

the bohemian aesthetic

provocant, intelligent et gratuit — pas la revue de votre père



the february '07 list
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published 15 february 2007

deleted scenes | volume 5 • number 4

We're still a few weeks away from what most of the studios (majors and independents) consider the start of the year: the day after the Oscars. That's when the distracted attentions of the higher-ups will turn, once more, towards the contemporary calendar, and the race for quality box-office will start anew. Even the independents will have finished swaggering through their scant months in the spotlight and begin the release of their most recent festival pick-ups. So, it's no surprise that February brings a slew of mostly foreign offerings.

THE MUST SEE

THE LIVES OF OTHERS

February 9 (limited)
written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck
rated 'R'/runtime – 137 min./2006

A Hitchcockian-looking drama from Germany, winner of numerous European film awards, and nominee for Best Foreign Film in this month's ceremonies, *The Lives of Others* is being praised as a rare breed of period film. Its gaze firmly cemented in the past, it looks to subtly glance at the present, sketching historical precedents as if they were blueprints for today's political movements. The story involves the East German Secret Police (the 'Stasi') and their relentless, methodical system of domestic spying in an attempt to maintain social order. Though political, the film has the ring and tone of a *Rear Window* or *The Conversation*. It may have certain aspirations, but countless critics have praised its ability to be more loyal to its story and characters than to lofty thematic goals. It's often these films (*Paths of Glory*, *The Battle of Algiers*) which attain a firmer hold on their audiences. A good character and intriguing story will always be far more memorable than shouts from a soapbox.

LOOKING GOOD

CLOSE TO HOME

February 14 (limited)
written and directed by Vardit Bilu and Dalia Hagar
not rated /runtime – 90 min./2005

My passion for Middle Eastern cinema has been documented, here, a few times; so, when a new such film arrives, it will almost certainly make an appearance in this column. Enter *Close to Home*, which appears to rise above making the list for purely stereotypical purposes. An account of two young Israeli women in the midst of their compulsory military service, Hagar and Bilu's unique coming-of-age drama draws some broad strokes (two girls of opposite temperaments, thrust together in the real world), but the devil and the truth are almost always in the details. Part of IFC's 'First Take' series (of which *Alone with Her* and *An Unreasonable Man* are also a part), the film can be seen in select theaters across the country, or through On Demand services available through most cable and satellite providers. Read more about it at the official IFC films Web site (<http://www.ifcfilms.com/>).

THE TASTE OF TEA

February 23 (limited)

written and directed by Katsuhito Ishii

not rated /runtime – 143 min./2004

Another festival favorite (especially with audiences), *The Taste of Tea* will arrive on a very limited scale near the end of February. It's a shame the release pattern looks so thin, because many reports from this film, in my over-active imagination, evoke thoughts of Buñuel. An absurdist delight, Ishii's film is about a small family and its members' surreal lives (i.e., the daughter, who can't figure out why she's followed everywhere by a much larger incarnation of herself). Apparently, this is just the tip of the iceberg, and it sounds like pure joy from start to finish. Films that defy expectations are, nowadays, few and far between, remakes and audience groveling being so prevalent. Cinema with a unique internal logic is just what the doctor ordered to break the monotony of the awards cavalcade.

CURIOUS

AVENUE MONTAIGNE

February 16 (limited)

written by Christopher Thompson and Danièle Thompson

directed by Danièle Thompson

rated 'PG-13'/runtime – 106 min./2006

No fan of the typical romantic comedy am I, but I won't deny that Danièle Thompson's previous effort, *Jet Lag*, starring Juliette Binoche and Jean Reno, played much sweeter and intelligently than expected. And my weakness for any and all films dedicated to the examination of art (in every form) and its purpose inclines me greatly to the filmmaker's latest.

Jessica comes to Paris to seek fame and fortune, but starts in the way so many often do—as a waitress—where she comes across an actress, a pianist, and an art collector, all whose lives, in some manner or another, have been touched by art and its obsessions. Will Jessica learn something about her dreams? Will her acquaintances learn something new about their lives? If this were a Hollywood offering, that mere encapsulation would make me cringe, but *Avenue Montaigne* hails from France and, as Thompson has proven before, she can take something saccharine and overly garnished, and turn it into something smooth, just slightly sweet, and ultimately capable of bringing a smile to the face of even the world-weary viewer.

GLASTONBURY

February 23 (limited)

directed by Julien Temple

not rated /runtime – 122 min./2006

Six years after his Sex Pistols opus, *The Filth and the Fury*, Julien Temple's still searching for that next great musical revelation (hint: it wasn't his video on Luther Vandross' *From Luther with Love* collection). Could his coverage of the 30th anniversary of Britain's widely-recognized music fest in Glastonbury be it? Initial signs are mixed, but one thought is shared by almost all early critics: Temple succeeds at placing his audience in the heart of the festival. From Glastonbury's infancy as a free event to its current prominence, the director covers it all. And even if the documentary can't dig any new ground, it may still make a heck of a concert film.

THE CULT PICK

THE WAYWARD CLOUD

February 23 (limited)
written and directed by Ming-liang Tsai
not rated /runtime – 114 min./2005

from IMDB:

Genre: Musical / Comedy / Drama

Plot Outline: "Hsiao-Kang, now working as an adult movie actor, meets Shiang-chyi once again. Meanwhile, the city of Taipei faces a water shortage that makes the sales of watermelons skyrocket."

The trailer: <http://www.lasaveurdelapasteque.com/movhd.html>

Few films leave me with a 'What the...?' look on my face, and never has a trailer been able to accomplish that feat...until now. Ming-liang Tsai is one of the few widely-praised modern filmmakers I've yet to encounter, but between his popularity with cineastes, his love of Francois Truffaut, and the incredible (quite strange) imagery from this trailer, it's about time to dive in. 'Anyone care to join? The watermelon's fine!'

THE GUILTY PLEASURE

BLACK SNAKE MOAN

February 23
written and directed by Craig Brewer
rated 'R'/runtime – tba/2006

I'm not quite sure what to make of *Black Snake Moan*. I first saw the trailer in front of, appropriately enough, *Snakes on a Plane*. The audience, already primed for scene-chewing Samuel L., responded appropriately with unbridled enthusiasm for what they surely saw as a throwback to Jackson's character in *Pulp Fiction*—albeit, this time, with a chain...and a little white girl attached to it. I file *Moan* under guilty pleasure because the trailer and advertising are far too B-movie to be taken seriously, but that may just be a ploy to garner a wider viewership. This film (and Brewer, judging from *Hustle & Flow*) might very well have more up its sleeve than we've been presented with, thus far. Time (and a ticket) will tell.

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