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The following movie reviews were written for Box Planet.com, a lifestyle and parenting site catering for thirty-something parents and singles. It was one of the premiere sites on the web but folded due to lack of funding. The reviews have been archived here for your convenience. Box Planet thought so highly of my review work that they paid for the tickets in lieu of services rendered. The contract was completed to their satisfaction and I continued providing reviews on a causal basis until the site closed in May 2001. I will be adding more published reviews once I have located them ☺

## LOOKING FOR ALIBRANDI

There's a point early in the movie, where Josie Alibrandi (Pia Mirandah) accepts a lift from Jacob Coote (Kick Curry). The only car in sight is a panel van and the voice over moans. "A panel van? Oh no! I'm going home with the wrong guy!" She is even more shocked when her lift turns out to be a motorbike.

The light-hearted banter, written by Melina Marchetta and directed by Kate Woods, is a strong point of this 'coming of age movie.' Josie's mother is Sicilian and a single mother. Josie is in her final year at school, (HSC) on a scholarship at an exclusive Catholic school, and struggling to come to terms with her Sicilian background in suburban Sydney. To add to her problems, the family is cursed, according to her grandmother Nonna Katia (Elena Cotta). Josie's mother, Christina (Greta Scacchi) had fallen pregnant to a boy when she was seventeen. Mr Alibrandi (Anthony LaPaglia) makes a sudden reappearance much to the family's distress. His role was minor but crucial to the plot; LaPaglia carries a persona on screen that makes me wonder why he wasn't chosen for one of the Godfather movies.

Josie's heart is torn between Robert Barton (Michael Gallina) and Jacob. Unlike other love triangles however, there is no pitting of egos and it's possible to cheer both boys on to victory, although ultimately only one will get the girl.

Tightly written and adapted from the book of the same name, Alibrandi exposes the dictionary of political correctness as being an outmoded book of meaningless words. The film's opening on 'wog's day' where Josie's relatives are making tomato paste says it all. The cultural cringe plays a strong part in the daily lives of emigrant families all over Australia and the Alibrandi household is no exception. Greta Scacchi's performance was outstandingly brilliant; Christina lives in the shadow of a checkered past and she manages the role without overdoing the theatrics. It's a believable movie all round; these people actually exist, I've met them!

One thing I liked about the film is that although focussed on teenage puberty blues, it doesn't labour over gratuitous sex and drunken debauchery. It's not an 'in your face' movie but it confronts issues such as teenage suicide and the pressures of exams and sexuality. Personally, I'm against those types of movies, finding them incessantly boring, but with Alibrandi I was hooked from the opening shots right through to the explosive finale where past and present meet. In the process a little bit of heaven comes to earth and we feel that all is well with our corner of the world.

The movie of the year?

I doubt it, but it's a refreshing start to a new millennium. I'd give it seven out of ten and maybe, just maybe, look for a sequel.

Written by Alastair Rosie

14/05/2000

# AMERICAN BEAUTY

Have you ever had a moment of clarity when you see your life in perspective from the cradle to the present day? One of those moments when you realise that your body is not the temple it used to be, the partner who used to worship the very ground you walk on treats you with contempt, and the cute little daughter who used to play games around your feet now wants you dead?

This is exactly the problem faced by Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) in *American Beauty*. He's in his late forties, fat, and depressed. His wife Carolyn (Annette Bening) seems more interested in her 'blossoming' career as a real estate agent to notice him and his daughter Jane (Thora Birch) wants him dead. In the middle of this atypical American family, steps Jane's girlfriend Angela (Mena Suvari) who has to Lester, suddenly taken all the attributes of a mythic siren.

*American beauty* is in essence, a black comedy on a grand scale. Lester is no beer swilling, pot smoking, arse grabbing Rodney Dangerfield type going through a mid life crisis. Lester is dying, slowly but surely he is one step closer to the 'last day of the end of his life,' and the sooner he gets there the better as far as his family is concerned.

But Lester is a fighter and there's plenty of fight left in him as he seeks to regain his lost youth. His boss is the first to feel the weight of years of pent up aggression, followed by his wife and daughter in that order. Director Sam Mendes artfully recreates Lester's myriad fantasies, longings he dares not tell anybody.

Carolyn is the archetype of the typical Hollywood mother, self-obsessed, neurotic, and image conscious. She too is having her own mid life crisis. The machinations between Carolyn and her co-worker Buddy (Peter Gallagher) are hilarious. Faced with an adonis, she stumbles over every word and almost manages to short-circuit what should be a run of the mill affair.

In between bouts of pot smoking, screaming domestics and the video happy antics of Jane's obsessive boyfriend Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley), Lester will discover that life in all its mundaneness is to be celebrated.

His daughter finds that she only has one father and her girlfriend will see that physical beauty is a transient state and that being ordinary is not a crime but something to be celebrated. And perhaps that is the essence of this quirky little movie. Life is to be savoured. There will never be another sunset just like the one you've just seen your partner will never look the same as he/she looked tonight and children's lives are to be treasured.

Written by Alastair Rosie  
24/02/2000

## ANGELA'S ASHES

This dark adaptation of Frank McCourt's book of the same name is an attempt to recreate the book and not having read the book, I was understandably nervous about reviewing the movie. But then again, movies are never 'exactly' like the book. A minute of film footage costs about \$10,000 and when you consider that a double spaced page of type equates to one minute of film, you can well understand how so much can be left out in the retelling. Be that as it may, the movie is a poignant record of life in Ireland in the thirties. Set in Limerick, the wettest part of Ireland, the rain never seems to stop. The moisture gets into everything, including the ground floor of the McCourt house. But as a living monument to sheer indomitable courage Angela's Ashes stands alone.

There were some reviewers who complained that the film dragged on but that is missing the point. This is a 'coming of age' movie, a story of personal triumph amid a flood of sorrow. The movie opens with the family leaving New York after the death of Frank's sister and takes us to Limerick, Ireland where the McCourts elect to live. But there is no freedom in the new Ireland for although free of English rule the populace is poverty-stricken. Frank's father, Malachy McCourt Sr (Robert Carlyle) is from the north, his mother, Angela, (Emily Watson) is from the south and we see the curse of tribalism at work throughout the film. "Your hair sticks up," his Aunt Aggie complains one day, "Because it's northern hair, not Limerick hair."

To make matters worse, Malachy is out of work, constantly, and when he does find work, he finds the pub shortly afterwards and the family goes hungry again. His battle with the 'Celtic curse' serves to remind us that alcoholism is a family disease, not a moral weakness.

McCourt is played by three actors (Joe Breen 1, Ciaren Owens and Michael Legge). The voice of Frank is Andrew Bennett and in typical Irish style he fills us in on the finer points we may have missed. This technique has been overused by Hollywood in the past but here it seems to fit, we almost expect it and the humour is as black as the ace of spades.

McCourt is in essence an antihero, a refreshing change from the bronzed ANZAC types we are so used to. I can relate to this hero, he's real and I'm sure I've bumped into him or her somewhere along the line.

As mentioned earlier, the film is unique and I feel it sets the book in stone. Far from being an attempt to cash in on the book's success, Alan Parker has faithfully reproduced memories of an earlier age when success was measured by whether there was food on the table that night. It has also encouraged me to put the book on my reading list and isn't that the ultimate purpose of an adaptation? McCourt's personal triumph is strange and touching and leaves you with a feeling of 'it's over now,' as you walk from the theatre. There are no brass bands to welcome an all conquering hero, rather a sense of déjà vu and a feeling of relief that the past doesn't need to be relived, simply remembered.

I gave it eight out of ten.

Written by Alastair Rosie

22/05/2000 ©

# ERIN BROKOVICH

It is a well-known fact that if you capture the heart of Middle America you have captured America. Perhaps that is why the Steven Soderbergh directed movie Erin Brokovich has managed to attain the dizzy heights of success. It attains to be a modern day Silkwood with an environmental touch; a small town lawyer and a heroine who seems more at home behind a bar serving bourbon than working in a solicitor's office. Julia Roberts is Erin Brokovich, a single mother with three kids and two ex husbands. She is without a doubt the strongest character in the cast, her love interest; George (Aaron Eckhart) may as well have stayed home. As a biker he was definitely lacklustre.

But Roberts doesn't have it all her own way, Ed Masry (Albert Finney) plays her boss and although the light hearted banter is cliched it's also entertaining enough to keep the movie from falling on its proverbial.

I agree that the story is a true David and Goliath tale but I personally think that the director and cast could have done the real Erin Brokovich more justice and yes, the story is real. Erin Brokovich really did take P.G & E (Pacific Gas and Electricity) to court while working as a file clerk in a small law concern.

I would file this movie under the 'light entertainment' genre, there are social issues aplenty but unfortunately most of them seem to belong to Julia Robert's body. There's lots of close ups of her 'assets' and while that may constitute a good night out at the movies it doesn't necessarily make for a good show. I couldn't help thinking that this is a perfect launch pad for yet another law and order TV series; a kind of Ally McBeal meets Karen Silkwood.

The social issues touched on are real enough and that is where the movie's potential strength lies. We feel powerless in the face of anonymous corporations who seem to take great pleasure in poisoning the environment. P.G & E's attempts to cover the tragedy up come unstuck when Erin discovers they have been paying for residents' medical bills. The deadly chemical hexavalent chromium is the culprit and as the plot unwinds we find townsfolk who rely on the chemical plant for employment questioning their value systems.

In defense of the movie, Erin does bring into question the political correctness that has saturated the corporate world, after all, when will we be able to write the word f\*\*\*? I wouldn't discourage anyone from seeing it, after all; I'm only the reviewer but don't expect high drama in the manner of Silkwood. This is more a lighthearted romp through Southern California with Julia Robert's mane flying in the wind and a bumbling Ed Masry trying to take the best of a no win situation. With a little more attention to the basics of screenplay, cinematography, and characterisation, this movie may well have been the Silkwood of the new millennium.

Written by Alastair Rosie

09/04/2000 ©

# ENTRAPMENT

Directed by Jon Amiel and produced by Sean Connery; this light hearted comedy written by Ron Bass and William Broyles and starring Sean Connery and Catherine Zeta Jones (*The Mask of Zorro*) is an entertaining flick combining high tech stunts with a touch of romance. Catherine Zeta Jones plays Virginia 'Gin' Baker, an insurance investigator sent to track down the notorious master thief Robert 'Mac' Macdougall. The plot stretches a bit thin in parts when Virginia "Gin" Baker's boss Hector Cruz (Will Patton) loses contact with her somewhere between the disappearance of a valuable Chinese mask and the final heist in the Petronas Towers in Malaysia. Similarly, some of the stunts are a bit hard to believe but then so are James Bonds' stunts and they're no less entertaining. The sexual chemistry between Gin and Mac is artfully managed by both actors in the classic sense, leaving us hoping, no, wishing that they will eventually get together.

Gin is your typical hero trapped in a mundane office job in an insurance company when she 'discovers' the theft of a Rembrandt from an office tower. The theft is traced to Mac and Gin is sent to London as a 'honey trap.' The plot gathers momentum when Gin convinces Mac to go after an ancient Chinese mask in a heavily guarded castle. The sexual tension gathers momentum when Mac spirits Gin off to his castle for some training prior to the heist. Catherine Zeta Jones has a dark sexual presence onscreen matched only by Connery's, which will serve her well in later roles. The heist is successful but Gin has other targets in mind, in particular, the eight billion dollars stashed in the World Clearance bank in the Petronas Tower, Malaysia. They will learn a lot along the way about trust, the double cross, and love as they race against the millennium clock in a bid to offload the loot. The ending will have you rooted to your seat.

Believable? Perhaps not, but a good night's entertainment is what Entrapment is all about.

Written by Alastair Rosie

13:36 7/01/2000

# GLADIATOR: DARK KNIGHT OF A FALLEN EMPIRE

Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* has been called dark and brooding and rightly so. This is a film that attempts to tell the story of an empire in decline. The Roman Empire conquered most of the known world in a short space of time but at great cost to its population, who were forced to fund the military campaigns against the barbarians.

The games were an attempt to keep the civil population from realising that there was no one at the helm of their ship as it sailed into the fires of discontent. Russell Crowe is magnificent as General Maximus, the commander of the northern armies; just winding up a successful campaign against the German tribes of Germania. Maximus reminded me of *Braveheart's* Wallace, a man who defied a king. It is the essence of the movie and it is this aspect that pervades the movie, making it a twilight excursion into the heart of the empire that ruled the world.

Rome's favourite son, Maximus falls foul of the regime when the aging emperor Marcus Aurelius, (Richard Harris) entrusts him with the empire, naming him the Protector of the Empire. This angers Aurelius' son Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) whose affection for his sister Lucilla (Connie Nielsen) goes far beyond brotherly love in the true tradition of Roman debauchery.

Sentenced to die in the forbidding woods of Germania, Maximus escapes and heads to Spain where he finds the Roman legions have beaten him and murdered his wife and child. Sickened at the brutality, he winds up in North Africa where he is captured and sold as a slave to Proximo (the late Oliver Reed). Proximo is an entertainer in the best sense of the word. He seeks to give the crowd what they want, and what they want is blood: Maximus does not disappoint him.

This is where more attention could have been paid to camera angles as we see a lot of blood, dust and sweat but have little idea of what's going on. I thought that some of Maximus' companions had been killed later on in the film, until they reappeared at the finish. That doesn't take away from the fight scenes, but it bears noting nonetheless. Ridley Scott's attempt to add realism to the bloody battles could have done with more locating shots and less close ups.

When Commodus lifts his late father's ban on the games, Proximo travels to Rome and the mighty Coliseum to take part in the one hundred and fifty days of games. It is here where Maximus faces the man he despises above all others. In a game of wits and unbridled courage he must rise above it all, in order to carry out the last wishes of Aurelius.

Lucilla is a character that is artfully managed by Nielsen and she is perhaps the only character capable of redemption. The others are doomed by their past demons and selfish ambitions *Gladiator* is not *Spartacus* or *Ben Hur*, there is precious little nobility here of which to speak. This is an empire in decline and thus, *Gladiator* should be seen as a fresh new look at an old theme.

The computer animated aerial shots of ancient Rome are breathtaking, giving us a unique picture of a place most of us can only imagine. This is an epic picture and I must admit that I was pleasantly surprised that this was not another 'Hollywoodised, lacklustre, blockbuster.' There are parallels between the bloody games of the Coliseum and

entertainment today, the only difference being fake blood versus real blood. The machinations between Commodus and the Senate are real enough although one doubts that the Roman version of democracy was as magnanimous as portrayed by Scott's epic.

Although it's not everyone's style of entertainment, I would give *Gladiator* the thumbs up and apparently, the traditional sign of life according to Roger Ebert, was a thumb enclosed by the fingers, (Commodus was unaware of that). *Gladiator* stands on its own merits, not those tired old principles laid down by countless Roman epics over the years.

Written by Alastair Rosie

13/05/2000 ©

## MISSION TO NOWHERE IN PARTICULAR

No I didn't get the title wrong. Whoever wrote the script for Mission to Mars should have done themselves a favour and plagiarised Contact, Apollo 13 or 2001 instead, at least the resulting lawsuits would have provided more entertainment than this movie.

I'm not being too hard on De Palma's latest flick. The plot in this movie has more holes than a meteorite blasted planet and unlike the Red Planet, it doesn't weather the constant beating. We begin at a farewell party for the astronauts who are due to fly off to Mars in the year 2020, a few minutes later we're on Mars. Isn't there supposed to be a countdown and some really awesome fireworks somewhere in between? It sets the scene for what is at best, an awfully clumsy attempt to cash in on NASA's failed Mars expedition. There are some special effects early on when a tornado on steroids sucks the life out of three of the crew. We can only assume that Luke (Don Cheadle) is dead but then again, his favourite story is Robinson Crusoe—no surprises there.

The rescue mission is essentially a comedy of errors led by Jim McConnell, (Gary Sinise) Woody Blake, (Tim Robbins) Woody's wife, Dr Terry Fisher, (Connie Nielson) and Phil Ohlmyer, (Jerry O'Connell) who, I assume, is the crew's stand in sex symbol in the absence of Tom Cruise.

There are some blatant errors in the plot such as a zero gravity dancing scene to Van Halen—in the year 2020? If that's what we'll be listening to in twenty years time I pity the infants of today. The rescue mission turns out badly and we suffer some of the most overused lines I have ever heard as the rescue team bumbles their way along through space. Couldn't they at least been forced to fight off mutant M and Ms? Nevertheless, Jim does discover they form the shape of a woman when subjected to zero gravity. How they manage to discover our DNA chain out of the brightly coloured candy is amazing—I believe LSD has the same effect on the human mind.

Luke is of course miraculously alive and the implausible becomes even more fantastic when we finally discover the source of life on Earth, as we know it. The special effects at the end are spectacular but so is the Batman ride at Movieworld. Had more attention been paid to the script I might have enjoyed it. But watching four suited astronauts abandoning ship to chase a re-supply ship that just 'happens' to be in the vicinity is an affront to the audience, and to add injury to insult, a case full of computer parts mysteriously reappears when this kooky keystone crew manages to trash yet another ship—and survive.

There are too many gaps in the storyline and that is where this movie falls on its backside and seemingly can't be bothered getting back up again. It's schmaltzy, cliched, and a pitiful attempt to cash in on current news events; I'm afraid that not even the special effects can save this movie.

If at all possible, wait until it comes out on video and then make sure that you buy the popcorn when you hire it—there's more than one use for popcorn.

Written by Alastair Rosie

16/04/2000

# THE TALENTED MR RIPLEY: THE SUBTLE ART OF DECEPTION

*“Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.”*

**Robert Burns: 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish poet**

Written and directed by Anthony Minghella, this movie oozes deceit and suspense from the opening scenes until the nail-biting finale. The theme is undoubtedly deception on a grand scale: Dickie Greenleaf (Jude Law) deceives his father and his fiancée Marge, (Gwyneth Paltrow) she deceives herself with dreams that Dickie will one day settle down and marry her. Tom however is the master at the art of deception, deceiving Dickie, Marge, Herbert Greenleaf, (James Rebhorn) Meredith, (Cate Blanchett) Peter Smith-Kingsley, (Jack Devonport) and a host of others along the way.

The Internet Movie Database compared it to ‘Eyes Wide Shut.’ I would compare it however to ‘Dead Calm,’ there is the same ruthless intent as the characters try desperately to outmanoeuvre each other. The sexual tension between Tom and Dickie is homoerotic and artfully managed.

Matt Damon plays Tom Ripley, a young man who is not all he seems. While masquerading as an ex Princeton student at a piano recital he is asked by Herbert Greenleaf to go to Italy and bring his philandering son home. The \$1,000 job is too good for the talented Mr Ripley to pass up and he is soon strolling along a beach where he ‘bumps’ into Dickie and Marge.

Thus begins a tale of entrapment as Tom tries desperately to win the heart of a spoiled rich kid, who treats people as carelessly as he treats his father’s money. Tom is essentially a lost soul washed up on the shores of plenty trying desperately to fit into Dickie’s world. It is one deception that overrides all the other deceptions, as he tries to become what he can never be—a bored, restless socialite.

Ripley is a strong character driven movie with a talented cast and much is made of knowing looks and frozen moments as the suspense builds. Tom is talented but can he completely assume another person’s identity or will he crumble under the mounting pressure? Brilliantly directed cinematography bolsters the cast and plot, and the plot at times, skates the thin edge of the wedge.

The abrupt ending slices through the realms of logical thought and left me wondering if there isn’t a secret ‘director’s cut’ out there on the cutting room floor or a planned sequel. Dark, brooding, and ultimately tragic, the movie is starkly reminiscent of the little deceptions we practice in day to day life albeit blown out to their illogical extremes. Are those little white lies really necessary or will they return time and again to trip us up?

Go see it, just to witness four talented artists recklessly propel a movie to its shattering conclusion.

Written by Alastair Rosie

May 1 2000 ©

## ROMEO MUST DIE (AND DID)

The story of Romeo and Juliet is a classic tale that has been rewritten thousands of times since Shakespeare's play hit the Globe theatre in England. After all, we all love the idea of an impossible relationship that seems doomed to failure, don't we? But if you want to see a romantic action movie, stay away from Romeo Must Die, it did die—in a big way. This movie directed by Andrzej Bartkowiak is about as mediocre as they come. The only thing missing is subtitles and out of sync lip movements. The movie is set in San Francisco's Oakland, but any recent visitors to Vancouver would recognise the scenery, get the picture? And although the martial arts scenes are explosive, they are helped along by special effects.

Jet Li, stars as Han Sing, a former Hong Kong policeman who took a fall for his triad family in Hong Kong and wound up in jail. From here on in, the plot goes from bad to worse when his brother Po Sing, (John Lee 1) is killed in a nightclub brawl started by black gangsters. The Sings are part owners of some exclusive waterfront properties with the O'Days owning the other half. I found it hard to stomach that these two gangs could ruthlessly butcher helpless shop owners in their bid to buy up the waterfront and no one notices? I know that murder is commonplace in America but shouldn't there at least be a news bulletin? A hard-nosed cop? Something?

Han breaks out of prison and smuggles himself into the US in order to find his brother's killer and runs smack bang into Isaak O'Day's daughter, Trish (Aaliyah). The sexual chemistry between these two is abysmal; I've seen slugs with more sex drive.

When Trish's brother is pushed from a penthouse window the two form an alliance and set out to stop the waterfront from exploding, let's face it, the cops aren't doing much. As a former licensed gun owner, I know how hard it is to dodge flying bullets but Han seems to do it again and again with monotonous regularity, it almost looks easy! Trish shows enough cleavage to keep the more refined male members of the audience from falling asleep and I wish the producers hadn't decided to use rap music for the score, although it did distract me from the hideous dialogue and cliched lines. Han's refusal to use a gun is yet another failure of the movie to live up to some semblance of reality and as for refusing to hit a woman, who's determined to kill him and his new girlfriend, spare me!

Jet Li, is a talented martial arts expert and actor, but I can only hope that someone out there in la la land can write a script that does him justice. I try to take the positive view, it can only get better. If you're into martial arts, you'll love it. But if you want a real movie, stay home and watch TV, anything is better than Romeo Must Die. I agree with Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun- Times, this movie is in desperate need of a screenplay.

Four out of ten and that's out of generosity.

Written by Alastair Rosie

15/05/2000 ©