

Despite the many sports clichés that inform Don Handfield’s football drama, “**Touchback**,” it never feels handcuffed by stereotypes or guided by the rules that govern such inspirational fare. Just when you think it’s going down one overly familiar road, it takes a detour. The destination is the same, but the path to get there is refreshingly different. “Touchback” opens by introducing us to a young farmer about to lose his soybean farm to the banks. People remember him most as the hard-nosed quarterback who led a team of farm boys to an unlikely championship against an Ohio prep powerhouse. After being injured in that game, Scott Murphy (Brian Presley) lost his opportunity to star at Ohio State and make a fortune as a pro. Just as he’s about to end it all, however, Scott is given a chance to go back in time and change his fortunes. To tell that story, Handfield has borrowed bits and pieces from such kindred movies as “It’s a Wonderful Life,” “Peggy Sue Gets Married,” “Back to the Future” and, in an obvious visual reference, “Field of Dreams.” Instead of strolling through the pearly gates, Scott is dumbfounded to find himself walking into his former high school the week before the championship game. Instead of being the macho prick his roughneck buddies recognize, Scott is a mature and chastened young gentleman. His girlfriend (Sarah Wright) is the prototypical blond cheerleader, whose odds of getting pregnant before Scott enters the NFL draft are prohibitively high. Instead of giving himself wholeheartedly to the cheerleader, he recognizes the band-geek girl (Melanie Lynskey) he would marry in real life and raise a family. She can’t believe her good luck and, thinking she’s being set up for a joke, resists his advances for as long as possible. Kurt Russell plays the team’s coach, who, contrary to stereotype, is not a fire-breathing fascist or someone who wants to ride the boy’s coattails to a job with OSU. No need to spoil the ending, except to say that it’s fresh, heart-warming and beautifully shot. Anyone who loves sports movies should give “Touchback” a shot. – *Gary Dretzka*

David Bowie: The Calm Before the Storm

In this “In Review” selection from Britain’s *Sexy Intellectual* catalog, David Bowie’s first steps toward superstardom are chronicled and evaluated by critics, musicians and producers who’ve witnessed his many career choices. “**The Calm Before the Storm**” opens with a look at his early, formative years as a rocker clearly influenced by folk, R&B and Music Hall, but with no real identity of his own. It winds up in 1971, after “Space Oddity,” “Man Who Sold the World” and “Hunky Dory” hit the charts. These albums elevated Bowie’s career from being an interesting newcomer to as influential and imitated a performer as there’s been in rock history. If it weren’t for Bowie and the risks he took – continuing into the Ziggy Stardust era and beyond — it’s entirely possible that Boy George, Madonna and Lady Gaga might not have had the courage to be as provocative and outrageous as they became. Conversely, if it weren’t for Liberace, Little Richard, Elvis and Mick Jagger, Bowie would have been required to cut himself out of whole cloth. Neither would androgyny win acceptance as a powerful fashion and lifestyle statement. Today, teenagers are still discovering the many Bowie incarnations and buying his CDs as if he were something very new and different. In fact, he’s been new and different for most of the last 45 years. The discussions and assessments in “Calm Before the Storm” are knowledgeable and not the least bit pompous or condescending. – *Gary Dretzka*

The Guest House

If there’s a point to this anemic lesbian drama, I’m not at all sure what it is. “**The Guest House**” isn’t steamy enough to qualify as erotica, but the chemistry between Ruth Reynolds and Madeline Merritt is the only thing keeps us interested for most of the movie’s 83 minutes. Reynolds plays an 18-year-old Goth gal who’s in the process of breaking up with her dickhead Goth boyfriend when she meets the recent college grad played by Merritt. She’s been hired by the younger woman’s father – also a dickhead – who “grounds” her for no apparent reason. This gives her plenty of time to make friends with Amy, who was invited to stay in the guest house so the old man can have easy access to her when he comes back from a business trip. Instead, all too conveniently, Rachel convinces Amy to sample Sapphic pleasures and they’re off to the races. When daddy comes home he finds them in bed and pitches a fit. Seemingly, the thought of having to share his mistress with his daughter — and vice versa — only works in hard-core porn. Her bliss abruptly disturbed, Amy is left wondering what hit her.

That’s pretty much it, except for some nice musical interludes from Rachel. There’s a tricky ending, but why spoil it? In “The Guest House,” everything happens far too quickly and for reasons that haven’t been valid since 1959. Nonetheless, if you’re a fan of the actors, you’ll appreciate the rather tame sex scenes, at least. – *Gary Dretzka*

Game of Life

After “Crash” stunned Hollywood movers and shakers by winning the Best Picture Oscar at the 2006 Academy Award ceremony – prompting comparisons to “Magnolia” and several of Robert Altman’s best movies – the floodgates opened to other ensemble dramas with interwoven storylines. Few of them received exposure outside the festival and straight-to-DVD marketplace – “American Gun” and “Powder Blue” come to mind – despite some interesting casting and nearly identical posters. In 2007, prolific B-movie writer/director/producer Joseph Merli contributed “**Game of Life**” (a.k.a., “Oranges”) to the glut and it’s only now being made available on DVD. Although it tugs the viewer’s heart in all of the right places and some of the acting is pretty good, “Game of Life” wants us to accept coincidences and relationships that wouldn’t be credible, even in Los Angeles. I believe this because, in the first five minutes, we’re told that a character played by Tom Arnold is married, if shakily to a lingerie designer played by Heather Locklear, in all her MILF glory. Give me a break. The other members of the racially and economically diverse cast are experiencing one crisis or another, and not all of them are going to survive their ordeals. This time, the common denominator is a soccer team comprised, in large part, of the sons of the primary characters. Needless to say, the kids have serious problems of their own with which to deal. Besides Arnold and Locklear, the cast includes Tom Sizemore, Jill Hennessy, Richard T. Jones, Beverly D’Angelo, Orson Bean, Marina Sirtis and Ruth Livier (“Revenge of the Bimbot Zombie Killers”). – *Gary Dretzka*

The Hand That Rocks the Cradle: Blu-ray

Hocus Pocus: Blu-ray

Cold Creek Manor: Blu-ray

The titles in this month’s package of new Blu-ray releases from the Disney library share one thing in common, at least. Their directors were selected from the top shelf of their profession. Five years before “L.A. Confidential” would become a cross-generational hit and be accorded huge critical success, Curtis Hanson directed the taut psychological thriller, “**The Hand That Rocks the Cradle**.” In it, Rebecca De Mornay plays a nanny who devotes herself to destroying the life and serenity of Clair, the woman (Annabella Sciorra) she blames for her husband’s suicide and the miscarriage of their child. The nanny does this by ingratiating herself with the husband and 5-year-old daughter, even going so far as to breast feed the baby, so he’s never hungry when Claire returns from work and is ready to feed him. By the time Claire figures out what’s been happening behind her back, everyone around her is convinced she’s going nuts.

Before directing the spooky Halloween-theme comedy, “**Hocus Pocus**,” in 1993, Kenny Ortega was primarily known for overseeing Cher’s Heart of Stone Tour and Michael Jackson’s Dangerous World Tour. (He also was a founding member of the Tubes.) Among the movies and television shows he choreographed were “Dirty Dancing,” “Newsies,” “Pretty in Pink” and “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off.” He would go on to choreograph and direct the “High School Musical” trilogy, “The Cheetah Girls 2,” the XIX Winter Olympics’ Opening Ceremony and the Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus tour. In “Hocus Pocus,” a Salem teenager named Max accidentally resurrects three sister witches whose spirits survived the witch trials. Three hundred years later, they pick up where they left off in the mischief department. Bette Midler, Sarah Jessica Parker and Kathy Najimy star as the Sanderson Sisters, alongside Omri Katz, Thora Birch and Vinessa Shaw.

Before directing “**Cold Creek Manor**,” Mike Figgis had garnered two Academy Award nominations for “Leaving Las Vegas” and a Palme d’Or for “The Browning Version.” His willingness to take huge risks thematically and structurally hasn’t always paid off at the box office, but he remains a formidable artist. The Touchstone Pictures thriller re-tells the familiar story of city folks who try to make the transition to country living, but don’t anticipate having to share their new digs with reminders of its past owners and their secrets. The stellar cast includes Dennis Quaid, Sharon Stone, Stephen Dorff, Juliette Lewis, 13-year-old Kristen Stewart and Christopher Plummer.