

A&E 2003 - The Year in Film

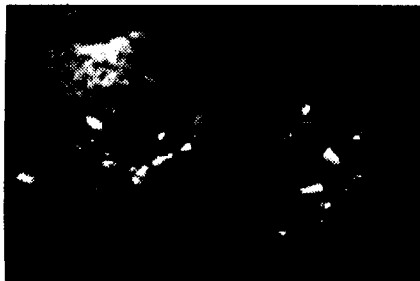
'Mystic River' soars; 'From Justin to Kelley' bores

by Daniel J. Stasiewski
a&e editor

Before everyone goes gaga over "Return of the King," it's important to remind people of real standout films of 2003 (both good and bad). Sure, most of the great films this year weren't special effects spectacles, but the intimate character studies and heartbreaking performances will always trump a film that's grounded in a CGI fantasy world.

Of course, there are the films that lack both the direction and motivation to become great, and the colossal epic "Lord of the Rings" will crush them out of existence. Inevitably, 2003 will be known as the year the last "Lord of the Rings" film was released by fan-boys and cine-geeks alike. But in that dust kicked up by wacky wizards and elvish warriors, let's not forget the films that actually made up this year in film.

THE GOOD

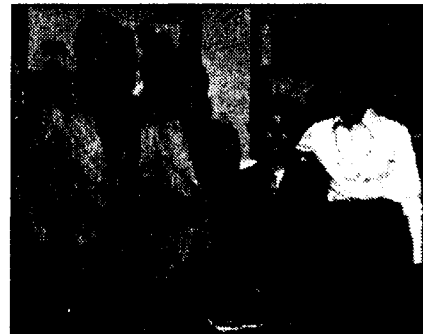


WARNER BROS.

Sean Penn has an emotional outburst in "Mystic River."

"Mystic River." Sure the year isn't over, but it's going to take one hell of a film to top Clint Eastwood's epic revenge drama "Mystic River." Eastwood tells a simple story with complex emotions, creating a film that recalls

the glory days of Hollywood filmmaking. Performances by the cast (including Sean Penn, Tim Robbins, Marcia Gay Harden and Laura Linney) are the best of their careers, without question. "Mystic River" is American filmmaking at its best.



MAGNOLIA PICTURES

Say "hi" to the picture perfect family from "Capturing the Friedmans."

"Capturing the Friedmans." Andrew Jarecki's documentary about a family torn apart by allegations of pedophilia is a riveting and at times disturbing film that tells its story more meticulously than most films, fiction or nonfiction. Not since "Hoop Dreams" has a documentary been as skillfully crafted. A tragic, emotional tale, "Capturing the Friedmans" is nonfiction storytelling at its best.

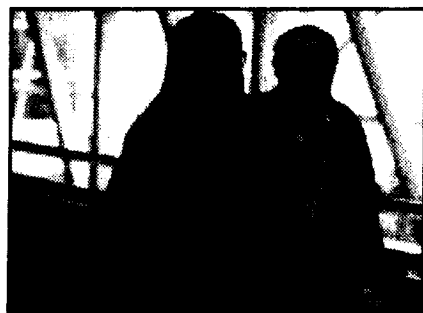


TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX

Russell Crowe leads his crew into battle in "Master and Commander."

"Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World." Peter Weir's naval epic isn't the action movie people might expect, but as a character driven period drama, this film has no competition. In some ways, I was reminded of the technical precision in "Titanic" and in other, the character study of "Barry Lyndon." Give it time. This one is destined to be a classic.

"American Splendor." The biopic of comic book writer Harvey Pekar is a brilliant fusion of reality and fiction, like nothing else I've seen this year. The funny and touching love story is a breath of fresh air when compared to the recycled ro-



FINE LINE FEATURES

Hope Davis and Paul Giamatti are dazed and confused in "American Splendor."

mances that are released every year. It's a film that lives up to its claim that "Ordinary life is pretty complex stuff."

"Kill Bill: Vol. 1." Quentin Tarantino's homage to martial arts films and Sergio Leone westerns is a stylish action adventure made for film fans by a film fanatic. The characters are sketched out in dark, ominous strokes that make the silent as-



MIRAMAX FILMS

Uma Thurman duels with Chiaki Kuriyama in "Kill Bill: Vol. 1."

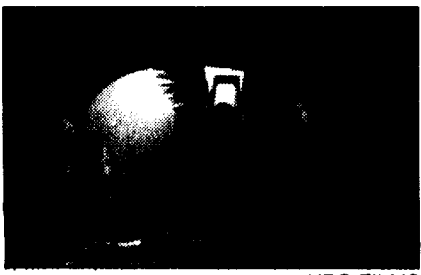
sassins standout, not with flash, but with finesse. Simply amazing.

"Angels in America." Okay, so this is a miniseries, but there's no way any studio would have ever produced a six-hour drama of this magnitude. Flawless performances, gorgeous production design and brilliant cinematography all under the direction of Mike Nichols ("The Graduate") -- astounding. I've only seen part one, but if the second part is half as good as the first one, "Angels in America" still belongs here. God bless you, HBO.

Honorable Mentions:

- "Whale Rider," directed by Niki Caro

- "The Russian Ark," directed by Aleksandr Sokurov



HBO FILMS

Emma Thompson makes her presense known in HBO's miniseries "Angels in America."

The year in numbers

\$339 million - The total domestic gross of "Finding Nemo." The Pixar/Disney collaboration became the highest grossing animated film of all-time.

\$304 million - The total domestic gross of "Pirates of the Caribbean." The swashbuckling epic was the first Disney movie to be released with a PG-13 rating and the first Johnny Depp starer to cross the \$100 million mark.

\$91 million - The opening weekend gross for the love-it-or-hate-it sequel "The Matrix Reloaded." The opening take led to a \$281 million total gross, making the film the highest grossing R-Rated film of all time.

\$48 million - The lousy opening weekend gross for the third installment of "The Matrix" trilogy, "The Matrix Revolutions."

\$8 million - The budget for the Disney Boyle's horror film "28 Days Later." The British indie film ended up with a domestic gross of \$45 million.

200,000 - The number of "digital participants" in the battle sequences of "The Return of the King."

3,749 - The number of theaters that screened "X2: X-Men United" in its opening weekend, making the superhero sequel the widest opening release in cinema history.

2 - The number of weeks it took the Ben Affleck/Jennifer Lopez vehicle "Gigli" to completely tank. The critically battered film only grossed \$6 million domestically.

BOXOFFICEMOJO.COM

Unforgettable performances

Johnny Depp as Jack Sparrow in "Pirates of the Caribbean"

Depp has always created memorable characters (Edward Scissorhands, Ed Wood, etc.) and in this swashbuckling summer epic, he outdoes them all. As goofy as his character is, his performance as Sparrow is acting at its finest.



WALT DISNEY PICTURES

Charolette Rampling as Sarah Morton in "Swimming Pool"

The appeal of "Swimming Pool" is often attributed to Rampling's blond co-star Ludivine Sagnier frolicking around without clothes, but Rampling's understated performance as a mystery writer on an internal erotic odyssey will make your head spin.



FOCUS FEATURES

Paul Bettany as Dr. Stephen Maturin in "Master and Commander"

Bettany pulled-off the unthinkable and upstaged his co-star Russell Crowe with his performance as a naturalist surgeon. Not many actors can make that claim, but Bettany provides an intimacy that makes his character feel like a friend to the audience as well as to Crowe.



TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX

Laura Linney as Annebeth Markum in "Mystic River"

Most people rave about Sean Penn or Tim Robbins, but "Mystic River" wouldn't be the same without Linney's dark turn as Penn's power hungry wife. She's in the film for only 10 or 15 minutes, but her presense resonates throughout the picture.



WARNER BROS.

THE BAD



WARNER BROS.

Keanu Reeves fights another boring battle with Hugo Weaving in "The Matrix Reloaded."

"The Matrix Reloaded." The needless sequel to the 1999 sci-fi hit is so muddled by its own attempts at profundity that it loses its grip on the story and the characters. The mindless action and silly dialogue are able to contradict any of the "pseudo-philosophy," and worse, it made me stop caring about the franchise. This is actually worse than a "Star Wars" prequel. Pathetic.

"2 Fast 2 Furious." The first film was awful, fast cars with an unbelievable plot. For the sequel any sense of reality was thrown out the window, and worse, there was no Vin Diesel. The only time Paul Walker should be the leading man is in a Special Olympic relay race. Absolutely pointless.



UNIVERSAL PICTURES

Paul Walker and Tyrese drive "2 Fast 2 Furious" into the ground.

"House of 1,000 Corpses." Rob Zombie's film vilifies suburban traditionalism by killing off a bunch of

teenagers from the 1970s who stumble on a house owned by a weird family of sadists. For a film that preaches non-conformity, it would have been advised not to fall into every horror cliché in the book.



LIONS GATE FILMS

In "House of 1,000 Corpses," the family that slays together stays together.

"Cradle 2 the Grave." To blatantly steal from "Saturday Night Live," I liked this movie the first time, when it was called "Exit Wounds." Sure, Jet Li is always cool, but for everything Li does that is interesting, there are 100 moments of boring, recycled action.



WARNER BROS.

See DMX and Jet Li run. Run, DMX and Jet Li. Run.

THE UGLY

"The Real Cancun." The first "reality movie" is a failed attempt to make money off the reality television fad. And we all know giving 16 college students a free week's



NEW LINE CINEMA

Who would have thought these college kids from "The Real Cancun" would act a little crazy on spring break?

vacation in Cancun with an open bar is going to result in an honestly dramatic portrayal of the spring break experience. Some critics praised this film for its bizarre look at youth today, but that's like saying "The Bachelor" is a study of American dating rituals. At least it wasn't pornographic. On second thought, it might have helped.

"From Justin to Kelly." Never before have I seen a movie musical lacking so much in direction, acting and musical ability. This pathetic attempt to make a quick buck off TV's "American Idol" lacks the production value of even a bad music video. Thankfully it tanked at the box office. Its failure saved us from having to suffer through a film version of "The Simple Life." Anyway, there's only one Paris Hilton film anyone wants to see.



TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX

Kelly Clarkson and Justin Guarini are stepping out and stumbling home in "From Justin to Kelly."

Unrewarding awards

Best Rave Orgy: "The Matrix Reloaded"

Best Sex Scene Involving a Priest: "The Order"

Best Stupid Grin: Paul Walker, "Timeline"

Best Attempt to Flush a Career Down the Toilet: Denzel Washington, "Out of Time"

Special Award for Surprisingly Large Nipples: Meg Ryan, "In the Cut"

Best Use of Leather: "Daredevil"

Best Use of Pubic Lice: "A Guy Thing"

Loss of Innocence Award: Mandy Moore, "How to Deal"

Best Cameo (or I want to be in a big movie and my daddy has a lot of money): Paris Hilton's club appearance in "The Cat in the Hat"

Best Use of Superfluous Star Power: "Love Actually"

Special Award for Contributions to the Power of Studio Films over Independent Productions: Jack Valenti for the MPA Oscar Screener Ban