Written by Mike Schulz
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HOLLYWOODLAND

Against all expectation, the most touching performance in current releases is probably Ben Affleck's turn as George Reeves in the Tinseltown drama *Hollywoodland*. Director Allen Coulter's work centers around the mysterious shooting death of the famed *Superman* star of '50s television, and Affleck is just about perfect here. Seen in flashbacks, he plays Reeves' heartrending rise and fall with the abashed sweetness of a man who knows his good looks and moderate talent will only carry him so far, and Affleck's strong, subtle turn is effortlessly moving. And as trophy wife Tony Mannix, Diane Lane nearly matches him, suggesting entire generations of women carelessly tossed away by Hollywood's obsession with youth and beauty; *Hollywoodland*'s tragedy is hers as much as Reeves', and the emotionally naked Lane turns in a fierce, brave portrayal.

If the rest of *Hollywoodland* - which follows Adrien Brody's private investigator, Louis Simo, as he determines whether Reeves' death was suicide or homicide - is good rather than great, that's hardly a major flaw; we're so caught up in the Reeves and Mannix sequences that those involving Simo are bound to disappoint. Too much time is spent on the P.I.'s relationship with his estranged wife and son, and as the truth behind the Reeves shooting is still open to debate, there's no way the film's whodunit angle can have a satisfying resolution. But Brody knows how to deliver wise-ass dialogue with entertaining flippancy, and there's a bevy of sensational supporting performers - Bob Hoskins, Robin Tunney, Lois Smith, Jeffrey DeMunn, Joe Spano, Molly Parker - around to keep these scenes moving.

And Coulter gives the film a spectacularly desiccated look. Hollywood's moral decline is embodied here in the movie's burnt-out color palette, as if constant exposure to all that "glamorous" sunlight is baking everything in sight; the sprawling lawns are less green than varying shades of beige, and Hollywood itself is less dream factory than sweatshop. But the surprise of *Hollywoodland* is that the film isn't draining; screenwriter Paul Bernbaum provides bright, witty dialogue, and there's great joy in the performances, Affleck's in particular. As someone who must certainly understand the ups and down of fame - and who may even be aware of the irony in playing a good-looking star of moderate talent - Affleck is thoughtful and even poignant; the actor may be revitalizing George Reeves' notoriety

here, but he's done a fine job of revitalizing his own career as well.

A SCANNER DARKLY

Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly*, currently playing at Moline's Nova 6 cinemas, is filmed in a style called rotoscoping, in which animators trace over live actors to create a world of fluid, humanistic cartoons. And while watching the film, the strangest thing happened - I all but forgot about the technique and found myself completely rapt in the
story
. Set seven years in the future, and detailing a potential drug bust that goes awry when the undercover detective (Keanu Reeves) himself becomes a junkie,
A Scanner Darkly
is an edgy, surprisingly beautiful experience - the movie's liquid visuals are the perfect metaphor for characters bleeding between reality and drug-induced fantasy -
but the film would probably have succeeded just as well as a live-action work; the storyline grows more engrossing as it develops, and as an ultra-wired hophead, Robert Downey Jr.
- or, rather, his computerized facsimile - is wildly funny. There's a lot of bum dialogue, and the likenesses of Woody Harrelson and Rory Cochrane are rather overbearing, yet the film - based on a work by sci-fi legend Philip K. Dick - is gripping and endlessly imaginative, and for an animated work,
A Scanner Darkly
proves to be more
human
than just about anything out there.

INVINCIBLE

After years of triumph-of-the-underdog sports flicks encompassing the good (*Remember the Titans*), the bad (*Glory Road*), and the indifferent (*Miracle*), the Disney studios have finally pitched one exactly right. The inspirational story of Philadelphia Eagle Vince Papale gets the Disney treatment in director Ericson Cove's *Invincible,* and while you've seen tales of this type told before, you've rarely seen it told with such honesty, such good humor, and such a refreshing lack of melodrama. Even the clichés here feel completely fresh - several actors play "supportive pal" (or "disgruntled pal") without appearing merely functional, and token girlfriend Elizabeth Banks is feisty and lovable in a captivatingly naturalistic way - and as Papale, Mark Wahlberg is as tough and tender as you could hope for. (At the film's end, the packed audience I saw *Invincible* with applauded heartily, and the response felt absolutely justified.) In an article last week, I bemoaned the absence of sincerity - and the proliferation of cynicism - in this summer's movies. Had *Invincible* been released two weeks earlier, the spirit of that article may have wound up far more upbeat.

THE ILLUSIONIST

There's less going on than meets the eye in Neil Burger's *The Illusionist*, a Victorian drama wherein Edward Norton's magician attempts to woo a duchess (Jessica Biel) from under the nose of her violent, unstable intended (Rufus Sewell). The movie looks terrific and the dialogue - though far from inspired - is literate, but it might not be until the film is over that you realize how very little there *is* to it, and while Norton is focused and intelligent, there's very little surprise to his performance. *The Illusionist* is well-produced but too slight for its own good, and there wouldn't be much to remember if it weren't for Paul Giamatti's magnificent turn as the cop on Norton's trail. Jettisoning all of his familiar cadences and comic tics, the actor comes through with a tough-minded, thoroughly

confident portrayal in a most atypical role; I never thought I'd say this, but I am officially aching to see Giamatti play Javert in *Les Misérables* one day.

CRANK

I held off on embracing the seedy, disreputable charms of *Crank* for as long as I could - about 10 minutes. But by the time Jason Statham, speeding through a shopping mall, found a way to drive his car up an *escalator*, I was forced to admit that I was having a *helluva* good time. In directors Mark Neveldine's and Brian Taylor's ultra-violent, ultra-macho revenge flick, the funny, quick-witted Statham pretty much plays the role of the bus in *Speed* - if he stops moving, he dies. Same with the movie, and unfortunately, only about 40 minutes of *Crank* is as enjoyable as that escalator ride, or the scene of Statham giving new meaning to the term "handgun," or the deliriously surreal, hysterically satisfying wrap-up. But since *Crank* clocks in at about *80* minutes, 40 minutes of exhilaratingly nasty fun ain't bad at all.

THE WICKER MAN

The sooner we can all forget about Neil LaBute's ridiculously static, laughably inept, jaw-droppingly inane remake of *The Wicker Man*, the better. But for those who were similarly repulsed by LaBute goosing his audience with the sight of Nicolas Cage socking a woman in the jaw (*three* women, in fact), know that the crowd's cheers were probably less a sign of The End of Civility than they were expressions of pure relief at something, at long last, finally *happening* in the movie.

I hope.