

## Old Stone ★★★

Kino Lorber, 80 min., in Mandarin w/English subtitles, not rated, DVD: \$29.99, Blu-ray: \$34.99

A barbed satire of urban Chinese culture and bureaucratic indifference, *Old Stone* is a Kafka-esque nightmare presented as a social realist drama. Taxi driver Lao Shi (which translates to both "old stone" and "honest") tries to do the right thing after a drunken passenger causes his taxi to hit a motorcycle rider. Lao reports the accident to the police and drives the hurt man to the hospital. But he winds up becoming responsible for the medical bills (he failed to follow proper procedures with the insurance company) and loses his savings, his wife, and eventually his moral equilibrium. Canadian-Chinese filmmaker Johnny Ma directs this surreal journey in a realistic manner, with Lao an honorable man in a callous society, although Ma also manufactures complications with inconsistent behavior, such as Lao not telling his wife until she notices their disappearing savings, and his neglecting to give key evidence to the police that could save him. Those inconsistencies aside, actor Chen Gang's performance as Lao is quite affecting as he endures the indifference of the hospital, the insurance company, the police, and the wounded man's family, who are all happy to let him shoulder the burden and want to wash their hands of any responsibility. It's a compelling piece of social commentary, an effective psychological drama, a bitter comedy with a bleak punchline, and an interesting portrait of life in contemporary urban China, where everyone is looking for an angle. Recommended. (S. Axmaker)



## Only the Brave ★★1/2

Sony, 134 min., PG-13, DVD: \$30.99, Blu-ray: \$34.99

Another big-budget dramatization of a story "ripped from the headlines," Joseph Kosinski's *Only the Brave* recreates the tragedy that struck an ace team of Arizona first responders fighting a massive wildfire in 2013. The first—and longest—part of this epic-length movie introduces the men of the Prescott unit, a Type 2 squad charged with assisting hotshot Type 1 units, the latter having primary on-the-ground decision-making authority. Headed up by Eric Marsh (Josh Brolin), the team wins certification as the Granite Mountain Hotshots with the help of Duane Steinbrink (Jeff Bridges), chief of Prescott's Wildland Department. Juxtaposed with the group's training exercises and locker-room camaraderie is the story of a new recruit, Brendan McDonough (Miles Teller), a troubled young man who learns that his girlfriend is pregnant and he is now deter-

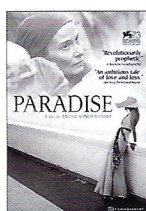


mined to turn over a new leaf. This prolonged introduction—which plays like a 90-minute exhibition of testosterone-fueled machismo and domestic family interaction—leads into the big finale, in which the Hotshots are called in to deal with the Yarnell Hill Fire, with 19 becoming trapped when the wind suddenly changes direction and the fire cuts off their escape route. While the climactic action scenes are technically well-executed—without excessive special effects and with appropriate soberness—the long lead-up is often melodramatically old-fashioned, with thinly-drawn characters. A respectful tribute to first responders who put their lives on the line to save others, this is unfortunately more workmanlike than inspired. Still, it should be considered a strong optional purchase. (F. Swietek)

## Paradise ★★★

Film Movement, 132 min., in Russian, German, French & Yiddish w/English subtitles, not rated, DVD: \$24.99

Andrei Konchalovsky's Holocaust drama interweaves the stories of three people: Olga (Julia Vysotskaya), an émigré Russian countess and fashion editor who has become a member of the French Resistance and is arrested for sheltering Jewish children; Jules (Philippe Duquesne), a collaborationist police official who meets an unhappy fate after he lets Olga go in hopes of romantic favors; and Helmut (Christian Claus), an SS officer who renews a brief pre-war encounter he had with Olga when he recognizes her in the concentration camp where he has been assigned to investigate the commandant's possible financial malfeasance. Although the initial segment focuses on Jules, detailing the destruction of his pleasantly bourgeois family life, the story of Helmut and Olga quickly takes center stage. The film's greatest strength lies in the complexity of the characters, with Helmut, for example, portrayed as a firm believer in Nazi ideals who is confronted by the seedy reality of how they are continually being debased in practice. It is weakened, however, by a streak of sentimentality coupled with an odd structure (combining straightforward narrative elements, flashbacks, and excerpts from interviews with the three principals). Despite its flaws, this is recommended. (F. Swietek)



## Pastor Paul ★★1/2

IndiePix, 67 min., not rated, DVD: \$24.95

A sporadically funny indie comedy, *Pastor Paul* finds Benjamin (played by the film's director, Jules David Bartkowski)—a pale American redhead and geeky mathematician—visiting Ghana to study the rhythms of



homegrown music. Sticking out in the African community like a vanilla popsicle, Benjamin is solicited to play the ghost Pastor Paul in a Nollywood film inspired by *Hamlet*. Although he tries to beg off, the timorous tourist reluctantly agrees and begins a strange odyssey into the occult. Bullied by the film's fierce director, Benjamin unintentionally enters a deep, hypnotic state, shaking violently and seemingly becoming possessed. What follows are efforts by some to free Benjamin with the aid of a village doctor—who practices occult remedies—while others warn Benjamin to keep away from dark magic. Bartkowski takes a semi-improvisational approach to the action and dialogue, with mixed results, drawing the viewer in one moment and repelling him or her the next. Still, the performances are surprisingly strong, and an extended scene in which Benjamin dances like crazy during an exorcism is something to see. A strong optional purchase. (T. Keogh)

## The Pirates of Somalia

★★  
Echo Bridge, 118 min., R, DVD: \$19.99, Blu-ray/DVD Combo: \$29.99

The Tom Hanks film *Captain Phillips* brought the issue of piracy and hijackings of cargo ships on the Indian Ocean off the Horn of Africa into the public eye. This drama delves deeper into the culture of Somalia and its precarious democracy. Tired of being rejected by leading magazines, wannabe Canadian journalist Jay Bahadur (Evan Peters) relishes a chance encounter with his idol, newspaperman Seymour Tobin (Al Pacino), who urges him to find a crazy, compelling story and pursue it. Having written a term paper on Somalia, Bahadur borrows money from his mother (Melanie Griffith) to travel to the country, where he hopes to meet with its newly-elected president about the complex socioeconomics of this region that was once known as a "land of poets" where people resolved their disputes with language. At the airport, Bahadur is met by translator Abdi (Barkhad Abdi, Oscar-nominated for *Captain Phillips*), who advises him not to accept CBS News's offer of \$1,000 for hostage footage from a ship captured by Somali pirates. So Bahadur schedules interviews with Somali bigwigs, all of whom expect to be bribed with the local drug khat, a chewable narcotic easily purchased in the open marketplace. Since Bahadur's a stoner, he understands this well. Unfortunately, as portrayed by Peters, Bahadur is an annoying wiseass, even though he does eventually become an acknowledged authority on Somalia. Based on the real Jay Bahadur's 2011 nonfiction book *The Pirates of Somalia: Inside Their Hidden World*, this debut feature by filmmaker Bryan Buckley suffers from simplistic subplots and superfluous characters. Optional. (S. Granger)

