

## **Movie reviews by Tim Graham for *City News* – 2008–2009**

### **BELLA**

Pregnant, single and just fired from her job as a waitress, Nina disconsolately wanders the streets of New York. Her coworker Jose, a former soccer pro turned chef, who carries his own burden of tragedy, follows Nina to console her. The pair wander through New York – buying a scarf at a market, cheering up a blind African-American pedlar of origami insects – realising that they can still enjoy simple pleasures amid life's adversities. Nina wrestles with her desire to have an abortion as she and Jose make their way towards the home of Jose's parents, who preside over a closely bonded Latino family. This winner of the People's Choice Award at the 2006 Toronto Film Festival has been dismissed by some as anti-abortion propaganda, but what really rankles are the ambiguities and plot holes that detract from what is otherwise a moderately amiable tale of the redemptive power of a family.

Reviewed by Tim Graham

### **BEVERLY HILLS CHIHUAHUA**

Chloe (voiced by Drew Barrymore) is a cosseted canine who regularly enjoys day spa visits, pedicures and prime rib steak. Viv (Jamie Lee Curtis), Chloe's owner, has to go on a business trip and leaves Chloe in the care of Rachel, her feckless niece. On a whim Rachel decides to drive to Mexico with her gal pals, taking Chloe with her. But Chloe is "dognapped" by a dogfight ring. She escapes with the help of Delgado, a kindly but world-weary German shepherd who tries to return her to the US. Chloe's cologne is washed off in a puddle, she loses her pink booties and she is swindled out of her diamond collar by a wily rat. But she also learns of her proud heritage from Montezuma, a politically revolutionary chihuahua who fights to restore the dignity of this oft-ridiculed breed. This witty and charming live-action tale is ultimately about getting one's priorities right.

Reviewed by Tim Graham  
Release date: Monday 29 September 2008

## **BLINDNESS**

A man driving in thick traffic in an unidentified city suddenly becomes blind. Soon thousands of people are blinded in what appears to be a global contagion. Transport accidents multiply and social institutions fall apart. The film focuses on the experiences of a doctor (Mark Ruffalo) and his wife (Julianne Moore, the only main character who has not been blinded) as they enter a quarantine camp for the afflicted. Here the inmates must endure not only the squalor and privations inflicted upon them by their frightened and uncaring captors, but also the prospect of some among their numbers inevitably preying upon their fellow inmates. A fascinating study of the blurred lines between virtue and depravity. (TG)

Reviewed by Tim Graham  
Release date: Thursday 19 March 2009

## **BOLT**

Bolt is a dog who plays the role of a crime-fighting canine in a hit TV series. But all his life he has been duped into thinking that the superpowers he demonstrates on the TV show are real. A kind of cross between Inspector Rex and the Truman character in *The Truman Show*, Bolt is one day accidentally freighted to New York. Out of the confines of the movie studio and gradually learning that he has no superpowers, Bolt is clueless about how to negotiate the real world. He meets Mittens – a shrewd alley cat who runs a protection racket with cowered pigeons as her victims – and shanghai's her into helping him get back to Hollywood. A sweet and intelligent animation charmer.

Reviewed by Tim Graham  
Release date: 1 January 2009

## **BRIDE WARS**

Friends since childhood, Liv (Kate Hudson) and Emma (Anne Hathaway) had always dreamed of holding their respective weddings at New York's Plaza Hotel. But a clerical error results in their nuptials being scheduled on the same day. They desperately try to change this situation, but when their strategies fail they turn on each other. Each seeks to sabotage the other's wedding through ploys such as blue hair colour, fluorescent-orange fake tans and home-delivered confectionery guaranteed to bust a tight-fitting wedding dress. For a movie billed as a comedy one might have expected some inspired repartee when the antagonists trade insults at an engagement party. But the taunts are bitchy rather than witty. A few laughs here and there, but a lazy and unconvincing script lets it down.

Reviewed by Tim Graham

Release date: Thursday 15 January 2009

## **THE CLASS**

If you love movies about system-busting maverick teachers in disadvantaged schools – think Hilary Swank in *Freedom Writers* or Edward James Olmos in *Stand and Deliver* – then brace yourself for a reality check. Filmed in a documentary style, this account of a year in the life of a class in a tough Parisian neighbourhood is possibly cinema's most realistic fictional depiction of school life yet. The teacher, François, presides over a multiethnic class whose students face numerous challenges that make it difficult for them to succeed. Although genuinely interested in the education of his students, François doesn't sport a halo. The often unruly students frequently challenge his teachings, and while he admirably respects their right to question him, he occasionally cracks under unwarranted provocation. A deserved recipient of the Palme d'Or at Cannes.

Reviewed by Tim Graham

Release date: 22 January 2009

## **CLOSED FOR WINTER**

Elise (Natalie Imbruglia) has a job and a boyfriend but spends most of her time ruminating on the day her sister, Frances, disappeared when they were children. Frequent flashbacks indicate Elise's constant preoccupation with the disappearance. Dorothy, Elise's seemingly depressive mother, lives in a dilapidated house filled with newspaper clippings about missing children. Elise's haunted beauty is supposed to make her intriguing, but the inability of Elise and Dorothy to extract themselves from the past – combined with the movie's somnolent pace – simply irritate the viewer, especially when compared with the feisty resolve of the Christine Collins character in the recently released *The Changeling* to make the most of her life despite a similar horrific loss of a child. (TG)

Reviewed by Tim Graham

Release date: Thursday 23 April 2009

## **CONFESSIONS OF A SHOPAHOLIC**

Fashion-obsessed young journalist Rebecca Bloomwood (Isla Fisher), bored by her work at a gardening publication, longs to work for *Alette*, a magazine that's a byword for cutting-edge fashion. She doesn't get a job with the fashion mag but instead scores a role with *Successful Saving* magazine. Her sound advice and sparkling writing style soon attract a loyal following, but her chronic overspending, lying and mounting debts belie her seemingly wise counsel. Aussie Isla Fisher injects loads of youthful verve into her role, but the numerous implausible gags (such as sliding across a boardroom table on her stomach to intercept a phone call) and other feeble attempts at humour detract from the story. But keep an eye out for the always watchable Kristin Scott Thomas in a small role as the rake-thin, cake-shunning francophone editor of the fashion mag. (TG)

Reviewed by Tim Graham

Release date: Thursday 12 March 2009

## **EARTH**

Many recent wildlife documentaries (e.g. *Life in Cold Blood*, *Wild China*) have narrowed their focus to a segment of this planet's life forms, but this movie's title implies that it will ambitiously examine the global gamut. Employing a dual geographic-chronological structure – by moving from the North Pole to the South Pole, and from January one year to January the next – it starts by investigating the shrinking icy environment of polar bears. Wolves, caribou and cute mandarin ducklings that ineffectually flap their stubby winglets in vain attempts to fly are among the parade of creatures that are sumptuously photographed in the journey south. The visual beauty of *Earth* is indisputable, but its concentration of the 'enviro-porn' of seemingly pristine landscapes undermines its professed concern for the effects of global warming and other human depredations upon the natural world.

Reviewed by Tim Graham

Release date: June/July 2008

## **THE GROCER'S SON**

Hordes of people yearn to move to the French countryside, according to the slew of books that have imitated Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence*. But Antoine, the eponymous grocer's son, doesn't want to be among them. He grew up in the Gallic backblocks and dreads returning to run the family business when his father falls ill and he quits his city job. He has to drive a lumbering, grocery-laden van to areas largely populated by old people, many of whom are rude, deaf, demanding or demented, thereby making the tree-change experience even more taxing for this sour and feckless urbanite. But amid the irritations Antoine finds unexpected rewards. Especially cute is the old dear who asks him to deliver her prayers to a priest in a faraway town, because her local priest is a drunk and 'prays all skewy'. A charming but unsentimental primer on the real meaning of good customer service.

Reviewed by Tim Graham

Release date: 2 October 2008

## **IN BRUGES**

Two hitmen are dispatched to the Belgian city of Bruges after a killing goes awry. Ray (Colin Farrell) is young, impulsive and unable to refrain from offending everyone he meets (dwarves, overweight Americans and Belgian paedophiles are among his many targets). The middle-aged Ken (Brendan Gleeson) has an easygoing, avuncular manner that belies his violent profession. Ray is horrified about having to spend two weeks in this Belgian backwater, but the bookish Ken revels in its cultural treasures. The movie's tagline – shoot first, sightsee later – and the wacky font on its publicity posters might make you think you're in for a hilarious, bullet-riddled romp, but its violence soon makes you realise that it's not exactly *Nuns on the Run*. Ralph Fiennes is great as a pitiless cockney crime lord – a welcome change from the limp, smooth-mannered aesthetes he usually plays.

Reviewed by Tim Graham

Release date: Thursday 4 September 2008

## **MY BEST FRIEND'S GIRL**

Tank (Dane Cook) helps guys to salvage their busted relationships. But unlike the Will Smith character in *Hitch*, who tutored his clients in the seductive arts, Tank befriends the ex-girlfriends of his lovelorn customers and then behaves so offensively that the girl runs back to the guy she dumped. It's an implausible premise – that most women would be stupid or desperate enough to choose between only two inferior suitors – but who ever said that plausibility had to form the backbone of an enjoyable romantic comedy? Tank's latest client is his best buddy Dustin (Jason Biggs), whose girlfriend Alexis (Kate Hudson) is losing interest in him. The fun starts when Tank's repertoire of offensive tricks enchants rather than repels Alexis. An enjoyable twist on the usual trajectory of films of this ilk, but the propriety police will no doubt hate this movie almost as much as they detested *Step Brothers*.

Reviewed by Tim Graham

Release date: Thursday 9 October 2008

## **THE READER**

In postwar Germany a 15-year-old schoolboy, Michael (David Kross), falls in love with Hanna (Kate Winslet), a woman in her mid-thirties. Hanna sets the rules for their roles: Michael reads to the illiterate Hanna, after which she consents to their lovemaking. One day Hanna suddenly disappears, and only years later as a law student does Michael discover Hanna's history as a concentration camp guard. Winslet expertly portrays the utter bewilderment of a woman who clearly believes she was only discharging her duties as a diligent employee. This study of the social pressures to conform that so consistently skew the moral compasses of so many is equally relevant now, when atrocities are still being committed by people who are 'just carrying out orders'.

Reviewed by Tim Graham

Release date: Thursday 19 February 2009

## **SEVEN POUNDS**

Ben (Will Smith) is a tax collector who has made a tragic mistake. He tries to atone for his sins by painstakingly selecting seven people sufficiently worthy to be the beneficiaries of his acts of redress. Somewhat like *The Sixth Sense*, this movie throws light on its mysteries only towards the end, so it's difficult to fully discuss it without revealing its spoilers. Two factors, however, that detract from *Seven Pounds* are its mawkishness and the numerous implausible plot devices. Rosario Dawson as Will Smith's love interest with a diseased heart is beguiling – but she glows a little too much with good health to fully convince as being at death's door. See it only if you are good at suspending disbelief. (Tim Graham)

Reviewed by Tim Graham

Release date: Thursday 8 January 2008

## **SEX DRIVE**

Ian is a put-upon teen who has to endure an arrogant and tormenting brother, a humiliating job that requires him to wear an oversized donut costume, and – worst of all – the prospect of perpetually remaining a virgin. On the internet he meets a gorgeous blonde, Ms Tasty, who promises to change this. The only problem is that she lives hundreds of miles away. Undeterred, Ian takes his brother's car and sets out with his buddies Felicia and Lance to find Ms Tasty. They encounter high-speed hoons, a cuckolded redneck bent on revenge, alluring dancers at an abstinence meeting, and mechanically savvy Amish farmers who fix their sputtering vehicle. This movie has its fair share of crude humour, but there is also a sweetness at its core.

Reviewed by Tim Graham

Release date: 13 November 2008

## **STEP BROTHERS**

Middle-aged Brennan (Will Ferrell) still lives with his mother, Nancy. Dale (John C. Reilly), in his forties, lives with his father, Robert. When Nancy and Robert marry, their unemployed sons are forced to share a bedroom. The two man-boys eye each other at their first meeting with all the wariness and undisguised hostility of two kids in the playground. Soon they are ferociously attacking each other, demonstrating the shocking extent of their arrested social development. Eventually the mayhem they wreak threatens to split their parents, so they set about reforming their ways and getting their parents back together. Fans of excretory humour and puerility will revel in innovations hitherto unseen in mainstream cinema, such as a woman who urinates while standing, and an invitation to coitus written on a plate with carrots and peas. Others, though, might judge the shock tactics a witless ploy to elicit laughs. *Step Brothers* nonetheless has the power to subvert the defences of the censorious guardians of propriety and provoke more than a few guilty giggles.

Reviewed by Tim Graham

## **WILD AFRICA 3D**

Flinch as elephants flail their water-filled trunks only a metre from your face. Recoil as a crocodile slithers towards you. Marvel as shrewd lionesses strategically attack a family of flustered warthogs. This 3D movie often makes you forget that you're in a cinema as it transports you to the majestic expanses of Africa's Okavango Delta. Situated in northwestern Botswana, the Okavango Delta is so vast that it can be seen from space. Jump aboard the boat as zoologist Liesl Eichenberger and wildlife filmmaker Tim Liversedge navigate this maze of swamps, lagoons and islands that bristle with life. Although the film abounds in lions, owls and other predators, you don't actually see any sinew being torn from the bones of living creatures – so the littlest cinemagoers won't be disturbed.

Reviewed by Tim Graham

## **YOUNG@HEART**

Documentarian Stephen Walker follows a group of singing senior citizens in America for two months as they prepare for a major performance. But this is no genteel afternoon singalong of vaudeville songs and show tunes. The members of the Young@Heart chorus are put through a demanding three-times-a-week rehearsal schedule of punk and rock anthems such as Sonic Youth's 'Schizophrenia', The Clash's 'Should I Stay or Should I Go' and 'Road to Nowhere' from Talking Heads. The choristers struggle with failing memories, bouts of poor health and tongue-twisting lyrics under the rigorous direction of choirmaster Bob Cilman. Despite the obstacles, they clearly love singing in the choir, and the themes of defiance expressed through the lyrics reveal themselves as unexpectedly apt for people who refuse to meekly submit to the debilities enforced by age. An inspiring insight into the indomitable senior spirit.

Reviewed by Tim Graham  
Release date: 16 October 2008