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AEON FLUX

By all rights, *Aeon Flux* should be godawful. (Certainly, Paramount is *treating* it like it is, as the studio opted against pre-release screenings for fear of lousy advance notices.) Set some 400 years in the future, director Karyn Kusama's film – a big-screen vehicle for MTV's

Liquid Television

character – takes place after 99% of the earth has been eliminated by a virus, the most humorless 1%, apparently, having been left to roam the earth. Charlize Theron's Aeon leads a Spandex-clad revolt against the government, and the movie is, for the most part, a joke; the effects are particularly shoddy, and as they recite their clunky dialogue, you feel badly for several performers – when they were being feted as Oscar nominees, did Theron, Frances McDormand (in a red fright wig), Sophie Okonedo and Pete Postlethwaite ever think it would come to

this

? (The film's one impressive performance comes from Marton Csokas, who's like a more rugged version of Kevin Spacey.)

Yet here's the biggest joke of all: The movie isn't *that* bad. It moves along at a swift pace, and Kusama proves gifted with clever, throwaway visuals; there's a nice moment, early on, when Aeon catches a fly with her *eyelid* – take that, Daniel-san! – and at one point, she presses her pouty lips together, whistles, and coerces

Written by Mike Schulz

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hundreds of explosive ball bearings (!) to rescue her from imprisonment. (For a brief moment, Aeon is like a high-tech Disney heroine.) And while none of the action is *exciting*

, per se, at least a lot of it is imaginatively staged; I especially liked the sequence of Aeon dangling from the tendrils of an enormous sci-fi Zeppelin, twisting and shimmying as if she was in the grandest Cirque du Soleil act of all time.

Aeon Flux

is crap, yes, but diverting crap, and infinitely more entertaining than...



BEE SEASON

Laughably bad movies can be kinda fun. Bad movies that you can't *quite* laugh at are no fun at all. So it is with *Bee*

Season,

a moribund tale of family dysfunction centered around a young girl's attempt to win the National Spelling Bee. Richard Gere stars as Saul, a Kabbalistic professor who believes that the gifts of his daughter, Eliza (the grave Flora Cross), demonstrate elements of the divine, but oddly enough, the movie doesn't seem at all interested in her accomplishments; your fears that

Bee Season

will wind up a half-hearted take on the superb documentary

Spellbound

soon give way to the realization that the movie doesn't feel

enough

like

Spellbound.

Although the facial expressions of the kids in the spelling-bee sequences lend those scenes some naturalistic flavor, directors Scott McGehee and David Siegel glide over them with undue haste, and the visual trickery they employ during these moments is more puzzling than anything. When Eliza spells "dandelion," for instance, she closes her eyes and imagines wisps of the weed floating in the air around her; the effect is lovely, but what does it

mean

?

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You might find yourself muttering "But what does it mean?" all *throughout* the movie. The directors and screenwriter Naomi Foner Gyllenhaal provide a series of leitmotifs – kaleidoscopic imagery, flashes to a tragedy in mother Juliette Binoche's past – with no payoff, and a subplot involving Eliza's brother, Aaron (Max Minghella), experimenting with religions outside of Judaism serves no conceivable purpose, and comes dangerously close to parodying Woody Allen's similar quest in

Hannah and Her Sisters

; Aaron even winds up joining the Hare Krishnas in a subplot laden with shame. Scene for scene, you don't know

what

the hell is going on in this movie. (Even the movie's chronology is baffling – at one point in the film, Gere mentions that he and his spelling champ were at a preliminary bee for three days, and the audience is taken aback, because we were barely aware that they were gone for *one*

.) All you do know is that the movie is boring you senseless and, somehow, making you feel vaguely guilty about it.

In the end, *Bee Season* is about how Gere's character – who we are told has shown little interest in his wife and children over the years – learns to appreciate his family, but even this is a head-scratcher, because Gere's loose, likeable performance doesn't in any way suggest the closed-minded, aloof scholar he's supposed to be playing. You spend the whole movie wondering why his family is needlessly hectoring him, then discover, to your shock, that we're supposed to be on the *family's* side. Except for the rare sequences where Binoche's full madness surfaces, and the actress gets to do some emoting beyond suppressed hostility, *Bee Season* is a laborious experience. That's spelled L-A-B-O-R-I-O-U-S.



THE ICE HARVEST

Harold Ramis's black comedy *The Ice Harvest* is a movie of moments. This tale of two embezzlers (John Cusack and Billy Bob Thornton) attempting to score millions from a Kansas City crime syndicate is a piece of completely disposable, and mostly unmemorable, nastiness. But even though the movie never adds up to much, I had a good time with Oliver Platt's drunken

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ramblings, and Connie Nielsen's throaty

femme

fatale

act, and the battle of wills (and bullets) between the leads and the man they have locked in a chest; every few minutes, something spiky and unpredictable will occur, and it's great seeing Cusack back in heartless sonofabitch mode.

The Ice Harvest

doesn't hold together and is a little too self-consciously pleased with its

noir

ishness, but individual sequences are sharp, and it's impressively dark for its seasonal release.

It's not quite

Bad Santa

, but it's an adequate enough Not-

Bad Santa.



MAGNIFICENT DESOLATION: WALKING ON THE MOON 3-D

A few months back, I wrote – regarding the actor's off-screen contributions to *March of the Penguins* – that

Morgan Freeman should be allowed to narrate every movie. But when the first celebrity to provide voice-over for

Magnificent Desolation: Walking On the Moon 3-D

turned out to, indeed, be Mr. Freeman, even I had to roll my eyes and stifle a giggle; after

Penguins, War of the Worlds, Million Dollar Baby

, and now this IMAX endeavor, it seems that – this year, at least – he

is

narrating every movie. (Be careful what you wish for...) But I digress.

Magnificent Desolation

is a strong, surprisingly frisky entertainment at the Putnam Museum & IMAX Theatre – its welcome sense of humor seems perfectly in synch with the sensibilities of the film's co-producer and

main

narrator, Tom Hanks – and it treats its astronauts with an awe that rarely slips into blind hero-worship. (Only the musical score feels excessively grandiose.) The 3-D effects add a depth to the film's moon recreations that feels refreshingly unobtrusive, and the whole endeavor

What the "Flux"?: "Aeon Flux," "Bee Season," "The Ice Harvest," and "Magnificent Desolation: Walking on

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is great edu-tainment for kids... and great fun for those of us who like playing Name That Celebrity Voice-Over, as more than two dozen film stars and actual Mercury-program astronauts provide a running commentary. No points for guessing which readings are Morgan Freeman's. I understand you may be familiar with his voice.