

— sailing safely to earth on nothing but a wing and a prayer. Add in frequent Korine collaborator Herzog as the priest who eggs on the nuns, and I promise the result will remain indelibly fixed in your head. What does it all mean? I'm not sure. But ye of little faith — in either God's abiding power or one's own self-image — seem destined to come crashing down. — *Marjorie Baumgarten*
★★★ Dobie

SARKAR RAJ

D: Ram Gopal Varma; with Aishwarya Rai, Amitabh Bachchan, Abhishek Bachchan, Victor Banerjee. (NR, 127 min., subtitled)

Not reviewed at press time. This Bollywood sequel is a political drama that further explores episodes in the lives of the powerful Nagre clan. It is also the first film to feature superstars Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek Bachchan since they were married in real life. — *Marjorie Baumgarten*
Tinseltown South

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

D: Errol Morris. (R, 117 min.)

Last time out, Morris, the eloquent documentary filmmaker and essayist, presented us with *The Fog of War*, a portrait of key Vietnam War architect Robert McNamara. The viewpoint revealed some of the inner workings of a sanctioned horror from the top command down. Before that, it was *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.*, a study of the execution-device designer and Holocaust denier — a man in denial of his own terror footprint. Now, with *Standard Operating Procedure*, Morris examines the atrocity of Abu Ghraib and the notorious photographs which have come to signify all the tortured secrets contained within that Iraqi prison's walls. No matter how much *SOP* delves into the "truths" that can be ascertained from those pictures (both from what's inside the frames and from what's cropped out from the sides), there's no degree of understanding that will ever permit an American viewer to walk away from these pictures without feeling sullied and ashamed. It's an approach guaranteed not to win hearts and minds, and ultimately makes *SOP* a tough sell. Unlike *The Fog of War*, this time Morris approaches his analysis of human horror from the bottom up, using the lowly MPs at Abu Ghraib (the soldiers foolish enough to snap photos of themselves with the prisoners, and the only ones to suffer the consequences when those pictures went global) to study a system of torture and degradation of prisoners in which the MPs were but cogs in the machinery. Are they "bad apples" or bored and frightened soldiers (the prison was being shelled daily), who were scapegoated for the sins of the system? Morris interviews five of the seven MPs indicted for their actions, including Lynndie England, the most infamous of the bunch. Morris is also interested in what kind of information can actually be conveyed by a photograph and whether any of that can construed to be truth. Further muddying our perceptions is Morris' reliance on subjective reenactments of situations and an intrusive music score by Danny Elfman. It's fascinating to hear from these witnesses and participants, including demoted Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski and U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Division photo analyst Brent Pack. For some, it will be hard to see those

Openings

*Bigger, Stronger, Faster** (PG-13)

The Foot Fist Way (NR)

Kung Fu Panda (PG)

Mister Lonely (NR)

Sarkar Raj (NR)

Standard Operating Procedure (R)

Stuck (R)

Surfwise (R)

You Don't Mess With the Zohan (PG-13)

Ratings

★★★★★ As perfect as a movie can be

★★★★ Slightly flawed, but excellent nonetheless

★★★ Has its good points, and its bad points

★★ Mediocre, but with one or two bright spots

★ Poor, without any saving graces

☹ La bomba

photographs and muster any sympathy for the Americans involved in their creation. Yet these people manage to convince us that the events at Abu Ghraib were standard operating procedure and not aberrant activities. Therein lies the horror of the movie — and also its banality. — *Marjorie Baumgarten*
★★★ Arbor

STUCK

D: Stuart Gordon; with Mena Suvari, Stephen Rea, Russell Hornsby, Rukiya Bernard. (R, 94 min.)

Had the horrific events detailed in *Stuck* not already been a matter of public record, no one in his or her right mind could have plotted them without agents and spouses fearing for the filmmaker's utterly absent sense of, ah, joie de vivre. But this is Stuart Gordon at the helm, former head of Chicago's Organic Theater Company and the man best known as the graveyard humorist behind 1985's *Re-Animator*. Gordon loves the grue — his *corpus delicti* is nothing if not deliciously corpsey — but more than that, he gets a downright jolly kick out of putting his characters through paces just this side of Franz Kafka-meets-Lucio Fulci. In his films, things go from bad to worse, and those who, at first meeting, appear to be the sanest of the lot end up just as mad, bad, and dangerous to know as the more obvious maniacs that surround them. And in that sense at least, he is one of a precious few American independent filmmakers who, you'll pardon the pun, lacerates his way straight to the bad, black heart of the (in-)human condition. *Stuck* is based on a traffic violation from hell that took place in Fort Worth, in 2001, when Chante Mallard, an off-duty nurse's

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