

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 13 July 2004 18:00

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GOOD BYE, LENIN!

Around this time last year, while local audiences were flocking to *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Bad Boys II*, the Brew & View presented the area debut of 2003's finest film to that point – the extraordinary

Capturing the Friedmans

– and, amazingly, the Rock Island venue has done it again this summer.

The theatre is currently showing the German comedy-drama *Good Bye, Lenin!*, and if audiences can pry themselves away from another viewing of *Spider-Man 2*

or

Fahrenheit 9/11

, this wondrous work deserves attention; very funny and effortlessly touching,

Good Bye, Lenin!

might be 2004's most fully satisfying entertainment to date. Its setup is pure screwball farce: Set in 1989 East Berlin, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Christiane (Katrin Sass), a middle-aged mother who passionately supports the Communist ideal, falls into a coma that lasts eight months. She awakens after Germany has been reunified, but when doctors tell her devoted son, Alex (Daniel Bruhl), that any shock might kill her, he goes to extreme lengths to keep this information from her; hiding all traces of capitalism and Western influence in Berlin, Alex creates a hermetically sealed environment for Christiane, which proves strenuous when your sister now works at Burger King and enormous billboards for Coca-Cola are popping up everywhere.

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Good Bye, Lenin! is rife with inspired set-pieces – Alex and a friend videotape phony news reports, all proclaiming Communism to be flourishing, which Alex plays to Christiane as live broadcasts – yet what makes the film so much more than a one-joke trifle is the incredible heart behind the jokes; in his every scheme, you feel Alex's love for Christiane and his fear of losing her, so the gags have a devastating emotional undercurrent unusual for a comedy. (The movie is thematically rich, too: Though it's openly scornful of Berlin's new materialism, the film has no qualms about showing how Christiane, with her blind devotion to Communism, was living in a bubble even *before* the coma.) Director Wolfgang Becker's touch is light and dexterous, and he elicits terrific performances across the board; Bruhl, a dead-ringer for an early-20s Ricky Schroeder, is particularly fine. By the finale, when all the pieces of *Good Bye, Lenin!*'s intricate puzzle fall into place, the movie emerges as a gloriously appealing and moving social comedy, and it makes Hollywood's typical summertime output look even more crass and empty-headed than it already is.



ANCHORMAN: THE LEGEND OF RON BURGUNDY

By the same token, no one in his or her right mind would expect the Will Ferrell comedy *Anchor man: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*

to be anything

but

crass and empty-headed, but as such, it isn't bad. Playing a beyond-smarmy news anchor, Ferrell earns laughs with his comically repellent cluelessness, and the film itself is another modestly amusing entry in a recent genre that includes works such as

Zoolander

,
Old School

,
Starsky & Hutch

, and
Dodgeball

– dumb-ass comedies populated by really smart performers with a gift for caricature. (To qualify

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for this genre, the movie in question must feature some combination of Ferrell, Ben Stiller, Owen Wilson, Luke Wilson, and Vince Vaughn, all but one of whom make appearances here.)

When

Anchorman

is really rolling – when it's dissecting '70s-era sexual harassment, for example, or whenever the invaluable Steve Carell opens his mouth – the movie is great fun; when it fumbles – during its news-anchor street-rumble scene or, you know, whenever the movie deals with its

plot

– it's still easy enough to shrug off, like a lame

Saturday Night Live

sketch. No one should mistake

Anchorman

for a

good

movie, but I'm betting it'll be a pizza-and-beer DVD staple for years to come.



KING ARTHUR

As big-budget Hollywood blockbusters go, *King Arthur* is pretty good; it's tough-minded and serious, with a solid cast and impressive production values. Yet I couldn't quite figure out its

point

; once you strip away the majesty, mythology, and supernatural elements from Arthurian legend, all you're left with – at least in director Antoine Fuqua's and screenwriter David Franzoni's vision – is a PG-13

Braveheart

. In

King Arthur

, which is being advertised – with a straight face – as the “true story” of this tale, there is no Lady in the Lake, Guinevere is a bow-and-arrow wielding warrior (whom Lancelot

doesn't

hit on), Merlin possesses no magical powers, Galahad and Gawain are ciphers, and no one onscreen has even

heard

of Camelot; I'm all for re-interpreting a classic, but the story should at least remain

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slightly

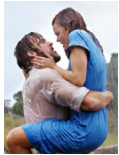
recognizable. (The film does show young Arthur pulling the sword from the stone, but the moment is almost embarrassingly clunky – Arthur's intent practically reads as, "I need a sword ... hey, there's one here in this rock!") If, however, you can get past all this, you can enjoy the movie for the ball-busting action spectacle it is. (No one will be shocked to learn that Jerry Bruckheimer is the film's producer.) There's a marvelous, mid-film battle on a river that's *almost*

solid ice, the final siege, though overlong, is awesomely choreographed – bless Fuqua for mostly curtailing the use of CGI – and the film proves yet again that attacks with flaming arrows are wonderfully cinematic. Plus, you get Clive Owen in all his brooding glory, a typically feisty Keira Knightley, and the irreplaceable Stellan Skarsgard, stage-whispering his dialogue with insinuating nastiness. As long as you're prepared to ignore everything you know about traditional Arthurian legend,

King Arthur

is a surprisingly adept entertainment, and a helluva lot better than the similarly themed *Troy*

.



THE NOTEBOOK

How do you pump up the umpteenth period romance involving poor-boy-who-falls-in-love-with-rich-girl-whose-snooty-parents-disapprove for maximum tears? If you're Nicholas Sparks, you create a framing device in which the boy, now an elderly man in the present day, re-tells the tale to his aged sweetheart who is suffering from Alzheimer's, so every tender look and romantic tribulation between the young paramours can be met with, "They love each other so much ... *and one day she won't even remember who he is!!!*" I know a lot of people are happily falling for this – the movie version of Sparks' novel is a sizeable hit – yet I found

The Notebook

absolutely loathsome. Using an incurable, degenerative ailment as a gimmick to wring tears out of your audience is about as grossly manipulative as writing gets; it belittles those with Alzheimer's, and those that love them, by employing the disease as a paltry love story's *prop*

. There's a lot to hate in

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The Notebook

– the truncated subplots (a World War II sequence lasts all of 45 seconds), the ridiculously clichéd plotting, the beyond-creaky contrivances (a year's worth of love letters have gone missing ... could

Mom

have stolen them ... !?), the humiliating waste of Ryan Gosling, Rachel McAdams, Joan Allen, Sam Shepard, James Garner, and Gena Rowlands – but the film's galling insensitivity was beyond odious; it made me want to hurl things at the screen.