



Writ Writer

Writ Writer (2008) *D: Susanne Mason.* (NR, 54 min.) On the heels of its SXSW Film Festival screening and prior to its broadcast in June on PBS' *Independent Lens* comes this local screening with the filmmaker in attendance. The documentary tells the story of self-taught jailhouse lawyer Fred Arispe Cruz, who challenged the constitutionality of Texas prison conditions in the Sixties and launched the state prisoners' rights movement. @Ruiz Library, Thu. 5/8, 7pm; free.

very Thai-specific charms that made the original *Shutter* such an unforeseen, unpredictable delight are almost entirely absent here, eclipsed by the annoying blond highlights of Taylor, ex-*Transformers* babe and forever, as the Thai say, *farang*. New rule: No more Asian-horror remakes until everyone outside of Asia has seen the originals. I'm not kidding. (03/28/2008) – Marc Savlov
★ Tinseltown South

SMART PEOPLE

D: Noam Murro; with Dennis Quaid, Sarah Jessica Parker, Thomas Haden Church, Ellen Page, Ashton Holmes. (NR, 95 min.)

Lawrence Wetherhold (Quaid), a widowed professor at Carnegie Mellon University, is a guy who would be able to spell "dysfunctional" with ease but never recognize the word as a description of himself and his family. Lawrence is acerbic and demanding yet wholly disinterested in his students, family, and career. His daughter Vanessa (Page) is a high-school senior whose character traits are even worse than her old man's. The film is the first feature effort for commercials director Murro and novelist-turned-screenwriter Mark Jude Poirier, who make a distinctive, if not entirely successful debut. Poirier's language is often delicious, highlighted by barbs and dialogue that are as well-aimed as they are socially inappropriate, and Murro evidences none of the ADD flash that often makes commercials directors ill-equipped to handle character arcs. Yet there's something amiss in *Smart People* that fails to get a fire going among any of the characters. (04/11/2008) – Marjorie Baumgarten
★★★ Alamo Drafthouse Lake Creek, Arbor, Dobie

STOP-LOSS

D: Kimberly Peirce; with Ryan Phillippe, Abbie Cornish, Channing Tatum, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Giardin Hinds, Timothy Olyphant, Victor Rasuk, Rob Brown, Mamie Gummer, Josef Sommer, Alex Frost. (R, 112 min.)

Peirce's second feature (her first was the accolade-magnet *Boys Don't Cry*) opens smack-dab in the proverbial fog (or sand, actually) of war. Tikrit-based Staff Sgt. Brandon King (Phillippe) and the men in his squadron are headed home to the Lone Star State (much of the film was shot in and around Austin, doubling for Brazos), following a nasty sniper battle. Stop-lossed almost immediately, King watches his fellow vets attempt to drink, drank, and skank their way back to some semblance of what was: King opts out, though, and goes AWOL with Michele (Cornish), the girlfriend

Asia Fest 2008 Mini Film Festival

Asia Fest 2008 Mini Film Festival Network of Asian American Organizations.

As part of this festival which celebrates Asian Pacific American Heritage Month with a variety of events on the grounds of this future center (8301 Cameron), eight film screenings will be held from 1-9pm. Some highlights include "Damn the Past," a musical directed by Juli Kang at 3pm; *Killing of a Chinese Cookie*, an amusing look at the history of the fortune cookie by Derek Shimoda at 4pm; and *The Motel*, a coming-of-age film by Michael Kang at 7pm. For more info, see www.aaaff.org and "Asia Fest," p.60. @Asian American Resource Center Grounds, 1pm; free.



of squaddie Shriver (Tatum), hoping to get to D.C. to plead his case with a potentially sympathetic senator. The road goes on forever, but somehow the party never starts. *Stop-Loss* does not deign to do what the audience may expect or want or need; just when it appears cut-and-dried, or locked and, especially, loaded, it turns out Peirce has the goddamn safety on. (03/28/2008) – Marc Savlov
★★★ Tinseltown South

STREET KINGS

D: David Ayer; with Keanu Reeves, Forest Whitaker, Hugh Laurie, Chris Evans, Martha Higareda, Terry Crews, Jay Mohr, Cedric the Entertainer, The Game, Naomie Harris. (R, 109 min.)

Dirty cops are the kings of the L.A. streets, and no one knows that better than James Ellroy, the crime novelist who wrote the story on which this film's screenplay is based, and for which he receives credit with Kurt Wimmer and Jamie Moss. It's a tangled, gritty story full of gunfire, blood, and vicious men (both on the side of the law and against it), and, for the most part, it's an absorbing *policier*. Curiously, the often affectless Reeves is well-cast as a vice detective whose placid exterior cloaks a volatile temper that his captain (Whitaker) puts to good use whenever he needs a mad dog to take care of business using methods best kept under cover from the public eye. Director Ayer brings a tactile feel to the urban grit he portrays, even though some of his imagery is rather worn. Despite its limitations, *Street Kings* is a solid contemporary crime drama. (04/18/2008) – Marjorie Baumgarten
★★★ Southpark Meadows, Highland, Tinseltown North, Tinseltown South

SUPERHERO MOVIE

D: Craig Mazin; with Drake Bell, Leslie Nielsen, Sara Paxton, Christopher McDonald, Marion Ross, Kevin Hart, Brent Spiner, Jeffrey Tambor. (PG-13, 85 min.)

Mazin's feature debut, *The Specials*, is a superhero satire that affectionately winks and nods at the whole concept of what superheroes do, if anything, on their days off. That said, his new parody, *Superhero Movie*, blows harder than Storm from *X-Men*. It's a tonally confused comedy, which, for once, doesn't go far enough comedically. Featuring an earnest performance from Bell – whose riff on Peter Parker/Spider-Man is very nearly note-perfect – and an appropriately scenery-devouring McDonald (voice of *The Iron Giant*'s G-man, Kent Mansley) as the supervillain Hourglass, *Superhero Movie* plays like a real (albeit really cheap) Marvel Universe knockoff that was shanghaied by the Wayans gang and then minimized by Reducto from *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law*. Even cameos from *Airplane!*-er Robert Hays and *Forbidden Planet*-er-cum-comedy-stalwart Nielson can't supersize the yuks on what turns out to be a mere annoyance of a spoof. Bah, puny insect! (04/04/2008) – Marc Savlov
★ Tinseltown South

TASHAN

D: Vijay Krishna Acharya; with Akshay Kumar, Saif Ali Khan, Kareena Kapoor, Anil Kapoor. (NR, 158 min., subtitled)

Not reviewed at press time. In this highly anticipated new Bollywood film, three people travel across India on a dangerous journey during which no one can be trusted. (04/25/2008) – Marjorie Baumgarten
Tinseltown South

21

D: Robert Luketic; with Jim Sturgess, Kate Bosworth, Kevin Spacey, Laurence Fishburne, Liza Lapira, Josh Gad, Aaron Yoo, Sam Golzari, Jacob Pitts, Jack McGee. (PG-13, 123 min.)

One might think that characters who have the mental quickness to count cards and take the Vegas blackjack tables for tens of thousands of dollars would also have the acumen to notice that some aspects of their caper just don't add up. The filmmakers take a pass on character development in favor of fluttery Vegas montages of cards, lights, money, and pretty, young faces in thrall to the gods of self-made fortunes and striking it rich. Adapted from Ben Mezrich's true account of similar events, *Bringing Down the House: The Inside Story of Six M.I.T. Students Who Took Vegas for Millions*, the film shows little interest in the honest reasons why a Harvard Medical School admittee, who professes that he's only in it for the \$300,000 needed to finance his education, just doesn't apply for a student loan like everybody else. *21* shares with the Las Vegas mythos the same stale temptations: easy glitz and little substance. (03/28/2008) – Marjorie Baumgarten
★★ Alamo Drafthouse South, Alamo Drafthouse Village, Barton Creek Square, CM Cedar Park, Hill Country Galleria, CM Round Rock, Southpark Meadows, Gateway, Tinseltown South

UNDER THE SAME MOON

D: Patricia Riggen; with Kate del Castillo, Eugenio Derbez, Mario Almada, Adrian Alonso, Isaac Bravo, Ernesto D'Alessio, Julie Dove, America Ferrera. (PG-13, 109 min., subtitled)

With the right set of eyes, anywhere can be heaven. Take the poor neighborhoods of East Los Angeles, for example: In the mind's eye of 9-year-old Mexican Carlitos (Alonso), that concrete jungle of endless strip malls and fast-food restaurants is a wonderland. Four years ago, his mother, Rosario (del Castillo), left him in their small Mexican village to seek work as a domestic across the border and hasn't been back since. Carlitos dreams of that Los Angeles barrio the way the Spanish conquistadors dreamed of El Dorado, so he resolves to make the perilous journey across the border and into America to reunite with his mother. As a work of dramatic fiction, *Under the Same Moon* isn't anything to ring bells over. Its parallel stories of two lost souls seeking each other across geographical divides is never more than one small step away from mawkishness and cliche, and oftentimes less. But as a sociological study, it's fascinating. (03/21/2008) – Josh Rosenblatt
★★★ Tinseltown North, Tinseltown South

THE UNFORESEEN

D: Laura Dunn. (NR, 88 min.)

At the heart of Dunn's documentary – which is part history lesson and part anthropological study, part geological survey and part nature special (complete with profoundly gorgeous views of Barton Springs shot in the style of the film's co-executive producer Terrence Malick) – lies Austin developer Gary Bradley. Forgoing partisanship, she resists the temptation to demonize Bradley, instead looking at him as a man full of contradictions and pain. Building out from Bradley, she uses underwater shots of the springs, chiaroscuro footage of the vast West Texas countryside (cour-

tesy of local cinematographer Lee Daniel), expert scientific analysis, and interviews with some of the era's most important players to tell a story that pushes front and center the conflicts that have come to define the American social identity: private property vs. community rights, individual liberties vs. corporate responsibility, growth vs. nature. The result is an expansive and ambivalent testament to human ingenuity, human intransigence, and nature's endangered yet enduring power to move. (03/28/2008) – Josh Rosenblatt

★★★ Alamo Ritz

THE VISITOR

D: Tom McCarthy; with Richard Jenkins, Haaz Sleiman, Danaei Jekesai Gurira, Hiam Abbass, Marian Seldes. (PG-13, 108 min.)

McCarthy (*The Station Agent*) is back with another humanist drama set among a mix of characters who might not ordinarily interact. Curiously, *The Visitor* is both predictable and unpredictable. Jenkins, a busy character actor, is uncharacteristically cast in the lead as Walter Vale, a gift that he capitalizes on fully. His performance (and the film) are studies in understatement, communicating often through the absence of words or actions. We may think we know where this is going: A hard-hearted economics prof reclaims his soul through his interaction with illegal immigrants (Sleiman, Gurira, and Abbass) who are full of life and artful enterprise. Well, yes and no. Change occurs, but not necessarily in the ways you might expect. McCarthy's approach is much truer to life, in which people enter and depart another's personal orbit without causing earth-shattering alterations in behavior or relationships. By definition, that means that not much occurs in *The Visitor*, yet it is never uninteresting to watch. (04/25/2008) – Marjorie Baumgarten
★★★ Arbor

YOUNG@HEART

D: Stephen Walker. (PG, 107 min.)

A documentary about a choral group of lovable octogenarians whose repertoire includes songs by Sonic Youth and the Talking Heads? It sounds gimmicky, scary even. But despite an occasional lapse into nudge-nudge jokes about old age, *Young@Heart* eschews the cliches for something that we can all relate to: our own mortality. Shot in a straightforward style that feels deceptively simple, this documentary spends two months with these senior citizens as they prepare for a concert. During the course of these eight weeks, the drama of everyday life runs the gamut from the comical to the heartbreaking. Songs like Bowie's "Golden Years" and the Bee Gees' "Stayin' Alive" take on an altogether different (often tongue-in-cheek) meaning when sung by someone with gray hair and wrinkles. The film suggests that the secret to growing old is to feel young, and – based on what you see in this film – there may be some truth to that platitude. (04/18/2008) – Steve Davis
★★★ Alamo Drafthouse South, Arbor

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