

CONVICT (2014) ♂♂1/2

D: David Field, George Basha. George Basha, Millie Rose Heywood, Franc Violi, Johnny Nasser, David Roberts. 107 mins. (MVD Visual) 4/16

Standard prison pictures place their stars in confined sets with menacing actors, as audiences wonder if the rookies will be able to survive. Creative directors revitalize the genre by introducing social issues to the mix. In 1984, Israeli Uri Barabash examined relations between Jewish and Arab convicts in **Beyond the Walls**. Nearly 30 years later, Australian co-director Basha wrote a script that features him as an Arab-Australian Afghan War veteran who is imprisoned for manslaughter. Although his main problem is a harassment campaign instigated by his victim's wealthy father (Roberts), he must play the institution's political games. This means dealing with Mazen (Nasser), the Arab drug gang's boss and his crew—who do not laud the new guy's service. Basha seems to enjoy twisting conventions. The most sexually sinister character is the most surprising. Mazen eschews and slams tattoos for purely secular reasons. Nasser is dangerously intelligent and intelligently dangerous. Field plays the warden as a refined bastard; he can satisfy Hollywood/British cinema's insatiable appetite for louche villains. 2 1/2 Ro-Mans mean you might like this film. Its juxtaposition of Arab hero and WASP heel is sure to annoy Donald Trump.

—Ronald Charles Epstein

GRUMPY OLD CRITICS
(Say the Darndest Things)

DEPT.

CRIMSON PEAK

SCARY!

"An extravagantly entertaining ghost story."

Rafer Guzman, *Newsday*

"It chills and excites with its revisionist visuals."

Emine Yildirim, *Today's Zaman*

"For the two hours it lasted I wasn't asking any questions, only giggling, squirming, screaming and swooning."

Dana Stevens, *Slate*

NOT!

"The atmosphere of dread never reaches ecstatic excesses."

Richard Brody, *The New Yorker*

"It's shockingly short on actual scares."

Andy Lea, *Daily Star*

"More silly than scary."

Rich Cline, *Contactmusic.com*

**CRIMSON PEAK (2015) ♂♂1/2**

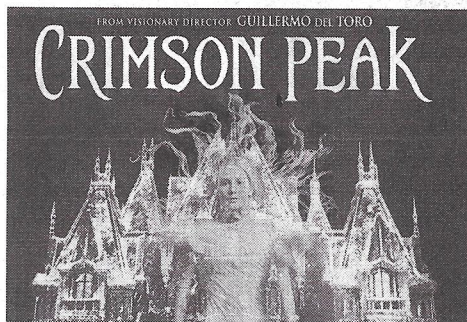
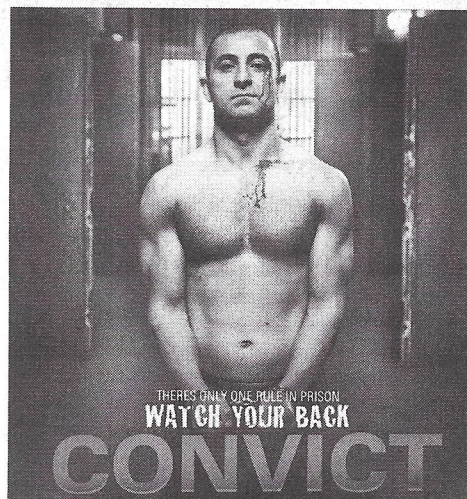
D: Guillermo del Toro. Mia Wasikowska, Jessica Chastain, Tom Hiddleston, Charlie Hunnam, Jim Beaver. 119 mins. (Universal Studios) 2/16

It was nice, as **Crimson Peak** began, to see the Universal Studios logo open what promised to be an old-fashioned Gothic chiller. It was Universal, after all, that put the Gothic horror film on the map in 1931, when **Dracula** and **Frankenstein** were released. With **Crimson Peak** coming to us courtesy of monster kid/auteur del Toro, expectations ran high as the new film's release date approached. Unfortunately, **Crimson Peak** is a misfire for the often brilliant del Toro. Billed as a "Gothic romance," **Peak** suffers from two fatal flaws—it's neither romantic nor is it scary. Parts of the film might remind some viewers of the "pre-Barnabas" episodes of **Dark Shadows**, that nine-month period prior to the arrival of the vampire Barnabas Collins on the Gothic horror soap opera. Like those early **DS** episodes, **Crimson Peak** boasts sumptuously elegant and atmospheric sets. But there's no there there. **Crimson Peak**, like the pre-Barnabas eps, looks like it should be scary. But it isn't. It's dull and plodding. Brief, occasional appearances by ghosts don't do much to lift the film up from the doldrums. It's a beautiful looking, well-acted film in search of an audience. The Victorian sets and costumes are lavish. The story's two mansions, one in Buffalo, New York, the other in rural England, are appropriately creepy and gargantuan in scope. But the film's basic storyline of incestuous siblings who kill wealthy women for their money is more akin to a film noir than a horror flick. There's little in **Crimson Peak** to attract horror buffs, except for a few brief scenes of excessive violence which come out of left field. These sequences, which include a shot of a man's skull being bashed open, might appeal to gorehounds, but they feel out of place in a "proper" 19th-century ghost story. Fans of classics like Lewis Allen's 1944 **The Uninvited** (VS #89) or Robert Wise's 1963 **The Haunting** (VS #42) will spend most of **Crimson Peak** waiting for the ghosts, while gore aficionados will snooze through the film's long, long (as in 30-40 minutes) stretches of dialogue. In addition to the impressive visuals, Chastain stands high above **Crimson Peak's** poorly conceived writing. The actress is wonderful as a deranged sociopath who doesn't care who she has to hurt—or kill—in order to get what she wants. The realization that it was Chastain's character, who comes across as a proper Victorian lady, who killed a big burly man twice her size with her bare hands is the film's most genuinely frightening moment. Universal includes an interview with del Toro, who offers a brief history lesson on the Gothic romance genre, among other extras.

—David-Elijah Nahmod —Ronald Charles Epstein

EARTHRISE (2014) ♂♂

D: Glenn Payne. Meaghin Burke, Casey Dillard, Greg Earnest, Sherri Eakin, Jon W. Sparks. 90 mins. (MVD Visual) 4/16



Environmentalists point out that the Earth is our only home. But what if that wasn't the case? If humanity were to relocate to Mars and dispatch expeditions to rehabilitate its home planet, how would the "Martians" react to the prospect of their return from exile? Dawn Nevil (Burke), Vivian Colfer (Dillard) and Marshall Clayborne (Earnest), the Revive Project's latest voyagers, experience hallucinatory fantasies as they cope with new realities. This is definitely an indie production—had this script been submitted to Rod Serling in 1961, he would have rejected it because it lacks **The Twilight Zone's** cosmic irony and profound social commentary. This DVD is for sci-fi/independent production fans who wonder if a low-budget filmmaker is capable of creating a futuristic world in a credible manner. Director Payne's ingenuity should be praised. If you did not access the commentary track, you would not know that the ship's living quarters were actually constructed from recycled building materials and that its power plant is really a closed factory in West Point, Mississippi. The crew is courageous—one of the plant's resident pigeons attacked actor Earnest. Contemporary influences include the cast's khakis and an iPad. These touches are supposed to enhance audience identification with the characters. Despite these efforts, you get a story that may deserve your spare time, but not your spare change.

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