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IN THE VALLEY OF ELAH

Paul Haggis' *In the Valley of Elah* continually approaches greatness without ever really getting there.

The movie is serious, frequently powerful, and boasts an altogether extraordinary performance by Tommy Lee Jones; it's a gripping, engaging work that deserves to be seen. Yet for all of its gravitas and technical acumen - Roger Deakins' bleached-out cinematography is particularly noteworthy - there's something a little too programmatic, too convenient, about the film. Though obviously fueled by passionate, unresolved anger, *Elah*, in the end, is a more conventional presentation than its themes deserve.

Set in late 2004, the film finds Jones playing retired military officer Hank Deerfield, whose son, Mike, has gone missing - and is eventually found murdered - after returning from a tour of duty in Iraq. Receiving minimal assistance from the authorities and members of his son's unit, Deerfield himself investigates the crime, aided only by a tenacious detective (Charlize Theron) and some suggestive, heat-damaged images from Mike's cell phone. As Jones' stoic, anguished father inches closer to the truths behind his son's killing, the seemingly banal clues - including the receipt from a fried-chicken dinner - begin to form a terrifying picture of the madness behind our present overseas conflict, and I've heard *In the Valley of Elah* described as a stinging Iraq War critique in the guise of a murder-mystery. Unfortunately, it's more the other way around.

Haggis telegraphs his recurring motifs and plot twists so that their payoffs - even the film's sure-to-be-divisive climactic fade-out - don't have the impact they should (*Elah* has some of the earnest obviousness of a well-made TV-movie), and while Theron does excellent work in the film, her role is pure formula: the beautiful, struggling single mom, ridiculed by her colleagues, who's determined to prove her worthiness. Theron's scenes with Jones, while touching, are sentimental distractions in an otherwise tough-minded work.

Yet nipping at the edges is a vital, provocative attempt to grapple with the senselessness of

modern warfare - even Deerfield, who we assume is a Vietnam vet, can barely grasp its complexities - and Haggis stages our protagonist's quest (and the scenes with Susan Sarandon as Deerfield's wife) with invigoratingly subtle emotionalism. It helps, of course, that he has one of our country's most masterfully subtle performers in the leading role; whenever Tommy Lee Jones is onscreen, his craggily benevolent face revealing a lifetime of experience and quiet outrage, *In the Valley of Elah* is every bit the searching, resolute, and pissed-off drama you want it to be, and all-too-rarely *find* it to be.

THE KINGDOM

The pleasant surprise of Peter Berg's action-thriller *The Kingdom* - in which Jamie Foxx leads an F.B.I. team sent to investigate a Saudi Arabian terrorist bombing - is that it's nowhere near as jingoistic and xenophobic as its trailers suggested. Despite the ass-kicking spectacle of it all, American naïveté and foolishness is at least acknowledged in the characters played by Danny Huston and Jeremy Piven (still doing Ari Gold), and the most empathetic figure in the movie is played by Ashraf Barhom, marvelous as a level-headed Saudi cop.

The unpleasant surprise is that the movie is nowhere near as *exciting* as the trailers suggested, either. Berg does well with unexpected violence and the rare, tension-filled fringe moment - *The Kingdom* 's best bit finds a grenade slowly rolling down a car's windshield - and the extended, shoot-first-and-don't-even- *think* -about-asking-questions finale is nothing if not kinetically staged. (A question, though: When did our heroes, after relinquishing their firearms in an early scene, secure all that artillery?) But most of the film consists of scenes of mumbled exposition and narrative incoherence, and the ever-jittery camerawork seems intended to whip audiences into a frenzy even when characters are just *sitting* there. *The Kingdom* proves that a movie doesn't have to be inert to be dull.

RESIDENT EVIL: EXTINCTION

As it had been several weeks since I last saw a sequel to a sequel to some hit movie, I was starting to get the shakes, so I went to a screening of *Resident Evil: Extinction,* even though, astonishingly, I hadn't seen either of its video-game-inspired predecessors. (I should be forced to turn in my Zombie-Flick Fan membership card.) It didn't take long, however, to get caught up with the series' storyline - zombies and scientists bad, everyone else good, right? - and while *Extinction* is about as poorly written and acted as I'd expected, it's hardly void of enjoyable, even clever, flourishes. There's a great attack by a pack of vicious dogs that appear to have been turned inside-out, and director Russell Mulcahy pulls off some thrilling visuals; the image of a post-outbreak Las Vegas as a literal desert is especially fine, and the scene involving a murderous murder of zombified crows would give Hitchcock himself the heebie-jeebies. Plus, even for this *Resident Evil* newbie, the finale packs quite an anticipatory punch. The film may be nothing more than an ultra-violent, low-rent diversion, but I'm more jazzed about its inevitable third sequel than I am about potential follow-ups to *Rush Hour, Spider-Man*, and *Shrek*.