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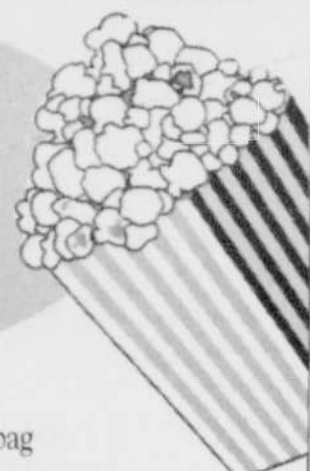
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☆☆☆☆ BAD SANTA

If *Elf* is the perfect family holiday film, *Bad Santa* is the perfect adult holiday film. Billy Bob Thornton plays a drunken Santa Claus who also happens to be, along with his dwarf sidekick, a safecracker and thief. Rarely has a movie this vulgar been so side-splittingly funny; it's Christmastime as if John Waters had directed a script by *The Simpsons* writers on crack.

—Andy Mangels

☆☆☆☆ THE HAUNTED MANSION

In the third Disneyland ride-inspired film of the year, Eddie Murphy proves he's no Johnny Depp, nor even as interesting as an audio-animatronic Country Bear. He plays a greasily slick real estate agent who gets trapped in a haunted mansion with his wife and kids. Terence Stamp as a deadpan butler is the only live thing worth watching, while the sets and a barbershop quartet of marble busts keep the flick from being a complete fright.

—AM

☆☆☆☆ THE LAST SAMURAI

It's 1876, and traditional Samurai warriors must fight the emperor's army against the West's assimilation of Japan. Sounds like a tough battle, but they've found a secret weapon—Tom Cruise! In this Asian version of *Dances with Wolves*, he defects from the U.S.-Japanese alliance to fight for a nobler cause and fall in love with one of its women. Ken Watanabe as Samurai Katsumoto leads a number of solid performances in what is otherwise recycled material.

—Lisa Bradshaw

☆☆☆☆ LOVE ACTUALLY

If you are expecting the same dry wit and clever charm from the writer/producer of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, you're in for a sad reckoning. Despite some strong performances, particularly from Hugh Grant as the British prime minister and Billy Bob Thornton as a skeezy president of the United States, this overdeveloped, maudlin mess of interrelated stories will leave you feeling manipulated and cheated.

—LB

☆☆☆☆ MASTER AND COMMANDER: THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD

Although its title sounds like a good porn movie, this bravura historical production is actually about a ship of all-male sailors in the Napoleonic era (which sounds like the plot

☆☆☆☆ dud, bottom of the bag

☆☆☆☆ only if you're really hungry

☆☆☆☆ good effort, pass the salt

☆☆☆☆ mmmm, tasty!

☆☆☆☆ get the big tub o' corn



Billy Bob Thornton and Tony Cox are one bad-ass *Bad Santa* team

of a good porn movie). Russell Crowe and Paul Bettany are excellent leads in this adventurous spectacle that mixes in personality, humor and a sense of discovery among ferocious sea battles.

—AM

☆☆☆☆ THE MISSING

Everyone in this cast looks grizzled and ugly, including lead Cate Blanchett as a frontier mother who must team up with her absentee "fake Indian" father (Tommy Lee Jones) to rescue her daughter from Native Americans who intend to sell her to Mexicans. Bloody and brutal, this western does not rely on clichés, but stakes its claim in strong story, good acting and a plot more about redemption than gunfights.

—AM

☆☆☆☆ TIMELINE

This latest Michael Crichton book-to-film is a bit generic. A group of mercenaries and archeologists are whisked to 14th century France to rescue an associate sent back in time to...well, it's not clear; the motives for many characters remain a bit murky. But the battle scenes between French and English knights are stunning, the armor is cool, and bear fans will love all the bearded and occasionally shirtless men.

—AM

☆☆☆☆ 21 GRAMS

Director Alejandro González Iñárritu (*Amores Perros*) has set up this wrenching drama of loss, serendipity and cruel fate in a shaky, hand-held, grainy, hyper-realist style, so the whole thing hangs on the ragged emotion expressed in the actors' faces. Thankfully, those belong to Sean Penn, Benicio del Toro and Naomi Watts, and the result is one of the best movies of the year.

—Christopher McQuinn

