

THE RITE (2011) ♂♂♂

D: Mikael Hafstrom. Anthony Hopkins, Colin O'Donoghue, Alice Braga, Toby Jones, Ciaran Hinds, Rutger Hauer. 114 mins. (New Line Cinema) 5/11

The great Sir Anthony, one of only two actors in history to win the coveted Oscar for a horror film, gives another chilling performance in this, one of the few *Exorcist* knock-offs that can actually stand on its own two feet. Irish thespian O'Donoghue, a relative newcomer, doesn't quite have Sir Anthony's intense acting chops yet manages to hold his own as a priest-in-training who's suffering from a loss of faith. Said to be a true story (aren't they all?), *The Rite* tells the tale of Michael Kovak (O'Donoghue), who appears to have entered the priesthood to escape the family business, a mortuary, and the oppressive relationship he has with his stern dad (an underused Hauer). But Michael isn't quite a believer—he wants out of the priesthood too. Not so fast, Mike. His superiors literally blackmail him into traveling to Rome to take a course in exorcism, which turns out to be a life-altering experience for him. Father Lucas (Hopkins), a colorful eccentric, is going to be one of Mike's teachers. In a delicious plot twist, Father Lucas also turns out to be in need of an exorcism himself! Hopkins chews the scenery in these sequences—like Dr. Pretorius in James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein*, he's one over-the-top monster, comical in parts but also unnervingly creepy. There are only a handful of actors who could pull off such a role convincingly: Hopkins, a true master at his craft, gives another Oscar-worthy performance. Largely shot on location in Rome, *The Rite* had all the makings of a classic. Unfortunately, many of the supporting characters are underwritten, with no backstory for any of them. Excellent character actors like Jones and Hinds, along with former star Hauer, contribute little more than glorified cameos. They deserve better. But the scenes that Hopkins and O'Donoghue share somewhat make up for this. In this CGI/3D age, it's always a pleasure to see a superb actor like Hopkins control the screen as he does. With his face, his voice, and his eyes, the possessed Father Lucas is a terrifying figure indeed. New Line offers *The Rite* in a DVD/Blu-ray combo pack, plus a digital copy playable on your PC. The Blu-ray includes a short film about Father Gary Thomas, the real-life basis for O'Donoghue's character. Maybe the film is a true story after all?

—David-Elijah Nahmod

ROBERT PLANT'S BLUE NOTE (2011) ♂♂♂1/2

D: Uncredited. Robert Plant, Nigel Williamson, Jimmy Page. 155 mins. (Sexy Intellectual/MVD Visual) 8/11

The Brit production outfit Sexy Intellectual (late of *The Sacred Triangle: Iggy, Bowie & Lou*) strikes again with another excellent, comprehensive portrait of a major rock figure. Utilizing archival concert, club and TV performance footage, interviews with participants and articulate crix like Nigel Williamson, this thorough rock doc covers the chameleon-like singer's trajectory from his Band of Joy roots through his halcyon Led Zep rule to his various solo incarnations, including his current C&W stint, while exploring his complex relationship with world music ranging from Egypt to India. As in SI's past efforts, the emphasis here is on the work and music; Plant's personal life refreshingly takes a backseat. Elsewhere on the digital musical front, First Run Features furnishes Kenneth Bowser's fascinating if ultimately downbeat folkie documentary **Phil Ochs: There But for Fortune.**

RUBBER (2011) ♂♂♂

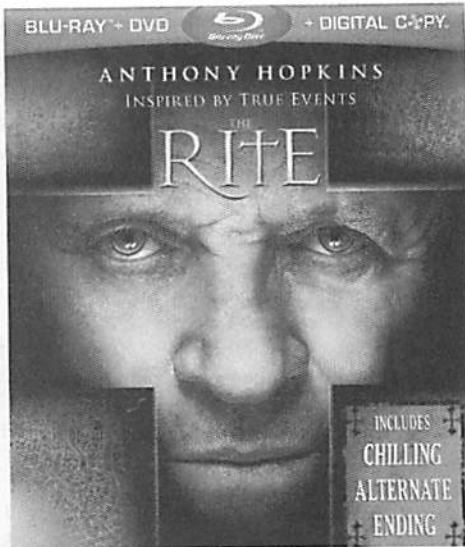
D: Quentin Dupieux. Stephen Spinella, Roxanne Mesquida, Jack Plotnick, Wings Hauser. 83 mins. (Magnolia Entertainment) 6/11

Rubber reps the type of elaborate deadpan deconstructionist goof that will either totally enthrall you or leave you climbing the fourth wall. Music vet/filmmaker Dupieux makes his intentions clear from the get-go when a local lawman (Spinella) directly addresses the camera to deliver a rambling lecture on the randomness of life and film. Next, binocs are distributed to a standing audience of onscreen onlookers who view and comment on the same proceedings we see, i.e., the transformation of the titular tire into a stalking killer, at first destroying discarded inanimate objects (as it itself once was) before graduating to bird, animal and ultimately human life. "Robert," as the tire is dubbed, develops an obsession with an attractive female traveler (Mesquida) whose motel shower is witnessed by our voyeuristic stand-ins. ("Her ass is not great," observes one, "but she has one rack on her.") Such an eventuality may seem like a long shot, but *Rubber* even ends with the possibility of a sequel (likely to be titled *Tricycle*). While it ultimately threatens to wear out its feature-length welcome, *Rubber* rolls in as a mostly fun outing and an overdue return to genre prominence by erstwhile movie wild man Wings Hauser, of *Vice Squad* and *The Carpenter* infamy, as a wheelchair-bound observer possessed of a bit more savvy than his peers. DVD extras include interviews with filmmaker Dupieux and actors Spinella, Mesquida and Plotnick (though not Wings, unfortunately), camera tests, a behind-the-scenes featurette and theatrical trailer. Magnolia's DVD case comes complete with a lenticular overlay showcasing the tireless tire with a police car in close pursuit.

—The Phantom

SEASON OF THE WITCH (2011) ♂♂

D: Dominic Sena. Nicolas Cage, Ron Perlman, Stephen Graham, Claire Foy, Christopher Lee. 95 mins. (20th Century Fox) 6/11



Disgusted at having had to slaughter innocents in the name of God, Crusaders Cage and Perlman desert. Leaving the Holy Land, they return to Europe to find it ridden by plague, caused, so they are told, by witchcraft. Arrested for their desertion, they are spared execution when they are charged by the local cardinal (Lee, unrecognizable in plague makeup, in a tiny role) with escorting a young woman (Foy) accused of sorcery to a monastery where a rare tome will be used to purge her and dispel the plague. Doubting the morality of their mission, they set off through a hostile land, encountering collapsing bridges, monstrous wolf packs, and other inconveniences. In other words, it's *The Wages of Fear* with a witch instead of nitroglycerine, and incoherence instead of existentialism. That Foy really is tossing spells around and messing with our heroes' minds is made pretty obvious early on, so, in the spirit of having one's cake and eating it too, the film postulates that the policies of the Church are monstrous and that witches are real and malevolent. Then there's the climax, which is rife with truly silly plot revelations and substandard CGI. The sets, at least, are nice and grimy, but Cage and Perlman's anachronistic banter does nothing to aid the viewer's suspension of disbelief and there are more than a few moments that are reminiscent of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* for all the wrong reasons. So though the film is entertaining enough to just pass muster as time-waster, it is also quite aggressively stupid. For a much more intelligent handling of some of the same themes, check out *Black Death* (Magnolia Entertainment) instead.

—David Annandale

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