



BAD SANTA

If *Elf* is the perfect family holiday film, *Bad Santa* is the perfect adult holiday film. Billy Bob Thornton (just nominated for a Golden Globe for this part) 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 BARBARIAN INVASIONS

French-Canadian auteur Denys Arcand's 1986 film *The Decline of the American Empire*, about the ideals and doubts of a group of Montreal baby boomers, had a thoughtful awareness and sophistication (including a then-progressive depiction of homosexuality) that were, in the Reagan '80s, unusual and welcome. Arcand's *The Barbarian Invasions* is a worthy sequel; his exploration of contemporary North American life is, 17 years on, as engaging as it was in '86.

When the dying Rémy (Rémy Girard) gathers his friends—including Claude (Yves Jacques), now living



The dying Rémy says goodbye to friends and family in *The Barbarian Invasions*

with his partner in Italy—the circle ruefully grapples with the failings of their lives and their generation as evidenced by troubled familial relationships and a decidedly non-utopian society. Arcand has achieved a truly personal, gentle sociopolitical epic.

—Christopher McQuain

THE COOLER

Character actor William H. Macy takes center stage in this intense dramedy about a sad sack whose odd job requires him to jinx gamblers at a Las Vegas casino. But when lady luck (Maria Bello) enters his life, his cruel boss (Alec Baldwin) flips out. One of the more enlightening films about Sin City, with strong support from Paul Sorvino as a lounge singer who is way past his prime.

—Jim Radosta

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

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING

Hear ye, hear ye, let it be known this is the first film on which I've ever bestowed the coveted five-kernel rating. Not having been a filmgoer who slathered over the first two entries in this epic trilogy from director Peter Jackson, it surprised even me. *The Return of the King* surpasses those in depth of story, cinematography, character development and sheer beauty of sound over imagery. The battle scenes have been continually good, but this time they reference their own brutality and hopelessness. And the women get meatier parts. I know you won't miss this movie, but don't miss this movie.

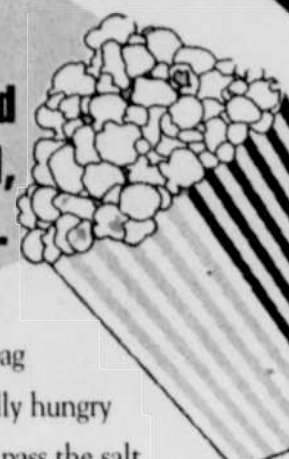
—LB

SHATTERED GLASS

Hayden Christensen does penance for *Attack of*

What's Poppin'?

What's popped and what's flopped, in a theater near you.



- ☹ dud, bottom of the bag
- ☹☹ only if you're really hungry
- ☹☹☹ good effort, pass the salt
- ☹☹☹☹ mmmm, tasty!
- ☹☹☹☹☹ get the big tub o' corn

the Clones in this riveting true story about Stephen Glass, a reporter who fabricated stories for *The New Republic*. A likable charmer, he slowly unravels as his co-workers (including Peter Sarsgaard and Chloë Sevigny—a mini *Boys Don't Cry* reunion) begin to doubt his credibility.

—JR

SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE

Submitted for your approval: an alternate universe in which a renowned playwright (Diane Keaton) falls for her daughter's boyfriend, a cadaverous hip-hop mogul (Jack Nicholson), because he calls her "flinty." Writer/director Nancy Meyers (*What Women Want*) somehow manages to fill her film with characters whose words and actions have no bearing on any reality with which I'm familiar.

—JR



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