

**ARBITRAGE (2012) 888**

D: Nicholas Jarecki. Richard Gere, Susan Sarandon, Tim Roth, Brit Marling, Laetitia Casta, Nate Parker, Stuart Margolin. 107 mins. (Lionsgate) 12/12

Richard's in high gear as Robert Miller, a slick NYC financier involved in shady dealings in both his public and private lives in writer/director Jarecki's gripping Madoff Meets Columbo thriller. Filling the latter slot is Brit thesp Roth (Harvey Keitel must have been otherwise engaged) as a low-key, class-hostile detective determined to nail Miller for his suspected involvement in his annoying French artist mistress's (Casta) death. As the story rolls on, its uncomfortable similarity to Tom Wolfe's superlative novel Bonfire of the Vanities (itself the victim of Brian De Palma's unfathomable film desecration) grows increasingly apparent. The film also exhibits an over-reliance on Law and Order/CSI-style dramatics, especially in its shorthand depiction of backroom-brokering lawyers and judges. In the end, though, steady pacing and charismatic perfs—especially from an intense Gere (who frequently puts the rage in Arbitrage) and Parker as his reluctant young African-American accomplice—win the day. What's more puzzling than the case on view is Lionsgate's decision to relegate this deft but essentially conventional suspenser to a limited theatrical release, marginalizing its box-office potential.

**ARGO (2012) 888 1/2**

D: Ben Affleck. Ben Affleck, Bryan Cranston, John Goodman, Alan Arkin, Victor Garber, Tate Donovan, Clea DuVall. 120 mins. (Warner Home Video) 2/13

A randomly caught clip from Battle for the Planet of the Apes inspires a daring hostage-rescue mission (!) in this stranger-than-fiction Affleck flick based on an actual case initially recounted in Joshuah Bearman's Wired magazine article "Escape from Tehran." When six American diplomatic workers take temporary refuge at the Canadian ambassador's home in Tehran during the 1979 siege staged by angry Iranians demanding the return of the fugitive U.S.-sheltered Shah, "exfiltration" expert Tony Mendez (Affleck) hatches a scheme to pass the half-dozen off as a Canadian film crew scouting locations for a sci-fi movie. To sell the ruse, Mendez enlists the aid of actual Planet of the Apes makeup ace John Chambers (the ubiquitous Goodman in fine form) and veteran producer Lester Siegel (a typically crusty Arkin, likewise at the top of his game), who option an actual script (the eponymous Argo), design a suitably tacky Star Wars-like poster, hold a media-invited dress reading, plant items in the trades and manage to gain permission from an otherwise hostile Iran's cultural ministry for Mendez to

enter that embattled country. Shepherded by Mendez and armed with new identities, the six seek to make good their elaborate escape before Iranian officials get wise or our own government pulls the plug on the operation. While conjuring comparisons with Robert Mandel's F/X and Barry Levinson's Wag the Dog (VS #27), but played for real, Argo reps that rare magic blend of a great, fact-driven storyline, a pitch-perfect script (by Chris Terrio) that deftly balances grit, wit and suspense, spot-on pacing, solid perfs, from a low-key Affleck to a skeptical Cranston as his agency superior, efficient, unobtrusive direction of the sort that steadied the actor/auteur's earlier efforts Gone Baby Gone and The Town (VS #77), and an excellent score by Alexandre Desplat. Cranston's Jack O'Donnell spouts the shaky rallying cry "This is the best bad idea we have—by far," but the most memorable lines belong to Arkin's Siegel. When pressed at the dress reading re his film title's meaning, an exasperated Siegel finally blurts: "Argo f\*ck yourself!"—which becomes the movie's comic mantra. Look, too, for fan fave Adrienne Barbeau's cameo as Argo's Serksi the Galactic Witch, along with appearances by character king Bob Gunton (as then-Secretary of State Cyrus Vance) and an unbilled Philip Baker Hall. Withal, an ace job all around and one of the best films of 2012. Now if only some enterprising auteur would actually film Argo. Listening, Lucas?

—The Phantom

**ROCK DOCS A GO GO**

**BEATLES STORIES (2010) 888 1/2**

D: Seth Swirsky. Ben Kingsley, May Pang, Smokey Robinson, Victor Spinetti, Jon Voight, Brian Wilson. 85 mins. (Cinema Libre) 10/12

A Beatlemania from age 5, filmmaker Swirsky set out a few years back to record all the first-person Fab Four fables he could find, related by fans-in-the-street and celebrities alike. The result is this fun addition to Moptop Mythology, wherein a wide range of folks who've crossed paths with the legendary Liverpoolians relive those encounters: Miracles man Smokey Robinson remembers the thrill he experienced when the Beatles revealed how vital a role Motown had played in their development; singer/songwriter Jackie DeShannon reminisces about a mile-high Monopoly game (!) she shared with George Harrison during an early tour flight; Bangle Susanna Hoffs recalls going all tongue-tied in the presence of Ringo Starr at a Hollywood party; Davy Jones cops to copycatting the Beatles' style after sharing an Ed Sullivan Show stage with the foursome in 1964; Jon Voight regrets his failed bid to bond with John Lennon at a London restaurant; former Yankees outfielder and current Latin jazz guitarist Bernie Williams re-creates a more recent melding with baseball buff Paul McCartney. The sheer scope of Swirsky's mission is truly impressive, as such unlikely eyewitnesses as Luci Baines Johnson (dad LBJ wouldn't let her meet the Beatles), Frank Gifford (saw

John and Ronald Reagan (!) at a football game), Art Garfunkel (dispensed musical advice to John), as well as more distant onlookers, like the girls who would wait for hours to get a fleeting glimpse of a real, live Beatle. Doubtless due to rights issues, no actual Beatles music is heard during the doc, but the stories themselves are so rapid-fire and compelling that few viewers are likely to mind. Swirsky wisely trims his miles of material to a fast-paced 85 minutes, but Cinema Libre's disc includes a half-hour of additional interviews, plus a director's commentary and an extended Q&A with the Beatles' first recording engineer, Norman (Hurricane) Smith. And yes, we have our own Beatles story. At a New York Ace party in 1972, yours truly exchanged greetings with John and Yoko and stood by while John whipped out his checkbook and made an impromptu donation to that underground tabloid. Might have made for a nice keepsake but it was probably cashed the following morn.

**THE ROLLING STONES UNDER REVIEW: 1975-1983 THE RONNIE WOOD YEARS (2012) 888 1/2**

D: Uncredited. 115 mins. (MVD Visual) 10/12

Another excellent rock doc from the ever-reliable folks at Sexy Intellectual/MVD, this exhaustive, self-descriptive investigation covers the Stones from departing guitarist Mick Taylor's replacement by former Faces ax-slinger Ronnie Wood to the dark days of the early '80s when the band seemed to be going through the motions with mixed emotions. The insightful usual suspects, including rock crix Robert Christgau, Anthony DeCurtis and Nigel Williamson, alternate with choice archival music clips in analyzing the band's chameleon-like years following what most fans consider the group's prime creative period. Said critics debate the merits of LPs like Black and Blue and Some Girls while discussing the behind-the-scenes dramatics, from Keith's deepening drug dependency to Mick's trend-chasing high-glam social whirl, that shaped the Stones' output during the era in question. Adding further info and flavor is Sugar Blue, the African-American harp virtuoso whose bluesy style breathed life into tunes like "Some Girls" and "Miss You." While the doc dips a bit into gossip and scandal, the main focus remains refreshingly on the music and the changes the band went through in search of inspiration. In addition to the nearly two-hour program, the DVD includes a bonus extended Sugar Blue interview.

—The Phantom

Also new from MVD Visual and worth scoping out: Bob Dylan and The Band: Down in the Flood: Associations and Collaborations, David Markey's Circle Jerks: My Career as a Jerk and Nadya & Bob Gruen's Ike & Tina On the Road 1971-72. Sony Pictures presents Neil Young Journeys and Searching for Sugar Man, while Wild Eye offers The Story of Rock 'n' Roll Comics.



# The Phantom of the Movies'

## NEW RELEASE SHELF

New release titles are followed by year, Phantom rating, director, lead actors, running time (with titles released in separate editions, the running time refers to the Unrated version), DVD and/or Blu-ray label and release date (month and year).

### RATINGS KEY

♫♫♫

Couldn't be better

♫♫♫1/2

Excellent

♫♫♫

Good

♫♫1/2

Not bad; worth watching

♫♫

Mediocre, worthwhile for a particular thesp, director or genre

♫1/2

Poor but may have points of interest

♫

Just plain bad

1/2♫

Even worse than that

0♫

The pits

N/A

Not available on video

N.I.D.

Not in distribution

Special thanks go to Guidance Ro-Man for his ratings symbol suggestion.



### ADVENTURES IN PLYMPTOONS!

(2012)♫♫♫

D: Alexia Anastasio. Bill Plympton, Ralph Bakshi, Ed Begley, Jr., Terry Gilliam, "Weird Al" Yankovic. 85 mins. (Cinema Libre) 10/12

Illustrator/ animator extraordinaire Bill Plympton receives his day in the verite sun in this super-fun and informative profile detailing the offbeat boomer artist's rise from out-of-it rural Oregon lad to Oscar-nominated wit. The creator of surreal shorts like *The Face* and *Guard Dog* as well as such subversive features as *I Married a Strange Person* (VS #35), *Mutant Aliens* and *The Tune* (VS #5), the genially impish Plympton combines imaginative spontaneity with extreme discipline (*The Tune* alone required over 17,000 hand-drawn frames!) to fashion a truly impressive body of work that also includes *New York Times* illustrations, *National Lampoon* cartoons and

some of *Screw* magazine's most memorable covers. Director Anastasio deftly juggles talking-head tributes from such diverse admirers as Terry Gilliam, "Weird Al" Yankovic, and frequent musical collaborator Maureen McElheron with autobiographical insights from the subject himself, while inserting generous clips from his oeuvre. Withal, a consistent treat for Plympton fans and an excellent intro for those less familiar with his work. And dig Smokey Miles' Dylanesque outro tune, "Bill Plympton," that caterwauls over the closing credits, supplying a perfect tonal coda. Bonus features include behind-the-scenes material, deleted scenes and trailers.

—The Phantom

### ALL ABOUT EVIL (2010)

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D: Joshua Grannell. Natasha Lyonne, Thomas Dekker, Cassandra Peterson, Mink Stole, Jack Donner, Patrick Bristow. 98 mins. (Peaches Christ Productions) 9/12

Films like *All About Evil* don't win awards. They don't make millions of dollars. But they're great fun to watch and often attract rabid, well-deserved cult followings. Because films like these are made by film buffs whose primary goal is to pay homage to the horror/cult films of their youth. And what the hell, let's have even more fun and cast our idols. In addition to being a filmmaker, Grannell is well known in San Francisco by his drag alter ego, Peaches Christ. The monstrously over-the-top character derives her persona from the campy B movies and horror flicks that shaped the auteur's career path. In *Evil*, Lyonne stars as Deb. She's turned the somewhat grungy Victoria Theater—a real locale in SF's hip, trendy Mission District—into the place to be. The highlights of the theater's all-horror-all-the-time schedule are the weekly, uber-gory slasher flicks which Deb herself produces. Unbeknownst to her audience, Deb is kidnapping her own patrons and starring them in snuff films! Dekker plays Steven, a teen monster kid and Victoria patron who slowly stumbles upon the horrifying truth. *Evil* is a deliriously mad gross-out satire, filled with nonstop in-joke references to classic B and drive-in fare

of decades past. The homage begins with the casting. Peterson is, of course, best known as Elvira, Mistress of the Dark; here she pulls back and gives an uncharacteristically restrained performance as Steven's mom. John Waters regular Stole plays one of Deb's ill-fated victims. Bristow, who portrayed the choreographer in Paul Verhoeven's notorious 1995 *Showgirls* (VS #18), Grannell's favorite film, is delightfully bitchy as a Perez Hilton type. Lyonne hams it up as the so-psychotic-she's-funny Deb. Though shot on a shoestring, *All About Evil* is well-made, fast-paced fun. Viewers will no doubt enjoy the self-aware, grotesque silliness of it all. The classic movie posters that adorn the walls of Steven's room and the theater are a joy to see. The film was obviously made by someone who loves what he does. He invites his audience to step inside his nightmarish world and to party right along with him. A bonus behind-the-scenes documentary is included on the disc, along with *All About Evil*'s original theatrical trailer and *Grindhouse*, a short film made by Grannell which inspired this, his first feature.

—David-Elijah Nahmod

