proud, stubborn, and not afraid to express her opinion. She marches through the heat and dust into the base and is guided to her "hotel," a room with two cots in a barracks made of tents. Other information is revealed, slowly. Her name is Alexandra (Galina Vishnevskaya). She is here to visit her grandson, Denis. He is a captain in the army.

The base is located in Chechnya. It is a Muslim republic, occupied by the Russians, who are sullenly disliked. On the base, discipline seems informal, the soldiers lax. When Denis (Vasily Shevtsov) turns up, she is appalled by the state of his uniform and advises him to wash up. She also sniffs disapprovingly at other soldiers, tells helpers "Don't pull my arm" and "Don't push me!" and that she is perfectly capable of taking care of herself.

The next day she wanders the base so early that no one seems to be around, and that was when I remembered a similar scene in Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, about an old man who dreams of wandering a deserted town. There are other parallels between the two films, but Bergman's is about an old man discovering himself, and *Alexandra* is about an old woman being discovered. She is a transformative presence.

The film was written and directed by Alexander Sokurov, maker of the remarkable *Russian Ark*—remember that one, in which he used only one uninterrupted shot to tour the Hermitage Museum? He follows the woman as she talks her way past a guarded checkpoint and wanders

into town to find the market. She is tired and hot. It must be 100 degrees. She meets Malik (Raïsa Gichaeva), a woman about her age, who gives her a seat in her booth, is friendly, and gives her cigarettes and cookies knowing that they will go to Russian soldiers. Then she invites Alexandra home to her flat in a building missing a big chunk because of bombs and shells. The two old women bond, and their conversation is the essence of the film.

If the locals do not like the Russians, the Russians do not like their duty. They can't see the point of it. They are not wanted, they will never be wanted, so why are they forced to stay? These conclusions aren't said in so many words, but they permeate the film. And notice the way some locals look at her with pointed dislike and some soldiers simply stare at her, perhaps because she is the only woman on the base and reminds them of grandmothers, mothers, sisters, girlfriends—the whole world outside their existence.

Alexandra is not a sweet little old lady. The fact that she is played by Vishnevskaya, who once ruled the Russian opera, may supply a hint of where she gets her confidence, her imperious manner. But when she hugs her grandson, when he braids her hair, when she says he “smells like a man” and she loves that smell, we get a window into her youth and her memories. Remarkable, how little Sokurov tells us, while telling us so much.

The color strategy of the movie is part of its effect. It is drab, brown, unsaturated. Reds and greens are pale, sometimes not even visible. Everything is covered with dust. Bright colors would add vitality to the base, but that would be wrong. The point is that for the soldiers it's a dead zone, life on hold, a cheerless existence. And this plainspoken old woman reminds them of a lifetime they are missing.

Alien Trespass ★★

PG, 90 m., 2009

Eric McCormack (Ted Lewis/Urp), Jenni Baird (Tammy), Robert Patrick (Vern), Dan Lauria (Chief Dawson), Jody Thompson (Lana Lewis). Directed by R. W. Goodwin and produced by R. W. Goodwin and James Swift. Screenplay by Steven P. Fisher.

Alien Trespass is a sincere attempt to make a film that looks like one of those 1950s B movies where a monster from outer space terrorized a small town, which was almost always in the desert. Small, to save on extras and travel. In the desert, because if you headed east from Hollywood that's where you were, and if you headed west you were making a pirate picture.

The movie is in color, which in the 1950s was uncommon, but otherwise it's a knowing replication of the look and feel of those pictures, about things with jaws, tentacles, clawed weapons that shot sparks, and eyes that shot laser beams at people, only they weren't known as laser beams but as Deadly Rays. Facing them are plucky locals, dressed in work clothes from Sears, standing behind their open car doors and looking up to watch awkward special effects that are coming—coming!—this way!

The movie doesn't bend over backward to be “bad.” It tries to be the best bad movie that can be. A lot of its deliberate badness involves effects some viewers might not notice. For

example: bad back projection in shots looking back from the dashboard at people in the front seat. In the 1950s, before CGI, the car never left the sound stage, and in the rear window they projected footage of what it was allegedly driving past. Since people were presumed not to study the rear window intently, they got away with murder. In *Casablanca*, Rick and Ilsa drove from the Champs-Élysées to the countryside instantly.

The plot: Astronomer Ted Lewis (Eric McCormack) and his sexpot wife, Lana (Jodie Thompson), are grilling cow-sized steaks in the backyard when something shoots overhead and crashes in the mountains. The sexpot wife is an accurate touch: The monster genre can pinups like Mamie Van Doren and Cleo Moore, who were featured on the posters with Deadly Rays shooting down their cleavage.

Ted goes to investigate. When he returns, his body has been usurped by Urp, an alien. Urp means well. He needs help to track down another alien who arrived on the same flying saucer, named the Ghota, which has one eye, enough to qualify it as a BEM, or a Bug-Eyed Monster. The Ghota consumes people in order to grow, divide, and conquer. Sort of like B.O.B. in the new *Monsters vs. Aliens*, which is *also* a send-up of 1950s BEM movies. So far Todd Haynes's *Far from Heaven* (2002) is the only movie ever made in tribute to a *genre* movie of the 1950s.

The Ghota is battled by Urp and his plucky new buddy Tammy (Jenni Baird), a local waitress who is a lot more game than Lana. As nearly as I can recall, in the 1950s good girls were never named Lana and bad ones were never named Tammy. There are also hapless but earnest local cops (Robert Patrick and Dan Lauria) and an assortment of Threatened Townspeople. Also great shots of the Lewis family home, separated from the desert by a white picket fence, surrounded by the age-old story of the shifting, whispering sands.

Alien Trespass, directed by R. W. Goodwin (*The X Files* on TV) from a screenplay by Steve P. Fisher, is obviously a labor of love. But why? Is there a demand for cheesy 1950s sci-fi movies not met by the existing supply? Will younger audiences consider it to be merely inept and not inept with an artistic intention? Here is a movie more suited to Comic-Con or the World Science Fiction Convention than to your neighborhood multiplex.

If you must see a science fiction movie about a threat from beyond Earth, there's one right now that I think is great: *Knowing*. If you're looking for a *bad* sci-fi movie about a threat, etc., most of the nation's critics mistakenly believe it qualifies. How can you lose? "From beyond the stars—a mysterious force strikes terror into the hearts of men!"

Alvin and the Chipmunks ★★

PG, 91 m., 2007

Jason Lee (Dave Seville), David Cross (Ian), Cameron Richardson (Claire), voice of Justin Long (Alvin), voice of Jesse McCartney (Theodore), voice of Matthew Gray Gubler (Simon). Directed by Tim Hill and produced by Ross Bagdasarian Jr., Janice Karman, and Steven Waterman. Screenplay by John Vitti, Will McRobb, and Chris Viscardi.

The most astonishing sight in *Alvin and the Chipmunks* is not three singing chipmunks. No, it's a surprise saved for the closing titles, where we see the covers of all the Alvin & C albums and CDs. I lost track after ten. It is inconceivable to me that anyone would want to listen to one whole album of those squeaky little voices, let alone ten. "The Chipmunk Song," maybe for its fleeting novelty. But "Only You"?

There are, however, Alvin and the Chipmunks fans. Their latest album rates 4.5/5 at the iTunes store, where I sampled their version of "Only You" and the original by the Platters and immediately downloaded *The Platters' Greatest Hits*. I imagine people even impatiently preorder the Chipmunks, however, which speaks highly for the drawing power of electronically altered voices by interchangeable singers. This film is dedicated to Roy Bagdasarian Sr., "who was crazy enough" to dream them up. I think the wording is about right.

Despite the fact that the film is set in the present, when the real (or "real") Chipmunks already have a back catalog bigger than Kimya Dawson's, the movie tells the story of how they become rock stars and almost get burned out on the rock circuit. Jason Lee stars as David Seville, who accidentally brings them home in a basket of muffins, discovers they can talk, and is soon shouting "Alvin!" at the top of his lungs, as Chipmunk lore requires that he must.

David Cross plays Ian, the hustling tour promoter who signs them up and takes them on the road, where they burn out and he suggests they start lip-synching with dubbed voices. Now we're getting into Alice in Wonderland territory, because of course they *are* dubbed voices in the first place. Indeed the metaphysics of dubbing dubbed chipmunks who exist in the real world as animated representations of real chipmunks is ... how did this sentence begin?

That said, whatever it was, *Alvin and the Chipmunks* is about as good as a movie with these characters can probably be, and I am well aware that I am the wrong audience for this movie. I am even sure some readers will throw it up to me that I liked the Garfield movie better.

Yes, but Garfield didn't sing, and he was dubbed by Bill Murray. My duty as a reporter is to inform you that the chipmunks are sorta cute, that Jason Lee and David Cross manfully play roles that require them, as actors, to relate with empty space that would later be filled with CGI, and that at some level the movie may even be doing something satirical about rock stars and the hype machine.

I was also grateful that Alvin wears a red sweater with a big "A" on it as an aid to identification, since otherwise all the chipmunks seem to be identical, like mutant turtles or Spice Girls. It doesn't much matter which one is Theodore and which one is Simon, although Simon is always the one who seems a day late and a walnut short.

American Gangster ★★★★★

R, 157 m., 2007

Denzel Washington (Frank Lucas), Russell Crowe (Det. Richie Roberts), Chiwetel Ejiofor (Huey Lucas), Cuba Gooding Jr. (Nicky Barnes), Josh Brolin (Det. Trupo), Ted Levine (Lo Toback), Armand Assante (Dominic Cattano), Carla Gugino (Laurie Roberts). Directed by

Ridley Scott and produced by Scott and Brian Grazer. Screenplay by Steven Zaillian, based on an article by Mark Jacobson.

Apart from the detail that he was a heroin dealer, Frank Lucas's career would be an ideal case study for a business school. *American Gangster* tells his success story. Inheriting a criminal empire from his famous boss, Bumpy Johnson, he cornered the New York drug trade with admirable capitalist strategies. He personally flew to Southeast Asia to buy his product directly from the suppliers, used an ingenious importing scheme to get it into the United States, and sold it at higher purity and lower cost than anyone else was able to. At the end he was worth more than \$150 million, and got a reduced sentence by cutting a deal to expose three-quarters of the NYPD narcotics officers as corrupt. And he always took his mom to church on Sunday.

Lucas is played by Denzel Washington in another one of those performances where he is affable and smooth on the outside yet ruthless enough to set an enemy on fire. Here's a detail: As the man goes up in flames, Frank shoots him to put him out of his agony. Not that's merciful. His stubborn antagonist in the picture is a police detective named Richie Roberts (Russell Crowe), who gets a very bad reputation in the department. How does he come out that? By finding \$1 million in drug money—and turning it in. What the hell kinda thing is that to do, when the usual practice would be to share it with the boys?

There is something inside Roberts that will not bend, not even when his powerful colleague (Josh Brolin) threatens him. He vows to bring down Frank Lucas, and he does, although it isn't easy, and his most troubling opposition comes from within the police. Lucas, the student of the late Bumpy, has a simple credo: Treat people right, keep a low profile, adhere to sound business practices, and hand out turkeys on Thanksgiving. He can trust the people who work for him because he pays them very well, and many of them are his relatives.

In the movie, at least, Lucas is low-key and soft-spoken. No rings on his fingers, no goatee around his neck, no spinners on his hubcaps, quiet marriage to a sweet wife, a Brooklyn Brothers image. It takes the authorities the longest time to figure out who he is because they can't believe an African-American could hijack the Harlem drug trade from the Mafia. The Mafia can't believe it either, but Frank not only pulls it off, he's still alive at the end.

When it was first announced, Ridley Scott's movie was inevitably called the black *Godfather*. Not really. For one thing, it tells two parallel stories, not one, and it really has to because without Richie Roberts there would be no story to tell, and Lucas might still be in business today. But that doesn't save us from a stock female character who is becoming increasingly tiresome in the movies, the wife (Carla Gugino) who wants Roberts to choose between his job and his family. Their obligatory scenes together are recycled from a dozen or a hundred other plots, and although we sympathize with her (will they all be targeted for assassination?), we grow restless during her complaints. Roberts's domestic crisis is not what the movie is about.

It is about an extraordinary entrepreneur whose story was told in a *New York Magazine* article by Mark Jacobson. As adapted into a (somewhat fictionalized) screenplay by Steven Zaillian (*Schindler's List*), Lucas is a loyal driver, bodyguard, and coat holder for Bumpy

Johnson (who has inspired characters in three other movies, including *The Cotton Club*). He listens carefully to Johnson's advice, cradles him when he is dying, takes over, and realizes the fatal flaw in the Harlem drug business: The goods come in through the Mafia after having been stepped on all along the way.

So he flies to Thailand, goes upriver for a face-to-face with the general in charge of drugs and is rewarded for this seemingly foolhardy risk with an exclusive contract. The drugs will come to the United States inside the coffins of American casualties, which is apparently based on fact. It's all arranged by one of his relatives.

In terms of his visible lifestyle, the story of Frank Lucas might as well be the story of J. C. Penney, except that he hands out turkeys instead of pennies. Everyone in his distribution chain is reasonably happy because the product is high-quality, the price is right, and there's money for everyone. Ironically, an epidemic of overdoses occurs when Lucas's high-grade stuff is treated by junkies as if it's the usual weaker street strength. Then Lucas starts practicing what marketing experts call branding: It becomes known that his *Blue Magic* offers twice the potency at half the price, and other suppliers are forced off the streets by the rules of the marketplace, not turf wars.

This is an engrossing story, told smoothly and well, and Russell Crowe's contribution is enormous (it's not his fault his wife complains). Looking like a care-worn bulldog, his Richie Roberts studies for a law degree, remains inviolate in his ethical standards, and just keeps plugging away, building his case. The film ends (this isn't a spoiler, I hope) not with a *Scarface*-style shootout, but with Frank and Richie sitting down for a long, intelligent conversation, written by Zaillian to show two smart men who both know what the score is. As I hinted above: less *Godfather* than *Wall Street*, although for that matter a movie named *American Gangster* could have been made about Kenneth Lay.

American Teen ★★★

PG-13, 95 m., 2008

Featuring Hannah Bailey, Colin Clemens, Megan Krizmanich, Geoff Haase, Mitch Reinhold, Jake Tusing, and Ali Wikalinska. A documentary directed by Nanette Burstein and produced by Nanette Burstein, Jordan Roberts, Eli Gonda, and Chris Huddleston.

American Teen observes a year in the life of four high school seniors in Warsaw, Indiana. It is presented as a documentary, and indeed these students and their friends and families are real people, and these are their stories. But many scenes seem suspiciously staged. Why would Megan, the "most popular" girl in school, allow herself to be photographed spreading toilet paper on a lawn and spray-painting "FAG" on the house window of a classmate? Is she really that unaware? She's the subject of disciplinary action in the film; why didn't she tell the school official she only did it for the movie?

Many questions like that occur while you're watching *American Teen*, but once you make allowance for the factor of directorial guidance, the movie works effectively as what it wants

to be: a look at these lives, in this town (“mostly middle-class, white, and Christian”), at the time.

The director is Nanette Burstein, whose credits include the considerable documentaries *On the Ropes* and *The Kid Stays in the Picture*. She spent a year in Warsaw, reportedly shot over a thousand hours of footage, and focused on four students who represent segments of the high school population.

Megan Krizmanich is pretty, on the school council, a surgeon’s daughter, “popular,” but sometimes considered a bitch. She dreams of going to Notre Dame, as her father, a brother, and a sister did. She seems supremely self-confident until late in the film, when we learn about a family tragedy that her mother blames for her “buried anger.”

Colin Clemens, with a Jay Leno chin, is the basketball star. His dad has a sideline as a Elvis impersonator (pretty good, too). The family doesn’t have the money to send him to college, so everything depends on winning an athletic scholarship, a fact he is often reminded of. He doesn’t have a star personality but is a nice guy, funny.

Hannah Bailey is the girl who wants to get the hell out of Warsaw. She dreams of studying film in San Francisco. Her parents warn her of the hazards of life for a young girl alone in the big city, but she doesn’t want to spend her life at a nine-to-five job she hates. “This is my life,” she firmly tells her parents. She also goes into a deep depression when a boyfriend breaks up with her and misses so many days of school as a result that she is threatened with not graduating.

And Jake Tusing is the self-described nerd, member of the band, and compulsive video game player, who decorates his room with an astonishing array of stuffed, framed, or mounted animals. He has a bad case of acne, which is a refreshing touch, since so many movie teenagers seem never to be afflicted with that universal problem.

During this year, a guy will break up with his girl by cell phone. A topless photo of a girl will be circulated by Internet and cell phone to everyone in school, and, seemingly, in the world. Megan will make a cruel phone call to the girl. Romances will bloom and crash. Crucial basketball games will be played. And the focus will increasingly be on what comes next: college or work? Warsaw or the world?

Warsaw Community High School, with its sleek modern architecture, seems like a fine school, but we don’t see a lot of it. Most of the scenes take place in homes, rec rooms, basements, fast-food restaurants, basketball games, and school dances (curiously, hardly anyone in the film smokes, although one girl says she does). We begin to grow familiar with the principals and their circles, and start to care about them; there’s a certain emotion on graduation day.

American Teen isn’t as penetrating or obviously realistic as her *On the Ropes*, but Nanette Burstein (who won the best directing award at Sundance 2008) has achieved an engrossing film. No matter what may have been guided by her outside hand, it is all in some way real and often touching.

American Violet ★★★

Nicole Beharie (Dee Roberts), Tim Blake Nelson (David Cohen), Will Patton (Sam Conroy), Michael O'Keefe (Calvin Beckett), Xzibit (Darrell Hughes), Charles S. Dutton (Reverend Sanders), Alfre Woodard (Alma Roberts). Directed by Tim Disney and produced by Brian Haney. Screenplay by Haney.

You may recall the story from the news in 2000. The cops in a small Texas town arrested forty black people on drug charges in a sweep of a public housing project. They were working on a tip from a single informant, a former mental patient who had good reason to cooperate with them. Dee, a young mother of four, who was not found with drugs and had no history of drug use, was arrested primarily because she went outside to drag her little girl to safety. She, along with the others, is offered a plea bargain: If she pleads guilty, she gets probation. She refuses to plead guilty.

American Violet is clear about the motivation for such raids with little or no evidence. A guilty plea helps the district attorney build up a record as a crime fighter, even though he is not the one who has committed the crime. A defendant who pleads guilty cannot continue to live in public housing and will always have a felony on her record. But if Dee caves in, she goes free and is reunited with her children. Her snaky ex-husband has snatched his kids and moved them in with his new girlfriend, who has a history of child abuse.

This is all based on an actual case (the names have been changed). This stuff happens all the time and is far from rare in Texas, a state with a shameful record of law enforcement practices. The movie occasionally intercuts commercials from the Gore-Bush campaign that were under way, to no particular purpose except to remind me that as Texas governor, Bush commuted the sentence of only one of the 131 people put to death under his reign, even though public defenders presented no defense at all for 41 of them and a third of the defense attorneys were later disbarred or sanctioned.

American Violet stars Nicole Beharie, a recent Juilliard graduate in her second role, as Dee Roberts. It is a stunning performance: She is small, vulnerable, fearful for her children, but damned if she will plead guilty to a crime she did not commit. She stands firm even as her mother, Alma (Alfre Woodard), begs her to take the plea; Alma argues the harsh racial realities of their small town. When Dee vows to stay in jail, she attracts the attention of the ACLU, which sends a lawyer named David Cohen (Tim Blake Nelson) down to defend her. Because he needs a local partner, he persuades the lawyer Sam Conroy (Will Patton), himself a former DA, to join him; Sam refuses at first but agrees out of guilt because he knows full well how the system works.

The DA is Calvin Beckett (Michael O'Keefe), a man of whom it can fairly be said that he has no interest at all in whether the people he has arrested are guilty. How would it look in an election year if he went around dropping drug charges? And now the stage is set for a docudrama that may have an outcome we already know but is a loud lesson about truth, justice, and the Texas Way. I know I'll hear complaints from Texans of a certain stripe. They won't see this film. They know all they want about the ACLU from their favori

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