



Barnyard (PG) - As it had been at least six or seven hours since I had last seen a computer-animated family movie at the cineplex, I was delighted to catch a screening of *Barnyard*

. Unfortunately, it only took about six or seven hours to all but completely forget the experience; the film is your standard pap about Believing in Yourself and Sticking by Your Friends and such, and it may hopelessly confuse the young kids it's geared towards - I'm sorry, but

male
cows? With
udders

? Yet, for what it is, it's agreeable enough and boasts a surprisingly bouncy soundtrack, and the movie displays a welcome nasty streak - when Danny Glover's sage, kindly mule kicked that elderly farmer in the head, knocking him unconscious, I laughed pretty hard. When he did it

more

, I laughed twice as hard.



Blood Diamond (R) - In this action-adventure-slash-message-movie, director Edward Zwick lectures us on the inhuman practices behind Africa's conflict-heavy diamond industry, piles on the suffering, and fixes his camera on Djimon Hounsou as he endures noble agonies aplenty; meanwhile, Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Connelly banter and behave as if they were in an artsy re-telling of *Romancing the Stone*. Doesn't Zwick see anything

morally questionable about this? You can admire the film's righteous indignation and enjoy DiCaprio's suave turn immensely while agreeing that the two halves of the movie aren't the least bit complimentary; every time you begin to have fun, the filmmakers remind you why you *shouldn't*

be having fun.

Blood Diamond

is a truly schizophrenic piece of work - an entertainment that seems ashamed to

be

one.



Written by Mike Schulz

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Déjà Vu (PG-13) - I know he's a powerful Hollywood player and all, but couldn't anyone have told director Tony Scott that opening his modern-day techno-thriller with an action set piece that recalls Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, and the Oklahoma City bombing was the zenith is tastelessness? That it's a mite unseemly for Denzel Washington's ATF agent to investigate the tragedy solely because he's falling in love with one of the corpses? And that the inevitable Happy Ending becomes far less happy when it negates every narrative rule the movie has spent two hours establishing? You know a popcorn entertainment is in trouble when its one sympathetic character is the *terrorist* -

Jim Caviezel's indifferent creepiness adds the only texture to this witless, pedestrian outing, although, considering the

Déjà Vu

screening I attended, he'll probably have to deal with audiences blurting out "Hey! It's

Jesus

!" for a few years more

.



Employee of the Month (PG-13) - As lazy and stupid and predictable and poorly-filmed as most adolescent slob comedies, but filled with so many incidental pleasures that it's easy to forgive its lack of major ones. I enjoyed the gargantuan, Sam's Club-esque mega-store that serves as an outsize playground for grown-ups - Dane Cook and his slacker allies have a fort hidden within those impossible-to-reach higher shelves - and the mega-store's parodistic products, including coffins and garbage can-sized bags of chips. I enjoyed the comic hostility between Cook and Dax Shepard, and Shepard's banter with put-upon stooge Efrén Ramirez. I enjoyed the throwaway wit of Andy Dick and Tim Bagley and Brian George. I enjoyed the movie's surprising sweetness, which nicely offsets its mostly amusing mean-spiritedness. And I enjoyed the brightly-lit, unfettered happiness of it all; crummy as most of

Employee of the Month

is, more movies of its type should be this spirited.



Eragon (PG) - Never mind the hysterically earnest dialogue, and the derivative plotting, and the weak effects. Forget about the poorly-staged action, and the cornball laugh lines, and the "

When

do I cash my paycheck?" slumming of Jeremy Irons, Djimon Hounsou, John Malkovich, and the voice of Rachel Weisz. Ignore - if you can - the criminally bland performance of lead Edward Speleers, whose portrayal suggests Elijah Wood's Frodo as played by a vanilla ice cream cone.

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Here's the big problem with the dunderheads-and-dragons epic

Eragon

: Most of the movie consists of Speleers and Irons schlepping from one meaningless destination to another, sometimes on horseback, often on foot. Uh... so why isn't that damned tag-along dragon

flying

them everywhere?! At just under 100 minutes, director Stefan Fangmeier's humorless, senseless, adolescent sword-and-sorcery adventure feels as long as

Lord of the Rings

. The entire

trilogy.



Flyboys (PG-13) - James Franco portrayed a wonderfully tender, brooding James Dean in a 2001 TV-movie. Would someone please tell him that filming stopped more than five years ago? As soon as Franco ambles into view in this achingly contrived WWI outing, his physicality and line readings feel grotesquely out of period, but they don't quite feel modern, either; it's like Franco doing Dean doing Tom Cruise in an Allied-pilot re-telling of *Top Gun*.

In this relentlessly earnest doggerel by director Tony Bill, you'll know where every plot point - and every character - is headed as soon as one is introduced. (Well, almost. As soon as I saw the film's moon-faced, impossibly innocent young flier on screen, I assumed he'd be the first to go. He was actually the

second

to go.) That

Flyboys

is sincere doesn't mean it isn't embarrassing, and I left the screening with a splitting headache, mostly because it hurts to spend 135 minutes rolling your eyes.



The Fountain (PG-13) - Darren Aronofsky's latest, and the one that *should* have been titled *Requiem for a Dream*

. Present-day researcher Hugh Jackman searches for a cure to wife Rachel Weisz's brain tumor, and while he does, the film's events flash back to the Spanish Inquisition, where a hairy Jackman discovers the secret of eternal life, and to the

future

, where a bald Jackman makes romantic declarations to a tree. This is probably an unfair simplification, but Aronofsky's cinematic tone poem makes so little sense that one will have to do; you can admire the writer/director's visuals and leitmotifs (and honest emotionalism) while

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still admitting that this head trip is more esoterically knotty than *Mulholland Dr.*

and

Donnie Darko -

and

Aronofky's

Pi -

combined. I'm glad to have seen

The Fountain

; I just wish I knew what the hell I

saw

.



***Hurricane on the Bayou* (not rated)** - Greg MacGillivray's environmental doc runs roughly 50 minutes, which is generally the perfect length for an IMAX edu-tainment. Yet the director probably needed

at least 100 minutes to pull off what

he's attempted here. The film celebrates the beauty of the Louisiana wetlands, explains their necessity, records their gradual loss, hypothesizes on what can be done to resurrect them, details the effects of Hurricane Katrina,

and

showcases the tenacity and talent of local Cajun musicians, and there are simply too many ingredients in this particular gumbo; the movie is simultaneously over-stuffed and under-developed.

Hurricane on the Bayou

's visual presentation is appropriately stunning, especially the aerial shots of New Orleans' devastation, but you leave wishing that any one of MacGillivray's topics had been given a 50-minute presentation of its own.



***The Marine* (R)** - You could bitch about it being a terrible, irresponsible movie, but that would imply that it *is* a movie. In truth, this WWE presentation featuring John Cena is

pretty much indistinguishable from a 90-minute WWE match featuring John Cena. And while I never bought the cheerful bad acting or the supposed tension or the "surprise" reversals, I never buy them from WWE matches, either (even as "entertainment"), so who am I to

complain? Clearly,

The Marine is not meant for me. For those it

is

meant for, enjoy the

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über

-loud action and the cheesy gags and the rampant homophobia. WWE fanatics will probably realize

The Marine

is crap, too... they just won't

care

so much.



Night at the Museum (PG-13) - Shawn Levy's *Night at the Museum* is this year's big, dumb, loud, family-friendly comedy that's designed to do nothing but rake in a bundle over the Christmas break. And, to my shock, it's actually pretty entertaining. The special effects, while not terribly special, are at least used in the service of loose, goofy throwaway gags, and while the film toys with the expected sentimental pap (Ben Stiller learns to be a more responsible father and blah blah blah), the movie appears so disinterested in its Life Lessons that you can easily shrug them off. Stiller is exactly the right actor for this kind of wind-up contraption - he's quick-witted and delivers several of those fantastically loopy, improvisational Stiller rants in which he just *can't stop talking* - and plenty of inspired comedians help him out, including Owen Wilson, Steve Coogan, Ricky Gervais (hysterical), Paul Rudd, and even Robin Williams, far more bearable than he's been of late.



School for Scoundrels (PG-13) - In this toothless and desperately unfunny comedy by Todd Phillips, Napoleon Dynamite takes dating advice from Bad Santa. At least, that's how I imagine the pitch meeting went, as Jon Heder and Billy Bob Thornton aren't asked to do anything but play lame variants on those iconic characters; Heder does his slack-jawed spaz thing, and Thornton does his irascible-grouch thing (as if the sound of him spitting out PG-13 expletives was enough to make audiences wet themselves). That the movie isn't hilarious is no shock, but I can't believe how *incoherent* it is. The characters' feelings about Thornton's self-help guru change from scene to scene with no preparation; the most dramatic plot developments appear to happen off-camera. Everything about *School for Scoundrels* is a pitiful blunder - including its waste of such talents as Sarah Silverman, David Cross, Todd Louiso, Michael Clarke Duncan, and Ben Stiller - and poor Jacinda Barrett plays Heder's love interest, mere weeks after Zach Braff was mean to her in *The Last Kiss*

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. Some women just can't catch a break.



Superman Returns: The IMAX 3-D Experience (PG-13) - If you're going to catch *Superman Returns: The IMAX 3-D Experience*

for the 3-D effects, you might be disappointed. Only four sequences are presented in this format, and while the near-plane crash makes for spectacular viewing and the visuals in the opening farmhouse scene are gorgeous, there doesn't seem to be much reason for this "special" version to exist - more than 90 minutes pass with no 3-D whatsoever. But if you haven't yet seen the film, any excuse to do so is a good one. On a second viewing, Lex Luthor's villainous scheming seems even clunkier than it did before, but nearly everything else improves; the epic-sized IMAX screen perfectly befits the epic nature of the presentation, and you may find yourself truly swept away by its romantic grandeur. All in all, it's a most heroic achievement.



Turistas (R) - As the latest entry in the presently inescapable realm of Torture Cinema, there's nothing much wrong with director John Stockwell's endeavor that couldn't have been fixed by adding some bucks to the lighting budget. A half-dozen tourists, stranded in Brazil, find themselves hunted by a madman who'd like them to fill out their organ-donor cards *pronto*

, and although the film is as one-dimensional as any of its type, it's not without grace notes; the first half has a surprisingly relaxed, playful air - the movie, thank the gods, isn't *relentlessly*

grim - and a few scares are satisfyingly staged. Too bad that, by the final reels, you can't *see*

any of them; the murky cinematography and whiplash editing make the climactic thrills all but incoherent - I honestly couldn't tell who was being killed, or by whom. For those who enjoy this sort of thing,

Turistas

might prove to be a swell time... so long as you pack your infra-red goggles.



We Are Marshall (PG) - This football drama is reasonably gripping and not as disastrously sentimental as many works of its kind, but it makes one enormous error, and unfortunately, makes it right at the film's close. For the whole of the movie, we've been told that - as the film is about the resurrection of a team where most of the players were lost in a tragic plane accident - it's not the winning that matters, it's that the teaming is playing at *all*, and this seems both logical and sincere. But then the climactic moment - in slow-motion, with accompanying flashbacks - implies that it's

all
about the winning, and the blatant, thoughtless manipulation trashes all of the goodwill, all of the

honesty

, that preceded it. What a shame, because

We Are Marshall

features numerous, legitimately moving encounters with Matthew Fox, David Strathairn, and Kate Mara, and Matthew McConaughey's hammy eccentricity proves absolutely vital to the proceedings. Talking out of the side of his mouth and clad in beyond-ugly ensembles, you may not believe him for a moment, but his ingratiating good humor adds necessary levity to this well-meaning, formulaic enterprise.