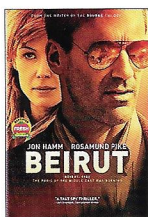


inclination to deal with obstacles by simply killing whoever poses a threat. For the most part, however, it emphasizes deadpan comedy as the alien-possessed humans go about their business of stealing ideas from various victims (who are radically altered in the process). *Before We Vanish* is not mainstream sci-fi, being more concerned with questions about what it means to be human rather than special effects, but it draws on genre conventions in quirkily amusing ways. Recommended. (F. Swietek)

Beirut ★★

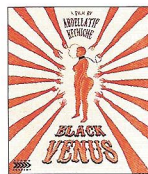
Universal, 110 min., R, DVD: \$29.98, Blu-ray/DVD Combo: \$34.98, July 3



Charismatic Jon Hamm is such a good actor that it's a shame his talents are wasted on this disjointed political thriller, set in war-torn Lebanon in 1982. Hamm plays Mason Skiles, a top U.S. diplomat who is married to Nadia (Leila Bekhti) and living in Beirut. Having no children of their own, the couple have taken in Karim, a 13-year-old Palestinian refugee. Over cocktails, Mason discovers that Karim's older brother is a terrorist suspected in the Israeli massacre carried out at the 1972 Munich Olympics and that Mossad agents want to question Karim. Without warning, Karim's brother barges in, guns blazing and grabs Karim, and Nadia is killed in the chaos. Cut to Boston 10 years later, where Mason has become a union negotiator and a bona fide alcoholic. One night in a bar, he's approached with an offer he cannot refuse. His CIA colleague (Mark Pellegrino) is being held hostage by now-grown Karim (Idir Chender), who demands the return of his brother from the Israelis. But the Israelis don't have his brother, forcing Mason to deal with the PLO. Milling around are cultural attaché Sandy Crowder (Rosamund Pike), CIA agent Donald Gaines (Dean Norris), and the Embassy's Gary Ruzak (Shea Whigham), each with his/her own agenda. Based on a 27-year-old script that was loosely inspired by CIA Station Chief William Buckley's 1984 kidnapping, director Brad Anderson is unable to successfully put together the pieces of this dark and murky thriller. Optional. (S. Granger)

Black Venus ★★★

Arrow, 162 min., in French & English w/English subtitles, not rated, Blu-ray: \$39.99

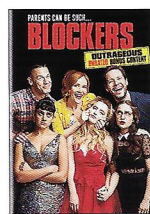


Saartjie "Sarah" Baartman was a black South African woman who was put on display like a sideshow freak as the Hot-tentot Venus in early 19th-century Europe. Award-winning director Abdellatif Kechiche (*Blue Is the Warmest Color*) dramatizes her short life and humiliating exploitation in this powerful and provocative 2010 drama. Where

Kechiche's earlier films tackled the lives of immigrants and minorities in contemporary France, this one jumps back two centuries to explore the ordeal of an African woman in Europe who is treated as less than human. Saartjie (played by first-time actress Yahima Torres) was not a slave but a South African Khoikhoi tribeswoman turned servant who agreed to partner with her boss (Andre Jacobs) to play an exotic wild woman performing "savage" dances at carnival sideshows. Her notoriety spread and she appeared in the society salons of London and Paris, where she was ogled, fondled, and presented as a subhuman specimen. Kechiche coolly observes her exploitation in freak show performances in which Baartman is ostensibly a partner, but playing out sexual and racial stereotypes that Europeans use to "prove" her racial inferiority. Kechiche makes an effort to show Baartman being dehumanized without exploiting her and he lets us see her sadness and loss as she plays her role, but mostly she's a voiceless enigma who seems to passively accept her place. A provocative and often disturbing film, *Black Venus* captures the ugliness of exploitation and the misery of Baartman's life. Recommended. (S. Axmaker)

Blockers ★★1/2

Universal, 102 min., R, DVD: \$29.99, Blu-ray/DVD Combo: \$34.99, July 3

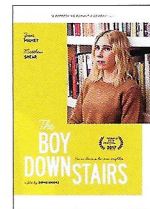


Three high-school girls make a pact to lose their virginity on prom night, while their parents try to stop them. Their story begins on the first day of elementary school, when the girls become instant BFFs. Fast-forward to high school, where the teens are still thick-as-thieves. Julie (Kathryn Newton) is the light of her overly-clingy, single mom Lisa's (Leslie Mann) life. Still suffering because her wise-cracking dad, Hunter (Ike Barinholtz), disappeared after cheating on her mom, sweet, bespectacled Sam (Gideon Adlon) suspects that she herself is gay. And athletic, adventurous Kayla (Geraldine Viswanathan) was raised in the image of Mitchell (John Cena), her softie/jock dad. Before they take off for the prom, Julie tells Sam and Kayla that she's planning to have sex with her longtime boyfriend Austin (Graham Phillips), filling them in on all the details. This inspires Sam and Kayla to plot their own deflowering. But when Julie goes on prom night, she inadvertently leaves a message app running on her laptop. Lisa spies the somewhat bewildering, emoji-riddled group texting, which concludes with the unmistakable #sexpact2018. Lisa is determined to prevent Julie from making the same mistakes she did. Springing into helicopter parental action, Lisa, Mitchell, and Hunter embark on their own overly-protective pursuit, encountering myriad mishaps along the way. Kay Cannon makes her directorial debut in

this sex comedy that is sporadically funny but unable to find a consistent tone. A strong optional purchase. (S. Granger)

The Boy Downstairs ★★

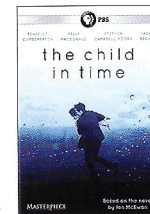
FilmRise, 90 min., PG-13, DVD: \$19.95, Blu-ray: \$24.95



Awkward, indecisive, ordinary people are at the center of filmmaker Sophie Brooks's dull, low-key rom-com. Returning to New York after spending three years in London, thirty-ish Diana (Zosia Mamet) is an aspiring writer who ostensibly works in a bridal shop, but—judging by her spacious Fort Greene apartment—is still being financially supported by her indulgent father. It isn't until after she has moved into the apartment building, which is owned by a widow (Deirdre O'Connell), that Diana realizes her old boyfriend, a musician named Ben (Matthew Shear), lives on the ground floor with his new girlfriend (Sarah Ramos). Frequent extended flashbacks reveal how the fumbling romance between squirrely Diana and snuggly Ben flamed and fizzled after she decided that she preferred freedom over commitment, which left him heartbroken. But now Diana is back in Brooklyn, filled with regrets and heavily into full-time flirting with good-guy Ben. That they will reconnect and re-ignite their relationship is an absolutely foregone conclusion. Unfortunately, sarcastic Diana is so constantly befuddled that it's hard to either identify or sympathize with her. And her hair/makeup/wardrobe choices make her look as unattractive as possible. Optional, at best. (S. Granger)

The Child in Time ★★★

PBS, 90 min., not rated, DVD: \$24.99



Based on novelist Ian McEwan's 1987 novel, filmmaker Julian Farino's PBS-aired adaptation boasts formidable star power in Benedict Cumberbatch and Kelly Macdonald, playing a couple split apart by the abduction of their daughter, who disappears one day in the supermarket while her father blithely goes about his business at the checkout. Cumberbatch's character Stephen is a children's book author who spends years looking for his lost child Kate, whereas his best friend Charles (Stephen Campbell Moore) is searching for a different kind of child—his inner child. Charles is a powerful political figure and publisher who eventually retires to the countryside and proceeds to crack up, reverting back to his childhood instincts and running like a crazed lunatic around the forest outside his country house in a descent into primal madness. Of course this wouldn't be a McEwan story without a few unnecessarily morbid twists and a